

IB Extended Essay

A critical analysis of the Platonic Idealist and Existential Nihilist conceptions of morality

Research Question:

What are the Platonic Idealist and Existential Nihilist conceptions of 'the good life' and are they applicable to contemporary society?

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Introduction

i. Introduction

‘The good life’ is a philosophical term used to refer to a high-standard state of living. This may mean different things to different people: one may view the good life as the pursuit of material possessions whereas another may see it as helping the needy. However, what everyone’s perception of the good life shares is its influence on personal moral principles. Someone solely striving to gain power may deem cunning behaviour as moral, and someone who’s ‘good life’ is helping the needy would view selfishness as immoral: who one wants to be in the future dictates their perception of what they should or shouldn’t do. This creates an inextricable link between morality and ‘the good life’, making the question of ‘what is the good life’ a critical one to answer.

Two of the most significant moral frameworks in philosophy are Platonic Idealism and Existential Nihilism. The former was created circa 390 BCE by ancient Greek philosopher Plato and introduced a paradigm of reason-based, virtue-focused morals that served as the basis for traditional moral structures in the Western world. The latter was developed by European philosophers in the 19th century, most famously by German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. This framework represents the most dramatic shift from platonic methods of thinking, upending hitherto accepted conceptions of morality and the meaning of life.

These conceptions change with time — as society evolves and people’s needs change, notions of what the ideal life is do as well. Therefore, the interpretations of morality and the good life put forth by philosophers of any era must always be

viewed in a contemporary context. This, paired with the influence of the aforementioned philosophical frameworks, makes the following research question an important one to answer: “What are the Platonic Idealist and Existential Nihilist conceptions of ‘the good life’ and are they applicable to contemporary society?”

The first section of this paper will discuss the tenets of Platonic Idealism and Plato’s morality, then analyse them to synthesise a Platonic Idealist conception of the good life. The second section will offer an analysis of Plato’s ideas, highlighting their strengths and weaknesses in a modern context. The third section will outline Nietzsche’s Existential Nihilism and its depiction of the good life as well as analyse its implications from a contemporary perspective. The paper will conclude with an evaluation of the two theories, commenting on their applicability to contemporary society, and highlighting how they may be used jointly to mitigate practical issues that come with their implementation.

ii. Methodology

Description of the theories will be done mainly through primary texts, namely Plato’s ‘Republic’ and Nietzsche’s ‘Thus Spoke Zarathustra’. Secondary sources like internet encyclopaedias of philosophy, dissertations on Plato and Nietzsche, and other philosophers’ summaries of Plato’s and Nietzsche’s works will be used as well.

1. Platonic Idealism

i. Cardinal Virtues

Central to Plato's conception of morality were the 'cardinal virtues': wisdom, courage, moderation, and justice. Wisdom refers to choosing the right course of action through reason, courage refers to confronting fear or challenges, moderation refers to exercising self-constraint and discipline, and justice refers to being fair in one's actions. Plato stated that the moral person would exercise these four cardinal virtues at all times, and therefore, that the virtues are necessary for living the good life¹.

A logical next step would be to define exactly what these virtues look like in practice so people can know how to act to live the good life. But this is not as easy as it seems. What people may rationally decide to do in a given situation may differ, and what one views as courageous may be seen as mundane by another. In other words, in practice these virtues are seemingly subjective, so a practical moral standard that is virtue-based seems to have to be subjective as well.

ii. The Forms

Plato addresses the point above with his metaphysical concept of 'The Forms'. A Form is a perfect conception of a thing that exists in a separate, inaccessible realm². Instances of objects in the material world 'participate in' or 'draw from' their respective Forms. For example, the millions of houses around the world all

¹ Plato, S. H. Lee, and M. Lane, *The Republic* (Penguin Classics, 2007), 3-7.

² "Plato (Stanford encyclopaedia of philosophy)," Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, n.d.<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/plato/>.

'participate in' the Form of a house. This is not a specific house, but a collection of traits which, when embodied in an object, make that object a house.

Plato states that every object or concept in our world participates in its corresponding Form³. So just as any house in our world participates in the Form of a house, traits like wisdom, justice, or courage would participate in their respective Forms. Herein lies the largest implication of the Platonic Idealist theory — that there is an objective standard for morality. If there are Forms of the virtues, that means that there are specific characteristics or conditions by which an action can be judged to be virtuous or not.

