Interpretations on Happiness by Plato and Aristotle: Analytical Essay

Exactly what is happiness? To many, happiness is a way of engaging in various activities as an aid to total life satisfaction. Aristotle believed happiness allows people to live the ‘good life’, so is such a life achieved through sole emotion? The following will be examining the ethics behind Aristotle (384-322 BCE) and Plato (428-347 BCE) to justify, analyze, and compare major concepts between the two. I will argue in favor of Aristotle’s explanation to the concept of the ‘good life’ as a better solution therein Plato’s. Included in such, I hope to summarize the fundamental concepts of Aristotle’s and Plato’s ethical theories, before providing personal opinion on the two in regard to their connection to ‘a’ soul.

Interpretations on Happiness

Individuals create their own perception of happiness, formed by dependent goals and standards that humans continue to adjust and set for themselves, others, and the world. Nonetheless, happiness is sought to be humans’ highest goal. Thus, their passions and efforts are rooted in humans’ desire to be happy – ultimately creating unique individuals throughout a seemingly infinite pool of humans over time. Happiness also is closely joined to the words of “fulfilled” and “successful”, but, if humans’ highest desired goal is happiness, then one must seek insight on how happiness is achieved. Early philosophers like Aristotle and Plato endeavored to define happiness, in which both claim that such emotion and desire to live life in the manner of happiness is ultimately a choice up to the individual. However, Aristotle and Plato both constructed different perceptions on what constitutes as the ‘good life’ and happiness detailing how each are attained. For Aristotle, happiness is a choice that starts within the individual. According, it is not something that just happens or ‘comes’ to a person without specific activities, rather for Aristotle, happiness can be seen as rooted within human choices that eventually shape an individual’s forming of the sought-after emotion.

As an eventual teacher to Aristotle, Plato was both an absolutist and a rationalist in respect to his approach on ethics. Plato’s rationalist background curated his beliefs as he seemingly assumed people can use reason alone as a mode to discover justification and knowledge, with no circumstances that the recognized knowledge can be inherently wrong. Plato believed that humans reasoning ability was the condition that allowed people to approach ideas and intricate details as a method of understanding ideas. Individuals live in a world where life can be set as a cohort for Plato, the visible world and intelligible things. The visible world is exactly what it entails – what humans see, hear and experience in their lives. The visible world has proven to be ever-changing and full of vagueness which means humans have to seek for absolute knowledge within their own minds to find the full source of information. His absolutist theories on the idea of happiness stem from the thought of Plato’s belief that there is “one and only one good life for all to lead” as goodness is not dependent upon human intricacies and experiences as argued by his student, Aristotle. Happiness is an absolute and exists independently of mankind, thus Plato ultimately assumed that “if a person knows what the ‘good life’ is, then he or she would not act immorally”. If desiring to live the ‘good life’ in Plato’s world, such people need to be ‘trained’ to give capacity on the knowledge of happiness and the ‘good life’, as evil

is the told lack of knowledge. Aristotle surely had opposing perspectives to Plato's beliefs of what the 'good life' actually entails and how to achieve such state as he saw the emotion more closely tied to an individual's involvements.

Eudemonia

The original founder of Lyceum, the preliminary scientific institution in Athens, Greece, Aristotle curated a series of lectures dubbed Nicomachean Ethics to project his theory of overall happiness. Within such, Aristotle asks "what is the ultimate purpose of human existence?" (Pursuit of Happiness) noting human wants are driven by internal desires and goals set without the need of specific thought by humans as it acts naturally within. Aristotle assumed that a sensible goal should be to pursue such a state that "is always desirable in itself and never for the sake of something else." (Pursuit of Happiness). In modern day contemplation, the aspect that humans are always willing to take the 'easiest' route in a given situation still holds true as we always seek a desirable state of living over one of suffering in the slightest of ways. In Aristotle's respect, the noted views don't necessarily mean that only intrinsic pleasures are to be achieved as humans contain far more capacity in his eyes to accept such a 'simple life'. In the works of developing his theory of 'happiness', Aristotle drew heavily on his disciplined knowledge of nature distinguishing why intrinsic goods are separate from human to non-human-animal as it is not a humans main strive to happiness. He contended that what ultimately separates man from animal is the ability to hold rational capacity, projecting that a human's unique function is the ability to reason. He went further to say that the 'need' for pleasure alone cannot produce happiness as animals are driven by the sole pursuit of pleasure and according to Aristoteles overarching views, humans have far greater intrinsic capacities than any animal of any class.

