

### ***Compare, Contrast, and Evaluate Plato and Aristotle on human Well-being.***

Plato's ethics concerning well-being arise from the end of the discussion on justice where Thrasymachus articulates that justice is in fact merely a social contract whereby people agree not to inflict harm on others in return for not being harmed. Out of this rises the question well if this is all justice is, if it is only desirable for its consequences, In this case the avoidance of harm, then why shouldn't I cheat? If I can get away with it why wouldn't one cheat?

Now follows the Gyges story, Glaucon puts it to Plato that if two men, one whom leads a life of virtue and one who doesn't, acquired a ring that could turn you invisible, even the virtuous man would not be able to resist acting immorally so therefore people are not actually virtuous, more just scared of the consequences of not being so. This is making the point that no man is so virtuous that he could resist the temptation of being able to steal at will by the ring's power of invisibility. In modern terms, Glaucon still argues that morality is a social construction, whose source is the desire to uphold one's reputation for virtue and honesty; when that sanction is removed, the moral character would evaporate.

However Plato disagrees, he thinks the truly virtuous man would act morally and be happy and at peace with himself, even when the outcome may not be seen as in their best interests e.g. loss of reputation; when sentenced to death Socrates had the chance to escape and go and live in another place but he refused to because it would be wrong to obey the laws of the land only when they suited you, so he stayed and was killed. For Plato this is not only the right thing to do but he would go as far to say that he would be happier dying virtuous than living having broken the law. Although I think this should not be taken as he enjoyed his actual death rather there was a certain content dignified air about it, as through living a virtuous life he had reached eudemonia because for Plato virtue is sufficient for human well being.

Then to illustrate the extreme of what Plato is saying a second ring is added, and it is put to Plato that if both men had a ring, one just and one unjust, and the unjust man carries out his unjust activities but is clever enough to disguise it and up holds his reputation for being a moral citizen so therefore gets away unpunished however conversely the just man whom has been virtuous in all his actions is misunderstood and crucified for being unjust and his reputation soiled. Is Plato saying even in this case it is still better to be the just man? Plato explicitly maintains that yes it is, and uses this example to show that if it is the most beneficial and right thing to do in this situation then I must follow that it is the most beneficial and right thing to do in all situations. But why is it the most beneficial? Why should people be just, Plato believes that it is down to the tri-partite nature of the soul; if things are not in the right balance then it becomes a matter of damaging your mental health. Plato believes that justice is gratifying in itself not merely because of its consequences.

The purpose of human life is to live virtuously. The end that all virtuous beings should aim at; to be in union with the form of the good, this is the way of achieving the highest form of human well-being. In order to live virtuously one must have justice in the soul. Justice in the soul can only be present when the tripartite elements are in accurate harmony; when reason is ruling over spirit and spirit is controlling desires or appetites; wisdom can be seen to represent the rational part of the soul and courage parallels the spirited part of the soul with discipline existing in controlling desires. When the soul is in balance only then can virtue be exercised and human well-being achieved.

Plato states that it is impossible for one to be happy if justice is not present in the soul and put forward this argument to illustrate why the unjust man's life leads to misery. Plato believes that the tyrant is the most unhappy of people because he is in a position of slavery and has no real freedom, he is ruled and governed by passion and surrounded by enemies. Due to being dominated by passion his main aim is to seek pleasure. Plato argues that each of the three parts of the soul corresponds to a different type of pleasure

Rational- Gains pleasure in seeking the truth.

Spirited- Gains pleasure out of achievement and honour.

Appetitive- Gains pleasure through the empirical senses, e.g. sex/drink/food.

The tyrant thinks that his pleasure is the best type, this can also be said for the oligarch and the philosopher, however Plato claims that only the philosopher's assertion can be the real truth for he has experienced all types of pleasure and is therefore in the best position to decide.

"when the whole mind accepts the leadership of the philosophical part, and there is no internal conflict, then each part can do its job and be moral in everything it does, and in particular it can enjoy its own pleasures and thus reaps as much benefit from pleasure as is possible" (586)

But if the mind is controlled by either the spirited or appetitive elements it is not possible for it to attain its own correct pleasure and begins to coerce the other two elements to engage in false happiness, so far as that appetitive desires are farthest removed from reason and therefore law and order, and the tyrant is then farthest removed from man's true and proper pleasure so therefore cannot achieve well being and leads to the most of unhappy lives.

So because justice is now desirable in itself and for its consequences it's not a case of why should I do it, for Plato you act justly for its own sake.

So how would the just man know what actions are virtuous and which are not; This is where the theory of the forms can be introduced, according to Plato we live in a world of appearances of which we cognise through perception, appearances are temporary, changing, fallible and subject to doubt. Although Plato also believed that there is an infallible, eternal, unchanging realm; the realm of the forms. The forms are independent of the mind 'metaphysical entities' as real as anything we cognise through are empirical senses.

So in order for one to possess any 'true knowledge' then one must have access to the forms. In order to know what courage is one must know the form of courage so that when deciding if a particular act is courageous you can compare the form with the act and see if they have anything in common. Upon gathering this information you are now and only after consulting the form, in a position to obtain an objectively correct answer. Does this mean that those whom don't have access to the forms of the virtues cannot be virtuous and in turn not achieve well-being?

So in summary one must have the soul in the correct balance; this is the necessary and sufficient clause for well being and why is this the case because of the tri-partite nature of the soul.

Aristotle's ethics are very similar to that of Plato's, sharing distinct similarities but also some differences. For Aristotle human well being can also be translated as Eudemonia (flourishing). In book one Aristotle states that "that every art, every investigation and similarly every action and pursuit is aimed at some good" and that happiness is an activity of the soul according to virtue.

