

# ARISTOTELIAN ETHICS ON HUMAN HAPPINESS AND PLEASURE

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## Abstract

*The issues of morality or the analyses of the ethics of living are dependent on the contents or intentions of one's actions. When actions are carried out or been exhibited, they are judged either right or wrongs, ethical or unethical dependent on societal classification of such actions, especially in accordance to the dictates of the natural law. This is socially occasioned by human sense of actions and their corresponding responsibilities for the attainment of happiness or pleasure. According to Aristotelian ethics, pleasures are very short-lived and fading, while happiness are enduring, lasting and in all, eternal, welling in the individual who long to please the other selves and the divine through his or her actions and taking proper responsibilities of his or her choices, for the sake of social order. Societies have been currently bedeviling by hedonistic and nihilistic consciousness and cultures of development, where we now have a very high demand for bodily modifications and enhancements. Hence, this paper adopts expository cum descriptive method of enquiry in assessing the implications of Aristotelian ethics on human moral responsibility towards the attainment of social order. The paper concludes that, following the principles of Aristotelian ethics, our actions should be enlivened by the consciousness of common good through moral values that lead to happiness rather than pleasure.*

**Keywords:** Human Person, Ethics, Happiness, Pleasure, Actions, Responsibility, Social Order

## Introduction

The human person is a conscious being. As such, he or she is not only conscious of himself or herself but also the things around him or her as well as exhibiting certain actions which classified him or her too as a social being (see, Isanbor and Irabor 2020: 25; Isanbor 2020: 142). These actions of the human person in the society cannot be free from moral implications, thus, he or she is evaluated from what he or she does. Worthy to note is that; the simple minded notion of rightness and wrongness of one's actions has raised serious controversies in recent past among ethicists. All the times, the society presents before the human person what he or she will consider moral or immoral values, situations or events according to the norms and customs which he or she has already

internalised in the understanding of natural order in effecting the courses of social order in human society.

Naturally, the human person as an agent of social order is free to do that which is good or to do that which is evil, depending on his or her values at a particular time or situation. Thus, “virtue as well as evil, lies in our power” (Frost 1989: 131). But, for the attainment of social order in a society which cannot be monopolised by a single person, he or she is encouraged to be drawn towards the good and avoiding evil, in order to be happy. This is achievable by the positivity of our actions exercised and valued choices made through the management of our freedom and adoption of moral responsibility. Understandably, morality is a matter of freewill, and freedom is the basis for holding anybody responsible for his or her actions (See, Ebosele 2010: 13). With morality or the employment of ethical principles, the society defines or categorises human actions (good or bad, virtuous or vicious), and then determines the ways the human person has to live, corresponding to his or her moral decisions and responsibilities. It is on this note that this paper shall assess the implications of Aristotelian ethics on human moral responsibility and consciousness of common good towards the attainment of social order.

Hence, the aim of this paper, using Aristotelian ethics on the valuation of human happiness and pleasure, is re-emphasise the importance of pursuing the courses of happiness over pleasure. This is in order to restore social order lacking due to some imposing hedonistic and nihilistic actions associated with contemporary development and civilization. The objective of the paper is to state the need that human actions should be dully and ethically directed or driven towards the attainment of happiness seated on the principles of common good and the transcendental valuation of the human person as an agent of development rather than the quests for pleasure that are non-enduring in keeping humanity in the threshold of social order.

### **The ethics of Aristotle**

Aristotle was born around 384 BC in Stagira, Chalcidice Northern Greece and died around 322 BC in Euboea, Greece (Aged 62). His main interest was on biology, zoology, physics, metaphysics, logic, ethics, rhetoric, music, poetry, theatre and politics. His notables are: Golden Mean, Aristotelian Logic, Syllogism, Hexis, Hylomorphism, and the Theory of the Soul. He was influenced by Parmenides, Socrates, Plato, Heraclitus and Democritus. It lies at the heart of contemporary moral theory and is essential to understanding the history of ethics. Thereafter, with this, he influenced virtually all traditions of philosophy: Christian philosophy, Islamic philosophy, Jewish philosophy, and the likes, all on the development of human person, humanity knowing and understanding itself, especially in the midst of conflict of ideologies that pertain to the attainment of truth which sustain human happy living, and that must be ethical in assessing whether human actions are right or wrong, good or bad. According to Gerald Hughes (2001: 7):

Aristotle would have thought it astonishing if thinking animals like ourselves had no way of expressing to themselves what was good for them. So, at many points in the *Ethics*, he starts by considering what people usually or frequently think about various questions connected with morality, on the assumption that their views must either be right or at least contain some considerable kernel of truth which would explain why people hold them

