
Nicomachean Ethics: Ideas And Arguments

Throughout the history of humankind, the ethical question of whether or not humans should pursue ultimate happiness without boundaries is often a source of philosophical discourse. Such a question has resulted in many interpretations and theories that have led to extreme violence, oppression, and affliction. Defining what ultimate happiness is and examining if it is possible to achieve such a concept will aid in comprehending such a perplexing question. This investigation will lead to a discussion about whether it is better to aspire towards ultimate happiness or restrict human ambition for its safety.

Aristotle's Nicomedian Ethics reveals the underlying interpretation of ultimate happiness in Western thought. Influenced by Plato and Socrates' ideas surrounding virtue ethics, Aristotle sought to refine such ideas (Moore, 2019). Aristotle believed that every human activity was for the sake of absolute satisfaction. He rejected pleasure and success and proposed they were not desirable for singular purposes. He maintained that success and pleasure are desired partially for themselves but additionally for attaining happiness. Moreover, happiness can pass through friends and family but to avoid infinite regress, Aristotle determined that an ultimate end was needed. Therefore, he concluded that happiness was the final, desirable, natural good for humans. However, the term 'happiness' is ambiguous and difficult to define. Aristotle's concept of happiness extended beyond emotion- it was the practice of 'living well. According to Aristotle, the path to ultimate happiness involves a rational process of reaching "perfect virtue" through self-realization. While this process may appear to be a matter of individual achievement, Aristotle argued that it was a social construct. He determined that only Greek citizens, excluding women, slaves, and children, could achieve this ultimate happiness. Furthermore, virtues are not innate and are learned through every action. Aristotle deemed this finite satisfaction as "eudaimonia" (Solomon, 2001, p. 505-507).

To reach eudaimonia, Aristotle attributed virtues to engage with the soul for the natural good (Rayner, 2011). However, to follow these virtues is not simple. Aristotle believed that to become virtuous, a balance between insufficiency and excess is necessary. He deemed this point of balance as the "Golden Mean". For example, in the situation of self-projection, cowardice is considered as a flawed insufficiency. On the contrary, rashness is regarded as flawed excess. Thus, Aristotle concluded that courage was the Golden Mean and was, therefore, a virtue (Rescher, 2015, pp. 54-55). Aristotle's other virtues include temperance, liberality, magnificence, pride, honor, good temper, friendliness, truthfulness, wit, friendship, and justice. Furthermore, he believed virtues could be categorized into two dominant virtues- intellectual and moral. He believed that intellectual virtues should be gained through education and inheritance and moral ones through practice and habit (Rayner, 2011). To Aristotle, following these virtues was the one way to achieve pure eudaimonia.

However, the restrictions and limitations of Aristotle's virtue ethics do not consider the importance of freedom in terms of happiness. As 'freedom' is another ambiguous term, it is beneficial to find a definition for it. The concept can be better understood if broken into "positive freedom and "negative freedom", where the distinction can create a new meaning. Negative freedom is perceived as freedom from interference (Solomon, 2001, p. 619). These 'interferences' include uncontrollable factors such as constraints, obstructions, or any

restrictions (Carter, 2016). In contrast, positive freedom is the ability to be self-determined and take action to find a place in society (Solomon, 2001, p. 619). In essence, positive freedom is internal freedom to do something and negative freedom is external freedom from something. The investigation into how one can achieve eudaimonia begs the question of freedom is necessary to achieving happiness.

The notion that ultimate happiness or eudaimonia is achievable through conforming to certain restrictions is not limited to Aristotle's virtue ethics. Western religions such as Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism do adhere to the idea of a eudaimonia or "heaven" and set restrictions and rules to follow to reach ultimate happiness. Furthermore, Immanuel Kant argued that ethics were based on God. Unlike Aristotle, he believed that eudaimonia could not be achieved in the present life. Therefore, Kant concluded that the soul was immortal and that a virtuous soul will be rewarded with the ultimate happiness in a future life (Mintz, 2012). Part of Western religion's ethical ideals is the notion of "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" (Tolstoy, 1900). This concept appears in Eastern religion where ethics is motivated by good and bad karma. To reach the highest level of tranquility and enlightenment, one must practice 'good behavior' and eliminate bad karma. However, within Eastern traditions such as Buddhism, Hinduism, and Taoism, a divine being does not determine rules and restrictions to follow to reach eudaimonia. In contrast to Western religious thought, Eastern religion does not advocate for punishing 'bad behavior'. Instead, bad behavior is relative to the individual and will simply hinder a person from reaching their ultimate goal of enlightenment (Billington 2003, pp. 152–153).