As an early virtue theorist Aristotle believes a person should be judged on their character and not their actions. According to Aristotle virtue is something learned through constant practice beginning at a young age. To further understand this we should fully translate 'arête' -this is the word translated into 'virtue' in most English translations however the word more generally translates into excellence, so for example a musician will exhibit 'arête' in performing without any moral connotations. It logically follows that excellence in music cannot be reached simply by reading about it, it requires systematic practice and practical implementation.

For Aristotle there is not necessarily an essential distinction between being virtuous and exercising a learned skill like playing an instrument, he believes that virtue is also a learned excellence (the highest learned excellence). So to be virtuous one must practice at it; human well being for Aristotle involves 'living well' and exercising virtue is a necessary condition of this.

Aristotelian virtue ethics are more specific than Plato's, he talks of virtue in a more systematic sense. This is highlighted by the doctrine of the mean; his theory that virtue exists between the vicious extremes of excess and deficiency. For example the virtuous mean of courage lies between the vices of recklessness and cowardice, which represent excess and deficiency respectively.

In order to achieve well being one must attempt to find the golden mean of all the virtues in the 36 name table, however Aristotle does clearly remind us that there are no exact laws in political sciences rather we need to approach each case individually informed by calculated virtues and some practical wisdom. Virtue for Aristotle is *A posteriori*; learning through experience, what is the mean path relative to us?

Like Plato, for Aristotle we cannot pick and choose our virtues, we cannot decide to display courage and patience but not truthfulness and modesty, nor can people be virtuous if they do not demonstrate all the virtues.

One of the most crucial points Aristotle makes is that although virtue is necessary for 'well-being' it is in fact not sufficient. In order to be truly happy one must have three things.

1. A good character.
2. One must be active in living virtuously
3. One must have external goods.

Happiness according to Aristotle is a public not a private affair, so whom you share this happiness with is of great importance. The city-states of ancient Greece were tightly knit communities. In politics Aristotle says we cannot fully realize our potential as humans outside the bonds of a Greek city-state so therefore well being cannot be achieved in the life of a hermit. This is not the only external good that is required, Aristotle also believes that in order to achieve well-being wealth is required, although I feel it should be made clear that he is not saying one needs to be rich to happy, rather that there needs to be a absence of extreme poverty; the view that it is hard to be happy when starving.

This is in direct contradiction with Plato's teachings and is blatantly outlined in the story of the ring of Gyges.

Another fundamental difference between Aristotle and Plato's teachings on well being is that the whole of Plato's metaphysics is underpinned by the forms. To be fully virtuous one must have access to the forms but Aristotle completely rejects the forms as having no tangible foundation for believing them. Aristotle thinks that the problem solved by the forms can in fact be answered empirically; he presents us with the function argument: this explains that the function of a harpist is to play the harp well. A human also just like the eye has a set purpose or function and the function of a good man is to live well or achieve 'well-being'. But Plato believes that people who reject the forms for empirical verification are sophist whose beliefs have no basis.

It seems that both Aristotle and Plato believe that in order for humans to achieve well being they must fulfil their function, so in order to identify the real difference of their views on well being we must understand their views on what our function is. Plato's view on this is outlined in Book One of *The Republic*; Socrates is trying to prove to Thrasymachus that it is better to be just than unjust. He starts by determining that all things have their own definite function, and that that function is "that which one can do only with it or best with it (*Republic* I 352e)." For example, the function of eyes is to see, and since a pruning knife is better suited to pruning than a butcher's knife, its function is to prune. Having established this, Socrates goes on to argue that everything also has a measured virtue that corresponds to the implementation of its function. The virtues of our ears are hearing and the virtue of the knife would be its sharpness. An object that is deficient in its virtue is said to be incapable of performing its function well (a dull knife would not be able to cut properly). Having demonstrated this, Socrates now looks at the human soul and its function. "Is there some function of a soul that you couldn't perform with anything else, for example, taking care of things, ruling, deliberating? Is there anything other than a soul to which you could rightly assign these, and say that they are its peculiar function? ...What of living? Isn't that a function of the soul? (*Republic* I 353d)" Thrasymachus agrees to Socrates' definition of the soul's function and they go on to examine what the virtue of the soul is, that allows it to perform its

function. From his previous argument regarding the importance of virtue in the performance of one's function, Socrates infers that a non-virtuous soul would do a poor job of ruling etc, while a virtuous soul would do a good job. Then going back to where he and Thrasymachus had agreed that justice was the virtue of the soul, and injustice its vice. This enables Socrates to conclude that a just soul and a just man will achieve human well being and flourish, while an unjust man will not achieve well being and be unhappy.

Aristotle agrees with Plato that the good for anything that has a function relies on the implementing of that function. So it follows that Aristotle tries to work out if human beings have a function ("the function argument"). "Then do the carpenter and the leatherworker have their functions and actions, while a human being has none, and is by nature idle, without any function? Or, just as eye, hand, foot and, in general, every part apparently has its functions, may we likewise ascribe to a human being some function besides all theirs? (Nicomachean Ethics Book I Chapter 7 29-33)". So assuming that there is a function specific to humans Aristotle discounts sense perceptions because they are not only human traits. He concludes that the human function is to exhibit reason. The function of the excellent man to equal the function of any man the only difference is that the excellent man exhibits his function well. So For Aristotle, the human good seems to be synonymous with human well being. Thus, in order for a human being to be happy, he or she must live a life that successfully expresses reason.

Here we see that both agree that to achieve well being, humans must fulfil their function but do they disagree on what that function is? Plato believing that it is living a just life and Aristotle that it is excellent reasoning, I think not, isn't being virtuous having reason ruling over the soul, surely this is the same as exhibiting excellent reason.