For ethics of Aristotelian ethics is about virtue ethics, a check on human actions towards the attainments of happiness or pleasure. With virtue ethics, Aristotle directs the human consciousness to the valuation of happiness rather than pleasure. Although, many ethical thinkers, with contemporary mindsets for the operational valuation of relativistic development accompanies by the epistemology of immoral-driven civilization, “have regularly criticized virtue ethics, saying that it is not very good at what is called 'action guidance', at telling us what we ought to do, and great efforts have then been made to provide an answer” (Coope 2006: 22). Such consciousness for development outside some moral or ethical restraints, “this criticism is quite indeterminate until we are told what kind of 'ought' is in play, the mesmeric kind or some other. In fact, it was the notion of force itself which was critical to the new outlook” (Coope 2006: 22). The consciousness of the oughtness of an action is supposedly to guide the individual with the sense of happy living through the principle of common good for the development of human community. This is really the understanding of virtue ethics, as Miller (2006: 67) puts it:

Virtue ethics, as a theory of moral obligation, holds that an action is morally correct in so far as it is an expression of moral virtue, for example, in so far as it is courageous, generous, or just. Virtue has an irreducible role in moral theory in that the correctness of a virtuous action cannot be explained on a more basic level, that is, in terms of duties derived independently of virtue (for example, from the categorical imperative or the principle of utility). A serious issue for modern virtue ethics is whether it can justify the respect for individual rights. If it cannot, this would seem to be a crucial lacuna for a theory of moral obligation.

Hence, human activities according to Aristotle are directed towards the attainment of a particular end. All human actions are means directed towards a certain end but some ends seem only as means to further ends and not as ends themselves. He further went on to admitting that, there is one end which is not a means to another end and which is sought for its own sake. All other ends are just guides or links that lead to the ultimate end which absolutely does not sought for the sake of another. For Aristotle, the ultimate value to be attained through and in actions is happiness (*NE*, Ch. 2, 117b, 1-3). For him, happiness is the only end which sought for nothing rather than its sake, for whatever a person seek as an end; he seeks it as a means to pursuing happiness (see, Echekwube1999:123). For him, happiness is the only goal for which all human activities

are directed towards. All men seek happiness but the only means to attain to such an end is through morality. The purpose and standard of morality is directed towards happiness. For if one wants to be happy, he must live a moral life, for those actions that lead to happiness are moral actions and those actions that lead to sadness are to be considered as a morally bad actions. This view that makes happiness a standard for morality is known as “eudemonism.”

For many social thinkers, Aristotle's *Nichomachean Ethics* is one of the most important and central texts in the history of Western philosophy (See, Hughes 2001: 1). Central in Aristotle's ethics is the belief in human freedom, and he upholds the view that the human person as an agent of social order is free and as such he or she is responsible for his or her actions (Cf, Frost 1989: 131; Ebosele 2010: 12). Hence, to Aristotle, morality of human pleasure and happiness is a content of reason of one's choice or action as a determinant of one's rationality and intelligibility. For him;

All things both rational and irrational aiming at it and because in all things that which is the object of choice is what is excellent, and that which is most the object of choice the greatest good, thus the fact that all things move towards the same object indicate that this was for things the chief good... and that which all things aim was the good (*NE*, Ch. 2, 117b, 10-15)

Critically examining the idea of Aristotle and his moral goal, we may ask: what exactly is happiness? Happiness is the activity of the soul in accordance with virtue. Happiness is the activity of the soul that is inseparable from virtue. Aristotle divided virtue into two namely: intellectual virtue and moral virtue (Stumpf 1994, 92). What Aristotle considered as intellectual virtue is today known as scientific knowledge, arts, practical wisdom, intuitive reasoning, theoretical wisdom, sound deliberation, critical understanding and judgment. While moral virtue includes justice, temperance, generosity, courage, brevity, etc. Aristotle also taught the doctrine of the Golden Mean, that is, “virtue lies in the middle of two extremes” (See, the analysis of the ethical conceptualization of the human person in Hughes, pp. 45-60). Virtue is the mean between excess and deficit. For example, generosity (in the middle) continues miserliness (deficiency) and extravagance (an excess). Temperance is the mean between total abstinence (deficiency) and selfindulgence (an excess). Although, Aristotle himself knows that may not be applied to all virtues and vices. Not all vices are extreme. For example, betrayal, adultery and murder are bad in themselves, not that they are extremes.

