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The Purpose of Life

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Throughout history, man has questioned the purpose of his existence on this earth. Man exists, and he inherently knows that the reason for his being cannot be merely that: to be. Thus, he wonders, "I am here, but why? What am I supposed to do about my existence, and in what way am I expected to exist?" Among those who attempt to answer these questions are the Greek philosophers, most notably Plato and Aristotle. These men boldly put forth the argument that the end goal, the cause of all actions, and the reason for man's existence is happiness. In their minds, happiness is the end, and the worth of everything else in life, including goodness, justice, and virtue, is based on whether or not it is beneficial as means to this end. Modern American society, though defining happiness differently, in many ways reflects the Greeks' idea that happiness is the reason for human life. Supported by the Christian and Hebrew Bible, this essay will attempt to debunk the Greeks' theory, which will implicitly criticize the modern American pursuit. It will be shown that entities such as goodness, justice, and virtue are desirable in themselves, regardless of whether or not happiness follows their attainment. Furthermore, Aristotle's defined happiness is neither the end nor the universal cause of human action, but rather a component and byproduct of the true end. Happiness is not the reason for which man lives; he exists for a much higher calling, one that defies the simplicity of the Greeks' philosophical ponderings.

Within modern American society, happiness is clearly a highly pursued desire. Anyone qualitatively observing the general population, or merely examining his own motives, will readily see that one of an American's greatest yearnings is to be happy and that most of his or her actions are determined by his or her pursuit of this desire. One need only look at common American advertising slogans such as "Disneyland: The Happiest Place on Earth," "Happy Meals," and "Coca Cola: Open Happiness" to see the prevalence of this theme in modern American society.¹ This desire has not emerged in a vacuum either; the pursuit of happiness is a notion that was established by the founders of the United States. The opening lines of the Declaration of Independence state, "We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness..."² According to the founders then, happiness is a natural and God-given right of man, and thus it was to be a central goal of American society. The way that modern America and likely the founders defined happiness is that of an internal, temporary feeling, "a state of well-being and

¹ -. "Advertising Slogans." *Advertising Slogans*. Think Slogans, n.d. Web. 22 Nov. 2013.

² -. "Declaration of Independence." *Primary Documents of American History (Virtual Programs & Services, Library of Congress): Declaration of Independence*. Library of Congress, n.d. Web. 22 Nov. 2013.

contentment.”³ Many Americans base their perception of the quality of their lives on this inner feeling, and this internal state determines the choices they make and the way in which they live. In short, as a supreme goal of American culture, happiness holds immense power over the American people, and as something which people base their entire lives upon, the pursuit of happiness has seemingly become a type of American religion.

When a modern American man asks his neighbor, “How are you?” he will typically answer, “I’m good.” One might then ask, “Are you good, or are you happy?” Aristotle would argue that these two states of being accompany one another hand-in-hand. Aristotle’s *definition* of happiness differs dramatically from the common definition of happiness in modern America, but America perfectly displays Aristotle’s explanation of the *role* of happiness. Before discussing the role that the Greeks believed happiness to play, the essence of their view of happiness must first be explained. While America views happiness as a feeling, in *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle views it as a way of living. Aristotle defines happiness as “a being-at-work of the soul in accordance with virtue,” meaning that to be happy, one must work, and he must live virtuously.⁴ The reason that Aristotle says “being-at-work” is necessary is because unless a man translates his virtue into action, he is unable to accomplish good. Therefore, according to Aristotle, someone who is asleep, or even children or animals, cannot accomplish good because they are unable to perform truly “beautiful actions,” such as risking death for one’s community.⁵ Aristotle also states that external goods, such as prosperity and fortune are also necessary to be able to perform beautiful actions, and “naturally assist the work and are useful as tools.”⁶ According to Aristotle’s definition, one also cannot perform good works unless he has virtue within him, as his action will never translate into good; thus, virtue is vital for happiness.

