

The Good Life according to Rubem Alves

A “vida boa” segundo Rubem Alves

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ABSTRACT

This paper will examine Rubem Alves' concept of “good life”, through a literature review. Alves' eudaimonistic ethics can be found in his theology of human hope and, in a sparse way, in his late theopoetic texts. After his disenchantment with the great political utopias, Alves started to develop insights on how to live a good life in a way, at the same time, aware of the pain and, even so, hopeful. This research will consider the different phases of Alves' thinking and how he dialogues with other thinkers on three major themes: the meaning of life, suffering and the virtues necessary to live a meaningful life. This article shows how Alves tries to balance the perception of the transience and harshness of life with the concept that life needs to be lived with pleasure and desire, but without falling into hedonism.

KEYWORDS

Rubem Alves; Human Flourishing; Good Life; Happiness.

RESUMO

Este artigo examina o conceito de “vida boa” de Rubem Alves por meio de uma revisão de literatura. A ética eudaimonista de Alves pode ser encontrada em sua teologia da esperança humana e, de forma esparsa, em seus textos teopoéticos tardios. Após o desencanto com as grandes utopias políticas, Alves começou a desenvolver ideias sobre como viver uma “vida boa”, de uma forma ao mesmo tempo consciente da dor, mas, ainda assim, esperançosa. O artigo considera as diferentes fases do pensamento de Alves e como ele dialoga com outros pensadores sobre três grandes temas: o sentido da vida, o sofrimento e as virtudes necessárias para viver uma vida significativa. O artigo mostra também como Alves tenta equilibrar a percepção da transitoriedade e dureza da vida com o conceito de que a vida precisa ser vivida com prazer e desejo, mas sem cair no hedonismo.

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PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Rubem Alves; Florescimento Humano; Boa Vida; Felicidade.

Introduction

The rise of positive psychology and the renewed popular interest in older schools of ethics such as Stoicism have breathed new life into philosophical and theological discussions about the good life (a morally correct and well-fulfilled life), human flourishing, and happiness. This paper will examine Rubem Alves' concepts of happiness and good life. Alves' eudaimonistic ethics can be found in his theology of human hope and, in a sparse way, in his late theopoetic texts. This research will address, through a literature review, Alves' thinking on three major themes: (1) the meaning of life, (2) suffering and death, and (3) the virtues necessary to live a meaningful life, which will be the three parts of this text.

Alves went through three distinct phases in his career: the theological-pastoral phase, the philosophical-poetic phase, and the poetic-philosophical phase. His reflections on the meaning of life deepen as he approaches the end of life, when he abandoned academic language and became a mystical poet concerned with living life. Therefore, it is hard to systematize his ideas without running the risk of overshadow his poetry. Thus, when exposing his ideas, it is inevitable to make some direct quotes, because the phrases and words of the poets carry meanings that paraphrases could not fully explain (translations of quotations into English were made by the author of this article). This research shows how Alves tries to balance the honest perception of the transience of life and the harsh realities of human experience with the concept that life needs to be lived with pleasure, desire, and pain, but without falling into naive hedonism.

1. The Meaning of Life

For Alves, the great philosophical question that deserves reflection is “judging whether life is worth living or not”.² From his writings, spring a great passion for earthly life, and he points out some meanings and purposes for life. First, Alves believes that full happiness is not possible, as human beings only have moments of joy, or rare moments of happiness.³ Life is made up of these short moments, but which are destined for eternity: “The beauty of a single eternal moment is worth all suffering”.⁴

Alves states that the meaning of life is simply to live. For this, it is necessary to recognize that life is short, that the present moment will never be repeated, and that the only thing human beings can do is grab this moment as if it were the last.⁵ Despite making many reflections on

² ALVES, R. *Conversas com quem gosta de ensinar*. São Paulo: Cortez, 1982. p. 19-20. In the original: “julgar se a vida é digna ou não de ser vivida”.

³ ALVES, R. *A Grande Arte de Ser Feliz*. São Paulo: Planeta, 2014. p. 28, 50.

⁴ ALVES, R. *Teologia do Cotidiano*. Perdizes: Olho d'água, 1994. p. 73. In the original: “A beleza de um único momento eterno vale a pena de todos os sofrimentos”.

⁵ ALVES, 2014, p. 38.

finitude and death, Alves does not seem to approach death from a *Memento mori* or Stoic perspective. He loves life and wants to live long and well. Alves seems to approach the Stoic idea that some things “depend on us” while others do not, and that it is essential to distinguish them correctly, however, he places more emphasis on enjoying life and venting desire: *Carpe Diem*. In contrast to the Stoicism of Marcus Aurelius,⁶ which regards death as indifference and life as something to which we should not become attached, Alves values longevity.

Alves’ philosophy of life is often expressed in terms of *Tempus fugit* and *Carpe diem*. These two Latin expressions could summarize, albeit superficially, what he thinks about life. Time is short, then it is necessary to live with full intensity. *Tempus fugit*, therefore, *Carpe diem*: “Tempus Fugit! Therefore, pick the day that begins like someone picking a flower, which will never be repeated”.⁷ However, enjoying the time is not being in a hurry, but a calm existential experience of communion,⁸ which is why Alves criticizes the “noisy and hurried madness of men of action and success”.⁹

Despite not believing that it is possible to be fully happy, Alves believes that it is good to strive to be happy.¹⁰ Apparently, for him, happiness is more a horizon that guides the journey than a goal that can be fully achieved. Theoretically, a happy person is someone who does what is pleasurable and lives a relationship of love-friendship with someone. However, Alves confesses that this definition never comes true.¹¹

Happiness is those rare moments that give meaning to life. For these moments to happen more often, the individuals must have joy at work, doing something they would do even without earning money, for pure pleasure, like Rubinstein, the pianist, or *Babette’s Feast*. People who do not have this joy are doomed to unhappiness. Furthermore, it is necessary to love and be loved.¹²

These moments of joy and happiness are not found on departure or arrival, but on the crossing, in everyday life.¹³ Life does not make sense for someone who lives always expecting great things. Hence the importance of small talk, of spending time thinking and talking about trivial everyday things. Friendship is made with insignificant things, and human relationships, to be legitimate, need to favor the dilution of one person’s powers over another and the expansion of affections.¹⁴ In Alves’ humanist ethics, power must be an instrument of love and is limited in relationships.¹⁵ Interestingly, Alves sets limits for forgiveness, which cannot be unconditionally made available in any situation.¹⁶

⁶ MARCO AURÉLIO. *Meditações*. São Paulo: Abril Cultural, 1985. *Meditações*. II; 11 e 14.

