

Awaken the Question A pilot study of the issue of a good life among young people

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Zusammenfassung: Generell bedeutet Religion ein Leben im Glauben in der Perspektive auf ein gutes Leben. Aber abgesehen von vagen Bildern wie dem Himmel oder dem Reich Gottes bleibt die Frage offen, was ein gutes Leben sein soll. Es sollte perfekt sein, aber wie definiert man Perfektion im Leben? Das können wir jungen Menschen nicht vorschreiben, und das sollten wir auch nicht. Es ist eine Frage, die in ihren Herzen geweckt werden muss, und sei es nur dadurch, dass wir hören, wie sie darauf reagieren. Im Prozess der Beantwortung dieser Frage können sie in ihrer Verantwortung für das gute Leben wachsen. Im Masterkurs Jugendkultur und Spiritualität an der *Tilburg School of Catholic Theology* haben wir die Studenten eingeladen, den Jugendlichen in ihrer Schule die Frage zu stellen: "Was ist das Reich Gottes für dich?" oder "Was ist das gute Leben für dich?" Die Antworten der Jugendlichen mündeten in Interviews und Briefe, in denen allgemeine Ideale - ein Arbeitsplatz, eine Familie, ein Haus - nach und nach durch persönliche Erfahrungen ergänzt wurden. Uns hat besonders interessiert, wie die Jugendlichen ihre Geschichten entdeckt und entwickelt haben. Eine narrative Analyse ihrer Erzählungen zeigt, dass sie sich für das gute Leben verantwortlich fühlen, auch wenn es nur in einem Anspruch auf ein solches besteht: "Man sollte all die schönen Dinge genießen können". Sie machen auch die Erfahrung, dass das Reden über das gute Leben bereits eine Form der Teilhabe an ihm ist. Daraus lässt sich schließen, dass die Beschäftigung mit der Frage nach dem guten Leben bereits eine Hinführung zum guten Leben ist.

Schlagwörter: Spiritualität, Jugend, Bildung, Narrative Analyse

Abstract: In general, religion means a life of faith in the perspective of a good life. But apart from vague images such as heaven or the kingdom of God, it is still an open question what a good life is supposed to be. It should be perfect, but how does one define perfection in life? We cannot prescribe this for young people and we should not. It is a question that needs to be awakened in their hearts, if only by our listening to how they respond to it. In the process of responding to the question, they may grow in their responsibility towards the good life. In the master course *Youth Culture and Spirituality* at the Tilburg School of Catholic Theology, we invited the students to pose the question to youngsters in their school: "What is the kingdom of God to you?" or "What is the good life to you?" The youngsters' answers resulted in interviews and letters, in which general ideals – a job, a family, a house – were gradually filled in with personal experiences. We were particularly interested in how the youngsters discovered and developed their stories. A narrative analysis of their stories shows that they feel responsible for the good life, even if it consists simply in a claim to receive: "one should be able to enjoy all the beautiful things." They also experience that talking about the good life is already a form of participating in it. We may conclude that awakening the question of the good life is already an introduction into it.

Keywords: Spirituality, Youth, Education, Narrative Analysis

I. Introduction

In early Christianity, people lived in the expectation of the prompt coming of the kingdom of God. One can be cynical about that and argue that 'it didn't come' or 'what came instead was the church', but then one is missing the point of that expectation. To live in the perspective of the good life is better than

living without even asking that question (Skidelsky & Skidelsky, 2013). Another aspect of that expectation is that in the Gospel it is not specified either and no one knows what it looks like. The suggestion, though, is that it must be good, life brought to perfection. We cannot tell young people what the good life is, and perhaps we should not. But we can ask them about their understanding of a good life: 'How do I see this, and how do I recognize it?' Their answers not only tell us something about their vision, but also shape the young people themselves, morally and spiritually.

