

# The concept of happiness



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However dull ones life may be there are times when one cannot help but question the meaningfulness of it. The subject of death is often a prime example of how people begin to question the value of life. Death usually brings people down and it makes them wonder if there is a meaning to existence or whether the recently deceased found it. In such situations, most of us turn to questions such as: What am I doing here? Am I happy? Am I doing the right thing? Am I making a difference? Hopefully one does not need to face such extreme events in order to question the meaning of life.

In Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle expresses his opinions about the function of the human being in an attempt to show that the human good is activity in accordance with reason, and in turn this alignment alone is responsible for our happiness which in his view is the highest good, a self sufficient and final goal for any human being.

Along the same lines, in The Experience Machine, Robert Nozick is addressing a similar issue, by arguing that pleasure is not the only thing which matters to us and brings to our attention the fact that there are other factors which contribute to our well-being.

In this paper I will explain the arguments of both Aristotle and Nozick by exploring the concept of happiness, its role in morality and what I understand through one's function of living a happy and moral life.

Soon after reading some Aristotelian material, one cannot help but notice that Aristotle was a man of science, a very analytical man. It seems that he deeply enjoyed putting things into categories of belonging. Things like the four causes, things like his classification of things that are inorganic and

living, and the list goes on. The same applies for his work, *Nicomachean Ethics*, and as the name implies, this is as close as we can get to Aristotle's code of moral values.

Aristotle felt that virtue and being active were a means to happiness, which he believed to be the universal goal of every human being. However, since we are all different, every person has a unique way of achieving happiness and he starts his argument by bringing this issue into focus. He sets out to investigate what does happiness really mean? Does it mean a warm cup of tea, a healthy family or perhaps a good looking partner? Happiness means many things to many people, and that brings into question the meaning of true happiness and what makes something true happiness. Aristotle says that the good we are looking for is apparently one thing in one action and another thing in another, (NE 106a15-17) thus we have to identify which is the good in each of these cases (1096a17-19).

Aristotle uses medicine as an example where the good would be health, or generalship where the good would be victory, but “ in every action and decision it is the end, since it is for the sake of the end that everyone does the other things” (NE 1096a20-22). Some, may find this argument problematic and could say that sometimes we do things without a set goal in mind, and rather do them just for the sheer joy of it, but I disagree.

Aristotle's point seems to be applicable in every situation, since even if the good is not obtained as a distant goal but rather as an immediate reward, or at the same time as the action is performed, his argument still holds. For example, listening to music or walking my dog results in pleasure from just the activity alone, in the very moment that the action takes place.

He then proceeds to explain that the highest good has to be complete and cannot be for the sake of something else as that would imply that the latter would become the highest. Aristotle says that it must be “ something complete and self-sufficient, since it is the end of the things pursued in action” (NE 1097b21-22). This also seems like a very sound point to me. If there is such a thing as a highest good, then we can easily imply that it should be complete and sufficient in itself in order to “ make a life choiceworthy” (NE 1097b15).

While reading Nicomachean Ethics, I could not help but wonder if Aristotle ever realized the irony of this vicious circle we seem to be caught in. Most people live life by going from one compensation to another, trying different experiences, looking for a lover, wife or husband, career or money. I strongly believe that one must realize that these are just learned concepts and not something we are born with, and the same applies for our morality.

It seems like we have a constant need to fill our lives with content, in order to keep us busy and to give us some sort of identity. It's quite easy to see the cycle that most people constantly go through: One feels empty and suddenly desire arises; soon after compensation comes, boredom sets in and then again one feels empty. I think we should strive to realize that it is not the object acquired that gives satisfaction, but rather that we are satisfied once we're at peace, not needing anything. It seems to me that satisfying desire is only a temporary solution and once the initial excitement associated with the new acquisition is fading, the need to acquire arises again and again. This only turns life into an addicting habit, and while I do believe in true happiness I doubt it can be achieved this way.