The Aristotelian interpretation of moral virtue, for instance, as a mean between two ends, re-enacts the golden rule principle of doing unto others as we want them to do to us. This very principle also re-echoes in Plato's theory of justice, Immanuel Kant's deontological ethics and his principle of categorical imperative. For Socrates, virtue can only come about through self-mastery (See, Okoro 2017: 63). Virtue, for Aristotle, is as a result of a habit; it is an internal disposition, a permanent of a person's mind inclined

towards good action which springs spontaneously from it (See, Stumpf, 1994, 95). Virtue is a state of mind which spontaneously gives rise to a good action as a matter of habit. Aristotle did not believe in the possibility of a sudden radical conversion in which a long established habit is suddenly laid aside and a new beginning made, hence, he stressed the importance of acquiring good habits from the beginning.

Practical wisdom is an important concept in Aristotelian ethics. It is the rule or standard by which any given action in any given situation can be judged as either right or wrong. Practical wisdom is the morality, inside of virtues of the human individual by which the right cause of an action in a given situation can be known. It is acquired through experience. From the understanding of human lived-experience, Aristotle famously says (*NE* 1144a9) that practical wisdom is not concerned with the nature of the good or the aim of life, but with “what is towards the aim” (*ta pros ton skopon*), with which the human individual identifies means to the good, and/or instances of the good (Cf, Miller 2006: 80). Therefore, in any situation, we are faced with moral decision making and the evaluation of choices to be employment within the exercises of our freedom (See, Stumpf, p. 94, Anele 2017: 29). Understandably, Aristotle was more empirical than Plato and Socrates in his theoretical assessment of human socialization. He pointed out that the society is the highest place of internalization and integration of the individual, a place where true human virtues are acquired and expressed towards the attainment of happiness, with the degree of good life for all citizens of a particular society to be achieved or realized.

### **Assessing pleasure, understanding happiness in Aristotelian ethics**

The human person is always longing to maximize his or her happiness, increase the avenues for his or her pleasurable moments, in order to balance the contents of his or her consciousness as human. Such as being his or her mentality that is associated with his or her nature as a rational and intelligent animal. That is why, in our contemporary society, there is a high rate in the demands for the avenues of increasing happiness and pleasurable moments associated with every model and patterning of development and socialization that such contemporary individual, has adopted or will be adopting. For instance, in the case of medical engineering or cosmetology, we hear of breast modulations and penis enlargements, all in a bid to increase the sexual satisfaction associated with contemporary sexual demands and orientations. With these bodily enhancements or enlargements, some dilemmatic moral or ethical question is asked: whether the human individual is working to improving nature or seeking to maximize his or her ego and hedonistic desires?

Considerably recognized, the societal quests for different but higher developmental orientation, especially those that concerned human sexual /moral development, are always orchestrated with every sense of increase in human happiness and pleasurable moments in human living (see, Isanbor and Irabor 2020: 35; Isanbor 2020: 153). Whether such demands are morals, amoral or immoral is a question that may not have the desirable logical answers, especially those answers that are epistemologically

founded with all needed ethical functionalities. That the human individual is demanding and increasingly orchestrated with desires to increase his or her happiness or pleasurable moments is a given, irrespective of the nature of such demands. But, the human individuals are expected to be moral and ethical in all demands, in considering the welfares of the others persons, towards establishing social order in the society. Our understanding of pleasure is common situated within the some conditions where we accomplish our activities associated with our desires or interests to attain or sustain some power, fames and wealth. Pleasure is derived from an activity dependence on individual's values of life and living.

Commonly, we can talk of pleasure from two different points of view: the physical and mental pleasure. More so, since pleasure is as a result of an activity, and thus it depends on contents or reasons of such activity that is exercised to determine whether the pleasure is good or bad. The implication here is that any pleasure derived from a bad activity is bad pleasure, and any one derived from a good activity is good pleasure. For Aristotle;

Some no doubt being persuaded that the facts are so, and others thinking, it has a better on our life to exhibit pleasure as bad thing even if it is not; for most people (they think) incline towards it and are the slaves of their pleasure. For which; reason they ought to lead them in the opposite direction, sine thus they will reach the middle state (*NE*, BK. X, ch, 1, 117a, 28-33).