⁷ ALVES, R. *O Retorno E Terno – Crônicas*. Campinas: Papirus, 1992. p. 25. In the original: “Tempus Fugit! Portanto, colha o dia que se inicia como quem colhe uma flor, que nunca mais se repetirá”.

⁸ ALVES, R. *Ostra feliz não faz pérola*. São Paulo: Planeta, 2008, Kindle. p. 104.

⁹ ALVES, R. *Se Eu Pudesse Viver Minha Vida Novamente*. Campinas: Verus, 2012. p. 35. In the original: “loucura barulhenta e apressada dos homens de ação e sucesso”.

¹⁰ ALVES, 2014, p. 38.

¹¹ ALVES, 2014, p. 50.

¹² ALVES, 2014, p. 50.

¹³ ALVES, 2014, p. 50.

¹⁴ SEVERINO, A. J. Crítica à infelicidade na escola: o lugar de Rubem Alves na filosofia da educação. In: NUNES, A. V. (ed.). *O que eles pensam de Rubem Alves*. São Paulo: Paulus, 2007. p. 122.

¹⁵ Alves’ ethics is humanist, and he was one of the first thinkers to develop a kind of Christian social ethics that would become the basis of Liberation Theology (GONÇALO JUNIOR. *É uma pena não viver: uma biografia de Rubem Alves*. São Paulo: Planeta, 2015. p. 296).

¹⁶ ALVES, 2008, p. 157. He cites torturers, abusers, and inquisitors as examples of unforgivable behavior.

Alves' concept of happiness was that of earthly happiness, and not the uncertainty of happiness in the heavenly paradise.¹⁷ He emphasizes "life to the full" (John 10:10) rather than the warning that "the whole world lieth in wickedness" (1 John 5:19). For him, happiness is in the simplest things in life, in nature, in ordinary relationships. He wanted to break away from the idea of heavenly happiness, to encourage people to enjoy life and pleasure, and denounces Anglo-Saxon Protestantism for having repressed Latin American bodily expression and its natural emphasis on earthly, joyful, and pleasurable life.¹⁸

The earthly aspect of happiness is illustrated by God creating a beautiful garden, without temples, where he walked and talked personally with human beings amid nature. In the original paradise, there was only aesthetics, and the human being was created primarily for beauty. The garden was a place of pleasures and joys,¹⁹ and this earthly happiness can only be enjoyed today by those who, like children, still see signs of paradise on earth, rejoicing in little. For them, God still walks in the garden.²⁰

Human desire plays an important role in Alves' thinking. Desire is not illusory, but it is the "presence of an absence".²¹ The heart cries when it has nothing to hold on to and laughs when it finds little fragments of what the desire craves.²² Desire is the "logic of the heart",²³ which feeds resistance, and rebellion against the world that kills aspirations and hopes. It is the perception that something is missing in that body's environment.²⁴

Another important element for Alves is the body, as human actions aim at a life full of satisfaction and the body has an "axiological priority over everything".²⁵ However, this emphasis on the body is not a materialist or pragmatic view of human life. Human beings also need something that gives meaning to their lives, not just things with practical functions. They not only seek to satisfy their biological needs but seek meaning and joy.²⁶

Because of the priority of desire and the body, pleasure precedes knowledge, as the desire to know is a servant of the desire to have pleasure.²⁷ Before knowing something, it is necessary to fall in love. Studying or researching is, above all, a libidinal action, as pleasure articulates the desire to learn. Therefore, Alves' pedagogical proposal is built on the emphasis on the body and on the act of telling stories to arouse joy and pleasure. His view of science is close to wisdom, sapiency, a "knowledge that has flavor".²⁸

In this theology of body and desire, the meaning of life is experienced in an emotional, unexpected, and inexplicable way. This experiential meaning of life is such an intense will to

¹⁷ GONÇALO JUNIOR, 2015, p. 567.

¹⁸ ALVES, R. *Religião: ¿Opio del Pueblo?* In: GUTIÉRREZ, G.; ALVES, R.; ASSMANN, H. (eds.). *Religião, ¿Instrumento de Liberación?* Barcelona: Editorial Fontanella, 1973. p. 102.

¹⁹ ALVES, R. *Entre a ciência e a sapiência: o dilema da educação*. São Paulo: Loyola, 1999. p. 77.

²⁰ ALVES, 2012, p. 13.

²¹ ALVES, R. *Meditações*. Rio de Janeiro: CEDI, 1983. p. 62. In the original: "presença de uma ausência"

²² TANCARA, J. J. *Florestas profundas, mares desconhecidos: o corpo e a nostalgia no pensamento de Rubem Alves*. In: NUNES, 2007, p. 223.

²³ ALVES, R. *Hijos del mañana*. Salamanca: Sígueme, 1975 p. 58. In the original: "lógica del corazón".

²⁴ ALVES, R. *Estórias de quem gosta de ensinar*. São Paulo: Cortez, 1984. p. 162.

²⁵ ALVES, R. *A Geração do Futuro*. Campinas: Papirus, 1987. p. 155-156. In the original: "prioridade axiológica sobre tudo".

²⁶ ALVES, 1987a, p. 162.

²⁷ ALVES, R. *Ciência, coisa boa...* In: MARCELLINO, N. C. (ed.). *Introdução às Ciências Sociais*. Campinas: Papirus, 2006. p. 10.