Nozick's philosophy is similar to this analogy, but rather than just arguing his point methodically, Nozick starts off by laying out a thought experiment. This experiment revolves around a hypothetical machine called "the experience machine" which is supposed to create a stimulated reality for any person that connects to it. The machine will then allow the user to experience various pleasures determined for each person by their own individual desires. In this hypothetical experiment, one would only have to be outside of the machine very briefly, in order to program the desired events and experiences for the next upcoming years of one's life. Another possibility would be for one to map out his entire life in the machine based on a very carefully conducted survey by "superduper neuropsychologists" which would guarantee a pleasant experience without having to ever leave the machine (EM p. 606).

Further, Nozick asks us to overlook certain concerns that would arise, such as who would run the machine if everyone would be plugged in, as it would not change the purpose of the experiment. He then asks: if presented with a choice "would you choose to plug in?" (EM p. 606) Nozick opposes the question using a few distinct reasons, namely: "we want to do certain things, and not just have the experience of doing them" (EM p. 606); "we want to be a certain sort of person" and we don't want to be limited "to a man-made reality, to a world no deeper than that which people can construct." (EM p. 607)

In short, Nozick argues that, if plugging in to the "experience machine" provides more pleasure, we should simply follow this idea; however that will only happen if pleasure is all that matters to us. Nozick's own reply is that

we would not choose to connect to the machine, and thus he concludes that pleasure is not the only thing that matters to us.

I believe that, the answer provided by Nozick for his own hypothetical experiment, only sounds like a choice one would make simply because it appeals to the human biases against things which are considered artificial. Simply put, a person will not opt for an artificial reality if given the choice, even if it was an ecstatic experience but that does not mean that one is not seeking pleasure. It may as well be that, the psychological gratification received from knowing that one is living a “ real” life is more rewarding than an “ artificial” but pleasant experience. If we carefully examine the values that people hold we can see how they are just a different form of pleasure. Certain people would easily get pleasure because they’ve turned down this “ machine” and feel good because they’ve made the right choice. Just because the psychological pleasure one may feel because of the choice made is more subtle than some ecstatic experience, it does not mean that it is not pleasure that one seeks.

In my opinion, we are often faced with trials during the course of our lives. These trials sometimes change us and our perception of what life really is, which is what I understand through Aristotle’s function of a human being. He believes reason is what separates us from plants, animals and just about everything else. He calls the man who only identifies with human enjoyment vulgar, because while pleasure is related to happiness it is not the highest good, since one can feel pleasure but might not be happy.

To me, this sounds exactly like Nozick's line of thought, but to be honest I don't think Nozick's experiment proves this argument. I believe his experiment may prove that there are several forms and types of pleasures, of which some are very subtle, but I'm not convinced of how his experiment is showing that we choose other things over pleasure itself. At most, I believe it shows that we like the idea of achieving something ourselves rather than it being given to us, but then again, achievement is just another form of pleasure in itself.

Aristotle's function argument also states that our unique human function is the use of reason. According to him, playing the harp is a harpist's function, and is the same as the function of an exceptional harpist. When virtue is expressed and added to the function, the harpist's function becomes playing the harp, while the exceptional harpist's function is to play the harp well. Each function is not considered complete until it expresses proper virtue and a degree of excellence (1098a11-16). Aristotle says that virtue is acquired through the practice of any given function, and that people are born only with the potential of being virtuous, yet they must act accordingly in order to acquire it.

As I see it, Aristotle's human function argument is a solid moral code that we should all follow. Given the use of reason is a primary requirement, everything one does needs to be analyzed, needs to make sense and needs to be channeled towards achieving happiness. If everyone strives towards the good with this in mind it is hardly possible to do harm or injustice to someone else for selfish or superficial reasons. I believe this is exactly what Robert Nozick was aiming toward in his work as well.

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My opinion is that life should be accepted as a gift which was given to us or an opportunity rather than striving to turn it into a race of satisfying desires and fulfilling ideas or concepts. I strongly believe life should be simply lived in harmony with everything around us and I would encourage anyone to consider the idea that life is not happening to us, but rather that we are happening in life.