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Aristotelian Concept of Happiness (Eudaimonia) and its Conative Role in Human Existence: A Critical Evaluation

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Abstract

Despite the challenges of human existence, identifying the major features that sustain man's striving to persist in life (conatus) is very essential in understanding who man is. This paper critically evaluates Aristotelian concept of happiness (eudaimonia) and its conative role in human existence as it ignites newness of interest in Aristotelian theory of happiness as the ultimate end of all human activities. Aristotle's notion of happiness connotes conative experiences; actions that signify movements of some sorts for preservation of life. With regard to self-preservation in existence, Aristotle held the opinion that man has the natural inclination to actualize his potentialities through strong efforts of the will towards the right, and at the same time to create new potentialities to sustain his life. Through the activities of the soul (virtuous acts), man propels himself in a distinctive way towards objects of his desire for survival and flourishing. His concept of emotions as having the affective, cognitive as well as behavioural dimensions revealed that emotions have psychological values and vital functions which serve as survival instinct in man. However, they differ in their aims in that they have both attractive and aversive characteristics such that they move him either to seek or to avoid necessary objects that enhance or harm his existence, respectively. Considering the subjective experiences of pains and pleasures of emotions, they dispose man to virtuous actions towards excellence. However, to sustain man's inner drive to persist in life, this paper objects to the theses that happiness can be restricted to only cognitive activities. Despite the weaknesses of his treatise concerning happiness in relation to man's striving to persist, it was observed that Aristotle's notion of happiness aids man's striving in life. For further studies, it recommended clarification of ambiguous concepts and reconciliation of contradictions inherent in the theory.

Keywords: Aristotle; happiness; conative role; human; existence; evaluation

I. Introduction

Aristotle has surely earned a very credible status in philosophical endeavour through his systematic articulations. He tried to respond to what constitutes the ultimate aim of man's existence; the end for which every other action tends motivated him to develop a classical treatise on happiness (*eudaimonia*). He holds that man's supreme purpose of life is to attain the ultimate perfection of his human nature. In his understanding, the pursuit of happiness presupposes an inner drive of continuous striving towards good moral character. Hence, the essence of human existence is not simply to live but to live well and attain perfection. Issues regarding the notion of Aristotelian happiness and its conative role in existence as well as the activity of the soul, the roles of desire, and emotions with regard to attainment of happiness will be critically discussed below.

II. Aristotelian concept of happiness as *conatus*

Aristotle's notion of happiness is chiefly presented in his monumental *Nicomachean Ethics* (NE) particularly in book I. At the very beginning of the book, he asserts that every rational activity, that is every activity of man, aims at some end or good and that even one end may be subordinated to another end as instrumental string to achieving other goals until the ultimate end is arrived at. So, he states, "every art and every investigation, and similarly every action and pursuit is considered to aim at some good. Hence, the Good has been rightly defined as 'that at which all things aim.'" ¹ In his understanding, all intermediate goals, also referred to as instrumental goals, must purposefully aim at final goal which is desired for its own sake. Otherwise, it would entailed an infinite progression of activities. Therefore, he identified the final goal of all human activities as *happiness* (*eudaimonia*). According to him, "Everything that we choose, we choose for the sake of something else – except happiness which is an end." ² Actually, Aristotelian happiness denotes a good life. Lawhead considers it to be 'well-being' or 'having a life worthliving.' ³ Kesebir and Diener conceived it as subjective well-being and feeling of satisfaction. ⁴ The course of attainment of happiness is a lifetime endeavour that encapsulates man's entire life and leads him to

¹ Aristotle, *The Nichomachean Ethics*, trans. J. A. K Thomson (New York: Allen and Unwin, 1976), 1094a1-22.

² Ibid., 1176a30-b15.

³ William Lawhead, *The Voyage of Discovery: A Historical Introduction to Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (Belmont: Wadsworth-Thomson Learning, 2002), 81.

⁴ Pelin Kesebir, and Ed Diener, "In Pursuit of Happiness: Empirical Answers to Philosophical Questions," *Journal of Happiness Studies* 3, no. 2 (2008): 117-125.

perfection and enhancement of his life. It requires as well strong efforts of the will towards the right path of goal-oriented activities of the soul, desire, and emotions. The principle of acquiring happiness is strongly opposed to instant gratification and pleasures of the moment. Aristotle establishes that the attainment of happiness is enshrined in man's natural desire which is implicated in his innate drive (*conatus*) to persist in life.

