

Plato and aristotle essay



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What is happiness? Happiness is a way of engaging in the various activities of life. Can happiness allow people to live the ‘ good life’? Aristotle believed that happiness can allow people to live the ‘ good life’. This essay will be examining the ethics of Plato (428-347 BCE) and Aristotle (384-322 BCE) to analyse, justify and compare the major concepts of the two philosophers therein. I will argue that Aristotle’s solution to the problem of the ‘ good life’ is a better answer than Plato. It will summarise the fundamental concepts of Plato’s and Aristotle’s ethical theories, before providing my own opinion on their ethics.

Plato:

Plato was a philosopher who was both a rationalist and an absolutist in ethics. He was a rationalist because he believed that people can discover knowledge or justification by reason alone and for no circumstances that the knowledge can be wrong (<http://philosophy.tamu.edu/~sdaniel/Notes/plato.html>). Plato held the belief that human reasoning ability is the condition that allows people to approach the Forms (in Greek, idea). For Plato, human beings live in a world of visible and intelligible things. The visible world is what we see, hear and experience. This visible world is a world of change and uncertainty which means that we have to seek for it only in the realm of the mind in order to find any absolute certain knowledge. Plato’s rationalism dissimulates his absolutism. He was an absolutist, in that he believed that there is “ one and only one good life for all to lead” since goodness is not dependent upon human inclinations (Popkin, Stroll, 1999, p. 4). It is an absolute and exists independently of mankind. Thus this had made him believe that “ If a person knows what the good life is, he/she would not act

immorally” (Philosophy Made Simple, 1999, p. 3). In order to live the ‘ good life’ people must be schooled to acquire certain kinds of knowledge. This training will give them the capacity to know the nature of the ‘ good life’, since evil is due to lack of knowledge. However, Aristotle had a different perspective to Plato’s belief of ‘ what the good life is’ and ‘ how should people act’.

Aristotle:

Aristotle was a philosopher who was both an empiricist and a relativist in ethics. Aristotle was an empiricist, in that he examined the behaviour and talk of various people in everyday life. He discovered that various lives, which people of common sense considered to be good, all contain one common characteristic: happiness. Aristotle concluded that the ‘ good life’ for people is a life of happiness. Aristotle defines happiness as “ an activity of the soul in accord with perfect virtue” (Philosophy Made Simple, 1999, p. 8). Aristotle considered that pleasure is essential for a person to live a happy life. Aristotle uses a formula called the ‘ Doctrine of the Mean’ or the preferred name ‘ Golden Mean’ to answer how people should behave in order to achieve happiness. Moderation in all things is the ‘ Doctrine of the Mean’. This leads to the fact that Aristotle was a relativist, in that he believed that there was more than one good life for people. He stated that we must have virtues of moderation which are different for each individual. The virtues are the ‘ virtues of moderation’ as this was how Aristotle perceived it as. By definition, virtue is “ a means between two extremes, an excess and a defect, with respect to a particular action or emotion” (The Purple Philosophy Book: Ethics, p. 21). This demonstrates that the ‘ mean’ is not the

mathematical definition, 'average'. Knowing what the 'Golden Mean' is, will allow an individual to develop self-control. People must strive for the mean between two extremes: courage is the mean between rashness and cowardice. Also people must act moderately in order to achieve happiness. (<http://www.plosin.com/work/AristotleMean.html>)

Appraisal:

I would now like to share my opinion and perspective on how I perceive the theories of Plato and Aristotle. In my view, the better solution to the problem of the 'good life' is Aristotle's relativism, rather than Hobbes's absolutism. Firstly, Plato's argument about the 'good life' is flawed for a number of reasons. The first reason I will analyse is whether his inference "If a person knows what the good life is, he/she would not act immorally" (Philosophy Made Simple, 1999, p. 3) is justified. I believe that Plato's account must be rejected because a person could still act evilly even though they know and understand what the right course of action is. For example, if a person knows stealing is wrong but stills commit the crime, then this casts Plato's argument in doubt. Aristotle's view on the human nature, on contrary, is that what is right for one person is not necessarily right for another, since he believed that there was more than one 'good life' for people (<http://www.ccs.neu.edu/home/rar/PvA.htm>). An example for this is that a person can be more or less courageous than others. When interpreting the theories of both philosophers, it is clear to me that Aristotle's view of human nature is far more superior to Plato. This is because Aristotle showed a more realistic view of human nature than Plato about the 'good life'. Therefore, it is

evident that Aristotle's solution to the problem of the 'good life' is a better answer than Plato.

Secondly, Plato suggests that moral difficulties in many cases are theoretically solvable by the acquisition of further knowledge. There seems to be situations in which moral difficulties are not theoretically solvable by the acquisition of further knowledge. For example, a person knows all the relevant facts that inventing a nuclear bomb will be able to kill 1, 000, 000 people which will then end and shorten the war by years. On the other hand, if the person knows the effects of dropping a nuclear bomb, it will then make the area uninhabitable for numerous years. The situation seems analogous to many problems which soldiers face. Should we or should not drop the nuclear bomb? In this situation, the acquisition of further information will not be able to help the person to solve this moral difficulty. In this account, Plato's theory cannot be accepted, since he has mistaken moral knowledge with scientific and mathematical knowledge. Therefore, it is evident that Plato's argument about the 'good life' and 'moral difficulties are like mathematical problems' are flawed for a number of reasons.

I believe that Aristotle's argument about the 'Golden Mean' is flawed for a number of reasons. For the first reason I will analyse whether his inference "that everyone always ought to follow the middle course between certain kinds of activities" (Philosophy Made Simple, 1999, p. 11) is justified. There are some situations that do not have a middle course. (<http://www.plosin.com/work/AristotleMean.html>) For example, there is no middle for keeping a promise and breaking a promise. Furthermore, moderation is not always appropriate, since some situations require extreme behaviour. Some people

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have passionate and flamboyant personalities. For example, a person may find that ‘moderation’ behaviour does not suit him/her as the person may be temporarily passionate about his/her occupation. Therefore, it is evident that Aristotle’s ‘Golden Mean’ is flawed in this case.

In conclusion, Aristotle’s argument about the ‘good life’ demonstrates that the ‘good life’ is a life of happiness. Plato’s however, does not; as he believed that people needs certain kinds of knowledge of the ‘good life’ in order to live the ‘good life’. From the reasons above, Aristotle’s solution to the problem of the ‘good life’ is a better answer than Plato. On the other hand, Aristotle’s ‘Golden Mean’ would not work. However Plato’s absolutism will work in the situation in keeping a promise and breaking a promise. From the reasons stated above Plato’s absolutism will be a better answer than Aristotle’s relativism.