Aristotle defines virtue as “an active condition that makes one apt at choosing.”⁷ By “active condition,” he refers to the faculty by which man makes choices.⁸ Aristotle explains that this choosing to attain virtue involves finding the “mean condition between two vices, one resulting from excess and the other from deficiency.”⁹ For example, if fear is one extreme vice and confidence is the opposite extreme vice, then the mean virtue is courage.¹⁰ Virtue is thus determined by choices coming from one’s active condition (which also help form

³ -. "Happiness." *Merriam-Webster*. Merriam-Webster, n.d. Web. 22 Nov. 2013.

⁴ All Aristotle references in this paper are to *Nicomachean Ethics* (Newburyport: Focus Publishing, R. Pullins Company, 2002), 15.

⁵ *Ibid*, 13-15.

⁶ *Ibid*.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 48.

it), and these choices lead to habit, which form one's character.¹¹ Therefore, because one both becomes virtuous and performs actions out of choice, happiness also is a choice.¹²

Not only is complete virtue necessary for happiness, a complete life is necessary as well; if a man lives his entire life happy and then "dies in misery," he is not labeled happy. This is not to say that a happy man can never experience misfortune, but when he does, he will shape this misfortune like a craft into something beautiful by "devoting [himself] to great and beautiful causes," and in doing so he will return to his state of happiness. The life of the truly happy man will not be void of misfortune, but the misfortune that occurs will only make his life more "beautiful and serious." Furthermore, a happy man will not necessarily be happy at every moment, but he will "be happy throughout life, for such a person will always, or most of all people, be acting and contemplating the things that go along with virtue, and will bear what fortune brings most beautifully and in complete harmony in every instance, being in the true sense good and flawlessly squarely centered." According to Aristotle, then, a man will be happy if he is at work with the help of external goods, he possesses complete virtue, and he lives and dies in this manner.¹³

Having defined Aristotle's *view* of happiness, it is now necessary to consider the *role and function* of happiness in Aristotle's mind. Aristotle does not only say that happiness is something that man should pursue; he states that it is something that man is already pursuing above all else. Aristotle explains that happiness controls man; it is the "end of actions," meaning that it is the ultimate end goal, and therefore the cause of all human action.¹⁴ This role of happiness is clearly evidenced in America. Also sharing America's apparent extreme devotion to happiness, Aristotle compares happiness to something "divine," because it is the "source and cause of good things," and "since every one of us does something else for the sake of [happiness]."¹⁵ As virtue is a means to the happiness end, virtue gains its value from its association with happiness. In *The Republic*, Plato also supports this idea. Throughout the work, Plato seeks to discover the essence of justice, and in the end, it is found that justice is beneficial solely because it leads to happiness. Plato shows how to establish justice within an individual, not because justice is beneficial in itself, but because "a just person is happy and an unjust one wretched."¹⁶ Furthermore, he dreams of a city where the rulers are

¹¹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 22.

¹² *Ibid.*, 45.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 16-17.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹⁶ Plato, *The Republic*. trans. C.D.C. Reeve, (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2004), 35.

fully just, so that they can “make [the city] happy,” as his “aim is to see this happiness develop for the whole city.”¹⁷ In the minds of Aristotle and Plato, happiness is everything: it determines man’s every action; it is the desire for which man truly and deeply longs; and it gives value and purpose to virtue, as a component of a greater goal.

After examining the views of Aristotle and Plato, as well as briefly surveying modern American society, it seems that the purpose of life is happiness. The Hebrew and Christian Bible, however, presents a more complete idea of the purpose of life. At the same time, while starkly contrasting with modern American society, the Bible does share much common ground with Aristotle. The Bible encourages man to live virtuously and “to be rich in good works” (1 Tim 6:18)¹⁸ as well as to be at work, saying, “whatever you do, work heartily...” (Col 3:23). The Bible also commends happiness throughout life, stating, “I perceived that there is nothing better for [men] than to be joyful and to do good as long as they live” (Eccl 3:12). The Bible, advising men to live virtuously, work diligently, and be joyful aligns in many ways with Aristotle.

The Bible does not always encourage men to live happily, however. While sometimes it exclaims, “Make a joyful noise to the Lord,” it also somberly states, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted” (Matt 5:4). Unlike Aristotle, it does not prescribe one condition throughout all seasons of life; rather, it explains, “For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven...a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance.” (Eccl 3:1,4). Man is called to live rightly before God. Often the righteous man may be the happy one, but in some situations the serious or sorrowful man may be the man truly in the right.

