

Consistency in nicomachean ethics philosophy essay



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There is a seeming lack of consistency in Nicomachean Ethics on what is required for human happiness. In the beginning of the book, Aristotle stated that, happiness requires both complete virtue and a complete life (Book I, 1100a), suggesting that happiness require all virtuous activities and all external goods that people pursue. However, further, in Book X of Nicomachean Ethics, he stated that contemplation is the only essence of human happiness as his argument develops. These two interpretations then are called the inclusivist and the intellectual interpretations respectively.

There is much contradiction on Aristotle's account, more specifically, Aristotle thinks that all kinds of virtue and external goods are what is required for happiness while in the same book, he claims that excellence in intellectual activity, namely contemplation is the only way to true happiness (the flourishing eudaimonic life). This disagreement makes his comments on happiness in Book I and Book X seem disconnected in a parallel fashion. In this essay, I would like to conclude that the way to make sense of Aristotle's account (if not to reconcile the contradiction) on what is required for human happiness is to emphasis the human nature of happiness and to exclude the possibility for human to achieve the contemplating happiness and embrace the inclusivist interpretation to an extent.

What is required for happiness will only be clear if we understand what happiness is, therefore, we shall discuss the meaning of Happiness Aristotle refers to. Firstly, we put aside this inclusivist/ intellectualist debate for a while, and investigate what Aristotle claims to be necessary for happiness.

The word happiness Aristotle used in Greek is “ εὐδαιμονία” (eudaimonia)”, which may differ from people’s understanding of the English word “ happiness” nowadays. On Aristotle’s account, happiness is not a state as contemporary common people would think, most people from a modern western background are most likely to answer what is happiness by telling what they regard as important and fulfilling in lives, or what makes them feel happy, e. g. having wealth, health, family etc., or simply the sensation of gratification as an enjoyable subjective state of mind.

However Aristotle characterised it in terms of an activity, which can be interpreted as a way of living, a lifestyle. This is found at the beginning of Book X (1176a34): “...Happiness is not a state. For it were, someone might have it and yet be asleep for his whole life, living the life of a plant, or suffer the greatest misfortunes. If we do not approve of this, we count happiness as an activity rather than a state.”

For him, it is the ultimate goal of human lives. He develops his case as followed:

“ Since every sort of knowledge and decision pursues some good... What is the highest of all the goods pursued in action?” (1095a15) He answered that happiness is this highest of all goods pursued by people, even though that different people may have different ideas about happiness and in action and have different approaches to acquire it. He gives examples to illustrate this, the common people pursue the life of gratification, the politically cultivated pursue honour, etc. but they all do it in order to pursue happiness eventually. Then, Aristotle claims that humans’ telos, i. e. final goal and aim

is to pursue happiness. It is a universal telos which all human actions aim at because all human actions are aimed implicitly and explicitly at it. It is a self-sufficient good that all who pursue it will have no further need and lack nothing.

“ Happiness more than anything else seems unconditionally complete, since we always choose it because of itself, never because of something else... Honour, pleasure, understanding and every virtue we certainly we certainly choose because of themselves, since we also choose them for the sake of happiness, supposing that through them we shall be happy. Happiness, by contrast, no one ever choose for their sake or for the sake of anything else at all.” (1097b)

He then progresses, stating that happiness requires living according to virtues, in Book I , “ Now we take the human function to be certain kind of life, and take this life to be the soul’s activity and actions that express reason . The function of man is to live a certain kind of life, and this activity implies a rational principle, and the function of a good man is the good and noble performance of these, and if any action is well performed it is performed in accord with the appropriate excellence: if this is the case, then happiness turns out to be an activity of the soul in accordance with virtue. (1098a13)”

Aristotle then speaks of function of a human being, and he suggested that humans have a special function that other organisms do not share, that is having the gift of reason. “ The human function is the soul’s activity that expresses reason.” (1098a)Therefore, the good humans aim at should be

the excellence in reason, which is what is required for happiness. As happiness is a way of living, the most ideal, best and ultimate way of living that people pursue will be happiness.

