

### Plato VS Aristotle: the understanding of Happiness.

The idea of happiness has been discussed in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* as well as in Plato's *Republic* and his *Symposium*. Two different perceptions of happiness are presented by Aristotle and Plato despite the fact that they both try to define same concept of *εὐδαιμονία* ***eudaimonía***.

Both Aristotle and Plato perceive happiness as an intrinsic finality. Both philosophers agree that ***τευδαιμονία (happiness)*** is the highest point of human achievement. They both see happiness not as a moment on a journey of achieving something else instead they see it as a perfect journey itself. Aristotle defines a happy man as the one who fulfilled his search in life. Aristotle's states the following concept in his *Nicomachean Ethics*:

“happiness must be placed among those [activities] desirable in themselves, not among those desirable for something else ... for, in the world, everything we chose we chose for the sake of something else – except happiness, which is an end” (N.E. 1176b30 [Ross, Brown, p 192-3]).

In Aristotle's view there has to be no alternative motive for wishing to be happy, therefore happiness is what one ultimately desires. Unlike other human activities happiness is finite in itself. Plato has the same outlook on happiness in terms of its finality. Plato raises the the concept of happiness in his *Symposium*. In the dialogue between Diotima and Socrates, Diotima asks Socrates why does “a lover loves attractive things? ... What will a person gain if he gets these attractive things?” (*Symposium*. 204d [Waterfield, p 46]) In response Socrates replies: “He will be happy” (*Symposium*. 204e [Waterfield, p 46]). This brief Socratic response satisfies Diotima completely. Diotima affirms that

“the point being that it's the possession of good things that makes people happy ... and there is no need for a further question about a person's reason for wanting to be happy” (*Symposium*. 204a [Waterfield, p 46]).

This response carries dual importance for the present essay: a) it implies Plato's perception of happiness as a self-sufficient thing - the end in itself, this aspect of Plato's thinking coincides with that of Aristotle's, and b) it firmly links idea of happiness with the possession of *the other* - the beloved object or subject, which implies that happy man needs something that he opriori lacks in order to be happy. This aspect of Plato's thought is the opposite of Aristotle's view as we would see further.

Now, before proceeding with the comparison of the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle I want to entertain the following question: why does the reader have to assume that Plato's true opinion on happiness would come necessarily through this particular character – Diotima from Mantinea? And this is one of the moments when it becomes challenging for the reader to reveal the true Platonic take on truth therefore forcing the reader to exercise personal virtues to unveil it. Plato's philosophy is

threaded through the maze of dialogues between different characters; in order to excavate the Plato's philosophy itself the reader must exercise a great deal of the personal interpretation, choice, opinion, bias, and intuition; and still one single opinion wouldn't be true in all cases due to the existence of other readers that do likewise.

Diotima appears in the dialogue as an expert on the ways of love. Many years prior to the dialogue Diotima elucidated Socrates about the true ways of love and equipped him with knowledge of how to excel in ascending the ladder of love to its top. Socrates retells the dialogue he once had with Diotima to the other participants of the symposium when his turn to give the eulogy to Love arrives. The symposium happens years after the actual conversation between Socrates and Diotima implying that Socrates had years to perfect his skill and knowledge of love and appear now to the participants of the symposium along with the readers in his present state – the state of absolute perfection. Plato suggests to the reader, but does not explicitly spells out, that Socrates is the Love personified. Socrates became so good in understanding the ways of love, due to the diligence in his studies with Diotima, that he becomes the personification of the spirit of Love. It is proved by the fact that Alcibiades himself is so in love with Socrates that despite Socrates' lack of physical appeal Alcibiades gives his eulogy directly to Socrates instead of the Love spirit. The reader is gently suggested to conclude that Diotima is a true expert, not is just claimed to be so, because she managed to teach Socrates how to ascend to such heights of love. The story of Diotima is an example of how the interpretation of the reader plays a role in the meaning of the text because the himself must figure out that the words Plato puts in the mouth of Diotima are the actual Platonic truth; other reading of the text are however possible.