In the master's course on *Youth Culture and Spirituality* at the University Teacher Training Program of the Tilburg School of Theology, the authors invite students to ask a young person what the good life means to them. The immediate scientific context of this question is a long-term research project by Monique van Dijk-Groeneboer on the religiosity and spirituality of youngsters (Dijk-Groeneboer, 2010; Dijk-Groeneboer & Herpen-de Regt, 2019). The long-term research project is based on questionnaires. We, however, wanted to add a deeper and more individual approach to it: the narrative analysis of their stories. In order to access their stories, we instructed our students to ask the youngsters a question. We started with the question: "What do you think the kingdom of God is?", which was quickly expanded by the students to include the issue of 'the good life'. The answer usually resulted in a story, in the form of an interview or a self-narrative, sometimes it became a film, a video clip, or a song, a few times it even became a project in a class at the Teachers' College for Primary Education. This article is based on the stories, either in the form of a simple interview (with only one or two questions) or a written answer by the youngsters. For the vast majority of the young respondents, it took some time for the question to land, and a general, ideal, image was gradually filled in by their own experiences. There is something of a paradox of individuality that emerges: what appears as most specific for an individual is in fact shared by everyone. The answers were very similar to one another.

What interested us most was the question of how young people arrived at their answers and what connections they made in their stories. Therefore, their stories were described following a narrative method of analysis. The analyses were performed groupwise during class; later, every student worked out his or her analysis individually.¹ To protect the privacy of the young people, we will only quote their stories in very general terms; even the 'quotations' are reformulations of their words. This, however, does not affect our question.

2. Method of Analysis

The stories were presented by the students and analyzed in class. We will present the method of analysis here to the extent necessary to follow the processing of the stories (Greimas & Courtés, 1979; Speelman, 2013). The leading question in analysis is how utterances (stories) generate meaning by the realization or actualization of values. In the elaboration of our analyses, we have added a second question, namely what were the most common values realized or actualized in the youngsters' stories about the good life.

Our analysis showed clearly that two layers can be distinguished: 1) the telling of the story, in which the young person connects with the question, and 2) the story itself, in which the image of the good life is outlined. In semiotics, these layers are distinguished as the level of uttering as a process (*énonciation*) and the level of the utterance as a result, that which is being uttered (*énoncé*). Notably, the study also shows that the interview or the writing itself – that is, the enunciative level – can be recognized as a narrative act in which the young person connects with the good life. This seems obvious: connecting to

¹ This article is based on the responses of eleven young people, seven women and four men. Four wrote down their stories, seven were interviewed. Most of them were between 11 and 19 years old, the age of one was not recorded. Most were middle- and high-school students. The analyses were made between 2016 and 2019 by Monique van Dijk-Groeneboer, Iris Adriaans, Koert Baas, Angelique Bakker, Han Bakker, Gerald de Groot, Quirien Hagens, Kees van Kranenburg, Alieke van Kruistum, Joost Roest, Willem Marie Speelman, Mirjam Spruit, Mirjam Venner. They have given permission to process their analyses, and we thank them for that.

a question is usually the act of someone to whom a question is posed. However, in this research, the two levels appear to be connected: talking about the good life is experienced as already participating in the good life. The enuncive level, the utterance as an outcome (*énoncé*), fills out the image of that good life further.

The method of analysis starts from the internal logic of the action that shapes the story of the good life. This logic is elaborated in the so-called narrative schema. The narrative schema describes the act as a logical sequence of four stages, which I call motivation (original French: *destination*), competence (*compétence*), execution (*performance*) and evaluation (*sanction*). For an act to be meaningful, all these four phases should be involved. The analysis is the description of the story as a narrative program, along the traces of these four phases that can be found in the story.

