

Aristotle and John Stuart Mill on Happiness and Morality

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Aristotle and John Stuart Mill on Happiness and Morality In this paper I will argue that Aristotle's conception of eudaimonia disproves Mill's utilitarian view that pleasure is the "greatest good." The purpose of this paper is to contrast Aristotle's and Mill's views on the value of happiness and its link to morality. First I will describe Aristotle's model of eudaimonia. Then I will present Mill's utilitarian views on happiness and morality. Lastly, I will provide a counterargument to Mill's utilitarian ethical principles using the Aristotelian model of eudaimonia.

In this section I will explain Aristotle's definition of eudaimonia and its relationship to happiness, morality and the virtues. Aristotle defines eudaimonia in the first book of the *Nicomachean Ethics* as "virtuous activity in accordance with reason" and that this is the highest good for human beings. For Aristotle, eudaimonia can be translated into a "human life of flourishing" since it occurs throughout a person's life. This lifelong happiness is complete and sufficient in itself, meaning that a person lives it as an end in itself and not for anything else beyond it.

An important aspect of reaching our own eudaimonia is to function well as human beings. Aristotle presents his concept of the human function by stating that what makes human function so distinct is not just to obtain nutrition and to grow because that aspect of life is shared with plants and it is also not perception because that is something shared with animals. Our ultimate human function therefore is reason and not just reason alone but to act in accordance to reason. Achieving excellence in human rational activity according to Aristotle is synonymous with leading a moral life.

To lead a moral life is a state in which a person chooses to act in accordance to the right virtues. Aristotle, defines virtue as a mean between two extremes (excess and deficiency). He argues that the mean is not necessarily the average or half way point, but rather changes in relation to each individual. For example, a person who just finished jogging needs more water after jogging than a person who was not jogging, so the mean between too much water and too little water is different for the jogger and non-jogger.

According to Aristotle, it is very difficult to discover the mean, to discover the exact point between the two extremes that is best suited for you. As he says, there are many ways to be wrong and only one way to be correct. Aristotle explains that the choice of the mean is going to depend on what the virtuous person's reasoning is. As in the case of the jogger, he will drink just enough water to quench his thirst (deficiency) but won't drink too much that would result in water intoxication (excess).

Aristotle focuses his moral theory on virtuous action and argues that virtue is necessary, but not sufficient for happiness. You need virtue to lead a happy life, but ultimately, virtue alone will not make you happy. What matters most is that you make a habit out of choosing to act in accordance with the right virtues, which leads to a balance in one's life and ultimately leads you closer and closer to achieving your own eudaimonia. In this next section I will present Mill's utilitarian views and the link between happiness and morality and how his views do not coincide with Aristotle's eudaimonistic ideals.

In chapter two of Utilitarianism, John Stuart Mill introduces his concept of utility, also known as the "Greatest Happiness Principle" to hold that "actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. By happiness is intended pleasure, and the absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain, and the privation of pleasure." In other words, Mill makes it certain that pleasure and freedom from pain are the only things desirable as goals and all things that we do are desirable because they produce pleasure or prevent pain.

Mill understood that it would be demeaning to humans to reduce life to pleasures as this would then put us at the same level as animals. Thus, he introduces the idea of higher and lower pleasures. The higher pleasures are those of a higher quality of that are determined by "competent judges." This competent judge is someone who is acquainted with both the higher and lower quality pleasures. In regards to morality, Mill anchors its definition on the premises of the greatest happiness principle stated above.

Unlike Aristotle who puts emphasis on the agent (the person themselves) in regards to acting morally, Mill is very indifferent and states that the character of the person and their motives do not matter only the consequence of those actions matter. For Mill, the morality of the action only depends on whether that action will produce pleasure for the greatest number of people. As stated before, he explains that pleasure leads to happiness, and happiness is the ultimate goal of each individual. However, morality is "the rules and precepts for human conduct," and not simply the causes of human behavior. Desire may drive human actions, but that doesn't mean that desire

should propel human actions. Morality is the ideal, not the reality. Because of his views on morality Mill would not agree with Aristotle that the completely ethical person will not be conflicted about his ethical choice. According to Mill a person could do the right thing, and act morally while also having the desire to do the wrong thing. To explain this, he gives the example of a rescuer who saves another person from drowning.