Historically, the debate over what constitutes being moral has caused mass conflict and suffering. For example, the rule of "thou shalt not kill" is commonly agreed to be an ethical concept across many religions and traditions worldwide. Yet, history reveals that there are a plethora of instances where murder has been practiced in the name of God and ethics. In the case of an individual, it can be argued that the ethical rules and regulations have been misinterpreted and will still lead to punishment. However, in the context of war, the question of who has responsibility for mass murder challenges the notion of restrictive virtue ethics. While killing in a war may have been committed by a soldier, the responsibility should fall onto the hands of the authority that instructed them to do so. This is where "karma" can come in the form of revolution as seen in history with the execution of kings, emperors, sultans, shahs, and khans. However, there needs to be an investigation into how the ethics of the individual soldiers who are physically killed come into play. It can be argued that the soldier could simply not listen to the authority and instead follow their virtue ethics, whether religious or based on Aristotle's ideas (Tolstoy, 1900). Nonetheless, perhaps the soldier believes that the authority is appointed by God and therefore has the ability to command the ethics. Alternatively, the ethics of the society are ruled by laws that are punishable if disobeyed. It is evident that moral authority can be corrupted by hypocrisy, which in turn can significantly affect a person's path to eudaimonia in accordance with virtue ethics (Isserow and Klein, 2017, pp. 194 -201).

Along with the notion that moral authority can be corrupted, virtue ethics still have a lot of problems. Aristotle's ideas have been reinterpreted into Kant's deontology, Jeremy Bentham's and John Stuart Mill's utilitarianism, and many religious versions of virtue ethics. However, these ethics tend to ignore large groups of people such as women, children, slaves, and other disadvantaged groups. Also, ethics regarding flora and fauna are often forgotten. Feminists believe that the emphasis on logic and reason within ethics promotes the idea that in order to achieve eudaimonia, one must remain unemotional while following objective and universal rules.

The feminist concept of 'ethics of care' introduces care and compassion as virtues into ethics. This concept of empathy is not only present in women but also in children and is, therefore, an important aspect of humanity. The ethics of care is influential in education, psychology, medicine. It advocates caring for the natural environment along with building compassionate relationships with people from disadvantaged groups (D'Olimpio, 2019).

After examining the various processes towards eudaimonia, it may be concluded that the notion of practicing virtuous good deeds in order to reach ultimate happiness is in essence, a selfish act (Billington 2003, p. 154). However, in accordance with virtue ethics, many believe that ego is not necessarily a bad concept. To be selfless is to deny oneself of the ability to judge, feel, think and act which are functions of the self. Pure altruism will lead to pain for the person sacrificing themselves for others, meaning that eudaimonia would be impossible to reach. Egoism generates the freedom to be independent and therefore not need to use others. Furthermore, selfishness in this sense can drive progress in society (Rand, 2019).

The dismissal of flaws in virtue ethics paradoxically highlights the flaws of virtue ethics. By restricting freedom and prioritizing reason over emotions such as care, compassion, and selfishness, moral authority can be corrupted by hypocrisy leading to the impossibility of reaching eudaimonia. However, Aristotle's virtue ethics are not entirely useless and can aid in protecting humanity from chaos. Perhaps Western thought should consider Eastern ethics, where ethics are not determined by a divine being and every individual has a unique form of eudaimonia. While the nature of virtue ethics does not allow for absolute freedom, the act of selfishness can allow for the freedom to be independent and empathy can give anyone the ability to pursue eudaimonia. Furthermore, independence and empathy can in the reduction of the hypocrisy of moral authority. The practice of virtue ethics may be a selfish act but its ability to drive progress can be beneficial to society on a global scale.