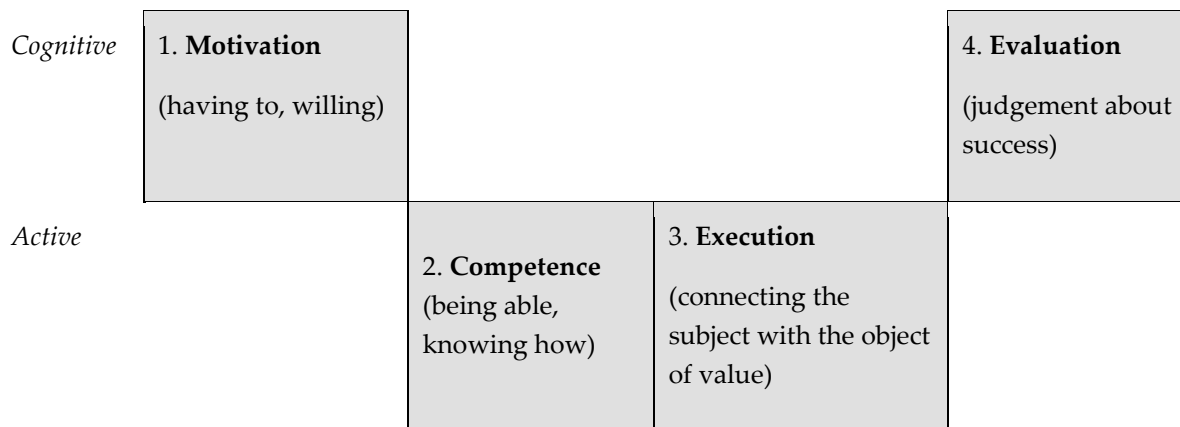


fig. 1: The narrative schema of the story

- a. **Motivation (*destination*).** Every meaningful action is motivated. Something or someone sets the action in motion (motivation is related to ‘moving’) and remains present in it as a force – as a ‘motive’ – until the action is successful. The motivating forces – in their virtual state, written between slashes – are: /having to/ (/must/, /should/) and /wanting to/ (/will/, /want/). Motivation is a strong narrative force and we must keep looking for it if it is not immediately apparent: ‘Why did you do this?’, ‘Why does this always happen to me?’ Thus, when people search for a reason behind apparently meaningless events, such as heavy rain or a disaster, the question about the motivation behind it turns the event into a narrative, e.g. ‘God’s will’, ‘human environmental politics’. In addition to the question ‘why’, the origin of the action, the question ‘what for’, the purpose of the action, is also part of the motivation (hence the term ‘destination’).
- b. **Competence (*compétence*).** An action presupposes an actor, a subject who performs the action. The actor must have the faculties to perform the action: a /being able/ and a /knowing how/. If he or she does not have these skills, the story will make clear that the actor equips himself or herself for it or is equipped for it by someone else, often the motivator in the role of helper. The four forces mentioned that modalize the action in a /having to/, /wanting to/, /being able to/ and /knowing how to/ derive their meaning from the fact that they form a trajectory with each other, in which the /having to/ is transformed into a /wanting to/, the /wanting to/ into a /being able to/, and the /being able to/ into a /knowing how to/. Specifically, the young person must answer the questioner, show that he or she can imagine the good life, and knows how to articulate it.
- c. **Execution (*performance*).** This means the execution of the act itself by the actor. The action is described as a change from an old state to a new state, for example from just existing now to living well later or forming an image of it. That state is described as a relationship between one or more subjects and one or more value objects. In this study, the main operations can be described as:

- an appropriation, in which the subject of state (S) is connected (\wedge) to a value object (O); the function is then $[\rightarrow(S \wedge O)]$;
- an exchange, in which the subject of state is disconnected (\vee) from one object and connected to another, $[\rightarrow(O1 \vee S \wedge O2)]$;
- and a sharing, in which one subject of state and the other are both connected to an object, $[\rightarrow(S1 \wedge O \wedge S2)]$.

The role of the subject is twofold: one is an actor who performs the action (Sd = subject of doing), the other is an actor who is connected to the object (S = subject of state). This can be the same person, and it often is in this study, but the syntactic roles are still different.

The syntactic role of the object (O) is that of carrier of values. The same object can have different values with different intensities in different narratives. For one young person, school may be a place where he or she learns competencies, for another school is primarily a place to meet friends. Which values are invested in the object depends on the narrative context, that is, what is being said about the school. These values are contextual. But next to values given with the context, there are also values that belong to the core of the object, as school always has the value of /collectivity/ in it. Thus, when a young person connects with a school, he or she always realizes the value of collectivity as well.

A value is virtual before it is invested in an object, and is realized when the value object is connected to a subject. For example, the meaning of the word 'beautiful' is only truly realized when someone has connected with that word: "I find this song so beautiful!" This, of course, also applies to life itself, which only becomes meaningful when the subject truly connects with it. Note that values are sometimes used as if they just exist (beauty, love), but in fact values only exist in objects such as in a loving look, a beautiful painting. Values are not available separately and cannot be imposed and administered separately. To indicate their virtual nature, semiotics puts values between slashes, as in /beauty/.

