

## Morality & Happiness

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### ABSTRACT

Virtue is intrinsic, indescribable and innocent. It stands on its own and while it is hard to pin down with particulars it is not arbitrary. It is not that everyone just does what they think is right or what society tells them is right, but what comes from within. It is assumed that the wisdom is real. Hence, there exists an objective, intrinsic morality.

**Keywords:** Virtue, Meaning, Morality, Happiness, Relativism

### INTRODUCTION

The world is a rational place. It is important to mull things over, come up with the right thing to do and so forth. Man is capable of making rational decisions; indeed, some philosophers claim that the reason why man is superior to beast is his ability to reason. Living a virtuous life is not only possible but also preferable. Of course, this theory as relayed in Rational Man (Veatch, H. 1996) is something that is aligned with Aristotle's ideas. One may sift through theoretical models but in the end, Aristotle's is the one worthwhile.

*Why be moral? The answer is that it is the best kind of life. It is the most fulfilling life that leads to happiness that is indestructible.*

Man should be moral, but there are questions that linger. Why should someone be moral if in fact they can increase their sense of pleasure by not considering moral consequences? Of course, that point is arguable. Indulging in for example food and drink, or engaging in indiscriminate sex, or gambling, are activities that some people derive excitement from. They find pleasure in these things. And while some might say that people cannot engage in pleasurable pursuits if in fact it hurts others, or is considered immoral in the church or in society. The pleasure should be examined in light of Aristotelian thought.

Fleeting pleasure is not the same thing as happiness. Still, happiness is something illusive to many in today's society, but the search for contentment goes back centuries. For many searchers, happiness comes and goes, but it is a popular subject of contemplation over the years.

It is related to morality because one reason one might give to ignore ethical behavior is that they can be happy only when they throw caution to the wind and act in an immoral fashion behaving in an offensive fashion for the purpose of having fun. The intention is to shock others and indulge in one's secret fantasies. But in reality, does acting in an immoral manner, even if it is a "fantasy," really lead to happiness? If the answer is no, then there is some notion that acting in a moral way is preferred.

Intelligence is not equated with morality as there are many examples of people who are brilliant, but are immoral at the same time. The irony is that knowledge is never equated with moral intelligence. There is so much offered today that was not available in past decades in terms of technology, hence, people should be happier today than they were years ago. In essence, if people today have access to cell phones, the Internet, air conditioning, fast food and so forth, their senses are stimulated and their needs are met. Yet, that is not the key to happiness. What is needed for a moral compass is knowledge; not of how to control nature, but how to control oneself. Man has come a long way in respect to technological and intellectual development, but has not necessarily learned to use things ethically; man can get this back by paying attention to virtue.

The idea that moral theory is important and that man should live an ethical presents a conundrum. An attitude of ethical relativism and skepticism is untenable, because of inconsistency. We have not as yet done anything in the way of directly

undermining its two foundation stones: the factual relativity of moral norms and the logical impossibility of grounding such norms on scientifically observable facts. Nor do we even propose to do anything of the sort, at least not just at present. Just shoving the problem aside for the time being is one approach; however, it is something that cannot be ignored and is the basis for opposition to this line of thinking. The problem is, how does anyone know anything? What is moral and what is immoral? The idea that there is an intrinsic monitor in each and every individual is one idea and others come from religion. Yet, Aristotle's virtue ethics seems to be something usable here.

One important point is that according to Aristotle, it is important for people not to be in the dark and think they are in the light. In other words, people who follow others' ideas, even those of a religious leader, are not really in the light. What is the answer to this? The individual should lead an examined life and should live intelligently; however, in some way, this answer is not practical. It is almost predetermined. People live on this planet for some purpose. As Aristotle sees it, the examined life is a goal or end toward which any and every human being is naturally oriented, regardless of whether he knows it or not, and regardless of whether he actually attains it or not, much as an acorn is ordered by nature to its own complete development and protection as a full-grown oak.