Now let's examine the second part of the Diotima's claim: "it's the possession of good things that makes people happy" (Symposium. 204a [Waterfield, p 46]). This phrase suggests that happiness is the state of being, rather than a state, of the individual that is in possession of goodness. This claim signifies one of the key differences between Platonic and Aristotelian happiness. As oppose to Plato, Aristotle classifies happiness as an activity rather than a passive state of being. Aristotle justifies this conviction by stating that if happiness was assessed as a state "it might belong to someone who [is] asleep through his life [or] living the life of a plant" and Aristotle finds such implications "unacceptable" (N.E. 1176a34 [Ross, Brown, p 192]). In other words Aristotle suggests that one cannot be passively happy because one must exercise his intellectual / spiritual capacities to experience happiness. In Aristotle's view the possession of the beloved entity makes one no happier then the absence of such possession, because while possessing the beloved entity one may remain passive and hence equal to the plant or man asleep. For Aristotle the continuous occurrence of intellectual endeavor is an irreducible condition of happiness; Aristotle calls it "the activity of reason, which is contemplative" (N.E.1177b19 [Ross, Brown, p 194]). The claim that activity is the most fundamental condition for happiness seems dubious at first, but can one really be happy without

exercising any thought? Even while holding the beloved in the arms while asleep one will be not happy; one will not be happy until he contemplates the fact of this possession. It is often said that people don't appreciate what they have until it's gone – it can be argued that this saying springs from this Aristotelian claim. When one loses what he had he starts contemplating the lost thing, hence, the appreciation for the lost thing occurs causing the understanding that there was happiness and now it is lost. Paradoxically, the thing that's lost is contemplated and recognized as lost happiness; before it was lost it wasn't contemplated therefore wasn't happiness. If somehow one would have the beloved thing while reasoning and contemplating it at the same time, contemplating the thing as if it's lost without losing it, then he would fulfill the criteria for being happy from the point of view of both philosophers.

Having established that Plato and Aristotle differ on regarding happiness as a state or an activity I would concentrate on examining Aristotle's happiness in the light of its four aspects to compare it with Plato's happiness further. For the ease of comparison I propose to separate Aristotle's view into four parts. A - absolute happiness lies in engagement of highest activity available to men – the activity of reason, that being contemplation. B – happiness (contemplation) lead to social autonomy of the thinker. C – happiness (contemplation) is the most divine activity available to men. D - happiness (contemplation) lead men to immortality.

(A) Aristotle claims that happiness lies “in virtuous activities” (N.E. 1177b10 [Ross, Brown, p 194]). And “if happiness is activity in accordance with virtue, it is reasonable that it should be in accordance with the highest virtue” (N.E. 1177b12 [Ross, Brown, p 194]). Since happiness arises from virtuous activities the greatest or absolute happiness would be that that arises from the highest form of virtue. Aristotle identifies this highest virtue as something that is connected to the highest or even ‘divine’ element in men.

“Whether it be a reason or something else that is this element which is thought to be our natural ruler and guide and to take thought of things noble and divine, whether it be itself also divine or only the most divine element in us, the activity of this in accordance with its proper virtue will be perfect happiness.”(N.E. 1177b14 [Ross, Brown, p 194]).

Aristotle claims that the highest capacity or element in men is the one that plays the role of the ruler inside the men – the element that stirs and motivates men towards noble and divine deeds and thoughts – that being reason. Aristotle hesitates to call it divine in itself but he does entertain the thought of it being such; but it certainly is, for Aristotle, the most divine element in men. Now if this divine-like element is being exercised in the most proper and virtuous way then the perfect happiness would be attained. What is the most proper way to exercise reason? The best way to exercise reason would be to engage in activity that uses reason the most and also uses only reason and nothing else, and the more reason man has the more he excels in this activity. Such activity would be

contemplation. So, exercising reason - the “best thing in us” for contemplation – the “best knowledgeable object” is the uttermost happiness for men according to Aristotle (N.E. 1176b21 [Ross, Brown, p 194]).

(B)Aristotle claims that the activity of contemplation which leads men to absolute happiness also reassures men’s complete autonomy and self-sufficiency. The happiness of man that lies in contemplation depends only on the man himself, therefore as long as one keeps contemplating one remains being happy. The happy men therefore may have, but does not need, anyone to maintain his happiness nor does he need happiness to achieve something else, because happiness is needed for itself. So, ultimately such man is self-sufficient in his happiness.

