A Critique of Aristotelian Ethics of Happiness and Enlightenment Ethics

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Quality of life is often described as one’s disposition or attitude toward life. An increase in quality of life may lead to one’s overall happiness. Yet, what does happiness mean? By comparing and contrasting happiness in ancient Greece to the Enlightenment period, a better historical understanding of happiness will be developed. Specifically, examining the differences and similarities of the Aristotelian ethics of happiness to those of the Enlightenment period aids in framing a better philosophical understanding of happiness. The purposes of this paper are to first describe in detail a model of Eudaimonia; and second, highlight the characteristics of Enlightenment ethics using the Aristotelian model of eudaimonia.

KEYWORDS: Eudaimonia, leisure, happiness, Aristotelian ethics, Enlightenment ethics

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What are Aristotelian ethics? A modern work on ethics may include discussion on rights, obligations, and duties. However, Aristotle and other ancient Greek philosophers were primarily concerned with “the good life” for humans, or happiness. Therefore, with Aristotelian ethics the question became what should or ought one seek in life in order to achieve this happiness? The answer was a total life lived well or eudaimonia.

The term, eudaimonia, is derived from *eu*, meaning well or good, and *daimon*, meaning fortune or lot in life, thus suggesting living a life well (Kraut, 1989). This can be loosely translated in English to happiness. However, this translation is somewhat misleading. *Eudaimonia* is the complete end or total good satisfying a person’s correct rational desire. Adler (1991) writes of the right end or the complete good as *totum bonum*. The complete good is considered to be complete “for happiness does not lack anything, but is self-sufficient” (Aristotle, 1984, p 1853). In conjunction with the idea of happiness, the terms totum bonum and eudaimonia will be used interchangeably throughout this critique.

Figure 1 illustrates the elements that were deemed essential by Aristotle in order to attain *eudaimonia*, or a total life lived well. A correlation will be drawn between the essential elements and the humanistic shape of the figure. Holistically, *eudaimonia* is represented by the figure in
Figure 1 – Aristotelian Model of Eudaimonia

**EUDAIMONIA**

**Totum Bonum**

- Leisure as Schole (Summum Bonum)
- Social Goods
- Goods of Pleasure
- Goods of the Body
- External Goods
- Moral Virtue
- Good Fortune

**External Goods**

- Goods of the Body
- Goods of Pleasure
- Partial Goods

**Partial Goods**

**Totum Bonum**

- Leisure as Schole (Summum Bonum)
its entirety: a sense of well-being. Aristotelian ethics implies that the use of one’s highest faculty -- contemplation or speculative intellect -- is necessary to pursue eudaimonia. The partial goods comprise the head and body of the model and consist of summum bonum (leisure), social goods, goods of pleasure, goods of the body, and external goods. Summum bonum (leisure) is at the top or head of the figure; indisputably, the human mind harbors the capacity for knowledge, which is considered paramount for success in modern times. When in balance and met without excess throughout one’s whole life they make up totum bonum, or a total life lived well. It is this combination of all partial goods that leads a person to eudaimonia under the Aristotelian ethics of happiness. Finally, according to Aristotelian ethics of happiness, the driving forces for eudaimonia are moral virtue and good fortune, thus providing the foundation, or proverbial feet, of the model. A complete discussion of this model follows.

Aristotelian ethics stress that both moral virtue and good fortune are the operative means or driving forces for the achievement of the partial goods that lead to eudaimonia. Moral virtues are the basis for common good and they are considered to be the habit of right desire, which leads to moderation, and balance in one’s life. Adler (1991), in writing about Aristotelian ethics, state[d] that temperance and courage (fortitude) are aspects of virtue. Temperance is said to be moderation in the desire for the partial goods. Courage or fortitude, “enjoins us to take and suffer certain immediate pains for the sake of living a good life as a whole” (Adler, 1991, p. 62).

According to Aristotle, virtue itself is of no value; what matters is actually performing virtuous actions (Furley, 1999). In other words, virtue is considered to be an activity versus an attribute held within. Becoming virtuous, then, is more like learning a skill, as would an artisan. One learns to build a pot out of clay by sitting at a potter’s wheel and trying it, and if one does it well, becomes a better potter. In the Nicomachen Ethics, Aristotle speaks of the role of proper virtue as action in a person’s life:

We can, for example, be afraid or be confident, or desire, or feel anger or pity, or in general feel pleasure and pain both too much and too little, and in both ways not well; but at the right time, about the right things, towards the right people, for the right end, and in the right way, is what is intermediate and best, and this is proper to virtue. Likewise, there is excess, a deficiency and a mean in the case of actions as well (Aristotle, 1999, p. 1747).