²⁸ ALVES, 1984, p. 15. In the original: "conhecimento que tem sabor".

live that it brings the courage to die for those things that give meaning to life. Alves explains, in an oriental pantheistic tone, that the meaning of life transforms a person's cosmivision and puts everything in harmony with the universe, it is a feeling of communion with a cosmic maternal uterus.²⁹ It is in the loss of this cosmic unity that religions work, keeping the memory of the original harmony and nostalgically pointing to future reconciliation.³⁰

In Alves' thought, the emphasis is on the physical and concrete life of human beings, considering their search for meaning and their longing for a loving order (*ordo amoris*), a world where beauty, joy, and pleasure prevail.³¹ His philosophy of life privileges the imaginary, the unconscious, the emotional, and the corporeal. He is only interested in "the subjectivity of the body and not in the *cogito*",³² as the human beings are not Cartesian beings, but are beings of love and desire.³³ Because of this, the experience of life is essentially emotion, it is perceiving the world through its reverberations in the body. The human being does not relate to the world mainly because of the truth perceived by the intellect, but because of the beauty experienced by the body's senses. It is not the truth that moves people, it is the beauty that seduces them. There seems to be a similarity between this concept and James K. Smith's theory regarding the liturgical nature of the human being.³⁴

In Alves' thought, beauty is a metaphysical category, not just an aesthetic one. Beauty is the ultimate harmonious purpose of life: "all beauty in the world is a memory of paradise or a prophecy of a transfigured world".³⁵ Beauty is also the goal of theological reflection, since "It is with the beauty that God defeats the Devil...".³⁶ Driven by their hunger for beauty, human beings become world builders. They organize their world to feel at home, creating a loving order (*ordo amoris*), where they can love and be loved.

This *ordo amoris*, term that Alves probably borrowed from Augustine,³⁷ is not an objective world, composed only of facts, but a world that includes imagination, a symbolic universe that makes sense, created by love and desire. It is not a question of releasing desires in a disorderly and individualistic way, but, as Lewis says, of calibrating the affections, granting each object that type or degree of love that is appropriate to it.³⁸

Imagination is an important component for building the *ordo amoris* and even for ethics, as it is from man's ability to imagine the suffering of the other that ethics is born. Following imagination and desire, human beings transcend the raw facticity of reality given to them,³⁹ and build a world where horizons expand. What is imagined is far superior to what is seen, as the

²⁹ ALVES, R. *O Que é Religião?* São Paulo: Loyola, 2005a. p. 120.

³⁰ ALVES, 1975, p. 115.

³¹ REBLIN, Iuri A. *Outros Cheiros, Outros Sabores...: o pensamento teológico de Rubem Alves*. São Leopoldo: Oikos, 2014. p. 31.

³² SEVERINO, 2007, p. 122. In the original: "a subjetividade do corpo e não a do *cogito*".

³³ ALVES, 2005a, p. 32.

³⁴ SMITH, James K. *You Are What You Love*. Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2016. p. 131.

³⁵ ALVES, Alves, 1992b, p. 125. In the original: "toda a beleza no mundo é ou uma lembrança do paraíso ou uma profecia de um mundo transfigurado".

³⁶ ALVES, R. *Variações sobre a vida e a morte ou o feitiço erótico-herético da teologia*. São Paulo: Loyola, 2005b. Text on the cover of the book. In the original: "a teologia é uma brincadeira cujo objetivo é produzir a beleza. É com a beleza que Deus derrota o Demônio...".

³⁷ In *The City of God* 15.22, Augustine asserts that "virtus est ordo amoris" (virtue is the order of love).

³⁸ LEWIS, C. S. *The Abolition of Man*. New York: Macmillan, 1965. p. 8.

³⁹ ALVES, 1987a, p. 56.

essential is invisible to the eyes.⁴⁰ That is why children are happy with little. Through imagination, they transform what is nothing into a lot.⁴¹

This is an issue that perhaps helps to understand Rubem Alves' departure from the Liberation Theology movement. As Volf and Croasmun demonstrate,⁴² it is a mistake to suppose that the satisfaction of basic needs – biological and social needs – can be separated from the meaning of life. In Latin America, many liberation theologians focused on basic needs and structural changes so that this could be met. However, a flourishing view of life is a basic need for a being who cannot live on bread alone,⁴³ but on symbols and practices that give meaning to existence.

In search of *ordo amoris*, human beings create culture, transforming an unknown world into home, based on their aspirations and emotions.⁴⁴ The absence of feelings and affections is a problem for a humanity that seeks to build *ordo amoris*. In describing the human search for *ordo amoris*, Alves seems to reflect the Weberian concept that man weaves webs of meaning and ends up tied to them.⁴⁵ However, in Alves' view, the human being is always creating new webs of meaning.

Despite affirming the human search for meaning, Alves also affirms that the attempt to create an *ordo amoris* always fails.⁴⁶ Human beings always create a culture below what he expected, and it is from this failure that utopian dreams and religion arise as witnesses of what is lacking, and which move human beings towards that *ordo amoris* that culture has failed to create.⁴⁷

Religion is one of the symbols and practices in search of the meaning of life, proposing recipes for happiness.⁴⁸ Despite this, religion does not always fulfill its purpose. Alves rejects the theological formalism that confuses and frightens readers⁴⁹ and considers philosophy, science, and religion as the three powers that enslaved subjectivity.⁵⁰

Therefore, some things impede human efforts to seek happiness and meaning in life. These things can be external (like religion and science) or internal (like some internalized ideas that paralyze the individual). Due to the size and purpose of this paper, below, Alves' ideas about just two items that people generally consider enemies of happiness and meaningful life will be evaluated: suffering and death.

2. Suffering and Death

The title of one of Alves' books used in this article can summarize his concept of suffering: "A Happy Oyster Does Not Make a Pearl".⁵¹ The need to create may not exist in happy people.

⁴⁰ ALVES, R. *Sobre o Tempo e a Eternidade*. São Paulo: Papirus, 1995. p. 123.

⁴¹ ALVES, 2012, p. 41.

