

How did the ancient greeks envision the good life essay sample



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As the only living creatures on earth who can reason and judge, we humans are trapped in an endless puzzle about why exactly we ever came to life.

This question leads every individual to their own self soul-search. As a result, captured in between two strictly certain and painful facts that we are born and we have time only until we are dead, and that we will definitely be dead, we all set ourselves the same ultimate goal of making the best of our lives, having the time of our lives. How this is possible is another big and stressing question, how we can achieve the best for ourselves is not easy to formulate.

It can be easily assumed that this worry is of an eternal one that it had existed since the foundation of the Earth and will exist since Earth ceases to exist. As one of the most civilized groups of history, the Ancient Greeks, since had a lot of extra time to think, answered and for the first time announced their answers to these fundamental questions. The famous philosophers of the age, Aristotle and Plato, gave shape to the understanding of good life in ancient Greek and they helped to construct the Ancient Greek Moral Theory.

In order to have a general view on the thoughts of these two men, their most famous works, the Republic by Plato and the Nicomachean Ethics by Aristotle can be studied. Both philosophers' aim was to idealize the concept of good, and reach an ultimate conclusion on how to achieve it. Plato's argument bases itself as the search for the true meaning of justice, piety. Plato throughout his dialogues and mainly in Republic suggests that there are elements to the concept of " good", which of the most important is the piety.

Throughout the dialogues he has constructed from the mouth of Socrates, we can identify the fact that Plato suggests a prerequisite for the achievement of the good life, and he defines this as the common good. From this particular point, he reaches the need of writing the Republic, the ideal state that actualizes and insures the common good for everyone. This way, Plato argues that individuals will be able to find the necessary conditions in order to lead a good life. Since Plato is a man of Forms, in favor of a reality that is beyond everyday's reality, he defines the "good life" as not being momentarily nor temporary.

He argues that, in order to live a good life, individuals are ought to live that life for the sake of itself, not for the consequences or rewards a good life may bring. Plato claims that the actions that should be taken in order to pursue a good life should not be considered good because they are appreciated by the Gods, but rather, it should be understood that all actions are good in nature and therefore are appreciated by the Gods. By giving such a distinction, he frees the concept of "good" from all other outside motives.

He supports his definition of good as being the one that should be pursued for the sake of itself by such a deconstruction of the meaning of the "good activities". In order to live a good life, we have to be under the laws and regulations of a state and that state has to be the ideally correct state, the Republic of Plato. Plato, as a man who believes that in order to live a good life, the idea of goodness shall be grasped, since only philosophers can achieve this, they should be the ones who rule the Republic. From here, we

may draw attention to Plato's ideal state's main organizational characteristics.

Plato believes that each man should be assigned in his burgeoning state a single occupation that best suits his natural inclination. Otherwise each man would work separately for his own need which would be complete waste of time and would miss the target that is trying to be achieved, the common goal. So Plato suggests that there should be a division of labor, using every man for what they are best for. Philosophers therefore are the ones who should rule the society since they have the wisdom, something that no other group of men has.

Below is an excerpt from the Republic that hints this philosopher-king ideal of Plato: " Unless either philosophers become kings in the cities, or those who are now called kings and rulers sincerely and adequately get to philosophize, and there can be found in the same person both political power and philosophy, the crowd of those who are nowadays driven by their nature toward either one exclusive of the other having been forcibly set aside, there can be no end, dear Glaucon, to the evils in cities, nor, methinks, to those of humankind. (Republic, V, 473c-d) Another important aspect of the Republic is that it reveals that the philosopher's aim was to make the audience understand that the ideal state should aim to fully conceive justice in public as well as private affairs.

Yet, for Plato, it is much more than that, and indeed, the whole purpose of the Republic is to make the audience understand that there can be no social justice with people who are not " just" within themselves: men cannot get

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along with one another and live in peace, social peace that is, unless they first bring peace and harmony between the various sides of their own selves, between their passions and their reason, between their thoughts, their words, and their acts. “ The State is the macrocosm of the individual; they share one another’s principles.

Socrates has “ proven” the existence of justice in the State; therefore, since the faculties of the individual correspond on a smaller scale to those of the State, justice must also exist in the individual. Not surprisingly, Socrates pushes on, showing how justice for the individual is the realization of an internal harmony among his own disparate parts his reason, appetite, and spirit. (Classical Notes, Analysis of the Book IV)” Plato is a strong defender of the idea that in order to establish the ideal state and in order to achieve a good life, education is needed.

The good can be achieved only through an education of a particular kind, and if this education is to available to more than a random selection of mankind, it will have to be institutionalized. What is more, the institutions of the educational system will have to be directed and controlled by those who have already made the prerequisite ascent from the vision of particular vision of the Forms. (MacIntyre, p. 53)” As a last remark on Plato’s Republic, one can say that everything is somehow connected to transcendently, the Forms in Plato’s philosophy.

In Republic as well, the good is defined as among the transcendental, an un-earthly object. Knowledge of the good is then addressed to be learned from the authoritative teachers, the philosopher kings, who lead, in Plato’s own

words, “ 729 times more pleasurable life than a tyrant. ” Aristotle defines “ good” in connection with the concept of “ excellency”. He again like Plato, argues that the activities that are good are only good, or done for good, if they are practiced for the sake of their ownelves.

