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Are we Destined to be Happy: Analysis of Aristotle's 'Happiness' framework

Introduction

Happiness, an idea as alluring as elusive, has captured the imaginations of philosophers and the common people, a concept so desirable that it has been the motivation guiding the choices and actions we make in our existence. The importance of happiness is clear, but that leads to the rise of more questions, is it fated or in our control? Are some people destined to find happiness or does everyone possess the agents to possibly achieve it? This essay has been worked upon after dealing with Aristotle's work, Nicomachean ethics, as a whole; but it only draws from book 1 of Nicomachean ethics, which explores the concept of happiness as the ultimate end or chief good, emphasizing the importance of virtuous activity and the role of external goods in its pursuit. This essay, using book 1 as a prerequisite, delves into the concept of happiness, first attempting to define it using the content available from the source then analysing the preconditions for happiness. After these, I analyse the permanence of happiness and the idea of coming back to happiness as portrayed in his book. This leads us to identify some problems with the overall framework of Aristotle's 'happiness philosophy' and take a stance against the whole non-deterministic theme of his framework. Using this source as the baseline and topics as roadmap, I argue that the framework provided to us by Aristotle

in terms of happiness, is a deterministic framework; meaning that happiness is fated rather than achievable.

Defining happiness

After working closely with Aristotle text, Nicomachean ethics, I have reached a certain point where I can clearly say that the idea of happiness is quite an important one for Aristotle and his moral frameworks. So before asking extensive questions about this said 'happiness', let us make an attempt to define it, its nature, what would count as happiness and what would not; to make a clear base before moving forward. Aristotle, I see dwells on the question of our ultimate purpose, our characteristic function in more technical terms. This brings us to the concept of ends. In the very early pages of book 1 of Nicomachean ethics he talks about the chief good, that could act as an end to all ends, thereby making it a contender for the question of our ultimate purpose; he states, " So if what is done has some end that we want for its own sake, and everything else we want for the sake of something else (this would lead to an infinite progression . . .) then clearly this will be the good, indeed the chief good" (Aristotle 1094a). Here we see the importance of ends (of say an activity), and while we do certain activities to achieve some ends to achieve further ends (concerning pleasure or pain for example) there is one end that we do for its own sake and for no further end, and that is termed as the chief good, that Aristotle argues to be 'Happiness'.

Now, one extremely important distinction to make about the nature of Happiness. Working from popular belief we know that happiness is seen as a state, a condition or position, that if you are inside of, you will be happy. But, after being familiarised with Aristotle's philosophy I clearly know is not the case. Aristotle clearly emphasis happiness as an activity or rather a class of activities, that an individual constantly needs to keep doing, to be happy. Although the idea of happiness as an 'activity' seems counter-intuitive – the fact that I have to do some