The study of *conatus* in regard to man's 'will to live' has gained newness of interest in various disciplines, including philosophy. *Conatus*, generally, concerns itself with the fundamental law of nature which has to do with self-preservation and maintenance of life. It connotes the 'will to persist' which basically implies an innate striving towards self-preservation through necessary activities that sustain life and prevent it from being harmed or even being lost. Simply put, it refers to "an innate inclination of a thing to continue to exist and enhance itself."⁵ It also explains the "instinctive 'will to live' of living organisms or to various metaphysical theories of motion and inertia."⁶ Keeping oneself from harm and destruction is often considered as the root cause of all human activities and the will to persist in life.

Although the term *conatus* was widely believed⁷ to have been used first by the Stoics, with the meaning of the movement of the soul towards an object from which physical actions result, Aristotle's writings especially on happiness, human soul, emotions and rhetoric can be connected to it. Despite the ambiguity of Aristotle's treatise on those themes, it can be still observed that they portray the unfolding of human nature towards self-preservation. It has been established earlier that Aristotle's position on the ultimate purpose of life is happiness. According to him, happiness is that which is always desirable in itself and never for the sake of something else. The drive to attain happiness is therefore the focal point of all human endeavours and an ultimate goal in itself. He further clarified that it is something on itself that is completely satisfying. "We always choose it for itself and never for any other reason. It is different with honour, pleasure, intelligence and good qualities."⁸ Knowing fully well that views on happiness differ and that different people associate it with pleasures, he quickly distinguishes happiness from mere pleasure. Thus,

⁵ John Traupman, *The Bantam New College Latin and English Dictionary* (New York: Bantam Books, 1996), 52.

⁶ Harry Austryn Wolfson, *The Philosophy of Spinoza* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1934), vol. 2, 202.

⁷ Vasiliki Grigoropoulou, "In History of Philosophy," *Proceedings of the XXIII World Congress of Philosophy*, vol. 14 (2018): 55-76.

⁸ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1097a15-b2.

happiness does not lie in amusement; it would indeed be strange if the end were amusement, and one were to take trouble and suffer hardship all one's life in order to amuse oneself.⁹

However, he recognizes that minimal degree of pleasure promotes good life. Lawhead captures it well when he wrote,

lack of resources as friends, health and sufficient material support take the lustre from happiness. While pleasure is not the goal of human life, it accompanies the life that is morally excellent.¹⁰

Aristotle meant that man's ultimate end is happiness which is conditioned by his very nature that essentially characterizes him to strive to maintain his existence. This feature distinguishes him from animals and inanimate objects. Again, this purposeful end of human activities presupposes reason and acts of excellence (virtues).

III. Happiness and its conative role in human existence

Aristotle considers happiness not as a passive state but as an active state of life that by itself is self-sufficient and makes life desirable.¹¹ He adjudges it therefore to a virtuous activity of the soul that presupposes reason. In particular, his explication of happiness presents a teleological image of human nature with purposeful character whereby the essence of man harbours specific inner drive to behave and develop in a peculiar way towards full actualization. The actualization of man's potentialities and the creation of new potentialities are seen as conative features of man's persistence in existence. As man comes into existence, he possesses the natural drive to undergo development. According to Aristotle, happiness is attained when a man lives in accordance to his nature; the inclination to continue to develop through actualization of his potentials. On this note, Lawhead remarks that "nature is a busy drama of restless, changing entities."¹² Against this background, motion is a good character of conatus since the later involves a life force in living things. In Aristotle's understanding, the conative role of happiness in human life can further be seen as an activity of the soul.

⁹ Ibid., 1176a30-b15.

¹⁰ Lawhead, 81.

¹¹ Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics*, 1097a15-b2.

¹² Lawhead, 79.

IV. The activity of the soul in conative role of happiness in human existence

Considering the nature of happiness, Aristotle holds that it can be acquired by moral goodness other than by chance. According to him, happiness is a virtuous activity of the soul which guides man's actions and drives him towards excellence. His virtue ethics concerns itself chiefly with life of flourishing and excellence which at the time points to conatus, the will to persist. Hence, virtue has the character of self-preservation through right desire with the right reason and good choice of action. Arguing that moral principles produce human excellence and judgment of right principles to follow, the appropriation of feelings and appetites lead towards its realization, he maintains that virtue involves proper choices and desires. Aristotelian notion of desire explains the movement of the soul towards an object that results to a physical act. This movement also involves aversion of the soul from an object of destruction. Desire also connotes appetite. Appetite itself can be said to be synonymous with conatus. Hence, Aristotle connects appetite to conative activity. In conative context, human desire (appetite) is put in motion by man's natural inclination to conserve himself, to endure and to continue to exist. It seems deeply characteristic of man to propel himself in a distinctive way towards objects of his desire for survival and flourishing.¹³ In this way, man is said to engage in goal-oriented behaviours to achieve his conscious and unconscious goals. In his principal psychological treatise *On the Soul (De anima)*, he explained that the soul is the "first actuality of a natural organic body"¹⁴ that has life potentially. As the actuality of a body has a life force, it is causally responsible for the animate behaviour (the life activities) of a living thing; the *capacity* of a living thing to engage in the activities that are characteristic of its natural kind¹⁵ such as self-nourishment, growth, movement, perception, thought, etc. Therefore, the soul has the capacity for growth and reproduction for self-preservation.

