Thucydide vs plato on the good life essay sample

Philosophy

What is the true nature of the Good Life? Is it living life with concern for only oneself despite the possible consequences of one's action on others? Or might it involve self-sacrifice in effort to do what one feels is right or just? Is it descriptive, or perhaps prescriptive? Two prominent Greeks, Thucydides and Plato, began providing answers to these questions over 25 centuries ago as they analyzed and wrote critically about life's ethical implications. They shined contrasting light on what is right, just, and good; as well as ways to achieve true happiness. In short, each gave an opinion on how to garner the Good Life. Let's start by taking a look at Thucydides, a general in the Athenian army.

Thucydides, one of the earliest true historians, chronicled the Peloponnesian War. Being scientifically-oriented, his descriptions of the lengthy war between Athens and Sparta were empirical. His account of events raised questions: What actions are justified to achieve happiness? Does justice fluctuate between times of war and peace? He seems to indicate might makes right, at least in times of war. In conflict, acting from a position of strength may be the best route leading to the Good Life. A clear example exists when he recalls interaction between Athens and Melos in the Melian Dialogues.

As we enter Thucydides' chronicle, the Athenian army is squaring-off against the small island territory of Melos following Melian refusal to succumb peacefully to the larger, stronger force. Athenian leaders have dispatched representatives to speak with the leaders of Melos, but by now Athenians are determined to take over the small island at all costs. However, the Melians think they may be able to avoid war with the Athenian army since Melos is

affiliated with Sparta via heritage and has been neutral in the confrontation between Athens and Sparta. During their meeting the Athenians inform the Melians that Melos should expect to be conquered.

To briefly summarize Thucydides version of the talks, Athens justifies its intent on domination by explaining that letting Melos survive would make Athens appear frail, thereby weakening Athenian power in the region. In the end, the Athenian army carried out their promise by exterminating military-aged Melian males, enslaving their women and children, and colonizing the island. But, why is the Athenian conquest of Melos important to a discussion of what constitutes the Good Life?

By describing his army's actions, Thucydides displays belief that, similar to the animal kingdom, the strong will survive and the weak will eventually perish. In essence, by elucidating this tragic event, he begs the questions: is anything right, or just, when attempting to reach victory in war? Were the Athenian army's deeds morally or ethically condonable? The brilliant philosopher, Plato, would have likely answered " no" to both.

In penning a series of important dialogues, Plato, student of Socrates and mentor to Aristotle, used normative theory via the Socratic Method–which involved questions, logical conversations, and conclusions by and between his central character, Socrates, and other players–to promote philosophy, self-sacrifice, and moderation as just and right methods to achieve the Good Life. In The Apology, one of Plato's earliest dialogues, Socrates, on trial for his life, gives a lengthy speech in court. In short, Socrates tells Athenians he would, and will if still given chance, continue to spread the truth that living a

virtuous life, without regard to luxury and materialism, leads to true happiness.

In Crito, Plato, utilizes discourse between Socrates and the title character to prescribe justice over self-interest. Crito visits Socrates in jail and tries to get him to evade death by leaving Athens. Socrates staunchly refuses because he thinks it would be hypocritical to circumvent the Athenian legal system. Later, in The Republic, arguably Plato's most prodigious philosophical work, Socrates asks logical questions to elicit answers from sophists, thereby getting them to eliminate their own hypotheses, thus proving his own points. In the end, Socrates' anecdotes show that living a modest and virtuous versus aggrandized and self-serving lifestyle, results in true happiness. But, was Plato right? How does his prescription of self-sacrifice for the good of all compare to Thucydides' win-at-any-cost descriptions of the Athenians in Melos. Which view is most just or right? Which will make a human's life truly happy and good?

For those who choose to live lavishly no matter the cost, or perhaps feel the nature of life is such that strength and power trump weakness and subservience, Thucydides' empirical recollection of Athenian army actions at Melos must seem justified. Don't those who have achieved dominance naturally deserve to live the Good Life? To the contrary, for others who believe that self-sacrifice and virtue are the key to justice, Plato's normative philosophy would be the wiser choice to attain happiness and goodness. One could surmise Thucydides was reporting the way life is, while Plato was analyzing and communicating the way things ought to be.

Personally, the author of this document is a retired military member of the U. S. Air Force (U. S. A. F.) and thus might be expected to have empirical views, especially in times of war. However, his firm belief in the Geneva Conventions and the U. S. A. F. core values of integrity first, service-before-self, and excellence in all actions leads him–me–to believe that Plato's views are most correct. Note to mentor: I didn't use quotes or paraphrases for this paper, thus there aren't any citations or references listed. I read and reviewed all assignments in part A of Module 1, then combined my recollection of it with my prior–and I must say somewhat limited–knowledge of philosophy to write the paper. Total word count for title and body is 879.