Good fortune is the second driving force in the achievement of partial goods toward eudaimonia. Unlike moral virtue, good fortune cannot be sought after; it is not considered to be an object of right desire. Adler (1991) wrote of good fortune as something “we may wish for or pray for, but we cannot choose between seeking it or not doing so” (p. 57). Therefore, good fortune is something that happens to, or may be inherent in a person rather than something one can seek out. Yet, good fortune is still an essential driving force in the achievement of eudaimonia.

In Aristotelian ethics, eudaimonia is considered the complete good. However, there are several partial goods that are interrelated and make up totum bonum. Summum bonum is the first of the five partial goods that make up totum bonum. Referring to the humanistic shape in Figure 1, summum bonum may serve as the proverbial head. Often considered to be the highest of the partial goods, the summum bonum literally means the highest good and represents the perfection for which we should strive (Adler, 1991). As the highest partial good, summum bonum is referred to as “goods of the soul.” Today, we would use the term leisure to describe summum bonum. However, as with happiness, describing summum bonum as leisure in current terms would be somewhat misleading. Leisure in ancient Greece was called schole (Dare,
Welton, & Coe, 1998; DeGrazia, 1990). Schole, according to Dare et al., (1998) was originally referred to as quiet or peace that included contemplation or a restful time to think without distraction. Today, leisure is frequently defined as an activity, time free from work, or a state of mind, to name a just a few (DeGrazia, 1990). With the understanding of the limitations of the meaning of leisure from today relative to times in Greece, summum bonum will be referred as leisure throughout the remainder of this paper. As one of many partial goods, leisure includes using one’s highest faculty, contemplation or speculative intellect, along with the soul to pursue eudaimonia.

Social goods are considered by some to be the second most important partial good. Social goods include the interaction of, support of, and camaraderie with family and friends. Although leisure is mentioned as the highest of partial goods, arguments have been made to suggest that in fact, social goods may be the highest of the partial goods (Furley, 1999). These arguments may stem from the social nature of humans. Companionship from both friends and family remains, in most instances, an integral and vital part of society and thus happiness. Unlike eudaimonia, some of the partial goods or ends are clearly subordinate, or less final, than others. For example, Aristotle suggests that eudaimonia is unconditionally the highest or final good, in the sense that it is never sought for anything else. Eudaimonia is the final or complete end of a life lived well. In contrast, a social good is not the highest good because we may choose it for itself; but we may also choose it for other reasons such as status or pleasure. Regardless, social goods are one of the essential partial goods that must exist to achieve to tum bonum or eudaimonia.

Goods of pleasure are believed to be the third most significant partial good in Aristotelian ethics of happiness. Pleasure, as a partial good, is considered to be play and amusement, to include recreation, versus the final good that leads to happiness; a complete life lived well. In the Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle refuted the idea postulated by his contemporary, Eudoxus, that pleasure was the final good. Eudoxus had argued that pleasure was the final good since pleasure, when added to any other good, makes it more worthy of choice; and, the good is increased by the addition of itself. However, Aristotle believed that Eudoxus showed that pleasure is one of the goods. Aristotle also supposed that Plato, in fact, used the same argument to show that pleasure is not the final good (Aristotle, 1984). Therefore, pleasure becomes a partial good that in combination with other partial goods leads to eudaimonia.

Next, goods of the body include a person’s health and vigor. To reach eudaimonia a person’s health must be satisfactory to include the stamina to survive and exist. External goods, the fifth of the partial goods, consist of physical objects such as food and shelter. External goods are required for subsistence in addition to a modicum of other items (Adler, 1991). As with all partial goods, a balance is needed in order to reach the final good, eudaimonia.

The Aristotelian model of eudaimonia represents actions that a person must take in order to pursue a life lived well or eudaimonia. The basis for eudaimonia is derived from good moral virtue and fortune. These driving forces provide the foundation as previously suggested. They represent a person’s legs and feet by which one is able to move forward in order to pursue eudaimonia through the partial goods. All five partial goods are required to achieve happiness. The partial goods are hierarchical in that leisure, the highest partial good, is considered to be more important than the other partial goods yet all are required to achieve happiness.