While the Bible and Aristotle closely parallel one another in most matters of happiness, with minor differences, when it comes to Aristotle’s claim that happiness is the purpose of life, an irreconcilable disagreement is realized. Aristotle states that the purpose for man’s existence, and the way for man to live well, is the pursuit of happiness. The Old Testament, on the other hand, explains that man is to serve God and obey his commandments, saying, “And now Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you, but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments and statutes of the Lord” (Deut 10:12-13). This command does not defy Aristotle; man is still expected to be at work in serving God and to live virtuously by obeying his commandments. Due to this parallel, Aristotle might say that the Israelites practiced religion as a way of living rightly and thereby achieving happiness. However, in reading the

¹⁷ Plato, *The Republic*, 104.

¹⁸ All references to the Bible in this paper are from *The English Standard Version*, (Wheaton: Good News Publishers, 2002).

biblical text, it is clear that worshiping God, and that alone, was intended to be the end for the Israelites. They were not to serve God as a means to achieving happiness or anything else; they were to serve God because he was worthy of service. God was not the means to an end; he was the end, and if Aristotle's defined happiness happened to be a by-product, it was a by-product. For the Israelites, happiness was not to be the goal.

On a side note, while happiness was not the focus of the Israelites, their belief system would seem more apt to lead to Aristotle's defined happiness than would Aristotle's philosophy. In Aristotle's world, there is no external moral standard by which to base virtue, so virtue and thus happiness become very subjective. This subjectivity can and will lead to conflict. For example, if one man believes that he has found the mean of virtue for temperance, and that within this mean he is virtuous in committing adultery with another man's wife, this will lead to horrendous issues between these two men. Each man may have been attempting to live in a pursuit of happiness, but due to the ambiguity and subjectivity of Aristotle's teaching, each may very well find himself unhappy. On the other hand, the Bible establishes a strong, objective moral standard by which man can base right and wrong; thus, two men both pursuing virtue will likely not come into such conflict over adultery, as the Bible is morally clear in this area. Therefore, in theory, a society based on biblical values will actually attain a greater level of Aristotle's defined happiness than one based on Aristotelian ideas.

Back to the main argument, in *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle states that the main reason to be virtuous is so that one "becomes a good human being" and "[yields] up one's own work well," thereby becoming happy.¹⁹ Thus, virtues possess worth mainly because of their leading to happiness. The Bible, however, states that man should "supplement [his] faith with virtue," so that he will not be "ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Pet 1:5). According to the Bible, then, virtues are beneficial in themselves, as they honor God and allow man to serve him on a greater level, regardless of their effect on the quality of man's life or his happiness. The biblical view endows much more meaning into life; if the only reason to live virtuously is so that one might live happily, what is the point? Man exists for only about one hundred years on earth, if that, so why seek to live virtuously for momentary happiness if it will all end in death and darkness anyway? Why attempt to improve an inner self that will soon be nonexistent? Coming from a biblical standpoint, however, living virtuously has massive and eternal significance, as the way in which one lives now is seen by the Creator of the universe, who has the power to impact one's life on this earth and one's life after death. Coming from this biblical standpoint, and making the

¹⁹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 28.

assumption that it is correct, clearly virtue is crucially important to life, and its attainment is desirable in itself, whether or not happiness follows.

In comparing Aristotle's ideas to the Bible's, it quickly becomes evident that the Bible's view of life is rooted in selflessness, while Aristotle's is essentially self-centered. When a Christian lives virtuously and is at work, he does this to serve others and God, emulating Jesus, who "came not to be served, but to serve..." (Mark 10:45). On the other hand, Aristotle encourages man to improve his inner nature, attain virtue, and be at work for his own satisfaction, as he is achieving happiness for himself. He says that "one is a friend to himself most of all, and so what he ought to love most is himself."²⁰ It then follows that a complete friendship, the best kind of friendship, occurs when one finds another who is equal in virtue, because it is like loving another version of oneself.²¹ In these friendships, he explains that a friend is good to another friend because "something beautiful comes from the act," which ultimately leads to his own happiness.²² Aristotle's belief that all mankind is self-serving is his greatest shortcoming, and is what causes him to believe that happiness is the cause of all action and the purpose for man. This topic is the crux of the matter, the area where the Bible proves itself to be the more all-encompassing belief system, and reveals a higher and more fulfilling purpose for life.