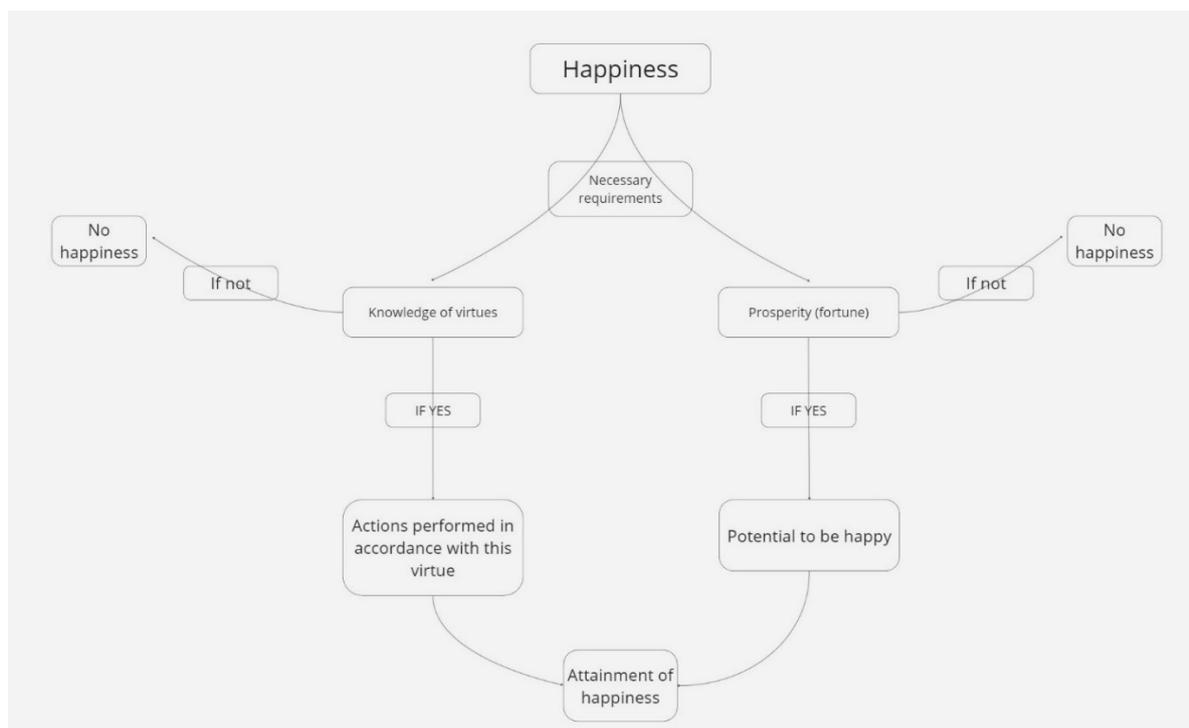
necessary activity to be continuously happy rather than just achieve its state and just be happy – Aristotle provides an excellent argument that helps with its reasoning, he says, “we said, then, it is not a state, since if it were it might be possessed by someone asleep all his life, living a vegetable existence, or someone suffering the greatest misfortunes. So, if this plausible, we should put it rather in the class of activities,” (1176b), and this does make perfect sense for why happiness should be classified as a class of activities rather than just a state of existence. Moving on, if I classify happiness as a class of activities, there is need to factor in the importance of choice here, i.e, while it being an activity (self-sufficient and complete in itself according to Socrates), there comes the question of choosing the ‘right kind’ of activity to perform, in accordance with the said end in mind (chief good/happiness); and Aristotle here argues that since we have defined happiness as self-sufficient, the activity done technically should be worthy of choice in itself when nothing is expected from it beyond its activity.

Preconditions to happiness

Talking in length about this chief good as happiness, let us talk about the attainment of the same. It is contradictory to use the term ‘attainment’ for the kind of happiness described (since a state can be attained and I have clearly stated that happiness is not one) but for the lack of a better word bear with me. Now I can move forward with the analysis of Aristotle’s framework for the conditions supplementing the attainment of the defined chief good – Happiness. To aid my argument, I am going to begin listing instances where Aristotle brings the conditions (necessary or supplementary) to happiness and analyse them , for the sole purpose of showcasing the reference framework; and convenience for the reader too.

In chapter 8 of his book 1 I see Aristotle first starts dealing with these ‘conditions’ for happiness; he states, “happiness obviously needs the presence of external goods as well, since

it is impossible, or at least no easy matter, to perform noble actions without resources” (1099b). Interpreting this I can say that fortune plays an important role in the determination of whether an individual would be capable of fulfilling the chief good. Later in the same paragraph he bases this point with the example of a person who is ugly, of low birth and similar misfortunes and again explicitly states the importance of some sort of prosperity. I can now surely say that this prosperity (of some kind) is certainly a ‘necessary’ condition to happiness. One more point that is of the outmost importance to understanding the conditions is when Aristotle says; “If he is called blessed, he is being described as such on account of the potential he has, since, as we have said, happiness requires complete virtue and a complete life” (1100a). Again, in this quote the phrases ‘complete life’ and ‘well bred’ points out to the prosperity that I have already pointed out in our previous point but with one more condition, i.e, complete virtue. If we go back to the end of the first section of the essay, we can recall that the activity should be worthy of choice itself; and the way we decide if the said action is ‘worthy’ is by checking if it is in accordance with virtues or not. To make things easier, here is a diagram for the conditions for happiness stated as of now in this section.



Permanence of happiness

After looking at the diagram I have constructed for the achievement of happiness, I reason that we do have a narrow window for happiness, which includes having the knowledge of virtues and prosperity, which is not enough, because the prosperity just provides us with the potential to be happy, but performing actions in accordance with those virtues while having the potential available would lead us to happiness. But we know that happiness is not a state, but a set of activities, so how do we ensure that we do not lose our 'achieved happiness'; Is happiness permanent? Aristotle's response would be "If activities are, as we have said, what really matter in life, no one blessed could become wretched, since he will never do hateful and petty actions." and if met with bad luck "he will not be shifted easily from happiness, and not from ordinary misfortunes, but by many grave ones" (1101a). What I can interpret from these statements is the fact that even after attaining happiness it is very possible that we lose it to misfortune. This further narrows the 'window' of someone being happy with some conditions already set up and even surpassing those conditions will not be a cause for relief for the person who attains it, and can very well lose it to misfortunes. This brings up the question of Is it even possible to be happy?, because it certainly is extremely hard to achieve it with the conditions set (that may or may not depend on us). But again, avoiding the bleak argument of 'we cannot be happy' let us assume we can be, and this led me to reason towards the possibility of a deterministic picture in the case of happiness.