Resulting of such separation between animal and human in their respective pursuit of happiness, Aristotle introduced the term "eudaimonia" to be simply seen as an 'activity expressing virtue' – or what Aristotle ultimately conceives to be happiness. Within Aristotle's work, he specifically describes, as follows, how he found his way to the terminology and how it creates the animal-to-human distinction for happiness:

'the function of man is to live a certain kind of life, and this activity implies a rational principle, and the function of a good man is the good and noble performance of these, and if any action is well performed it is performed in accord with the appropriate excellence: if this is the case, then happiness turns out to be an activity of the soul in accordance with virtue' (Aristotle, 2004).

A key component of such thinking in Aristotle's theory of happiness (eudemonia) is the factoring of virtue. He contested that setting a goal for the state of happiness should start at the most important factor - having 'complete virtue" – or said otherwise – good overall moral character. Aristotle went on to project his belief that happiness involves a lifetime of actions of choosing the 'high ground' or the 'greater good'. Aristotle more closely connected with the thought of a soul as noting that happiness is achieved through long term outlooks, rather than short term, accelerated pleasure. The concept of a soul is most closely related with an entire lifespan of information and acting – as Aristotle held, how happiness is ultimately achieved. It is a greater take than a reoccurring 'I am doing the right thing at this period of my life' aspect of time… focusing the eventual higher grounds found in everyday human choices and engagements.

Virtue

The achievement of the ‘good life’ is sought after from all humans in whichever respect their minds (souls) set for themselves to be dubbed as the good life. Understanding exactly what that entails is where Plato and Aristotle not only agree, but they differ in veneration to their expressions of virtue and how one is able to use virtue to lay out the foundation for the noted ‘good life’. To Plato, the good life is one in which a person portrays perfect virtue throughout their time, therefore putting that person closer to the higher realm of existence. Virtue in a way comes from the absence of desires and a human’s ability to feel contentment – thus one what is fully satisfied in their own respective ‘good life’ must contain no desires. As Plato describes, this satisfaction of found happiness occur when a person arrives at a certain mystical understanding of the world and the various attributes involved in the soul’s lifespan on earth. An attribute to the sought-after happiness within a human’s soul, for Plato, is the medium of love in which humans will seek out ‘ownership’ of good things that makes one happy. According, humans desire for love is ultimately the true “desire to have good forever” (Plato, 43) within their lives. Reproduction, an effect of love, is as close as humans come to attaining a physical immortality – showing their desire to live vicariously through future children. In addition, the result of these basic human desires of immortality, goodness, and love are all attributes to the noted good life, and for Plato, it is simply a matter of achieving these attributes to have a rested soul. If a person is eventually (slowly) taught the ways of love through experience, then that person can achieve the good life. The humans must overcome the perception of the persons physical beauty, and transition to loving the beauty of his/her mind – showing love in a more general state of mind and a highly weighted factor in the contest for happiness.

After progressing through these stages, a person will have a strong grasp of the understanding of the concept of ‘formless beauty’. From there that person can understand beauty as a larger picture, and therefore understand the divine and the achievement of the good life. Having this developed perception and understanding, a true projection of virtue will occur – therefore “has a chance of becoming loved by the gods, and immortal” (Plato, 50). Since this person has come about the understanding of the world and achieved immortality, ‘he/she’ has therefore quenched their worldly desires. This person has reached the good life according to its definition, and achieved ultimate happiness during, and after, its pursuit to the good life.

To show happiness lies within virtue, Aristotle initially splits forms of goodness into three parts – “external goods, goods of the body, and goods of the soul.” (Aristotle, 160). Aristotle continues to project that the ‘good of the soul’, also noted as virtues, is the most important within these split forms as a person has the ability to gain material wealth and therefore pleasure. He goes on to define happiness, and thus the good life, as the “realization and perfect exercise of excellence. And this is not conditional, but absolute” (Aristotle, 184). He ultimately finds that happiness occurs when a person’s true actions are in all ways virtuous and have set goals to achieve, or become, virtuous. This thought patter n also implies that in order to live the noted ‘good life’, there must be no action within a souls existence that can be classified as ‘unnecessary’ through the lenses of achieving perfect virtue – implying the need for group-setting appropriate conduct and a formation of achievable goals. This process comes from the initiative that humans take in the path to happiness because unless all within a group are perfectly virtuous, an action is needed to maintain virtue for those whom do not act, or set goal, to be the standard of virtuous as other members (souls) perceive and desire to be. Within this group-setting and its implications on a single soul’s pursuit to happiness, Aristotle states

“There are three things that make men good and excellent; these are nature, habit and reason.” (Aristotle, 185). The path to happiness, looking at Aristotle’s sequences, is formed through the construction of habit and reason which ultimately creates a soul’s virtuous actions, in addition to possessing the character (nature) that aligns with these actions. Some people are unable and unequipped to lead a good life as the true desire and nature of a person cannot be changed - nature is absolute. The method to construct a change in a person’s reason and habit is through training and education, which is most effective from the birth of a soul. A soul must be respectively trained and educated to be held in a virtuous manner from quite a young age in order to live the good life as souls are a true compilation of past events and memoires served though its existence.