The soul in living creatures is distinguished by two functions, the judging capacity which is a function of the intellect and of sensation combined and the capacity for exciting movement in space.¹⁶

¹³ Jeff Malpas, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward Zalta (Stanford: Scholarly Publishing and Academic Resources Coalition, Winter 2012), 24.

¹⁴ Aristotle, *De anima*, trans. Polansky Ronald (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) II, 1, 412b5-6.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, II, 1, 412b5-6.

¹⁶ Aristotle, *On the Soul*, trans. W. S. Hett (London: William Heinemann, 1964), 181.

Although the soul is implicated in motion in pursuit of its objects of desire, it is not sufficient to initiate motion but it depends on the appetite (desire) whose major duty is to initiate movement towards the desired end.¹⁷ In this way, he considered desire a faculty in the soul to initiate motion for purposive actions, though not completely.¹⁸ Therefore, he included the faculty of practical reason as a source of movement in working together with the faculty of desire when the object of desire is desirable.¹⁹ This is the conative role of happiness as man's desire as implicated in the activity of the soul towards objects of actions that sustain his persistence to maintain his existence. Aristotle's notion of desire as the activity of the soul also is connected to human emotions.

V. Emotions in conative role of happiness in human existence

The concept of emotion is a complex phenomenon that encompasses cognitive, desiderative and affective aspects of human nature. Understood as capable of arousing distinctive bodily changes, movements and behaviors, emotions are generally considered as survival mechanisms that motivate responsive behaviors to maintain existence. Based on their chains of action, they have five major components of evaluative (appraisal of the object), physiological (the state of the body), phenomenological (subjective experiences of pleasant or unpleasant feelings), expressive (distinctive bodily changes) and behavioural (fleeing or combating tendency). To this effect, emotion theorists have been categorized into three major classes of affective, evaluative and motivational traditions.²⁰ With Aristotle, human emotions play very vital roles in man's life, including the striving to survive life and maintain himself in existence. As many classical Greek philosophers, Aristotle considers emotions as affective experiences, though co-existing with cognitive aspects of man.²¹ As such, he identified both physical and mental states of man in his explications of emotions, though with little emphasis on bodily sensations. For him, emotions are built on beliefs and assessments that give meaning and value to situations of life. Consequently, man's judgments of life's situations are greatly influenced by his emotions. Specifically, he adjudges emotions to be parts of the soul (sensual aspects of the soul as they belong to lower part of

¹⁷ Aristotle, *De anima*, III, 432b14-33a5.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 10, 433a31-433b1.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, III, 10, 433a17-2.

²⁰ Jesse J. Prinz, *Gut Reactions: A Perceptual Theory of Emotion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 559-567.

²¹ Jonathan Barnes, "Aristotle's Concept of Mind," *Proceedings of Aristotelian Society* 72, no. 1 (1971-2): 101-114.

the soul) because they are subject to and moderated by reason and they are involved in the pursuit of happiness for man seeks for happiness with his whole soul. His treatise on emotions which he refers to as *pathos* in the second book of his *Rhetoric* stands as one of the three major methods of rhetoric arts namely; *ethos*, *pathos* and *logos* and it aims at “relating emotional susceptibilities of an audience to the art of persuasion.”²² Such use of rhetoric arts helps to manage people’s emotions in order to produce the desired beliefs in them. Emotions have psychological values and vital functions. Taking critical stance, some authors argue that *pathos* has more to do with affection than with emotion, though it closely connects to the latter.²³ In Aristotelian understanding, emotions connote conative experiences; actions that signify movements of some sorts for preservation of life. According to him, emotions regulate man’s life. They differ in their aims in that they have both attractive and aversive characteristics such that they move him either to seek or to avoid necessary objects that enhance or harm his existence, respectively. They are related to desires and accompanied by feelings of pleasure or pain.²⁴ The characteristics of emotions as pain and pleasure map man’s value of life. To have an emotion is to have the experiences of pleasure, pain or both which is goal-oriented. The experience of being pained or being pleased disposes man to ill- or well- regulated passions. In his words,

we have special class of ‘somatic passions’ to which the pains of want and the pleasures of replenishment are referred and which may reasonably be supposed to include appetites of hunger, thirst and sex.²⁵

Taking into account the subjective experiences of pains and pleasures of emotions as dispositions to virtues towards excellent actions, he states, “the pleasure or pain that actions cause the agent may serve as an index of moral progress since good conduct consists of proper attitude towards pleasure and pain.”²⁶ Considering emotions as states of pleasure and pain, he also refers to it as passions which he primarily regarded as states that affect judgement. And defining passions, he enumerated species of pleasures and pains.