- d. **Evaluation (*sanction*)**. An action is not concluded unless there is feedback to the motivator about the success of the execution. Thus, there will always be some trace of judgment in the story, and if not, this is a sign that the action has not yet been (fully) executed. There is drama in a story that is still waiting for confirmation from the motivator. Therefore, the feedback not only says something about the execution, to what extent it is completed, but also points – retroactively – to the actual motivator. In the analyses, it often happens that the I-figure also turns out to be the motivator in retrospect, namely when he or she turns out to be the evaluator himself. This can be explained as an appropriation of the motivating force by the subject of doing, turning the /must/ into a /will/.

3. Analysis

The research took place in the context of a seminar, in which the students practiced the method. Each analysis started with asking what the story was about, what the narrative program would be. This program was always formulated in such a way that it described the movement from an old state to a new state, so that there was already some insight into the action to which the phases could be linked. It was still of a hypothetical nature. At the end of the analysis, it often happened that this hypothetical program was changed. Then the traces of motivation and competence (equipment) in the story pointed to a slightly different action. It was also often unclear whether a particular trace pointed to motivation or competence. Very often, it was possible to give different descriptions of the execution. All these differences stem from the weight the narrative gives to the different syntactic roles and operations, but undeniably also from the weight the reader gives to them. In short, there is no single analysis and the interpretation of a story is never mandatory. Analysis does not yield established facts. But the question is always whether a proposed interpretation is demonstrably based on the text: how do you know that, and what brings you to that interpretation?

Our leading question during the analysis was how the individual stories generated a meaningful image of the good life. But our second question focused on a more general picture of the good life according to young people.

3.1 The interviewer's question

The questioner usually began with 'What is the good life for you?' and/or 'In what do you recognize something of the good life?' But often also, 'What, for you, is the good life or the kingdom of God?' or occasionally, 'What do you understand the kingdom of God to entail?' In other words, the question came both in a secular and a religious version. Sometimes the answer began with: "I don't know anything about that" or "Difficult question, a bit vague, what do you mean?" But eventually, they took up the question and looked at it from different angles: "I've never actually thought about that before, but I'm going to try to answer it." In many cases, the young person's story subsequently revolved around the question itself, the reflections it triggered, and how it 'opened up' the question, as one put it. We called this the level of enunciation.

There were also young people who answered immediately. One of them instantly began to speak about her relationship with God, another talked about the bad life he had left behind, a third showed that he had already thought about the question. In these stories, the program played out mainly on the level of the utterance (*énoncé*). In the interview genre, both levels of enunciation and utterance are of course always present. Yet it is good to keep this distinction in mind, to see how the two levels are connected.

3.2 The youngsters' answers

The youngster's story of the good life is described as a narrative program, which transforms an old condition into a new one. At the level of enunciation, the program is aimed at connecting with the question of the good life and at searching for words to formulate an answer. This is always about finding words that truly match one's own feelings. When those words are found, the matter really gains meaning, a meaning with which the subject – the 'I' – can truly connect. This program is about appropriation: the question of the good life is meant to be something with which the young person connects, in which he or she grows. This program was sometimes confirmed by spontaneous judgments at the end of the interview: "it was fun to talk about these things."

At the level of the utterance, we can distinguish between two main programs. The first is designed at reclaiming a past life, which revolves around good relationships, reclaiming the self, and restoring what is good and beautiful. This program occurs in interviews where the young person does not have to think long about the question: after all, if you have experienced firsthand what is not good, you immediately know what would be good. However, the program also occurs in an interview in which precisely the memory of the good plays a leading role: the young person wants to restore and maintain his or her relationship with God, which he or she experienced as good. The second program describes the realization that the good life is already given, and that this must be shared. This program describes the story of the good life as something to be received and passed on. It is about good relationships, granting each other the good, and the ability to enjoy together all the beauty that presents itself. It is noteworthy that none of the interviews ended up with a revenue model, along the lines of: "You have to be good and then you'll get to heaven." All narratives involved the realization that the good life is something already available and accessible in the present.