“The activity of reason, which is contemplative, seems both to be superior in serious worth and to aim at no end beyond itself, and to have its pleasure proper to itself, ... and the self-sufficiency, ... , and all the other attributes ascribed to the supremely happy man are evidently those connected with this activity, it follows that this will be the complete happiness of man, if it be allowed a complete term of life (for none of the attributes of happiness is incomplete).” (N.E.1177b19 [Ross, Brown, p 194]).

Aristotle calls the activity of reason, contemplation, to be superior to all the other activities and virtues because it is produced by the most ‘divine’ element in men – the human reason. Also this most noble and supreme activity gives absolute pleasure to the thinker; it leads to no other end but itself making the thinker or the contemplator or the philosopher supremely happy at the moment of contemplation, wanting nothing besides contemplation and depending only on himself and his own wisdom as the mean of reassurance of contemplation in the future. Aristotle goes as far as to claim that it allows one to attain the complete term of life. The philosopher – the man whose virtue lies in contemplation is therefore the most self-sufficient type of men:

“And the self-sufficiency that is spoken of must belong most to the contemplative activity. For while a philosopher, as well as a just man or one possessing any other virtue, needs the necessities of life, when they are sufficiently equipped with things of that sort the just man needs people towards whom and with whom he shall act justly, and the temperate man, the brave man, and each of the others is in the same case, but the philosopher, even when by himself, can contemplate truth, and the better the wiser he is; he can perhaps do so better if he has fellow-workers, but still he is the most self-sufficient.” (N.E.1176b25 [Ross, Brown, p 194])

So the only thing that keeps the philosopher grounded and doesn’t let him to become divine is his bounding by earthly body. The philosopher is obliged to take care of his mundane necessities just like non-virtues men and men of all the other virtues – the just men, the temperate men, etc. But

unlike man of any other type of virtue the philosopher does not need another entity to continue exercising his virtue – and this is where the intellectual autonomy of the philosopher begins. The process of the contemplation that reassures the completeness of life and provides absolute happiness depends solely on philosopher's wisdom. So a radical conclusion arises from this claim: less is more – the philosopher needs less from other men than other men of other virtue need from other men but arrives at a more complete and happy life and in addition has a complete social autonomy, therefore reassurance of being happy as long as he himself desires.

(C) Aristotle derives a conclusion that contemplation is the activity worthy of God and this likeness to God is another reason why contemplation provides absolute happiness.

“Now if you take away from a living being action, and still more production, what is left but contemplation? Therefore the activity of God, which surpasses all others in blessedness, must be contemplative; and of human activities, therefore, that which is most akin to this must be most of the nature of happiness.” (N.E. 1178b20 [Ross, Brown, p 197])

Aristotle deduces that contemplation is the activity of God from the fact that if men's life would be stripped down of action and production nothing besides contemplation would be left. Humans produce to sell to make living to support their need; humans act to achieve something that is not the end in itself, unless it is contemplation. God doesn't need to provide for living or engage in activities that aren't pleasant in themselves therefore it can be concluded that amongst the human-like activities God only engages in contemplation because it is pleasant in itself and doesn't require dependence on others, and God is independent. So engaging in contemplation one actually becomes God-like and there is happiness that springs from that as well.

(D) Aristotle states that besides providing happiness the engagement in contemplation leads men to immortality.

“If reason is divine, then, in comparison with man, the life according to it is divine in comparison with human life. But we must not follow those who advise us, being men, to think of human things, and, being mortal, of mortal things, but must, so far as we can, make ourselves immortal, and strain every nerve to live in accordance with the best thing in us; for even if it be small in bulk, much more does it in power and worth surpass everything.” (N.E. 1177b32 [Ross, Brown, p 195])

Aristotle urges everyone to not fall into mistake of being satisfied with mortal things merely because one is made of flesh and has earthly desires, but to strive for immortality through exercising the most divine human capacities – that of reason and contemplation. Aristotle urges to ignore those who advise to stay satisfied with mortal aspects of life and strive for immortality. And even thought after

taking care of necessities of life little time is left for contemplation it is a powerful enough activity to worth the struggle for accomplishing it. Aristotle leaves it unclear, however, how exactly the immortality arises from the activity of contemplation. If contemplation is the most divine act available to men and even if the argument that it makes men God-like holds true it is still unclear how it leads men to immortality. The question of how happiness is links to immortality would be answered in *Symposium* by Plato, but under different set of circumstances.