Happiness, in ordinary discourse usually refers to a positive state or a kind of feeling that is good, It is equally a matter of common experience that we are happy when we possess what we want, unhappy when we cannot get what we want. Thus, in whatever most people seek, they seek the cessation of unhappiness and the satisfaction of happiness. More so, one thing that all human beings want out of life is obviously happiness which is the reason why many people qualify as the ultimate aim of all things. But there exist a fundamental problem which is the fact that human beings disagree on what count or constitute as happiness. While one might think that an ideal life is one devoted to military adventure, for an instance, others may think of a life devoted to contemplation and still other will subscribe to teaching as a profession that will give them some of fulfillment – a source of happiness. Hence, to be happy, according to Immanuel Kant, “is necessarily the wish of every finite rational being” (see, Morris, 1927, 100). We can say then that all our actions, activities, labours and desires are implicitly geared towards attaining happiness, since man's hope is directed towards happiness in all activities.

Here, it should be posited that both pleasure and happiness are as a result of an activity and they are equally referred to as a kind of feeling that is satisfactory in nature. The question then is, where lies the difference? Since in our everyday life we hear and see people making use of them as if they mean the same thing. It is true that a lot of people confuse pleasure with happiness and make use of either depending on the situations,

seemingly expressed within social and societal doctrinal relevance of hedonism, epicurianism, fascism, utilitarianism, nihilism and emotivism, especially (see, Isanbor and Irabor 2020: 30; Isanbor 2020: 150). With a particular reference to hedonism which equates happiness with pleasure, as Furrow asserted that “pleasure is the only thing in life that is good, the only thing worth pursuing. A life of happiness then would be a life that contains a favourable balance of pleasure and pain” (Furrow 2008: 110). Hence, Hedonists simply subscribe to the fact that happiness consist in embracing pleasure and avoiding pain. The Utilitarian ethicists also speak of pleasure and happiness interchangeably as though they were the same thing with two different connotations. Whatever direction such thoughts have gone, the fact still holds that pleasure and happiness are not the same; they differ as discussed thus:

The relativity in human feeling is the point that is lacking in Aristotle's understanding of happiness and pleasure. Such relativity is based on the moral and ontological propensity that encourages human individual to “do good and avoid evil.” This moral conviction is something that everyone knows, that directs human and societal values and interests in the pursuits for social order and justice. It cuts across all cultures, and thus becomes a universal principle of morality (see, Isanbor and Irabor 2020: 30; Isanbor 2020: 150). Nevertheless, the philosophical problem is; what is good and what is bad? So, when one describes pleasure in terms of good and bad, under what criteria is he or she doing it? This, Aristotle refused to take cognizance of when he rejected the view that pleasure is the good. He did it under the guidance that, all things move towards the good, and as, they tend to see it as the good. Everyone necessarily and ontological detects the effects of evil, even when they may love doing the same evil. But, a morally-guided individual will do all things necessary to avoid doing evil. Furthermore, Aristotle came to the some epistemological conviction that pleasure is mostly connected to human nature from the wrong premise that human beings tend to love things they ought and hate. The premise is wrong because it has been proven beyond some reasonable doubt that human beings at times love things they ought to hate and hate the things they ought to love. In fact, if Aristotle was correct then human beings would be relegated to the level of animals who act out of instinct. For Aristotle:

It is wrong to say that there is a process or coming to be of pleasure. For this is not said of everything, but only of what is divisible and not a whole, for seeing, or a pint, or a unit, has not coming to be, and of these is either a process or a becoming. But pleasure is a whole, hence it has no coming to be (*NE*, Ch. 5, 117a, 12).

In attempting to refute the claim that pleasure is the greatest, Aristotle said that pleasure checked by wisdom becomes more pleasurable than a pleasure without wisdom, by implication, intellectual pleasures are greater than bodily pleasures. This philosophy is hinged on the notion of living that: “The greatness of a thing is known by its effects.” Thus bodily pleasures have greater effect than spiritual and intellectual pleasures. But to increase a pleasure more intensely and in order for it to occur in the nearest possible time, one needs to enjoy whatever he or she is doing. As such, bodily pleasures like

drinking alcoholic beverages can be increases while the individual still finds pleasure in other activities. But in respect of intellectual pleasure, majority will agree that to increase any intellectual pleasure one, in most cases, needs to go through the rigour of reading and studying, which for majority are not pleasant or pleasurable. Therefore, the bodily pleasure has the capacity of increasing with the speed of light and as such, possessing a greater advantage than the intellectual pleasure. Thus, it becomes the greatest pleasure as opposed to Aristotle's intellectual pleasure. For Aristotle;

Now since activities differ in respect of goodness and badness, and some are worthy to be chosen, other to be avoided, and other neutral, so too are the pleasures; for to each activity there is a proper pleasure (NE, Bk. X, Ch. 5, 117b, 25-28)