Education and training of the good life does not come from specially built institutions that provide ‘the good life’ teaching, however the teaching aspect of the good life and happiness plays an imperative role. A soul, as it complies information from its early years, has no control over whether it lives the good life or not. The ability to make concise and clear decisions at a very young age is obviously not to be asked for and can be very well dubbed as impossible – showing the importance of education and training from the ‘state’. The job the greater regional respective areas has an effect on a person and how they operate and see the world. It is ultimately the job of the state to create the good life for its citizens as it outlines and lays the foundation of all projected virtuous actions within. Infrastructure, safety, walkability, scenes, etc. all play an immense role in the development of souls from an early age… which is the most important time period to construct an achievable route to happiness and the noted good life. Formed habits and reason are truly two of the most important players in the pursuit to happiness, and the aspect of being educated on the two plays the missing role. Teaching one about specific ‘duties’ to achieve happiness is not an approachable or desired method of the good life, but through the surrounding regions goals of quality of life, and the way persons communicate with each other have a strong say in the future of a souls quest to happiness and eventually will allow that soul to find happiness in reproduction – to finally allow the process of applicable teaching of the good life to begin again on a renewed soul. The relationship of others, third places, and daily encounters and interactions shapes humans and souls in the past, modernly, and for the projected future as the human soul is, truly, a gathering of past experiences and thought.

Nature of Virtue – Conclusion

Together Plato and Aristotle see happiness as a soul constructing a life that achieves the high standards of being virtuous, but ultimately disagree widely on the nature of virtue causing seemingly equal ideas to follow different paths only intersecting at certain key points. Plato eyes happiness as being close to godliness and the thought of the ‘higher up’, and by constructing such a life of virtuously nature, one can obtain this god-like holding. However, to Aristotle, happiness is the result of simply being virtuous, as the action itself allows the should to obtain pleasure and external wealth – both in my personal opinion construct to be key components on a soul’s pursuit to happiness. An intersecting point between Plato and Aristotle is the agreement that education is the means to attain appropriate virtue, but a disagreement on how a person should be educated as a result from their differing views on the true cause of virtue. For Aristotle, virtue resides in the agreement of the nature, habits, and reason in a person’s thought, and therefore within a persons acquired soul. Through that connection, Aristotle states that education needs to begin from birth and should involve shaping and changing a child’s

habits and forming its reasoning capability so that its nature , habits, and reason will align together to construct a well-rounded and inclusive soul that is not only capable of finding happiness, but can achieve the state through life practices. Plato supposes virtue stems from a higher understanding of true beauty, which to hm exist only in the higher plane of the world and therefore allows one to reach the highest echeloned status of a soul's desire… happiness. Plato believes the education aspect of happiness should begin when the child is ready to love another human, rather than from conception. Plato's ideal formulization of education for individuals in such position involves brining a person along by having him/her experience different form of love between people, thus to Plato, allows that person to experiences different forms of love between people so that they may begin to admire their own forms of love to physical and soulful beauty. Through this methodology, Plato notably sees beauty in all things and eventually, with shared knowledge and guidance, allows one to understand all forms of beauty, ultimately being able to understand the previously prominent 'formless beauty.

Both Aristotle and Plato settle together on the importance of interpersonal relationships in the quest for the desired good life, ultimately reaching the goal of happiness, however, Aristotle goes further as he sees the good life and ability to achieve happiness as societal in its practice. He recognizes that if a soul is forced to take action due to a consequence brought on by other human's misdoings, then that soul cannot live the good life – therefore each human must be independent of one another so no one human has to act on account for another. Each individuality and uniqueness of souls show the true singularity that the emotion of happiness is. Happiness is practically a universal emotion in whatever respect a soul finds such emotion, so it is rightfully so that Plato and Aristotle held similarly viewed perceptions of happiness. But, Plato and Aristotle through the course of history were and always will be completely unique individuals, so the causes of their own happiness to make infringements on are completely different – shown in their respective arguments for achieved happiness and the good life. Aristotle more closely illustrates modern day thinking in terms of a society wide necessity and the eventual happiness that is achieved with the help and education of others.