For now however let's look at *Republic*. Plato claims that happiness comes from being just. "The best and the most just man is happiest, and he is that man who is kingliest and is king of himself" (*Republic*. 580c [Bloom, p 260]). So the kingliest man or the one that is in the most control of himself is the happiest. This claim is similar to Aristotle's claim (A) that reason is "our natural ruler and guide" and reason leads to happiness through contemplation. So Plato and Aristotle seem to agree on the point that in order to be happy one must possess some internal guide. But not yet, Aristotle states that the just man cannot be the happiest because such man needs the one towards whom to be just. Therefore just man lacks self-sufficiency, therefore he is not God-like, and therefore he is not truly happy. So a confusion occurs – for Plato just man is happiest due to self-control and his compatibility with others, but for Aristotle the just man lacks the self-sufficiency therefore he hasn't achieves the state of happiness yet.

Reason plays the role of internal guide for Aristotle. What plays this role for Plato? Plato identifies "the work of the soul" (*Republic*. 353d [Bloom, p 33]) as the work that can't be accomplished with any other aspect of human persona besides the soul. The examples of such work would be "managing, ruling, and deliberating" (*Republic*. 353d [Bloom, p 33]). Plato claims that these works can only be executed by the soul because soul has certain faculties that "attribute ... [to] a soul and ... are peculiar to it" (*Republic*. 353d [Bloom, p 33]) that allows it to do these works. So the soul holds within itself the capacity to do the 'works' that would do the job of the internal guide. The individual whose faculties are disordered has a bad, nonworking, misguided soul and "manages badly while a [man of a] good soul does these things well" (*Republic*. 353e [Bloom, p 33]). A good and happy man is the one who's soul is working well and therefore does a good job of guiding. "Justice is virtue of soul, and injustice, vice ... the just soul and the just man will have a good life ... the just man is happy" (*Republic*. 353e-354a [Bloom, p 33]). So, soul is the center of Plato's attention as the most divine element in men and he examines it in the similar way to Aristotle's examination of reason. And this examination leads Aristotle to declaring the act of contemplation supreme as the prime activity of the reason, while it leads Plato to dub justice supreme as the prime activity of the soul. Consequently reason leads to self-sufficiency because one contemplates best in solitude, and justice leads to necessity for the other to be just towards. Hence happiness for Aristotle vs happiness for Plato = happiness in solitude vs happiness in the community of people.

For Plato in *Republic* all the good qualities in man accumulate in his ability to be just, not only to self but also to self and others. Justice in regard to self helps men to achieve the internal harmony. While justice to others assures the happiness of community and gives pleasure to others. So if everyone was just everyone would receive additional pleasure from others. The internal justice allows one to reach a balance within himself and due to his justice to others he would share it with community, hence every member in the community would be doubly benefited by justice. The balance of the soul is therefore a condition for justice, so all the other virtues that balance the soul are subservient to justice and are mere means to it. Once man reaches the internal harmony, he must be careful to maintain it, because disturbing it would affect the community. And the happiness of community is where the accent lies for Plato. He

“look[s] fixedly at the regime within him ... and guards against upsetting anything in it by the possession of too much or too little ...” (*Republic*. 4591e [Bloom, p 274]), “... adjusting the body’s harmony for the sake of the accord in the soul” (*Republic*. 4591d [Bloom, p 274]).

Plato is similar to Aristotle in that he identifies one thing amongst the multitude of human capacities - justice (the capacity of the soul), calls it the most noble and above all else, and associated it with and makes it irreducible condition for achieving happiness. Plato thinks that men must exercise the faculties of the soul that are of highest order in order to achieve justice and therefore happiness similarly to Aristotle’s claim that men must exercise the reason - the most ‘divine’ element in men in order to reach happiness through contemplation (agrees with A). But unlike Aristotle Plato doesn’t claim that justice that leads to happiness makes men independent, nor does Plato suggest that independence is necessary. Quite the opposite, Plato states that happiness of the community is more important than that of the individuals.