From Plato's emphasis on virtues and the Forms, a Platonic conception of the good life can be formed: in order to act morally and live the good life, one must act with the four cardinal virtues, and whether or not one does so can be objectively assessed by comparing their actions' characteristics with the Forms of the virtues.

However, it is not that simple. This conception gives us a concrete standard with which to compare our actions, but doesn't explain what the standard entails. One cannot assess the virtue of their actions if they don't know exactly what the Forms say the virtues look like.

³ David Macintosh, "Plato: A Theory of Forms," *Philosophy Now*, 2012, xx, https://philosophynow.org/issues/90/Plato_A_Theory_of_Forms.

iii. Education and societal roles

Plato stated that reason and education are the key ingredients to understanding the Forms. Constant application of reason to identify facts and patterns in the world will bring one's understanding closer to the truth of the world of the Forms. This is facilitated by rigorous education in analytical subjects, namely mathematics, from a young age to develop the appropriate skills⁴.

However, there is a caveat in Plato's prescription for self-education: not everyone can and should pursue it. This is an idea conveyed in Plato's 'Republic', a thought experiment detailing his ideal city. This city is divided into classes, among which only the highest class of people — the 'philosopher-rulers', whose roles are to rule over the society — should pursue the Forms. They are born with innate inclinations towards rational thought, and as such, they are selected and trained from a young age to hone their analytical skills so they can understand the world of the Forms to become effective rulers.

Plato actually believed that for other classes of people to do so is immoral, stating that "the provision that the man naturally fitted to be a shoemaker, or carpenter, or anything else, should stick to his own trade has turned out to be a kind of adumbration of justice"⁵. Essentially, the "philosopher-ruler" should pursue the education required to understand the Forms as this will help him in his duty. Other classes, like farmers or soldiers, shouldn't because their roles don't call for it.

⁴ Plato, S. H. Lee, and M. Lane, *The Republic* (Penguin Classics, 2007), p227-228

⁵ Plato, S. H. Lee, and M. Lane, *The Republic* (Penguin Classics, 2007), p152

iv. Synthesis of 'the good life'

Upon analysing the different tenets of Platonic philosophy, a roadmap towards the good life can be synthesised: one must use their rational capacity to constantly educate themselves about the world around them. They must analyse facts and identify patterns in order to achieve an understanding of the abstract Forms which our-worldly objects participate in. The closer this understanding is, the better they will be able to embody and enact the four cardinal virtues of wisdom, justice, courage, and moderation. The better they can act with these virtues, the closer they are to attaining 'the good life'. However, one must only pursue this path to the extent to which their role in society demands it, as straying from this role would be immoral.

2. Analysis of Platonism

i. Implications

The definition in the previous section has some general implications on ‘the good life’ and morality. Firstly, there exists an objective standard of the good life and morality in the Forms. Secondly, rigorous analysis-focused education is required to understand this standard. Lastly, people can only be moral insofar as they stick to their roles in society. This section will analyse each of these implications from a contemporary perspective, highlighting their effects on the applicability of the Platonic conception of the good life to today’s society.

ii. Shortfalls of Plato’s education

Plato’s prescription for rigorous education from a young age is a tall order, and is perhaps infeasible in contemporary society for a few reasons.

Firstly, Plato’s exclusionary approach to education is counter-productive in modern society. Whilst gifted programs and access to specialised education for academically advanced children is not negative, the disincentivizing of ‘normal’ children from pursuing that which the ‘gifted’ children do would be suppressive and lead to a less productive populace. Perhaps Plato’s notion that kids should be grouped from a young age and educated according to their level was appropriate in his time, when resources for teaching specialised skills were scarce and needed to be distributed carefully. However, with modern youth’s access to teaching resources for any number of analytical skills such as logic, philosophy, or mathematics, it is possible for many more people to get educated at the same time. Therefore, the idea that certain

children should be selected and have the best educational resources devoted to them from a young age doesn't account for the widespread access to elite educational resources in the modern era which allow anyone to develop high-level skills at any age.