A deterministic picture of happiness?

After working with Aristotle's book for a period, we know for a fact that he is anything but deterministic. I observe several phrases where he tries to be non-deterministic, after laying out some necessary conditions in the first place too. One example could be; "Nevertheless even in their midst [misfortunes] what is noble shines through, when a person calmly bears

many great misfortunes, not through insensibility, but by being well bred and great souled” (1100b). This is one of the examples of how Aristotle tries to be non-deterministic in the case for happiness but if we observe the term “well bred” would again imply prosperous conditions and “great souled” imply in accordance with virtues. According to my reasoning, his attempt to be non-deterministic failed here, where he referenced back to the conditions provided earlier that we have no control on. He also eliminates the possibility of chance in this scenario stating “to entrust what is greatest and most noble to chance would be quite inappropriate” (1099b), this statement sounds surprisingly like Einsteins statement of “God does not play dice” which we know is not true in the light of the existence of Quantum mechanics in physics. I am arguing that the framework Aristotle has laid out for us in the topic of happiness looks to be deterministic, in contrast to Aristotle’s attempts to state that it is not.

To argue for this, first I would like to make a distinction between the idea of fortune and similar terms. In order to make a non-deterministic argument, I observe Aristotle always touch up on the idea of coming back to happiness, reusing the statement referenced in a previous paragraph, “He will not be shifted easily from happiness, and not by ordinary misfortunes, but by many grave ones. He would not recover from these to become happy again in a short space of time. If he does recover, it will be after a long and complete period of great and noble accomplishments” (1101a) . This is the part where I see him deal with this idea of ‘coming back to happiness’ ; where he talks about the shift of a happy person, away from happiness due to a number of misfortunes (grave ones) but by the way of completion of great and noble achievements for a long period will that individual manage to return back to happiness. Reading the section from his book, two points troubled me, i.e., the splitting of states between fortune and misfortune (the idea of existence in just black and white with no grey areas) and the discrete nature of misfortune.

Addressing the first problem, this can also be essentially reduced to a discrete nature problem. Aristotle's argument for coming back on happiness assumes only two natures/happenings in life, i.e, fortune, or misfortune. This means, either good things are happening to an individual or bad things. Just from a practical perspective on the daily happenings in a person's life, this does not fit in, while practical life would not have such a discrete nature but a more continuous nature; which brings me to adding one more distinction – the absence of fortune or misfortune. The new distinction (that seems more practical to me) would be fortune, absence of both, and misfortune. This distinction looks more like a spectrum with allowance for the existence of grey areas rather than two discrete blocks as seen in Aristotle's work. While the existence of fortune clearly sets up the individual on the path to be potentially happy (of course if it is in accordance with the other conditions too):the absence of both fortune and misfortune sets up the individual on a harder path, while still happiness being a possibility with noble achievements and perseverance (provided that he is not met with any misfortunes on the path) and lastly the most important happening that we're concerned with – misfortunes. In the case of misfortunes, I can see clearly that one of the necessary conditions of 'prosperity' or more practically 'the absence of misfortune' is not being followed, then this means the individual is set up for an impossible path for happiness? But, according to Aristotle while after a long period of noble achievements that the person may recover, bringing us to question if the path is as impossible as I have reasoned it out to be or not.

To provide further clarity on this, it is important to address the second problem – the discrete nature of misfortune portrayed. I observe in the statement and multiple times throughout the text that Aristotle refers to the shifting away from happiness due to many (implying discrete) misfortunes, while coming back to happiness requires some certain conditions to be true – well bred and well souled (1100b) and long and complete period of great and noble

accomplishments (1101b). So essentially, after the end of a certain number of misfortunes the person does return to the state of absence of fortune and misfortune; which then sets the individual on the path to be happy, provided that they persevere enough and are noble. I do not see this important distinction in his argument which felt like an attempt to be non-deterministic (example - no matter the adversity if tried hard enough an individual can reach happiness), and I certainly felt that this distinction was important to show importance of the conditions (misfortune in the way of happiness) and the person does not return to happiness during misfortunes, but rather in the absence of it, while certainly taking a harder path due to the absence of fortune as well. An example to support this could be taken from an interesting conversation I had on the same topic; the conversation revolved around the idea of continuous misfortune. While here in Aristotle's argument we see a shift from the state of misfortune to absence of it, we can certainly question if there is a return to happiness in the case of continuous misfortune. In the case of chronic illnesses or any example for a continuous misfortune, does the individual come back to happiness? Practically if a person keeps facing continuous and grave misfortunes in life, they do not get a chance to recover; and return to the state of absence of misfortunes to move towards happiness. The idea of continuous misfortune throws out the possibility of recovery (until the misfortune stops) or the misfortune results in the death of the individual which is out of the scope of this paper.