⁴² VOLFF, M.; CROASMUN, M. *For the Life of the World (Theology for the Life of the World): Theology That Makes a Difference*. Ada: Brazos, 2019. p. 11-34.

⁴³ SCOFANO, R. B. Iluminação e desaprendizagem: influência do Zen-Budismo no pensamento educacional de Rubem Alves. In: NUNES, 2007, p. 150.

⁴⁴ GEERTZ, Clifford. *A Interpretação das Culturas*. Rio de Janeiro: LTC, [s.d.]. p. 35.

⁴⁵ GEERTZ, s.d., p. 4.

⁴⁶ ALVES, 2005a, p. 23.

⁴⁷ REBLIN, 2014, p. 119.

⁴⁸ ALVES, 2005a, p. 119.

⁴⁹ SEVERINO, 2007, p. 119.

⁵⁰ SEVERINO, 2007, p. 121.

⁵¹ ALVES, 2008. In the original: "Ostra feliz não faz pérola".

Alves believes that creativity comes from pain and that only an oyster that suffers from its impurities can produce pearls. Like oysters, humans can produce pearls amid suffering.⁵²

Suffering brings out beauty, as there is beauty hidden in sadness.⁵³ The ancient Greeks, even though they took the tragic feeling of life seriously, did not succumb to pessimism because they managed to transform tragedy into beauty, and beauty makes tragedy bearable. Alves clarifies that happiness is enough, it does not need justification and utility, it is a gift that should only be enjoyed. Nevertheless, happiness does not produce pearls: “it is those who suffer who produce beauty, to stop suffering”.⁵⁴ He illustrated this by remembering that Beethoven was an unfortunate oyster; that there was something painful inside him. Then, to alleviate his suffering, Beethoven filled the world with pearls.⁵⁵

Here, too, Alves distances himself from the approach that some ancient philosophical schools give to pain, such as Epicureanism and Stoicism. From a psychological perspective, such philosophies look like an attempt to avoid pain and frustration. By considering everything that can be loved as something ephemeral to become immune to the possibility of loss and frustration, in the case of Stoicism’s idea of “Negative Visualization” for example,⁵⁶ the person runs the risk of losing their ability to value things and destroying any possibility of happiness. That’s not how Alves deals with pain.

He describes life as a mosaic made of broken glass. The shards alone have no beauty or meaning, but they can be put together by an artist, generating a work of art. Troubles and sorrows don’t even have to be big and deep to serve as a platform for beauty. Because life is made of trifles, like poetry, the kaleidoscope of life makes beauty out of small shards of glass.⁵⁷

There is a pedagogical aspect to suffering. Evoking Nietzsche’s idea of practicing philosophy with hammer blows, Alves states that education is like the art of carving: the raw material cannot be left as it is, it is necessary to hit the chisel with a hammer and tear off pieces of marble. Michelangelo did not hit the marble because he hated it, but because he knew the *Pietà* was hidden inside. Therefore, complacency and omission are bad, because they soften or avoid blows, and marble remains marble.⁵⁸

Even illness is a teacher that can make us wiser, and if it is heard as a teacher, in the end, it can even bring some happiness.⁵⁹ Suffering can create beauty, as beauty appears as a remedy for the human fear of dying, and Alves states that “people who enjoy perfect health do not create anything. [...] Creation is the fruit of suffering”.⁶⁰ All great artists have some kind of disease or disorder. God himself was sick with love, and that is why he created the universe. Therefore, Alves states that “health dumbs down the senses”.⁶¹

Alves does not subscribe to the Epicurean teaching that the pursuit of happiness and the minimization of suffering can be achieved through the pursuit of simple pleasures, moderation,

⁵² ALVES, 1995, p. 39.

⁵³ ALVES, 1995, p. 40.

⁵⁴ ALVES, 2008, p. 4. In the original: “são os que sofrem que produzem a beleza, para parar de sofrer”.

⁵⁵ ALVES, R. A educação como descoberta. *Língua Portuguesa*, v. 2, n. 20, 2007, p. 18.

⁵⁶ IRVINE, W. B. *A Guide to the Good Life: The Ancient Art of Stoic Joy*. Oxford: Oxford University, 2009. p. 65-77.

⁵⁷ ALVES, 2008, p. 72.

⁵⁸ ALVES, 1995, p. 37-38.

⁵⁹ ALVES, 1995, p. 82-83.

⁶⁰ ALVES, 1995, p. 82. In the original: “pessoas que gozam saúde perfeita não criam nada. [...] A criação é fruto de sofrimento”.

⁶¹ ALVES, 1995, p. 83. In the original: “a saúde emburrece os sentidos”.

friendship, peace of mind, and detachment from irrational fears.⁶² Apparently, on this matter, he is closer to the existentialist idea that there is contingent, senseless suffering, like the absurdity in the myth of Sisyphus.⁶³ Alves believes that it is possible to create meaning and purpose amid adversity.

Faced with the creative potential of suffering, Alves said he was terrified of very happy people, very excited, with a futile and noisy joy, of the *happy hour* or carnival type. The reason for such aversion is that this type of joy does not generate beauty. It is a sign of a disturbed soul that makes noise because it cannot bear the silence or the contemplation of beauty.⁶⁴

As a psychoanalyst, he humorously revealed the desire to develop a kind of therapy for this kind of happy people. A therapy that would include Lacan, Beethoven, Mahler, Van Gogh, and Monet, and that the session would only end when people cried, because “whoever cannot make friends with sadness is a candidate for the psychiatrist’s office and diets of antidepressants and tranquilizers”.⁶⁵

The beautiful and good life should be like the Passover: a celebration that mixes good food with bitter herbs. Many people cry in the face of beauty because “beauty is the pleasure of sadness”,⁶⁶ and it would be absurd to look away from beauty to avoid crying. There are justified, necessary sadness, natural parts of life, and those who do not feel this sadness are sick and would need therapy to learn to be sad.⁶⁷ There are many situations in life where the right and healthy thing to do is to be sad. Joy is not always evidence of balance and mental health, as joy at an inappropriate moment is a sign of madness.⁶⁸