Aristotle's ideas go to the concept that man is destined to live an ethical life and that just may be man's purpose. It is not only that man is destined to accomplish this goal on the planet, but also that there is something within man that prompts him to do so. The nature of man is essentially why he should lead a moral life. His nature is not something outside of one's self. Rather, man is made of something that is a part of the larger consciousness and the goal of every individual is to live a good life, for which the contemplative life is the best type.

For the most part, people strive for happiness in their lives. They do things that will make them happy, and try to avoid painful experiences. At least, that is what psychologists say. But happiness may be equated with virtue. Leading a moral life can be consistent with leading a happy life. Aristotle sees virtue as necessary to secure happiness. Again, it appears that Aristotle's conception of happiness is not simply tied to the feeling of bliss or well-being. People can for example-using contemporary

examples-indulge in drugs and alcohol and feeling good, but one would not say that they are happy. That kind of "happiness" is fleeting. Rather, many look towards leading a virtuous life where one can manifest happiness as being relevant and aligned with a life purpose. Aristotle held a similar view and rejected hedonism as man's highest goods. In other words, feeling good is not the only thing necessary for a happy and content life, but virtue is.

Virtue is intrinsic, indescribable and innocent. It stands on its own and while it is hard to pin down with particulars it is not arbitrary. It is not that everyone just does what they think is right or what society tells them is right, but what comes from within. It is assumed that the wisdom is real. Hence, there exists an objective, intrinsic morality. This is the point is relayed in Aristotle's ideals. So we can ask why people should be moral. It is their birthright. Based on these premises, there is an objective sense of right and wrong after all. Of course, determining what that is can be difficult, but the fact that it exists suggests something beyond whim and culture.

Although living a virtuous life it is an individual decision, Aristotle sees it as something that may be formally taught. Virtue is something that people are raised with. For example, parents try to teach their children to lead a virtuous life and they will be more inclined to do so. However, children in a negative environment will likely not learn virtue. If their parents are neglectful and abusive, the children will likely indulge in behaviors that give them instant gratification and forgo the idea of virtue. How does Aristotle see it? Aristotle writes: "...happiness... comes as a result of virtue and some process of learning or training..." (Aristotle, 350 BCE). The philosopher sees teaching virtue is important, but also recognizes that it is something that can come about spontaneously: "It will also be on this view be very generally shared; for all who are not maimed as regards their potentiality for virtue may win it by certain kind of study and care. But if it is better to be happy thus than by chance"

One can see that Aristotle held virtue as being relevant in the attainment of happiness. Russell (2004) puts it this way: "Aristotle thinks that for us living well must be understood as living well as humans, and thus as beings of theoretical and practical rationality." Aristotle would implore people to use their minds to make good decisions that will provide them with lasting

happiness. It does become clear that, in examining this issue, the idea of happiness is more than feeling good. Aristotle's conception of happiness is that it always includes being virtuous. Happiness, it seems, is something equated with emotion. And emotion is something that is fleeting. At the same time, people can tweak their emotions with a variety of psychological techniques to achieve contentment with life that may be construed as happiness. Yet, it is rare that someone indulging in sensual gratification will find happiness. More often than not, they will manifest addictive behavior patterns or a sense of loss when that type of gratification is not achieved. This, Aristotle's idea of happiness-in the gander, complete sense of the word-is aligned with virtue, seems to be accurate. It is the reason why man should strive to be moral. It is man's highest good.

Aristotle's theory is helpful to the creation of moral life, along with Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics, but there are others who differ. While Veatch wrote a text entitled Rational Man, there was a man by the name of William Barrett (1962) who wrote a book entitled Irrational Man. Rather than support an ethical viewpoint, Barrett delves into existentialism. He mentions Aristotle as the hero of anti-Platonists. But then he remarks that "there is an existential aspect to Plato's thought." Of course, existentialism is hard to define, so it is not surprising that there are some ideas of existentialism that linger in a variety of writings. Of course, Veatch's view of Aristotle's moral theory is aligned with doing the right thing, and Barrett's ideas go more to existentialists who see morality, or doing what a human being should be doing as equated more with individuality. In some way, the books Rational Man and Irrational Man by Veatch and Barrett respectively are at odds, but there are similarities. Indeed, there is deep thought on morality that enters the picture in the context of each work. In some way then, ironically, Barrett is fostering a contemplative life; something that Aristotle claimed is good. Yet, it is important to note that the theorists were at odds. In order to understand a different point of view, as Barrett entertains, the subject of existentialism must be understood. In summary, existentialism helps to explain why the only practical way of living is to live for one's personal desires and existence.