He helps this person because it is morally right, regardless of being seen as a good Samaritan or if he would've been compensated for his actions. Mill would also disagree with Aristotle's argument that it is determined whether or not someone led a eudaimonistic life only after this person has died. Mill essentially believes in concrete happiness and believes that people should be happy while they are alive. Mill states that pleasures are parts of our happiness and not an "abstract" means as Aristotle puts it.

In this third section I will provide a counterargument to Mill's utilitarian ethical principles using the Aristotelian model of eudaimonia. I firstly disagree with Mill's idea that happiness is equated with pursuing acts that only lead to pleasure and avoiding those that decrease pleasure. I side completely with Aristotle in that he believes that the purpose of pleasures is to serve as side product of activity to perfect our activities. For example, for a mathematician to become an excellent mathematician he must become very talented in doing mathematical activities but also must have the pleasure in doing this activity.

I also side with him on his statement in Book Ten of the Nicomachean Ethics certain pleasures such as those of touch " can lead us to become servile and

brutish" and says that "it attaches to us not in so far as we are men but in so far as we are animals." For example those who eat food to the excess have slavish characters because they are choosing to eat past their bodily intake limit. I agree here with Aristotle that those persons who are destitute of self-control do not use their reason, take pleasures exceedingly, in the wrong way and in the wrong objects.

Ultimately, in order to act virtuously a person must act rationally in a manner that is between the two extremes of deficiency and excess when it comes to matters of pleasure. Thus, pleasure should not be sought just for its own sake. In terms of moral actions, Mill's arguments also seem to be flawed. He believes that the goodness of an action is based on whether or not it produced pleasure and happiness for the greatest number of people. There is little emphasis on the disposition and character of the agent performing the action.

This idea seems illogical because then everyone would be acting without reason and doing things for the wrong intentions. As Aristotle says in Book One of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, "the man who does not rejoice in noble actions is not good; the good man judges well in matters of the good and the noble." Here he is referring to the fact that a person who is not performing actions for the right intentions is not a good man at all. To explain this further I will use the example of the drowning person.

Aristotle would advise that I should save a drowning person because I have the positive and noble intention to do so and not because someone is going to pay me for helping them. I think Mill's view on happiness and morality that

pleasures should equate with happiness sounds like it would be ideal to live this type of life. However, this type of logic would not work out in today's society. He tells us that in order to find out what kinds of pleasures are most valuable we should look to "competent judges" who seem to just know what are considered the better "higher" pleasures because they have experienced both the "higher" and "lower" pleasures.

As Aristotle states, however, not all pleasures are universal to all men because not everyone is directed to the same things. What if their idea of a higher pleasure is to rape women on the streets? The problem with Mill's argument then is that what this "competent judge" may consider to be a higher pleasure may actually be a lower pleasure and be very wrong about what they consider to be right. Aristotle would respond to Mill's statement that happiness should be concrete by stating that happiness in Mill's view seems to just be a fleeting experience.

For example, if a person spends their whole life trying to figure out a cure for cancer it won't be determined whether this person's life work was meaningful only until we examine this person's life work. To conclude, I have stated both Aristotle's and Mill's arguments in relation to happiness and morality. Aristotle concludes that happiness (eudaimonia) is to have a flourishing life in which actions are performed in accordance to virtuousness and reason.

Mill, on the other hand, believes that pleasure is ultimately the greatest type of good and therefore is equated with happiness. I have argued that Aristotle's concept of eudaimonia disproves Mill's "greatest happiness principle" on

the grounds that pleasure is only a small part of happiness and that the emphasis on living a happy life should be placed on the agent to habitually act in a rational and virtuous manner.