Alves associates beauty with the feeling of sadness because they live in tension, even though beauty does not have the power to nullify suffering and death, which is the final destiny of the human being.⁶⁹ Suffering and death confront life and desires, and it is from this confrontation that the sad and tragic beauty is born,⁷⁰ which is not annulled by suffering and does not annul suffering. Beauty creates meanings that make the human being see *beyond* suffering and death.⁷¹

The relationship between suffering and beauty causes some experiences to be described as *happy sufferings*, which are sorrows that produce beauty. Alves illustrates the concept with one *nocturne* of Chopin played by pianist Rubinstein, it is suffering because the *nocturnes* are sad, but it is happy because the *nocturnes* are beautiful.⁷² The sadness of old age, for example, is a sadness of love for life, it is the awareness that *Tempus fugit*, but it is a sadness that is good for the heart.⁷³ Thus, often the secret to happiness is not to cure suffering, but turning suffering into beauty, like Chopin and his *nocturnes*.

⁶² See EPICURO. *Carta sobre a felicidade (a Meneceu)*. São Paulo: Unesp, 2002.

⁶³ See CAMUS, Albert. *O mito de Sísifo*. Rio de Janeiro: Record, 2018.

⁶⁴ ALVES, 1995, p. 106.

⁶⁵ ALVES, 1995, p. 106. In the original: “quem não consegue fazer amizade com a tristeza é candidato ao consultório dos psiquiatras e às dietas de antidepressivos e tranquilizantes”.

⁶⁶ ALVES, 1995, p. 107. In the original: “a beleza é o prazer da tristeza”.

⁶⁷ ALVES, 2012, p. 47.

⁶⁸ ALVES, 2014, p. 28.

⁶⁹ REBLIN, 2014, p. 172.

⁷⁰ ALVES, R. *O Poeta, o Guerreiro, o Profeta*. Petrópolis: Vozes, 1992. p. 129.

⁷¹ REBLIN, 2014, p. 173.

⁷² ALVES, 2014, p. 24.

⁷³ ALVES, 1992b, p. 160.

However, despite seeing virtue in sadness, Alves says that there is a limit, because life cannot be just sadness.⁷⁴ It is necessary to temper the sadness with joy, as constant sadness is very dangerous and can generate suicidal thoughts and desires. A good remedy for not wanting to die and having joy again is to talk, to have someone who listens and understands the sadness.⁷⁵ Another way for someone to deal with sadness is otherness and service to the other, to be so filled with the sadness of others that there will be no more room for one's own sadness.⁷⁶

Then, how to deal with life's problems? First, it is necessary to check if there is a problem. Alves defines a problem as something that has a possible solution. If no one could solve it, it is not a problem. Thus, faced with unavoidable situations, or issues for which there is no way out, the best thing to do is to forget and mentalize that that problem does not exist, because, in fact, it does not exist.⁷⁷ Life has its natural wisdom, and there are situations in which trying to do something ends up making things go wrong, like trying to help a butterfly to get out of its cocoon, making things easier.⁷⁸

The person needs to let go of the pressure of always producing, solving problems, doing multiple tasks at the same time. Alves compares the promises of hyperactivity with the promise of a future reward made by the devil in the temptation of Jesus in the desert: "All these things will I give thee..." (Matt. 4:9). It is an empty promise. At the end of life, in general, people complain about having run so hard after things that did not give any flavor to their existence.

It is only possible to win when you recognize that stress is a sign that death is taking over life. It is good to be aware of the transience of life, but it is bad to live in the grip of the fear of death. Recognizing the finitude of life must lead to a positive attitude, *Tempus fugit*, therefore, *Carpe diem*. This healthy awareness of death (*memento mori*?) eliminates the power of pressure, making the person reflect on their deepest yearnings, which are buried by hyperactivity.⁷⁹ When there is wisdom, the proximity of death can illuminate life.

The notion that time is fleeting is a reflection that can be found in various philosophical and literary traditions. However, it is difficult to assert with which one Alves identifies. For example, this idea is consistent with Stoic philosophy, which emphasizes the importance of living in the present moment and accepting that time is inevitably transitory. Stoics believe that we should focus our efforts on what we can control, such as our actions and choices, rather than worrying about the past or the future, as time is uncontrollable. Nevertheless, Alves does not appear to be a Stoic, given his appreciation for the body and pleasure.

The finitude of life is also a recurring theme in Sartre's existentialism,⁸⁰ and he argues that the awareness of death and the limitations of our lives are fundamental to our freedom and responsibility in the face of actions and choices. Sartre addresses the notion that death confronts

⁷⁴ ALVES, R. *Da esperança*. São Paulo: Papirus, 1987b. Foreword to the book.

⁷⁵ ALVES, 2012, p. 47.

⁷⁶ ALVES, 2008, p. 143.

⁷⁷ ALVES, 1995, p. 22.

⁷⁸ ALVES, 1995, p. 23.

⁷⁹ ALVES, 2008, p. 142. Alves does not insist rigorously on *memento mori*, as other thinkers do, such as Seneca, who advocates: "[...] never stop thinking about death" (SÊNECA. *Sobre a Brevidade da Vida*. São Paulo: Companhia da Letras, 2015. 11, 1-2.). For Seneca, death, whether natural or self-inflicted, is perceived as a form of liberation. This notion paves the way to consider suicide as a viable alternative whenever external conditions render a life of dignity impossible.