²² H. N. Gardiner, “The Psychology of the Affections in Plato and Aristotle,” *The Psychological Review* 28, no. 1 (1919): 1-26.

²³ Asli Yazici, “Aristotle’s Theory of Emotion,” *Turkish Studies* 10, no. 6 (2015): 901-922.

²⁴ Aristotle, *De anima*; Jonathan Barnes, “Aristotle’s Concept of Mind,” *Proceedings of Aristotelian Society* 72, no. 1 (1971-2): 101-114.

²⁵ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1104b20-1105a9.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 1104a33-b20.

By passions, I mean appetite, anger, fear, confidence, envy, joy, love, hate, longing, emulation, pity, and in general states accompanied by pleasure and pain.²⁷

Aristotle's concept of passion has conative characteristics in the sense that it expresses appetites, tendencies and striving to persist in life although with obvious ambiguities. To this end, one actually wonders whether he has it in mind to specifically discuss conatus (the will to persist) in relation to happiness. Therefore, his terms and their explications on the issues should be sharpened to minimize such uncertainties.

VI. A critical evaluation of Aristotelian concept of happiness and its conative role in human existence

As said earlier, Aristotle considers happiness as the meaning and ultimate end of man's life; the whole aim and end of human existence that encapsulate man's entire life. In pioneering the course of man's happiness, he maintained a credible position in philosophical world and in other fields of life, Aristotle maintained a credible position in philosophical world and in other fields of life. Despite his wonderful contributions on the concept of happiness and its conative role in human existence, there are some basic issues inherent in his treatise that elicit critiques.

First of all, one of the most salient problems that this paper tries to address is the multiplicity of notions related to the pursuit of happiness; an inner drive towards 'good moral character.' A question could be: does it mean that those without good moral character (unfortunately, anyway) do not possess an inner drive to persist in life? Again, as Hosseini, Zariaie and Karami hinted, Aristotle paid too much attention to human reason, while less to the nature of man. His restriction of happiness to cognitive activity stresses that the function of man is to reason.²⁸ Thus,

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 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.²⁹

²⁷ Ibid., 1105b2-26.

²⁸ Hassan Hoseini, Tayebe Zariaie, and Mohsen Karami, "Evaluation of Happiness Concept in the Aristotle Viewpoint," *Journal of Applied Environmental and Biological Sciences* 6, no. 3 (2016): 104-111.

²⁹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1097b22-1098a8.

Then, with regard to the inner drive to persist, one questions the fate of those with cognitive impairment or even those with temporal lack of mental capacity either due to genetic conditions or sicknesses, old age, etc. It is either that he considers them less human for lack of such mental ability or that he adjudges them incapable of attaining the happiness that he propounds. Yet, such people in many cases, especially the sick ones, survive and thrive due to persistent hope and faith in play other than reason. In some human existential conditions, faith prevails reason, especially where science fails, miracle then triumphs.

Furthermore, in his view, the attainment of happiness is teleological in which case he gives the impression that happiness, which is an end and a goal in itself, may not be attainable as it transcends this physical world. Apart from one imagining that Aristotelian concept and course of happiness renders life so strict and makes man only a thinking entity with austere existence, it exposes the danger of the teleological nature of his happiness which demands a good modicum of constant discipline. This lies in the fact that one might easily lose the elasticity of conative character (inner drive) in continuing to pursue what one cannot enjoy as one presently lives in this physical world. It can happen that at a certain point in life, one may be overwhelmed and as such develop *akrasia* (weakness of the will). Hence, the intermediary ends (goals) should have been considered as significantly important as they can serve to sustain the innate drive. That would mean the act of stopping intermittently to enjoy the fount of life and gather energy to forge ahead.