The argument of suffering

While exploring the preconditions for happiness according to Aristotle, it is evident now that the attainment of virtues is absolutely necessary; and virtue as Aristotle describes it is not something that we are born with but habituable through consistent actions aligned with morality and the doctrine of mean. However, an interesting point to consider is the relationship between acquisition of virtues and suffering (boiling down to misfortunes).

While the attainment of virtues is important, the question that arises is – can virtues be truly

acquired without suffering? We know that these virtues are gained due to repeated practice; and reasoning further it is valid to argue that growth of virtues emerges from adversity and hardships. His defining of happiness as an activity and not an emotion but an ongoing process of engaging in virtuous activities, suffering may very likely play as a catalyst for these activities. In these exact times of misfortune, individuals may be encouraged or forced to reflect, reevaluate, and perform actions. I am arguing that this process of self-examination plays an important role in the development of virtues. So, Aristotle's framework recognizes the importance of virtues for happiness, it indirectly also acknowledges the role of suffering in shaping and strengthening those virtues. This realisation proved to be contradictory to me, due to the precondition of prosperity for happiness but also the role suffering or misfortune plays in the development of virtues (the other precondition). This led me to believe and argue for a more deterministic picture for happiness with the interplay between the attainment of virtues (with suffering) and the importance of fortune; the attainment of the two conditions being contradictory or at the very least counter-productive for each other.

Conclusion

In conclusion, my exploration lies in Aristotle's conception of happiness as outlined in Nicomachean ethics as the ultimate end or chief good, achievable through a life of activity in accordance with reason and virtue. This understanding clearly challenges popular ideas of about happiness as a fixed condition or a state and also factors in the concept of choice, in selecting the right kind of activities. Moving on, I have examined the preconditions for happiness, including external goods such as prosperity and internal goods such as complete virtue. These conditions again do not lead us to happiness, but provide the potential for happiness; and I also acknowledge the role of misfortune in potentially disrupting happiness. Aristotle suggests that while happiness may be susceptible to disruption by misfortune, individuals who possess complete virtue and engage in noble activities are better equipped to

maintain or if lost, recover happiness despite challenges. However, from my argument I have identified potential limitations in Aristotle's framework, particularly regarding its non-deterministic implications. Despite Aristotle's attempts to highlight the role of misfortune and the possibility of coming back to happiness after adversity, I have argued that his framework may still imply a deterministic view in which external factors such as fortune play a significant role in determining happiness. This argument was aided by the distinction I made for the categories of fortune, absence of both, and misfortune; this helped us examine the nature of misfortune better in its role of hindering happiness. Going deeper I have also questioned the discrete nature of misfortune in his works, and provided the example of continuous misfortune where the individual is unable to return until and unless there is an absence of misfortune. This further helped us in our argument for the deterministic nature of Aristotle's framework for happiness.

The next would be to state possible objections to our analysis; the most straightforward one could be the challenges in the interpretation of Aristotle's text or just limitations in my analysis due to the complex nature of Aristotle's philosophy. One more possible limitation could be that the paper solely works with the content of Aristotle's book *Nicomachean ethics* and no preceding or newer works and may possibly miss arguments or ideas already made or better arguments in his newer works. One possible objection to the deterministic argument in the essay can be the doctrine of mean – an idea which can be argued to fit in all of our arguments – for example making the presence of fortune tend towards a mean so that it allows potential while also suffering existing parallelly (thus attainment of virtues); which again tends to a mean. This allows both of these opposite conditions to exist hand in hand allowing for Aristotle's framework to work ; while I would still argue that the window provided is still too narrow (given that we achieve happiness with the superposition of different means) and still too idealistic and deterministic. Looking ahead, I believe this

argument does have further implications as questioning the deterministic nature of happiness is just the start and if answered can be used to aid bigger philosophical arguments like “Do we have free will” and is certainly an integral stepping stone in the direction of answering questions regarding our freedom and will.

References

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