Aristotle, somehow like Plato, is looking for more than just a list of the things that are “ good” but he wants to name a higher, actually the highest definition and form of “ good”. Aristotle’s chief good has mainly three characteristics: it is desirable for itself, it is not desirable for the sake of some other good, and all other goods are desirable for its sake. Aristotle also suggests that the “ good” in man or the “ good” the man is seeking for have to do something with him being human. As a result he outlines the distinction of men, that is their ability to reason.

If we use reason well, we live well as human beings; or, to be more precise, using reason well over the course of a full life is what happiness consists in. Doing anything well requires virtue or excellence, and therefore living well consists in activities caused by the rational soul in accordance with virtue or excellence. Here one can easily remark the major difference of Aristotle from Plato in the sense that he clearly states the formula on how to live a good life. He argues that in order to live a good life, one should be involved with some certain activities that are virtuous.

In Nicomachean Ethics, he states that living a good life is nothing but actualization of the rationality of the soul. Another difference he has when compared to Plato’s understanding of the “ good”, he clearly states that in order to be happy, or live a good life, one must pursue other goods as well,

besides the chief good. One must have friends, wealth, and power. From here, we can draw the conclusion that some people might be lucky when compared to others while trying to live a good life.

Aristotle claims that one's happiness or good life may be endangered if s/he is lacking in certain advantages. If a person is born ugly, there he has a disadvantage. Aristotle's point is that one's virtuous activity will be to some extent diminished or defective, if one lacks an adequate supply of other goods (1153b17-19). Nevertheless, Aristotle argues that virtuous activity is not something that comes to us by pure chance but actually we share the responsibility of achieving it as an individual searching for the "good life".

Ethics, particularly in Book X, indicate that the philosophic life is the best because it engages the highest part of the soul in contemplation of the highest things, and is the most complete, continuous and self-sufficient activity. In MacIntyre's book, the author draws the conclusion that thus the whole of human life reaches its highest point in the activity of a speculator philosopher with a reasonable income, in a sarcastic way. MacIntyre also pays attention to the banality of such a conclusion.

Aristotle seems aware of the fact that only a few people can fulfil the requirements of a good life in that sense: "For it is the nature of the many to be moved by fear, but not a sense of honor, to abstain from what is bad not on account of its baseness but for fear of the penalties; for living on their emotions, they pursue the appropriate pleasures and the means to these pleasures, and avoid the opposite pains, but they lack even a concept of the noble and the true pleasure, never having tasted it.

Here one may also grasp the fact that the audience of Aristotle is more sophisticated than of Plato, most probably in the sense that in order to reach a conclusion, one has to make assumptions and in that sense Aristotle assumes that his reader is not moral skeptic. There is another contrast with Plato that should be emphasized: In Book II of the Republic, we are told that the best type of good is one that is desirable both in itself and for the sake of its results (357d-358a).

Plato argues that justice should be placed in this category, but since it is generally agreed that it is desirable for its consequences, he devotes most of his time to establishing his more controversial point — that justice is to be sought for its own sake. By contrast, Aristotle assumes that if A is desirable for the sake of B, then B is better than A (1094a14-16); therefore, the highest kind of good must be one that is not desirable for the sake of anything else. The study of the human good has therefore led to two conclusions in Aristotle: The well being of communities depends on the willingness of some to lead a best life — a life devoted to the study and practice of the art of politics, and to the expression of those qualities of thought and passion that exhibit our rational self-mastery. " Aristotle suggests also that if the evil person wholeheartedly endorses some evil plan of action at a particular moment, but over the course of time, he will regret his decision, because whatever he does will prove inadequate for the achievement of his goals (1166b5-29).

Aristotle assumes that when someone systematically makes bad decisions about how to live his life, his failures are caused by psychological forces that are less than fully rational. His desires for pleasure, power or some other

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external goal have become so strong that they make him care too little or not at all about acting ethically. This is what also Plato feared in the nature of the man, and caused him to suggest a mechanism to sustain and protect the common good, the state.

Both Aristotle, and Plato, believe that if the chain of justifications which are constituted answers to questions about the good for men is to be a chain of rational arguments, there must essentially be only one chain and there must be one essential point at which it reaches a final conclusion. Both men rely on the need and the importance of reason and rationality in order to achieve a true definition of the “ good”.

As a conclusion we can say that the fundamental question of how to use our limited time on earth as best and how to make it a good life in order to be happy still remains unanswered with all the vagueness and the hard-to-achieve ideals of the above mentioned systems of thought. The ancient Greeks have almost agreed upon the fact that the good life requires a general behavior of a “ good” that is independent of the time and the other goods.

Their common understanding of the concept is that it should be sought as an eternal truth. Aristotle’s formulation on how to live a good life, i. e. through reasoned virtuous activities, is somehow a good starting point for all individuals. If the Plato’s utopia Republic is achieved to be founded, with some small corrections, the men may have the chance to be able to pursue a good life for the first time in history. Then of course, the very nature of men must not interrupt and corrupt the “ good”.