Moreover, the virtuous acts which man reiterates as excellent channels to attainment of happiness harbour some controversies. In the first place, virtuous acts have no universal character and standard of evaluation since they differ across individuals, cultures, epochs and in various circumstances. Therefore, there is no guiding principle to control them. This implicates the existence of moral relativism in the pursuit of the said happiness.³⁰

Again, Ezedike's observation of the claim that, "right actions must be understood by reference to virtue"³¹ points to another weakness of the theory. This explains that "an action is right if and only if it conforms to virtue."³² In his critique, it should have been the other way instead, arguing that it is a misplacement of order. More to the point, Aristotelian presentation of virtue as implicated in the 'golden mean' poses kind of difficulty in identifying the extremes. His understanding that virtues are acquired through constant efforts and not given or by mere chances disputes his explication that the inclination

³⁰ Joseph Fletcher, *Situation Ethics: The New Morality* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966), 13.

³¹ Edward Uzoma Ezedike, "Happiness as an End: A Critique of Aristotle's Rational Eudaimonism," *Inkanyiso: Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 10, no. 1 (2018): 51-62.

³² *Ibid.*, 59.

through the course of happiness which automatically involves virtuous life is natural to man. Just as Spinoza, Aristotle opines that there is a natural tendency of all things to persist and continue to maintain their own characteristics. That is, there is a natural force in every animate being including man towards self-preservation of its very existence. But very little was observed in his writings that addressed the force to avert the things that threaten to harm or take away existence. Among other weaknesses of his treatise that concerned man's striving to persist, Aristotle contradicted himself by explaining that happiness which involves man's inclination to persist in life is innate and naturally given to him, that is, it naturally unfolds itself. However, at the same time, he holds that happiness requires excellent virtuous activity that involves desires, appropriation of feelings and activities, right judgment and right choices that can only be acquired by constant exercise of moral goodness towards excellence other than by chance. Aristotle establishes that man has the natural inclination to continue to develop and actualize his potentials. However, he made us to understand that this natural striving ceases at the very end of the developmental process which he actually referred to as the *entelechy*. In his understanding, the term *entelechy* denotes full realization of man's potentialities that ends the process of his existence. Such cessation possesses no characteristics as to how and when it occurs. Could his notion of *entelechy*, which means an end of developmental process, concede to natural forces opposed to existence?

In addition, the great necessity laid on virtues (action based on proper use of reason) for the realization of happiness invariably suggests that the non-virtuous will not experience happiness. Further still, Aristotelian notion of happiness, which culminates in intellectual contemplation, seems to contradict his explication of man as a being with tripartite dimensions of vegetative, sensitive and rational soul. Now, the emphasis on happiness as the result of man's activity that terminates in pure intellectual exercise negates the other aspects of man that share in nutritive and sensual functions. Again, Aristotle purported that emotions are accompanied by pleasures and pains but his explications were not too clear on their complex functions with regard to man's inner drive to persist. Finally, the inclination to desire poses an epistemological question. Thus, how can man know the right things to desire and the right actions to perform³³ that lead to virtues since virtuous acts lack principle guidelines of universal character?

VII. Recommendations for Further Studies

This paper recommends that studies on Aristotelian happiness especially as it concerns conatus (the will to persist) should be given more attention. Again, it advocates that his concepts and their expositions on matters regarding the

³³ John L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (London: Penguin Books, 1977), 186.

inner drive to maintain existence and flourish in it should be clarified to minimize ambiguities. Besides, obvious contradictions as mentioned above, should be reconciled. This paper further proposes that individuals should engage in things that bring them real and lasting happiness in this physical world so to sustain with ease the will to live and blossom in life. Above all, the paper proposes that both individual and global peace may be restored through giving meaning to life by concentrating on the activities that drive to virtuous activities of the soul and true happiness of man whereby the means justifies the end for which nothing else may be desired.

VIII. Conclusion

Having critically evaluated Aristotelian concept of happiness and its conative role in human existence, this paper demonstrates that Aristotle's theory remains quite influential for subsequent discussions on conatus (the will to persist) despite all the critiques raised. From the above, it becomes clear that happiness, as conceived by Aristotle as the ultimate end of all human activity, is a very crucial factor that sets man in motion and upholds his innate drive to maintain his existence. The features that characterize man's happiness and determine his persistence in life are implicated in his soul as the capacity to desire rightly, choose rightly and act appropriately towards excellence. Emotions as pain and pleasure map man's value of life. They regulate his life. As pleasure or pain, they can determine moral progress since good conduct consists of proper attitude towards desires. Poor perception of emotions may lead to conditions that do not encourage the will to live. Poor perception of emotions may lead to conditions that do not encourage the will to live, while good judgement of emotions may encourage rightful responses that promote and enhance life. However, to sustain man's inner drive to persist in life, this paper objects to the theses that happiness can only be teleological and that the restriction of virtuous acts, which leads to happiness, culminates only in cognitive activities. Hence, other dimensions of human nature and those individuals that are mentally incapacitated should be put into considerations.

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