It sounds like a selfish proposition, and in some way it is, but what does anybody really know about existence except for what they experience? Many people have beliefs or

theories, but there are no proofs. A thought experiment is to perhaps imagine oneself as creating the whole world. Is the individual God in his own universe? Is there anything beyond the realm of the individual thinker or observer? What if everything that happens is made simply for the benefit of the individual and no one else really exists. Ironically, the opposite of existentialist thought, or the idea that everything is connected instead, relies on the idea of meaningful coincidences. But what if coincidences are meaningless activities created by the individual thinker who indeed creates his personal universe? It is really difficult to prove otherwise because everyone has an individual mind.

Ideas of existentialism abound and a blanket is sometimes used to explain how all human beings are connected to one another. The idea that everyone is connected by some grand plan, and force that aligns people together, is something that is integrated into the concepts discussed. How are human beings connected? What makes them different? How can one's personal philosophy be correct if it is not aligned with the general mode of thinking? As existentialist theory contends, people just exist and they can define that existence as they see fit. The idea is that people have free choice. They decide their own fate. Existence is the thing that is the beginning, unlike other theories that first claim there is something more and then human beings are created.

This position is reminiscent of Descartes' notion that the proof of existence is thinking, as well as Eckhart Tolle's emphasis on the idea that the thinker is just a mind and not really the soul. Either way, the human being is at the center of things. Perhaps it was the Freudian emphasis in society that would come about to change ideas. Egoism is viewed as negative. Still, the existence of the ego-good or bad-does provide a sense of detachment. Ironically, it also provides a sense of connectedness or humanness. Sartre seems to see the cogito as something that does not connect people. The act of thinking, in some way, is not the answer to the problems life presents. This is clearly the opposite of the Aristotelian view that thinking, or contemplating morality, is key to a good and happy life.

While the positions are clearly juxtaposed, they are also in same way congruent. That is, one can live a contemplative life, look at morality, mull things over, and still an existentialist because of the broad interpretation of the latter position.

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Existentialist are not necessarily hedonists, although the possibility is there. Still, existentialism does not really prelude contemplation. The fact that Veatch and Barrett's book contain titles that are antonyms- Rational Man and Irrational Man- does not mean that there is no meeting of the minds, at least some of the time

The Veatch text is useful in answering the question as to why someone should be moral. Morality is after all important in the scheme of things and allows people to have full, more satisfying lives. Living a moral life is the key to happiness, which is not necessarily the blissful fleeting feeling one gets from indulgence, but rather a satisfaction the human feels when he or she is doing the right thing. The existentialist view does not incorporate correctness or virtue into the mix. Although individuals are making decisions in either case, there is a difference. The existentialist sees connections, but not the existence of a black and white set of codes for which the human must decipher. While Barrett and others are not in agreement with such sentiments, and vie for a life only existentialists would think proper, each of the positions can lead to greater personal fulfillment. It seems that what matters is one's perspective. For example, the existentialist is contemplating life by his own rules, whereas the contemplation Aristotle

speaks of suggests that there will be a meeting of the minds and that individualism is not desirable.

## CONCLUSION

For my part, Veatch certainly answers the question, why be moral. The answer is that it is the best kind of life. It is the most fulfilling life that leads to happiness that is indestructible. Of course, the opposing view is that life is changing all the time, and there is no one focused method of discerning intrinsic right and wrong. Of course, contemplation is desirable for both kinds of lives. For the Aristotelian philosopher, contemplation is the road to virtue, but for existentialist, it is simply a way for individuals to find fulfillment and meaning.

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