The entity that Aristotle fails to acknowledge, which possesses power far greater than happiness to control human action, and is exalted by the Bible above all other virtues, is love. Aristotle says that happiness drives all actions and is the goal of man, but he never takes love into account. There are endless instances of people who have made decisions that are completely contrary to Aristotle's defined happiness, and can be explained by only one driving force: love. For example, a mother that steals food for her starving children is clearly not acting out of a pursuit of Aristotle's defined happiness, as she is not acting within the guidelines of his defined virtue. Viewing man as an egocentric creature at base-level, Aristotle would explain that the mother is acting out of vice, because he would believe that she is in some way serving herself. On the contrary, the mother acts out of selflessness; the powerful force of love, not happiness, drives her actions, as she tarnishes her own virtue in seeking to provide for her children. Happiness may drive a vast amount of human action, but love often proves itself to possess the greater power over the lives of men.

Love is the complete and highest end of man. If a man is at work and living virtuously for others, one might argue that he is pursuing love, thus making Aristotle's happiness a component of this goal of love. Furthermore, in pursuing love, one will often be at work and living virtuously, making Aristotle's happiness

²⁰ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 172.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 168.

²² *Ibid.*, 171.

a byproduct of this goal. If a man lives in pursuit of happiness for himself, however, one could argue that he is living within the vice of self-centeredness (a vice Aristotle never discusses). When a man lives in a pursuit of perfect love for God and others, selflessly disregarding what he will gain, he lives a truly perfect and selfless life. From the Christian standpoint, only one man has ever lived such a life: Jesus Christ. Not only did he command, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself,” he demonstrated this perfect love (Luke 10:27). Aristotle would agree that a happy man does not end his life nailed to a cross. Jesus was clearly determined to achieve a much higher and exalted end than his own happiness; he brutally suffered for the sake of love, a love for his Father and for those he came to save.

Jesus Christ demonstrated the complete and highest end of man, and man is now called to follow in his path. As can be seen in Rom 8:28, “And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose,” man is promised goodness, but he is not promised happiness. Thus, a Christian is called to look beyond his own happiness, loving God and people in every moment. Love is the reason the Israelites were to “keep the commandments and statutes of the Lord” (Deut 10:13). Love is the reason Christians are to work, “as for the Lord and not for men” (Col 3:23). Love is the reason Christians seek to live virtuously, in order to glorify their God through their actions. This love is not given to God and others in the hope that God will then give one happiness. It is given out of gratitude, as “we love because he first loved us.” (1 John 4:19) If Christ selflessly died for man out of love, love for Christ is the natural response, whether or not anything is gained by this love. This is the highest and most beautiful goal a man can pursue: to love the Lord who created him and saved him, and to love those whom God places in his life.

Man exists on earth for but a moment. He possesses only one opportunity to live, one chance to lead a meaningful life. People find meaning for their lives in an abundance of pursuits, but as can be evidenced in modern America, and was identified by Aristotle and Plato in ancient Greece, the desire for happiness is a common force driving these pursuits. While modern America defines happiness as an internal feeling and Aristotle defines it as a way of living involving virtue and work, both seem to agree that it is the end goal of man. The Hebrew and Christian Bible, however, disagrees with this idea. While it agrees that Aristotle’s defined happiness is a component and byproduct of the goal of man, the Bible opposes the belief that happiness alone is the goal. As was taught and demonstrated especially by Jesus Christ, love is a higher and more powerful driving force that controls the actions of man. Man was not made solely to live well, improve his inner soul, find happiness, and then cease to exist. Man was made to love God and others to the fullest, not because of what he can get, but

because of what he has already received. In this way, he will truly change the world, experience an existence of true meaning, and live a life so impactful it resounds in eternity. This is the true end of man. This is the purpose of life.

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