3.3 The motivation to act

The questioner is an important motivator. He or she intervenes in the life of the young person, who often appears to have given little or no thought to the question of the good life. Two types of unaccustomedness are discussed. The first is that it is a new question; this unaccustomedness can be found in

the stories in which the young person has yet to connect with the question, and grows into it in the course of responding. The second is that the question is very intimate – “it’s kind of a private thing” – and the young person is not used to speaking candidly about these matters. The latter is clearly evident when you compare these stories with those that the young person is used to talking about, for example with the psychologist or in a circle of fellow believers. Later, we will return to the questioner as a helper who provides the youngster with the competence to deal with the question.

At the level of the utterance, the motivating forces are the young person’s own experiences of the bad or the good life, himself, others, nature, or God. Negative experiences automatically awaken a will to make life better, and thus set the process of searching in motion. Positive experiences of the goodness of life are also motivating forces of will or desire. The will is understood as a force that motivates to do, the desire as a force that motivates to let happen and to receive. We encounter this will in the young person who wants to do things better now and stop acting in the way that he or she did in the past. The desire is seen in the young person who is open “to all the beautiful things of life and of nature,” even without knowing what he or she should do to get them.

It also happens that others – “grandpa,” “they say so,” “my parents” – have motivated the young person to seek the good life, some by telling the youngster what to do, others by supporting him or her in the search for the good life. We are inclined, after these analyses, to count that second category – the supporters – as part of the phase of acquiring competence. Yet we also see that there is something of /must/ in the help that is offered, as in “go ahead, you can do it!” This distinction is sometimes difficult to make, because it is often the same people who call for the good life and offer support in the process. This also applies to the role of “God” or “an angel” in the stories. God is usually discussed as a helper and supporter – as a provider of competence – less as a motivator to seek the good life. But again, it is difficult to tell the two phases apart.

The phases are perhaps difficult to tell apart because the different modalizations of the action – /having to/, /wanting to/, /being able to/, and /knowing how to/ – are interrelated. Sometimes, for example, a series of motivations can be found in the story: for instance one person motivates another, who in turn motivates a third. Interestingly, one youngster commented that people pass on what God has given them. There is also the example of a grandfather who motivates the young person to choose the good life and at the same time supports her in that choice. We are still at the beginning of the research, but already a narrative field is emerging in which we must learn to describe how processes of motivation and competence lead people to the good life.

3.4 The competence to execute the act

The stories showed many traces of competence. This in itself is not surprising, especially when the question is rarely asked and the young person needs to equip himself or herself with the ability to respond. Moreover, the content of the question is one that primarily evokes capabilities: how to achieve or shape the good life.

The competence of the first program, previously called appropriation, is expressed in traces of being able to connect with the question, and to articulate the answer. Such a trace is recognizable, for example, in the statement: “Difficult question, vague, I think, what do you mean? I haven’t thought about that so much actually. But when I think about that now...” It is noteworthy, however, that the answer to the question of the good life gets off to a hesitant start in almost all stories, and that hesitation is evident until the end. The young person is looking for the words, for the ability to express himself or herself in language, and to write about deeper things – such as their relationship with God. But there are also situations where he or she can meet fellow believers and find a space to talk about the good life. Sometimes the questioner reaches out with words, taking on the role of a helper. But often the youngster

looks to himself or herself to find out which words best express his or her own vision of the good life. In this sense, the question reaches inward (“private question”) and into the future (“it’s something for later.”) The answer develops during the story. Often, the respondent starts with himself or herself before turning to the relationship with others – “helping others,” “being useful to the world” – later. In this sense, openness is also a competence. It is mentioned explicitly only once, but is also assumed in the other stories.

Equipping oneself for the second program, exchanging the bad old life for the good new one or restoring the lost good relationship, comes down to the ability to give up the old and accept the new. This involves being able to listen, knowing how to process experience, to let go, to change, to reconcile. It also includes finding time, space, rest, and opportunities for repairing and maintaining relationships.