Enlightenment Ethics

The period of Enlightenment provided an intellectual current that galvanized Europe during the 18th century and that still continues to be influential today. Rationalism, an impetus toward learning, and a spirit of skepticism and empiricism in social and political thought characterized
this period. The Enlightenment era highlights a time when significant change took place in how we lived and viewed the concept of happiness.

Aristotelian ethics of happiness are based upon the concept of *eudaimonia* as the highest good and profess to answer the question - what should we do to live our lives (see Figure 1)? Enlightenment ethics are also based upon living a good life. However, philosophically there are differences. First, Enlightenment ethics are concerned more with the question - what is the right way to live life versus what should or ought a person seek. Whereas, Aristotelian *eudaimonia* was more about using one’s speculative intellect toward the final good and a sense of well-being, the Enlightenment was a period where people were more concerned with using their practical intellect toward well-feeling or enjoyment. This fundamental difference laid the groundwork for how we currently view leisure from its traditional, Aristotelian form.

To examine this fundamental difference in the pursuit of happiness, it would be prudent to critique the driving forces during the Enlightenment with those of ancient Greece. As previously discussed, moral virtue and good fortune were the driving factors for the partial goods in Aristotelian ethics of happiness however, these forces changed.

The Aristotelian ethic of good fortune was not significantly different during the early part of the Enlightenment. Pre-Enlightenment philosophers, such as Martin Luther and John Calvin, argued that life’s outcome cannot be influenced, regardless of what one does (Dare, Welton, & Coe, 1998). However, here end the similarities to Aristotelian ideas of good fortune. As the idea of work, from an economic standpoint, became more important to society, the belief of individual contributions expanded. During the Enlightenment evolved the notion of human potential, and it is this driving force that resulted in the differences between Aristotelian and Enlightenment ethics of happiness. Aristotle acknowledged that the circumstances facing a human are beyond their control. During the Enlightenment, individual contributions or good fortune, were sought after and achievable. The role of good fortune is in the hands of those who toil.

Moral virtue, another driving force in Aristotelian ethics of happiness, was no longer suggested to be individually monitored during the Enlightenment: “Locke endorsed the use of the power of the magistrate to enforce morals” (Grell & Porter, 2000, p. 39). This change in how moral virtue was addressed stood in direct contrast to Aristotelian ethics of happiness. During the period of Enlightenment, the role of the state was increasingly more important, thereby influencing how one may achieve the final or complete good. This change manifested itself in the influence of the state, the Church, and other institutions as regulators of behavior.

In the Enlightenment, the purpose of life was no longer to live it well, as with Aristotelian ethics of happiness. Rather, human potential was now directed toward gratifying God (Dare, Welton, & Coe, 1998). The final good had changed in the first part of the Enlightenment period from happiness to living for one’s self with God. John Locke argued that work and labor were the means to happiness in that God now revered accumulation of wealth as a sign of his favor. In addition, Locke felt that anyone not willing to ascribe to labor and the accumulation of wealth was lacking morals. In other words, morals, although significantly different in definition between Aristotelian and Enlightenment ethics, were the driving force toward different ends, *eudemonia* versus an economic man. “Locke, influenced by Calvin, modifies the classical perspective [moral virtue] to a point that reason guides activity toward desire’s end. Unbridled desire, with the aid of reason, is free to pursue material success” (Dare, Welton, & Coe, 1998, p. 116).
The Enlightenment was also a period of an additional contradiction; the role of God changed over this time. Toward the latter half of the Enlightenment, the use of practical intellect had virtually removed the concept of God as a guiding force. This is an important element in critiquing the Aristotelian model of *eudaimonia* with that of Enlightenment ethics for the speculative intellect was critical in the pursuit of happiness as *eudaimonia* during Aristotle’s time. However, the use of practical intellect was one of the factors that changed, this, in turn influenced how and what people perceived as the final good.

The Enlightenment had a different focus for happiness than Aristotelian ethics and thus, the partial goods were viewed from a different perspective. For example, in Aristotelian ethics, leisure was the highest of the partial goods, yet with the Enlightenment, this idea was indirectly undermined by the idea of economic self-sufficiency. *Scholae* became viewed as being free from necessity, and work or labor consumed one’s focus. The focus on the economic man became the driving force for existence. Leisure in essence, became confused with the highest and complete good as happiness. Therefore, leisure became the focus for people to strive toward in the Enlightenment versus its original connotation as a state of being in Aristotelian ethics of happiness. In fact, it was this notion of economic self-sufficiency that led to the death of classical leisure.