⁸⁰ See, for instance, SARTRE, Jean-Paul. *Ser e o nada: ensaio de ontologia fenomenológica*. Petrópolis: Vozes, 2015.

us with the responsibility to create our own meaning in life.⁸¹ However, Rubem Alves does not seem to share the existentialist sense of estrangement and absurdity in the face of the finitude of life and the lack of intrinsic meaning in the world, as portrayed by Sartre's character Roquentin in "Nausea".⁸²

Faced with death, Alves dealt with two possibilities: whether or not there was life after death. In the first possibility, the afterlife would be a realization of love, without hell, for torture after death is a slander by God's enemies to make human beings hate him. In the second possibility, death would just be a return to the state of non-existence, without any feeling or awareness. Therefore, Alves prefers the first, but is not afraid of the second, he only feels sad "because this world is very good and I would like to continue doing my things here".⁸³

The awareness of the passage of time and the brevity of life appears to have intersections with the Christian teaching that actions and choices made during life will have eternal implications. It may also have some relation to the Buddhist practice of "mindfulness" and the understanding of impermanence (*Anicca*). Alves certainly drank from both sources: Christianity and Buddhism.⁸⁴ However, Alves does not emphasize the Christian heaven, nor does he focus on concepts like reincarnation (*Samsara*) and detachment from time (*Vairagya*), which are central elements of Buddhist philosophy.

Alves was not attracted to the idea of perfect celestial happiness after death. He highlighted the fact that most people who believe this do not want to give up the small joys of this life to enjoy heavenly happiness. These people take care of their health because, deep in their hearts, they do not want heaven, but they want to stay here. For him, God himself prefers the delights of this material world to the spiritual heavenly happiness, because if he were happy and satisfied in heaven, he would not have created the earth.⁸⁵

But how to live this earthly and brief life with beauty? How to make the most of your time harvesting the days and satisfying your desires? According to Alves, what kind of characteristics should someone looking for a good life have? These will be the guiding questions in the next section.

3. Virtues for Living a Meaningful Life

The concept of *Carpe diem* can easily be confused with some form of irresponsible hedonism. But in the thinking of Alves, as explained in the previous topic, enjoying life includes reflection, sadness, crying, silent contemplation. Futile, noisy joy does not fit Alves' concept of a good life. Life needs to be enjoyed, because *Tempus fugit*, but always with an awareness of finitude and suffering, as this awareness generates beauty and avoids empty and meaningless joy. For Seneca, throughout life, one is constantly learning to die,⁸⁶ and perhaps Alves agreed with the essence of this thought, however, he was interested in emphasizing life. The awareness

⁸¹ See, for example, SARTRE, Jean-Paul. *Essays in Existentialism*. Secaucus: Citadel Press, 1967.

⁸² SARTRE, Jean-Paul. *A náusea*. Rio de Janeiro: Nova Fronteira, 2019.

⁸³ ALVES, 2008, p. 156. In the original: "porque este mundo é muito bom e quereria continuar a fazer minhas coisas por aqui".

⁸⁴ SCOFANO, 2007, p. 135-154; ALVES, 1995, p. 22-23; ALVES, 2014, p. 14.

⁸⁵ ALVES, 2012, p. 14.

⁸⁶ SENECA, 2015, VII, 3-4.

of death puts everything into perspective,⁸⁷ and it is from this awareness that the necessary virtues for a good life are deduced. They are born and grow on this platform of recognizing what a human being is and what life is.

Life is like a girl who plays in the morning, works until noon, loves in the afternoon, and finally finds time for rest, which is also showtime.⁸⁸ As *Tempus fugit*, the human being becomes a child, for there is a childhood that lives in the silence of old age. Therefore, Alves sees beauty in old age, in the end (it is showtime), and says he does not believe that life should be preserved at any cost, as life is not biological, but aesthetic. And like any work of art, it needs to come to an end. Like children, who live not to work but to play, adults must understand that the meaning of life is to play and see beauty. And when the possibility of rejoicing in the face of beauty ends, life is over, even if the person continues to breathe.

That is the concept of living for the sake of living. There is great value in calm, gratuitous, purposeless, idle, beauty-bound contemplation. In the face of beauty, happiness, pure pleasure overflows.⁸⁹ Alves denounces what he calls the “utility compulsion”,⁹⁰ the pressure to be useful, to perform tasks, to get somewhere. According to him, it is necessary to live “under the grace of uselessness”,⁹¹ without wanting to go because they are convinced that they have already arrived at the place, it is necessary freedom to do things that are apparently useless, “for the sheer joy of being”.⁹² This freedom is a sign of authentic existence, and inauthentic existence is the result of slavery to the power of this meaningless system.⁹³

Anthropology is fundamental to the thinking of Alves. Rejecting Platonic anthropology, he defended a holistic anthropological conception, placing great emphasis on the role of the body,⁹⁴ and describing the human being as a being of dream, love, desire, nostalgia, and utopia rooted in a body, in search of an *ordo amoris*.⁹⁵ Hence the choice of Alves for the sensitivity of children, because they are desire.⁹⁶

However, the body should not be seen only as a biological phenomenon, as it is also transcendent, in dreams, desires, and words: “we humans are not just matter. We are poetry. Poetry moves us. If you doubt it, it is because you never loved”.⁹⁷ The human being has an abyss ahead but believes that there is another margin and tries to jump over it, even if he does not reach the other side.⁹⁸ As long as there is desire and passion, the human being will continue to try to jump. Thus, there is a link between desire and hope.

Hope is one of the essential virtues for a meaningful life, it is a central concept in Alves’ thought. It means the desire for a new ecumenical humanity that overcomes the historical and

⁸⁷ GONÇALO JUNIOR, 2015, p. 532.

⁸⁸ ALVES, 1992b, p. 113.

⁸⁹ ALVES, 1992b, p. 59, 73.

⁹⁰ ALVES, 1995, p. 71. In the original: “compulsão da utilidade”.

⁹¹ ALVES, 1995, p. 71. In the original: “sob a graça da inutilidade”.

⁹² ALVES, 1995, p. 71. In the original: “pela pura alegria de ser”.

⁹³ ALVES, 1982, p. 86.

⁹⁴ ALVES, R. *A alegria de ensinar*. São Paulo: Ars Poetica, 1994. p. 52.

⁹⁵ NUNES, A. V. Etapas do itinerário reflexivo de Rubem Alves: a dança da vida e dos símbolos. In: NUNES, 2007. p. 14, 40, 50; ALVES, 1992b, p. 27, 49.

⁹⁶ ALVES, 1987a, p. 14.