Other competences point to both the program of exchange and that of sharing the good life, the third program. Examples include a good, happy environment that allows for sharing the good with each other, family, friends, love (“that someone loves you”), “peace with everything,” mutual respect, and space for oneself. Respect means that the other is recognized in his or her individuality, and this then applies mutually: that each can do his or her own thing. Connected with this are people and institutions that are helpful. Moreover, God or “something higher” is especially mentioned as help; “must be there,” because “He is there for me unconditionally.” Present, but somewhat less important, is the competence to receive, namely that the good life is given, and that you must be able to receive what is given. An example of this is the ability to enjoy all the beautiful things that exist. Other traces of competence have to do with the environment: money, freedom, being able to help, and knowing how to “connect oneself with examples of the good life,” knowing a song that brings the good life closer. Noteworthy is the trace that points to a learning process, which thereby places the good life in the future: “because that’s how you learn it,” but also “you grow into it.” In this context, it is notable that only one respondent mentions school as a place of equipping them for the good life; the vast majority of youngsters rather see school as something that keeps them away from the good life. Finally, feeling is often mentioned as a competence because feeling indicates when life is good.

Most traces point to an ability to connect with others to share the good life. A few have already been mentioned, such as “being at peace with everything around you,” love as a competency, or helping others. These competencies create the conditions for establishing good, harmonious relationships with others. The others are almost always people close to the young person, family, and friends, but sometimes also unknown others, and a number of times God is also mentioned. Equipping oneself is also often mentioned, because after all it is the ‘I’ who must shape the good life in his or her own way. The respondent often realizes that he or she still must grow, especially in maintaining good relationships.

3.5 The execution of the act

The three aforementioned programs are described more precisely in the narrative phase of execution.

- The appropriation of the question can be described as $Sd \Rightarrow [(S \vee O) \rightarrow (S \wedge O)]$, where the young person (Sd = subject of doing) connects ($\rightarrow \wedge$) the subject (S) with the ability to understand the question and develop an answer (O).

The object is initially the question itself, but in some stories it takes the form of a tradition (“people pass that on”). If the question and answer are already preordained the young person attempts to appropriate the object. We recognize an example of this second appropriation in the sentence: “according to me, the kingdom of God is not something from above, but it happens here.” The value of this object relates to equipping, i.e. to the ability (/can/) to relate to the question in such a way that the individual can answer for himself or herself. The relation of the self to the question is already a relation to the good life itself.

In the vast majority of the stories described here, connecting to the question emerged strongly, although a number of them were not included in the main program.

- In three stories, the program was described as an exchange: $S_d \Rightarrow [(O_1 \wedge S \vee O_2) \rightarrow (O_1 \vee S \wedge O_2)]$, where the subject separates from (\vee) the old life (O_1) and connects with (\wedge) the new life (O_2).

Again, it must be stressed that this program is actually an equipping program: one must be able to let go of the old life in order to connect with the new life. Especially the first object was described quite extensively in two out of three cases, so that it became clear what was bad about it all. It then turned out to be mostly about things that were bad for the subject, that made him or her lonely or depressed. This was a rather elaborate depiction of a life about which the subject says: "this was not good for me." We will not elaborate on this particular depiction here, but in general it seems that it is important to know exactly what (bad) life one is distancing oneself from, whereas it is not essential to know exactly what the new life is one wants to connect with.

In almost all the youngsters' stories, there are traces of the program that ultimately describes the good life in their vision, which is sharing the good life in good relationships with others:

- $S_d \Rightarrow [(S_1 \vee O \vee S_2) \rightarrow (S_1 \wedge O \wedge S_2)]$

In about half of the stories, the subject of doing is composed of multiple persons, a "we," in which for example the $S_d = (S_1 + S_2)$. Some of the young people realized that they were therefore also dependent on the other in order to share in the good life. The other half had a single S_d , almost always "I", and in one story "God." The first subject of state (S_1) is the "I" in all cases; the S_2 is again different: "others", "family and friends", and again "God" are mentioned. From this we can see that the good life is realized because people connect themselves with each other and with God. This alone evokes a responsibility in the subject of doing, giving the object itself a motivating force.