Social goods also changed insofar as how they were perceived as being part of a partial good. The coffee houses of the Enlightenment were the gathering places for large congregations of wealthy and educated people. However, this was not the case for the working class. The coffee shops were for the elite or those with time away from obligation or work. These elite classes justified their free time with an entirely different focus than that of Aristotelian ethics. In this sense, social goods were similar with the exception that they were no longer directed toward the pursuit of *eudaimonia* as an end. Social good became an end in itself during the Enlightenment period versus a partial good for Aristotelian ethics of happiness.

The goods of pleasure, as a partial good for Aristotle, also changed from their original meaning during the Enlightenment. Pleasure became a focus as a means to avoid pain. Locke believed in the innate tendency to seek pleasure and avoid pain (Spencer & Krauze, 1997). Pleasure became an end within itself, thereby once again diminishing the ability to pursue happiness as a complete good, as with Aristotelian ethics of happiness.

The Aristotelian partial goods, Goods of the body, became a total good in the Enlightenment period. The focus became an end versus a means to the end as with *eudaimonia*. Work and labor increasingly became a central part of life thereby impacting how people perceived health. With the rise of capitalism, the work hours and toils of the Enlightenment period led people to perceive the goods of the body much differently from the Greeks. The goods of the body were no longer perceived as a partial good but rather as something to be protected and nurtured as an end.

Finally, comparing the idea of Aristotelian external goods with external goods in Enlightenment ethics, we see that external goods also became more of an end in themselves during the Enlightenment. Through labor, accumulation of wealth took on vital importance as either a necessity for survival or as an extra for living comfortably, depending upon social class, laborer or intellectual. Therefore, consumption of external goods that were accumulated as a representation of or reward for one’s work became important during the Enlightenment. Again, this notion of an external good as a partial good in Aristotelian ethics was diminished, if not absent, in Enlightenment ethics. External goods were not just a means to an end but became the very reason people labored.
In the Enlightenment period, the original driving forces in Aristotelian ethics of happiness, good moral virtue and fortune were perceived differently. Moral virtues were no longer a moderator of right desire that were determined individually. Instead, they became directed by society as a whole. While the concept of moderation may have been the same, the normative value changed significantly. Thus, each of the partial goods were perceived more as complete goods. For example, the accumulation of wealth was used to purchase and store external goods. Leisure became not a partial good rather a final good in that it was achieved outside of labor or work.

The ordering of the partial goods also changed in the Enlightenment period. As previously suggested, the partial goods, in some instances, became total or complete good and the relative importance of the partial goods diminished. External goods became, in some instances more important than leisure, which is vastly different from how they were viewed in Aristotelian ethics of the happiness. Therefore, the role of desire in the Enlightenment was no longer guarded through the use of speculative intellect as in the Aristotelian ethics, rather a practical intellect was used that transformed how people lived and viewed happiness. In summation, with the Enlightenment emerged the belief that happiness was based upon the accumulation of wealth, and leisure became time away from labor.

Regardless of the period of time, whether ancient Greece or the Enlightenment, happiness was considered a vital part of society. Today, happiness is often revered as something that can be a quick fix for the challenges life may bring. Happiness is no longer perceived to be the final good or the end, as it was with Aristotle. Today the final end may masquerade as a number of partial goods. Regardless, there is a lot to be learned about ourselves by examining how we feel and view the concept of happiness. The starting point is by answering the question of how one should live his or her life? The answer to this question indirectly provides the framework for how happiness will be viewed throughout one’s life. Is happiness an end or is happiness a means to an end? Aristotle would argue that living a total life well; *eudaimonia* would provide a sense of happiness. However, today, happiness is often viewed as a sense of well-feeling or enjoyment where any one of the partial goods, social, pleasure, body and external may be confused with happiness as the final good. Better understanding can be found through the application of the Aristotelian and Enlightenment ethics of happiness and the notions of priorities and balance. In a time where society is often defined by the notion of consumption, Aristotle’s idea of balance and direction toward a total life lived well may aid in providing perspective to life by focusing holistically on one’s well-being versus the immediacy of well-feeling.

References


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