⁹⁷ ALVES, 2008, p. 141-142. In the original: “nós, humanos, não somos apenas matéria. Somos poesia. A poesia nos move. Se você duvida, é porque nunca amou”.

⁹⁸ TANCARA, 2007, p. 228.

tragic devastations of Western colonization. Hope is the desire for liberation.⁹⁹ Hope is believing “in spite of”,¹⁰⁰ and human beings lose their humanity when they lose hope.¹⁰¹

Apparently, at this point, Alves approaches a Christian vision of the good life. Historically, the good life was seen as health, wealth, fertility, and longevity. The Christian vision of happiness, however, includes contentment, the arduous ways of living under sinful conditions, and the transcendent hope that one day everything will be all right.

Hope has a subversive nature, seeking to revert “the impediment to flourishing; impediment to authenticity; impediment ‘from being properly what one really is’”.¹⁰² Hopeful people invest in creating fragmented glimpses of the future, hope is an experience of “tasting a different and better world than today”,¹⁰³ is a resurrection, which is preceded by the “death of absolutes and absolutisms”.¹⁰⁴

Alves’ thought can be summarized as follows: *Tempus fugit* – time flees – therefore, *Carpe diem* – reap the day. It is necessary to live the present intensely because twilight is approaching, the night is coming, and this transforms every moment of life into a farewell.¹⁰⁵ *Tempus fugit* is the awareness that after adulthood comes old age and death.¹⁰⁶ The *Carpe diem* concept puts the focus on the present life, in front of the clock of life that only shows that time is passing, not how much time is left. The clock of life just warns, with its ticking, that time is passing, and that it is necessary to pick the red strawberries that grow on the edge of the abyss.

The reflection on the passage of time makes Alves see beauty in old age, because the individuals know that death is coming, and this makes them wiser, making them savor each moment as a unique joy. The awareness of farewell makes a person look at life with tender eyes. According to Alves, old age is a twilight, the beautiful stage of life when things are seen more consciously. Old age is a second childhood, which makes the individual see things as a child does, with wisdom and love.¹⁰⁷ In Alves’ thought, there is a solidarity between old age and childhood.¹⁰⁸ Old age provides an opportunity to recover childhood happiness.¹⁰⁹

What would I do if I could live my life again? This question evaluates what a good life is. Thinking about this question, Alves says that he would want to live life exactly the same way he did, with all the mistakes and sufferings, because he didn’t feel unhappy. Although his life took turns he had never planned, he thought he was living in a beautiful twilight.¹¹⁰

Wisdom is another virtue necessary for a good life. Alves makes a difference between wisdom and science. Wisdom and happiness are things that grow inside the human being,¹¹¹ on

⁹⁹ JAMES, L. R. Rubem Alves e a teologia da libertação ecumênica: a esperança e a busca de uma nova humanidade. In: NUNES, 2007. p. 158.

¹⁰⁰ NUNES, 2007 p. 32. In the original: “apesar de”.

¹⁰¹ NUNES, 2007, p. 25.

¹⁰² JAMES, 2007, p. 158. In the original: “impedimento ao florescimento; impedimento à autenticidade; impedimento “de ser propriamente o que se é, realmente”.

¹⁰³ SEVERINO, 2007, p. 119. In the original: “degustação de um mundo diferente e melhor do que o atual”.

¹⁰⁴ JAMES, 2007, p. 158. In the original: “morte de absolutos e absolutismos”.

¹⁰⁵ ALVES, 1992b, p. 101.

¹⁰⁶ ALVES, 1995, p. 13.

¹⁰⁷ ALVES, 1992b, p. 84, 140.

¹⁰⁸ ALVES, 1995, p. 159.

¹⁰⁹ ALVES, 2012, p. 25.

¹¹⁰ ALVES, 2012, p. 12.

¹¹¹ ALVES, 2012, p. 34.

the other hand, “science is not life. [...] Life is much more than science. Science is one thing among others that we employ in the adventure of living, which is the only thing that matters”.¹¹²

According to Alves, science is the servant of life. Wisdom is in another position. It also serves life, but it usually does this by directing life in a good way. Wisdom is not exclusive to experts, scholars, or people with degrees. It is the art of living. This is the reason why, “in addition to science, sapience is needed, tasty science, wisdom, which has to do with the art of living”.¹¹³

Alves values traditional wisdom that helps to understand the mystery of human existence. For example, he incorporated the Zen Buddhist concept of enlightenment into his thinking.¹¹⁴ He often cites Eastern wisdom, especially Taoism and Zen Buddhism.¹¹⁵ He describes the *Tao Te King* (the Chinese *Book of the Way and Virtue*) as one of the wisest books ever written.¹¹⁶

Christian Theology itself is defined as “wisdom”, a “knowledge transfigured by love, tasty knowledge, knowing that it tastes good”.¹¹⁷ Theology as wisdom is a reflection that takes place in the reality of life, it is practical, linked to human experience and the art of living, and it is not the exclusive subject of specialists.¹¹⁸ Theology is not a sort of wisdom received by the intellect, but by the body, as the body is in search of the pleasant and erotic truth.¹¹⁹

Describing the men of science today, Alves states that while they become more scientifically intelligent, they become more foolish, as they forget the ancient forms of wisdom.¹²⁰ And what is a sage? Based on Jesus and the *Tao Te King*, Alves defines the sage as an adult with the eyes of a child¹²¹: curious, ready to see, empty, and eager to know, they are always dazzled by the eternal newness of the world.¹²²

It is not possible to separate Alves’ philosophy of life from his educational philosophy, as he does not separate the two things: education is life, and life is education. To educate is to help people to rediscover the joy of living.¹²³ He calls his educational thought the *Pedagogy of Unconsciousness*,¹²⁴ to highlight the pedagogical importance of the senses and pleasures.