More diverse are the descriptions of the object with which the subjects connect themselves or each other. As a syntactical position in the narrative the good life is an object, but that does not make it a 'thing.' There was talk of images - "a settled suburban life" - and examples, but also of nature, "the beautiful things in life that make me happy", a "fantastic world." These always came up as things that represented the good life, but were later replaced by other words. Furthermore, people, others, and even God, came up as if they were objects, but they then became subjects who were connected to an object and/or connected the young person to the good life: "But that's not enough; they have to grant it to you too." It seems that connecting oneself, as an act, is more important than knowing exactly what one is connecting to; or perhaps that it only becomes clear later what exactly one has connected to. The core values, which all these objects carried, were /connection/, /reciprocity/ and the /goodness/ of the relationship (good relations).

It is notable that the values have their own syntactic function. For example, /ownership/ and /respect/ are in a sense preconditions, values that belong to the narrative phase of competence, but /peace/ and /love/ are also mentioned in the context of competence: "full of love to grant each other the good." Individuality is a condition for the good life to come to the self, and respect is a value that equips the self to allow the other the space and reciprocally to experience the good life in their own way. In addition to /ownership/ and /respect/, these include the values of /helpfulness/ and /contact/. These came up especially as conditions for the good life.

Values that relate more to the judgment of the success of the act were also mentioned: /happiness/ in "feeling happy," and "feeling that everything is right," the /peace/ that comes over you, /nearness/ in

“feeling that He is there for you unconditionally,” /love/ in “feeling that you are loved.” Like the conditions mentioned above, they belong to the good life, but are, as it were, a response to it, or perhaps a foretaste of it.

3.6 The feedback as a conclusion of the act

A striking number of young people end their story with a spontaneous statement that they enjoyed talking about this. “I think it’s very special, this. Nice.” That it is fine to be challenged we hear in statements such as: “I found it fun to think about this, but also kind of hard” and “maybe I forgot things now and then I’ll come to them later.” The student-researcher rightly notes that the good life is apparently not a station at which to arrive, but that it is a perspective in an ongoing search process. The assessment confirms that, on the one hand, the program has been implemented, and on the other, that it is still awaiting completion.

This corresponds to the experience of the respondents that the good life carries the value of future, in the sense that one can keep talking about it and then maybe learn new things about the good life. In fact, two stories confirm that the good life has been achieved: “Back to the good life with beautiful people around me who love me because then I don’t have any worries, and if I do have them, then I’m not alone.” But the same story clearly states that the young person in question must always work at it. Some youngsters talk about images of the good life that are to be achieved. It is something like a promise – “that’s what I’m told”; “I think I’ll achieve that, but it can always grow” – but even then there is the realization that you have to work at it.

Work, according to others, is part of the good life itself. We have already seen that even being busy with the question, talking about it, is experienced as already participating in the good life: “In that way I am busy with the Bible and I also see that as part of the Kingdom of God.” In this context, the statements about the good life as a life in which everything goes well (“everything is right”) can be read as a trace of an evaluation. Such a statement expresses that the young person has had an experience, even if only briefly, in which everything goes well. He or she then knows: this is how life is. Examples are feelings or states of mind evoked by the experience of the good life. Sometimes these are paradoxical feelings. For example, one experiences that the good life gives support and rest, while another – a boy of eleven – finds going to a party cool. Another boy says: “It evokes a kind of warmth.”

4. A question with a story as an answer

It was surprising that every youngster – faithful or not – responded as if he or she knew what “the kingdom of God” is. At the same time, no one knows exactly what or how it is. The “kingdom of God/good life” is not only a perspective, but also a question. In a sense, this question has no answer, it is not a research question, but a motive, a narrative figure that sets a process in motion. The analyses show that the way the question is asked depends on the situation, on the questioner, and also on the respondent. Thus, in retrospect, it is understandable that no single unambiguous question was asked. The question whether or not this is desirable for a follow-up study depends on the research question: if the intended result is the collection of data, the question needs to be unambiguous, but if the intended result is to learn to know not only what, but also how, values have been realized and actualized, the question may very well be open and ambiguous.