“We are not looking to the exceptional happiness of any one group among us but, as far as possible, that of the city as a whole... fashioning the happy city – a whole city, not setting apart a happy few” (*Republic*. 420b [Bloom, p 98]).

Plato underscores the idea that the individual happiness is not as valuable as the happiness of the community therefore making the idea of autonomous and enduring happiness of discreet individuals altogether irrelevant. (disagrees with B). If the community is happy and just it would fix the discreet individuals like the human body that heals its sick parts. But if the parts are too sick they need to be amputated because they would ruin the whole body. In the same manner here one must take concern of the health of the body because without the healthy particular organs are of no use if the body is dying. An unjust and rotten city would spoil even the just citizens, so citizens need to be just to keep the city just.

In *Symposium* Plato takes a different route to happiness by introducing the idea of the strongest human desire – the desire for immortality. Plato defines happiness as the sensation of approaching immortality. As mentioned before, Plato establishes through the dialogue between Socrates and Diotima that “a lover loves attractive things” because if he gets these things “he will be happy” (*Symposium*. 204d-e [Waterfield, p 46]). Now looking closer at this argument Diotima states that “love isn’t a search for a half or even a whole unless the half or the whole happens to be good” (*Symposium*. 205e [Waterfield, p 47]), implying that the lover is only happy when he gets what he loves if what he loves is good. So ultimately it is goodness that the lover seeks. “The object of love is the permanent possession of goodness for oneself” (*Symposium*. 206a [Waterfield, p 48]) and it necessarily follows, states Diotima, that “we desire immortality along with goodness, and consequently the aim of love has to be immortality as well” (*Symposium*. 207a [Waterfield, p 49]). Diotima derives it from the fact that no men would be satisfied with the prospect of possessing the goodness, in the form of the beloved for instance, for only a finite amount of time. Men would necessarily desire to possess the goodness forever. This statement seems natural because men in love never want to be separated from the beloved. Yet the days of men are measured so a way has to be found to perpetuate the moment of togetherness. So in order to exist beyond the counted years of human life men desire to remain alive through their children – men procreate to achieve immortality. Hence, the love that leads men to finding the beloved with whom the children would be begotten ultimately is generated by the thirst for immortality. “Aim of love has to be immortality” (*Symposium*. 207a [Waterfield, p 49]), says the expert on the ways of love Diotima to her student Socrates. The entire human race states Diotima is “in love with immortality” (*Symposium*. 208e [Waterfield, p 51]) and the immortality can only be achieved by the “birth and procreation in a beautiful medium” (*Symposium*. 206e [Waterfield, p 49]) which men are led to by love. The unattractive medium would cause men to ‘shun away’ and procreation would never occur, states Diotima (which is not so true in the case of physical offspring but is undoubtedly so in case of intellectual procreation as would appear later). So happiness experienced by the lover when coming in proximity with the beloved is explained by his approach to opportunity at becoming as immortal as he can be. And this is even more so present between men who don’t love each other’s bodies but love each other’s minds (to be discussed further). Love leads men to the only form of immortality available to mankind. Plato links the happiness with immortality similarly to Aristotle (agrees with D). But unlike Aristotle, Plato does not claim that autonomy or self-sufficiency is an attribute of happiness. The contrary is true. It is the other – the desired – that leads through love of his beauty to happiness and immortality. The ‘other’ is always necessary – the happiness that arises from the approach to immortality arises only if one finds that “beautiful medium.” So similarly to happiness described in *Republic*, the happiness described in *Symposium* by Plato differs largely from Aristotle’s happiness in that it necessitates other people – the community, the beloved, in other words

Plato does not regard pure solitary activity, such as contemplation, that has means in itself as pure happiness; nor does Plato find the idea of autonomy to be attractive because he excludes the possibility of happiness in solitude.