One of his preferred themes is the eyes and the looking. He says that education must teach how to see, the act of seeing must be learned. And there is an anthropological aspect here because human beings see what they are, so it is necessary to be different to see it differently.¹²⁵ How to be different? Practicing unlearning, dismantling language, and freeing the eyes of

¹¹² ALVES, 2006, p. 15. In the original: “ciência não é vida. [...] A vida é muito mais que a ciência. Ciência é uma coisa entre outras, que empregamos na aventura de viver, que é a única coisa que importa”.

¹¹³ ALVES, 2006, p. 15. In the original: “além da ciência, é preciso a sapiência, ciência saborosa, sabedoria, que tem a ver com a arte de viver”.

¹¹⁴ SCOFANO, 2007, p. 135-154.

¹¹⁵ ALVES, 1995, p. 22-23.

¹¹⁶ ALVES, 2014, p. 14.

¹¹⁷ ALVES, 1987a, p. 32. In the original: “sabedoria”, “saber transfigurado pelo amor, saber saboroso, saber que tem gosto bom”.

¹¹⁸ BRAKEMEIER, G. O Mandato Teológico da IECLB: algumas teses. In: HOCH, L. (ed.). *Formação Teológica em Terra Brasileira*. São Leopoldo: Sinodal, 1986. p. 90.

¹¹⁹ ALVES, 2005b, p. 78.

¹²⁰ ALVES, 2014, p. 10.

¹²¹ ALVES, 2014, p. 14.

¹²² ALVES, 2014, p. 15.

¹²³ SCOFANO, 2007, p. 147.

¹²⁴ ALVES, R. *O livro sem fim*. São Paulo: Loyola, 2002.

¹²⁵ ALVES, R. *A escola que eu sempre sonhei sem imaginar que pudesse existir*. Campinas: Papirus, 2001. p. 27.

knowledge and memories that blind them, locking them to the past and preventing them from seeing the eternal newness of the world. Thus, the eyes recover the purity of children's eyes, starting to see what they had never really seen before.¹²⁶ This awakening of the child who lives within the individual is also the retrieving of the lost wisdom.¹²⁷

This unlearning process can be encouraged by provokers of a new view of things,¹²⁸ such as poets, psychoanalysts, and Zen Buddhist masters. Upon recovering childhood, human beings start to see the world differently and to be who they really are, reaching happiness more often, because happiness is back to being a child.¹²⁹

Conclusion

Alves' concept of good life can be summarized in the following sentence: *Tempus fugit*, therefore, *Carpe diem* as the *ordo amoris* is built. The meaning of life is to live. He does not believe that happiness can be fully achieved, but it is worth the effort to achieve it. It is in this search, in this journey, that the human being finds many moments of happiness and beauty. And a single moment of beauty makes many moments of suffering worth it.

Sometimes, Alves is very critical and treats religions in a generalized way. However, the concepts of *ordo amoris*, desire, and imagination fit perfectly into the workings of many religions, both negatively and positively. Therefore, Alves' criticism of religion should be more specific, as his proposal also sounds like a kind of deinstitutionalized and secular religion.

There is a theological problem with Alves' contempt for heaven. What if celestial happiness was generated by desire, imagination, and dreams? What if Christian eschatological expectation is a manifestation of the yearning of the *ordo amoris*? Alves, as well as Liberation Theology, prefer immanence. Or at most a transcendence that does not go too far, that is not too heavenly.

The good life is simple, made with everyday things, even insignificant things. That is why Alves, in the final phase of his production, dedicated himself to children. The good life is becoming a child again. Children know the essentials of life. Alves sees beauty in both children and the elderly, because, for him, old age and childhood meet. Both are beautiful phenomena, very similar, like sunrise and sunset.

The idea of enjoying life for Alves is not a form of irresponsible and futile hedonism. *Ordo amoris* requires balance in the expression of affections, thus, *Carpe diem* includes silent contemplation, sadness, and weeping. Alves recognizes that there is suffering, and it is no use pretending it does not exist. It is necessary to live the sadness, learn from the pain, and pick the delicious strawberries that are growing on the walls of the abyss. The pain does not end, but it can be transfigured by beauty. Suffering is the raw material for human beauty and creativity.

Finally, to live a good life, it is necessary to be aware of the brevity and finitude of human existence. This attitude puts everything in perspective. The virtues required for a good life spring from this recognition. Rubem Alves' philosophy seems to fit a Latin American way of life that he imagined was standard. Certainly, the generalization on this subject is a mistake,

¹²⁶ SCOFANO, 2007, p. 151-152.

¹²⁷ ALVES, 1992b, p. 134.

¹²⁸ SCOFANO, 2007, p. 152.

¹²⁹ ALVES, R. *Tempus fugit*. São Paulo: Paulus, 1997. p. 41.

but anyone interested in wisdom, philosophy, theology, and the art of living will find in Alves' work many strawberries to pick.

Some questions arose during the research and now they are turned into suggestions for further research. Living intensely and not being in a hurry seems like contradictory advice. Especially considering the many warnings that time is passing. How not run in the face of *Tempus fugit* insistent warning? As Alves sparsely writes, a literature review could specifically examine this topic in more depth in the future to systematize this topic.

Alves says that happiness is not possible, but then goes on to talk a lot about how to be happy, says that people should strive to be happy, describes how happy children are, and even describes his happiness at the end of life. It is just implied in his texts that he refers to complete happiness as something impossible and that his concept of happiness is closer to an endless journey with happy moments than to a point of arrival. Future research could make a comparison between texts about happiness and texts about sadness and suffering. Thus, a concept of happiness could crystallize.

Alves' eudaimonistic ethics rests heavily on his anthropology. Human being is a being of desire, dreams, and hope. From then on, the impression given by Alves' texts is that if these beings free themselves from the pressures and illusions of a world that represses them, then all their dreams and desires will be good and correct. In Alves' texts, the human being wants to build a world of *ordo amoris* and fails. Execution of the plan is bad, but the intention is always good. Do human beings always want the good? Do they always imagine the good? Are human dreams always positive? Future research could investigate these elements of Alves' anthropology – desire, dream, imagination – and assess the extent to which Alves portrays them as something naturally positive.

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