Also striking, and comforting, was that none of the students stuck to the “bon vivant”, living like “God in France” or the “American dream.” Those myths proved too superficial for them. And those respondents who had believed in a myth did not have to think long, for they had already been confronted with the question, in a negative way, and were looking for a way to make life good again.

In all cases, the question started a process of reflection, in which the student connected himself or herself with the question and looked for words to make that connection. The result of this reflection is a story, in which meaning is generated by narratively connecting words with each other, with experiences, and especially with the self. It is in these narrative relationships that the words, and the story, gain real meaning: the “good life,” what does that mean to me?; “being happy,” but what is real happiness?

The analyses show that the stories tend to have an influence on the youngster and his or her life. This is because the story shapes the storyteller, who plays a role in the story, as subject of doing and/or as subject of state. This means that the question of the good life awakens the self, which takes that question to itself and ultimately searches within itself for answers. Responding to the question, the youngster is transformed into a narrative and responsible self (see Zande, 2018, p. 90).

We have noticed that it is not important to know exactly what the good life is, that it is more a perspective in which the present life is considered. This not-knowing-exactly may be a form of transcendence in the story of one’s life. Tjeu van Knippenberg argues that in his or her life story, a person is confronted with two moments of transcendence: the beginning, one’s own birth which no one remembers, and the end, one’s own death which one cannot recount (Knippenberg, 2008). The life story is about everything in between, but is defined by the line between its forgotten origin and its unacknowledged end. Life is good when it connects with its own transcendence: the beginning and end of one’s own life, two moments that no one knows exactly.

Van Knippenberg distinguishes between a minimal transcendence, in which only the transcendent power of one’s own birth and death are experienced, and a maximal transcendence, in which the larger story of creation up to the end of time also resonates (Knippenberg, 2008, p. 22). For the purposes of our study, this raises the question whether it is enough to leave young people alone with their own attempts to find the good life, or to give them the chance to gain a deeper insight into the mysteries of the good life. A first response to this question might be that if the research focuses on the values that youngsters realize or actualize in their own stories about the good life it is enough to listen. In a second stage, however, it can be foreseen that youngsters confront their own stories with other – comparable (traditional) – stories, which may open a new perspective for them.

5. The story of the good life

Our study focused on the story of the good life as experienced or hoped for by young people. The aim was to gain knowledge about how they connect to the question, how they formulate their answers, and ultimately how their responding connects with the good life in a questioning way. The answers in their stories raise questions about this reflective process. In what context of visions about the good or the good life do they grow up? How do we understand the question ourselves: as a goal, a project, a critical reference point, or as a perspective? Do we really want to listen to their stories, or do we want them to listen to the traditional ones?

The question of the good life is ambiguous. On the one hand, we live in an age and culture in which technical perfection has become attainable; on the other hand, the culture of technical perfection considers everything and everyone from the perspective of deficiency: it is never good enough. As young people constantly measure themselves against others, they will be always reminded of their shortcomings. Educators in religion or the philosophy of life may be in a prime position to bring attention to the question in a different way, starting with listening to the way in which youngsters reflect on these issues. We will conclude with some thoughts about the nature of the question.

First, as we have seen, the good is elsewhere, for example, in the past and the future. This is not specific to our time, but is related to the mythical nature of the good life as a perspective. Religions always have a story about the perfect beginning (paradise) and the perfect end (heaven), that rounds out the big

story. The perfect life is open to all who are open to it, but as a myth, it transcends our earthly reality. Although mythical, the good life is not a lie or an illusion, but living in the expectation of the good. Living in the perspective of the good is a mystery: it happens to you, revealing itself to you (Speelman, 2022).

It is important to always keep this ultimate perspective in mind, and appropriate it into your own story. The art of speaking meaningfully about the ultimate can be helpful in interpreting the experience of young people. It begins with the suggestion that the good life has future value, that it is the ultimate form of life. Good experiences of the present are pointers to the ultimately good. Not because things will get better, but because as memories and expectations they will continue to guide life, even when things get worse. In this sense, the ultimate good is always abundantly present even in bad moments. At the same time, the theological understanding of the eschatological *caveat* teaches that this ultimate goal is not yet complete, and perhaps even gains meaning in its unfinishedness.

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