More so, the human person naturally desires to know something whole and perfect, and when therefore a thing cannot be apprehended at once or at a given moment, the human person becomes unpleasant, therefore, intellectual pleasure possesses a greater limitation which comes as a result of human's limited nature. Again, even when it is known, the human person by nature will always want to know more, as such, he or she is insatiable. However, in respect of bodily pleasure, the repetition of it, provides and increases the pleasure of the human person. Although old age and disposition can make an individual act contrary and give a wrong judgment to both the activity and the pleasure. A significant aspect of Aristotle's conception of pleasure lies in his description of the best kind of pleasure. Aristotle came from the perspective that since pleasure is proper to an activity, as much a worthy activity produces a worthy pleasure and *vis-a-vis*. So, the best activity produces the best pleasure. This is true because what is morally praiseworthy is not seeking pleasure for oneself but seeking pleasure for others. As such, the activity of producing joy for others, act in the case of the actor as pleasure, for instance, because he or she becomes satisfied in living for others while he or she tries to live a moral life.

### **Implications of Aristotle's ethics on happiness to human Consciousness of moral actions and responsibility**

There is, at least, one thing which every human person, without an exception, wants and will relentlessly seeks for, which is "happiness." There is nobody who does not want happiness. For it is part of human nature to seek it. Our actions, activities, and gestures are geared towards this ultimate end of the human person (See, Afolami 2015: 1; Isanbor and Uzomah 2017: 76; Isanbor, Ajibewa and Ekuigbo 2015: 78). Therefore, one cannot attain happiness without necessarily putting up some pleasurable acts. It is based on this that Aristotle's conception of pleasure becomes very necessary in understanding the human individual as a person. Since pleasure cannot be derived outside an activity, it therefore means that there is a fundamental relationship between pleasure and activity. By this, it is believed that pleasure adds something different and special to our activities, and such activities must be ethically evaluated in order to consider that which grant true happiness to the human individual.

In all, virtues lead to happiness while wickedness or immortality leads to unhappiness. This is the kind of answer given by men like Plato and Aristotle. In their view, a wicked person is unhappy; a virtuous person is a happy person. This is the view of many people who believe that wicked or immoral people cannot be happy in spite of their wealth and apparent 'success' in life. Hence Aristotle observed that both human beings and animals desire certain ends as observable in their actions. It is equally obvious that the proper actions for animals to achieve their desired ends are obtainable through instincts and imitation of their species of animal. But human beings are required to develop their rational faculty through which they gradually attain the capacity to have the knowledge of the good and deliberate well to achieve their desired ends (See, Afolami 2015: 1; Isanbor and Uzomah 2017: 76; Isanbor, Ajibewa and Ekuigbo 2015: 78). As moral responsibility is based on the requirement of deliberation, then blame or praise would be apportioned on the ability and act of adequate deliberation or lack of meaningful deliberation before a moral act. This implies that human beings are morally accountable for both their choices and states of character.

Nevertheless, Aristotle does not deny the fact that animals and humans that lack rational capacity for deliberative decision for choice are responsible for their actions. For him, all creatures in this category do not deserve praise or blame for their action no matter how grievous and disastrous the action might be, because they lack adequate intelligence to know the details of their actions and correspondent consequences. Aristotle strongly underlined the fact that only a moral agent characterized by rational ability and deliberative free will to choose the course of an action after adequate knowledge of the consequence of the action is morally responsible and deserves either praise or blame. Any other creature that lacks rational and deliberative quality and still carries out voluntary actions is primarily responsible for the consequence of such actions but deserves no praise or blame because it is not morally responsible. They are exonerated from moral responsibility because their voluntary actions are largely based on natural instincts.

## **Conclusion**

In all, we conclude that a proper understanding of Aristotelian concepts of human actions, valued choice and deliberation clearly show that the societal primacy for moral responsibility of an action is located in the act that is based on direct volitional control of a moral agent of development and social order. In anyway, Aristotle refuses to make the claim that pleasure is the end of the human person. Rather he calls for happiness, as such pleasures put together will result to happiness and this happiness becomes true and meaningful if it is derived from good activity as a pleasure and false if it is derived from bad activity as a pleasure. For valuation of happiness in the development of the human person lies in the recognition of the God in his or her actions and in making valued choices. Therefore, it is only when true pleasures are put together that the human person can realize his or her ultimate end of being happy. That is, pleasure as a satisfactory feeling which can neither be said to be good or bad, it depends on the activity to give its consequence just as Aristotle has opined.

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