In order to achieve human happiness, i. e. having the most ideal life, Aristotle then concluded: “ And if there are more virtues than one, the good will express the best and most complete virtue.” Since he earlier mentioned understanding is the best virtue, this seems to lend support for the intellectualist view. However, then, rather abruptly, later in Book I, he added: “ Nonetheless, happiness evidently also needs external goods to be added , as we said, since we cannot, or cannot easily do fine action if we lack the resources.”(1099a)

Many take what Aristotle mentioned in Book I into account (and parts in Book X seem to lend support to the inclusivist view too). However in my opinion, Aristotle’s suggestion that the whole range of virtue is required does not fully make logical sense in the whole Nicomachean Ethics, rather, it appears to be an added comment to make his argument more relevant to real-life.

On the other hand, there is the intellectualist view that interprets the happiness, the human telos, consists of one single virtuous intellectual activity: contemplation.

Most support can be found in Book X.

“ If happiness, then, is activity expressing virtue, it is reasonable for it to express the supreme virtue, which will be the virtue of the best thing. The best is understanding... and to understand what is fine and divine, by being

itself either divine or the most divine element in us. Hence complete happiness will be its activity expressing its proper virtue; and we have said that this activity is the activity of study.”(1177a11)

Interestingly, J. M. Cooper originally in his book *Reason And Human Good in Aristotle* (1975) supported this theory however he later changed his opinion. Heinaman criticised his deflection, suggesting that he made an unsuccessful defence. Cooper changed to the intellectualist view, he suggests an interpretation to avoid inconsistency between the contradictions found in Books I and X, his attempt does not treat Aristotle’s view in Book X as agreeing that intellect person with vicious morality can be happy. Since happiness without moral virtues can still be achieved if intellectual activity is the only necessity. Cooper tried to reconcile this contradiction in his interpretation, since Book I suggests that all kinds of virtuous activities are required, while Book X denies that all kinds of virtuous behaviour but especially intellectual activity are required for happiness. Heinaman criticised that “ by making activity with a kinship to divine activity sufficient for happiness in Book X, he (J. M. Cooper) commits Aristotle to happiness for the morally vicious thinker, since human intellectual activity on its own has a greater kinship to divine activity than morally virtuous action on its own” Also, Thomas Nagel noticed this indecision on Aristotle’s account and concludes that Aristotle is tempted by the intellectualist account.

Inevitably, a conflict arises as evidence for both sides is found in Aristotle’s text. However, if the function argument he has made stands, there should not be other things rather than doing what the most excellent human being should be doing, i. e. contemplating.

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Therefore it may seem like a contradiction within Aristotle's argument, that whether contemplation is the only thing required. A reconciliation can be hard to achieve in my opinion, we infer that Aristotle on the one hand recognise a life of contemplation as the most ideal happy life, while he also realises without external goods a life cannot be sustained.(1178b34) On the other hand, he suggest only contemplation is required.

However, if we take the affinity to divinity into account, we may suggest that human happiness, (not divine) require external goods as well as the intellectual activities. If we draw a distinct line between human happiness and general happiness (in the more theoretical and divine sense), the question can be answered better. Aristotle asserted that the function of something must be what it should be good at, so human's function should be reasoning since the ideal human should engage in intellectual activity (contemplation), this reasoning of his is drawn by the comparison to carpenters and architects, that their function would be crafting and building, however, he neglected the fact that both carpenters and architects are human, and human would share the actions of plants and animals (the action of living, pleasure-seeking etc.). Also, divinity is shared by humans when it comes to reasoning and thinking, however humans are not completely divine, having all the earthly desires and needs. Therefore, following this line of argument, I would conclude that human happiness would include living according to all virtues that human are able to take part in. Since the contemplating happiness is the form of eudaimonia that bears more reminiscence of the realm of divinity, it is not possible that human can

achieve it completely, especially without external goods. Therefore, taking account of human nature, the kind of happiness is the only possibility for us.

Hence, in my view, as the result of the discussion, it would be more appropriate to agree with the inclusivist view that human happiness on Aristotle's account requires a life with accordance to the full range of virtues and their supporting external goods.