A Brief Biblical View of Science, Technology, and Business: Would Utilitarians Agree?
Utilitarianism, originated by Epicurus in ancient Greece, was firmly developed as a field of normative ethics by Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill in the late 1700's and early 1800's respectively. Ideas included in Utilitarian supposition, inferring that which causes pleasure is beneficial, while that which results in pain is not, fit well with the modernization occurring in the western world at the same time. However, while the new concept fit well with changes going on in areas of science, technology and business, many of the new Utilitarian ideals seemed to clash with some of the traditional teachings spelled out in the Bible, arguably the most followed of all religious works, certainly in western culture. But why the differences? In an effort to understand why Biblical ethics conflicted with Utilitarianism in the budding technological era, it helps to know a bit about Biblical views on the previously stated areas of science, technology, and business.

First off, it's fair to say the Bible doesn't specifically mention science since exact scientific methods weren't around yet. It's widely known, however, that the omnipotent Biblical God is thought to have created heaven and earth in a week–six days and a day of rest. Obviously this doesn't meld with non-biblical scientific belief of Uniformitarianism, an evolutional theory which stated the earth developed as a series of geological changes over extended periods of time (Wicander, Historical Geology, p. 14), and had it's origins in the late 1700's, nearly the same time as Utilitarianism. But what about technology?

Similar to science, the Bible appears vague when looking directly at technology. Nevertheless, major technological advances seem unnecessary, or at least unimportant, especially with God, the ultimate provider, taking care of his followers. For example, in the Biblical New Testament, in The Gospel According to Matthew, a recounting of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount mentions that God's disciples who are mourning or in need will be " comforted" and " satisfied" (Newton, Source Reader, p. 58) in the end. Furthermore, in essence, if one has a loving God providing all one's needs for following set guidelines, such as the Ten Commandments; or if one lives a just life as prescribed by Jesus and his Apostles, then why would one need technology to survive? Biblical ethicists might argue one doesn't. How, though, is business viewed within context of the Bible?

In attempting common sense analysis of my prior, yet rather limited knowledge of the Bible, it makes sense that the business world, especially making major advances in the business sector, isn't a high priority from a Biblical perspective. Looking again at his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus, when

preaching to his disciples, seems to infer one won't have to be successful from a materialistic or business sense to be ultimately rewarded: " Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth." (Newton, Source Reader, p. 58). While this brief statement obviously isn't all-encompassing when it comes to a Biblical look at business' influence on secular or religious interests, it is a telling summation of the Biblical theory regarding a materialistic outlook on life. How, though, does this very truncated look at how the Bible tends to view science, technology, and business compare with Utilitarian ethics which emerged in the late eighteenth-century world?

Utilitarianism, primarily developed and rationalized by Bentham and Mill, is fairly simple in its most basic form: " Pleasure is good; pain is evil" (Newton, Study Guide, p. 37). To expound, Utilitarianism is a form of ethics based upon consequences of actions taken; in short, it is results-based. Basically, a course of action which leads to the most good for the largest amount of people is the proper step to take. For example, as pointed out by distinguished panelists on the audio required for this module of study (TESC, Audiotape Programs 2A-B), when Churchill avoided disclosing German plans to bomb Coventry, England for fear of disclosing England's cracking of German code in a crucial part of World War II, his decision would be fully justified by Utilitarians. Why? Despite the tragic deaths in Coventry, many more lives were probably saved by keeping an important secret. But how would Biblical disciples view the same situation? And, would Utilitarians agree with Biblical ethicists? In this author's opinion, most likely not.

Regarding Coventry, rigid rules laid out by the God of the Old Testament, along with Jesus' advocacy for loving one's enemies in the New Testament,

would lead one to believe Biblical ethics would prohibit Churchill's cover-up despite the potential for more lives lost. After all, if God is omnipotent, as in the Bible, things happen for a reason. Followers of the Bible's all-powerful God don't have the right to change the course of action. But which philosophy is correct? The Utilitarian or Biblical ethical view?

My limited knowledge of philosophy, and more specifically ethics, doesn't exactly qualify me to give a definitive answer. After all, how egotistical would I be to second guess the likes of framers of the Bible or philosophers who rationalized a school of thought as profound as Utilitarianism? However, as a student of ethics, and thus, one expected to give an opinion based upon my studies thus far, I have to take the side of the Utilitarians. Not because I don't agree with many Biblical principles, but rather because my love of humanity–combined with the luxury of 20/20 historical hindsight–leads me to believe Churchill's decision, while certainly morally difficult, was correct in the end. Works Cited

" 2B – Ethics in America: The Traditions of Ethics", courtesy of Thomas Edison State College YouTube. com, n. d. Web. Newton, Lisa. Ethics in America Source Reader. New Jersey: Pearson Education Inc., 2004. Print. Newton, Lisa. Ethics in America Study Guide. New Jersey: Pearson Education Inc., 2005. Print. Wicander, Reed, et al. Historical Geology. California: Brooks/Cole, Cengage Learning, 2010. Print. Total word count for title and body is 920.