Plato separates the human desire to procreate into two diverse realms that follow similar behavioral pattern. Diotima, which serves the role of mouthpiece of Platonic (or perhaps Socratic, at this point the boundary is completely blurred) wisdom claims that the desire for procreation divides into its physical and mental (intellectual) subcomponents. The physical procreation arises from the physical pregnancy men have; it makes men “attracted to women” and manifests in causing men to “try to gain immortality [and achieve] happiness by producing children” of the flesh and blood (Symposium. 208e [Waterfield, p 52]). This type of desire pertains to men of baser state of being; men who value bodily pleasures more than spiritual, soul and mental pleasure. These men would search for physically “beautiful medium” (Symposium. 208e [Waterfield, p 52]). But since the body is mortal the route to immortality they take by means of begetting mortal children is imperfect because the life of their children is finite. The flesh and blood of children die and with them dies the memory and glory of the parents. The mental procreation, on the other hand, arises from the mental pregnancy in people “whose minds are far more pregnant than their bodies; they’re filled with the offspring you might expect a mind to bear and produce” (Symposium. 209a [Waterfield, p 52]). So men that are finer in their character, men that bare offspring of thought and reason find intellectually “beautiful medium;” they find the “mind which is attractive, upright, and gifted” (Symposium. 209b [Waterfield, p 52]) and impregnate it by the means of education to produce children that are truly immortal. Such men take up other’s education to build together intellectual edifices that would remain immortal till the end of times; they produce works that would be remembered for ever due to the true love being their cause and absolute beauty that they bare. The children of this kind are

“particularly attractive and are closer to immortality than ordinary children. We’d all prefer to have children of this sort rather than the human kind, and we cast envious glances at Homer and Hesiod because the kind of children they leave behind are those which earn their parents renown an ‘fame immortal,’ since the children themselves are immortal.” (Symposium. 209c-d [Waterfield, p 53]).

So it can be concluded that absolute happiness in Plato’s view is achieved also through faculty of reason but necessarily in combination with the soul that connects with others and the spirit that falls in love and desires the others and the others of course. Ultimately it is *the other’s* mind and body and spirit that complete the quest for happiness by allowing one to approach immortality – the lover, the fellow citizen, the intellectual partner. Perhaps it is for the reason of recognition of the importance of the other mind that Plato presents his philosophy in such welcoming, loving, and caring for the reader’s education manner “... performing the function of the living teacher who makes his student

think, who knows which ones should be led further and which ones should be kept away from the mysteries,” making readers “exercise the same faculties and virtues in studying his words as they would have to use in studying nature independently,” as Allan Bloom puts it in his preface to *Republic*. (*Republic*. [Bloom, p xxi]).

Plato does not connect the idea of happiness to God, as Aristotle does by stating that contemplation is the Godly activity. God is immortal. Does the the progress towards immortality make men happy or the possession thereof. If former is true then the idea of happiness is inapplicable to God; if latter is true, then God is and was from time primordial happy. But God created men, for company to never be alone. God created woman for the man to never let him be alone. Men contemplate about God, but contemplation in human understanding, without action, does not seem to be God-like. If God just contemplated he would have never created men. And even though God doesn't need to take care of bodily needs he takes care of needs of men. In every type of religion (I can think of) people pray, therefore hope that god will take care of their needs.

In conclusion I want to summarize the three works as following:

*NE*: wisdom + satisfaction of earthly needs = contemplation = happiness= less need in other men = divinity ? = immortality?

*Republic*: just man + the man towards whom the just man is just + satisfaction of earthly needs = happiness + the other's happiness

*Symposium*: intellectual desire + beautiful mind = intellectual offspring = happiness = immortality

From this summary I would be more prone to accept the letter two combined as formulas for true happiness.

---

### *Bibliography*

Plato. *Symposium*. Trans. Robin Waterfield. New York: Oxford World's Classics, 1994. Print.

Plato. *Republic*, Trans. Allan Bloom. United States: Basic Books, Perseus Book Group, 1968. Print

Aristotle. *The Nicomachean Ethics*. Trans. David Ross. Revis. Lesley Brown. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009. Print.

Spring 2012 H392  
Professor Brent  
Anastasiya Chybireva  
Feb 09 2012

Ethics