The second reason Plato's prescription for education may not be particularly applicable in contemporary society is its narrowness. He essentially claims that an analysis and mathematics-based education is required to attain 'the good life'. However, this seems overly restrictive. Many aren't interested in pursuing a heavy mathematical education from a young age, but this doesn't mean they can't act morally and live the good life. Again, perhaps this condition was reasonable in ancient Greece, where there didn't exist the vast breadth of study options that there are today. However, in contemporary society it is certainly possible to develop analytical skills in subjects other than mathematics and philosophy, such as economics, literature, natural sciences, amongst others. Furthermore, breadth of knowledge, especially at a young age, is increasingly emphasised in modern education. It provides students with a strong foundation in all subjects, giving them options when deciding between specialised roles to pursue as a career. It is for this reason that children, until high school and even university, are given well-rounded curricula with subjects in mathematics, languages, and humanities, as opposed to being forced to study solely mathematics and philosophy from a young age.

As explained with the analysis above, Plato's educational roadmap for achieving the good life and living morally has some practical issues when implemented in today's day and age. Whilst the Platonic definition of the good life can be amended slightly to

address these issues, there is a more profound implication of this definition that must be discussed.

iii. Applicability of the Forms

Perhaps the most significant implication of the Platonic good life is the existence of an objective moral standard. However this objective moral standard is unique from other prominent ones like the utilitarian principle or the categorical imperative because its exact criteria are unclear. Utilitarianism emphasises doing the most good for the greatest number of people. The categorical imperative provides clear maxims to obey. The Forms' characteristics are left unclear, leading to some issues when trying to implement Plato's ideas in practice.

If no one knows what the Forms entail, then their utility as a judge of virtue reduces significantly. Whilst it may be useful to have a standard to aspire to, such as looking up to a particularly courageous person, in practice this wouldn't work if the standard is unknown. Simply stating that one should be wise or just without specifically explaining what wise or just behaviour entails provides no clarity.

This lack of clarity may not only be not useful, but also harmful. If people are forced to adhere to an objective moral standard, but can never know or attain it, then they may get discouraged from even trying. This would lead to what is known as a state of Nihilism — believing that life and morality have no intrinsic meaning. Plato claims the meaning of life to be pursuing the Forms, but if nobody can even know, let alone attain this goal, then for some this pursuit may cease to have any significance.

People may simply accept that pursuing the Forms is a futile journey and trudge through life with no aim to be moral or act virtuously.

The vagueness of the Forms is not entirely negative however. It allows the Forms to transcend time and be applicable in any era. What wisdom or courage may have looked like in ancient Greece would likely be different now, so had Plato given specific characteristics of the Forms, they may not be as translatable to today's society. Therefore, the Forms as an objective moral standard is perhaps not as much inapplicable to contemporary society as ineffectual.

iv. Restrictiveness of societal roles

The immorality of straying from one's societal role is the easiest implication of Platonic Idealism to find faults in. Plato's claim that those who do not stick to their societal roles are acting unjustly does not apply to members of contemporary society. People don't define their goals or ideal lives as the optimum functioning of their city as a whole. People will define their 'good lives' as that which brings them the most happiness, satisfaction, and fulfilment. Even if this doesn't align with the good of the city, such as by encouraging a job switch or pursuit of education in a different subject, calling them immoral would be unreasonable by today's standards. Plato's notion of every member of society functioning as a cog, working to perfect the machine of the city, applied much more in ancient Greece than it does now. With globalisation, vast ranges of job opportunities, more material incentives to work for oneself, and larger populations, it is increasingly accepted that strong devotion to the functioning of the city takes a backseat to the pursuit of one's own goals. The idea of collaboration to improve the lives of society as a whole is obviously a positive thing,

and perhaps should factor into one's conception of morality or 'the good life'.

However, to call any person who doesn't devote their lives to the functioning of the city immoral is perhaps unreasonable in a contemporary context due to the evolution of the expectations that members of society have for each other.

3. Nietzsche and Existential Nihilism

i. Introduction to Nietzsche

Friedrich Nietzsche was a 19th century German philosopher. He is most well known for his scathing criticism of traditional European and rationalist conceptions of morality and religion. He is commonly associated with Nihilism, a branch of Existentialism that states that life has no intrinsic meaning or purpose, and that all morality and values are baseless⁶. Based on this definition, it is clear why Nietzsche was a harsh critic of Plato, whose philosophies had gone on to underlie many traditional moral structures such as religion⁷.

The parallels between Platonic Idealism and religions like Christianity⁸ or Islam are quite clear. Both espouse an objective moral standard which people should live by, and both promote the pursuit of some 'higher world' that is greater than simple Earthly existence, whether it be Heaven, Jannah, or the Forms. Nietzsche harshly criticised religion, and therefore Platonic ideals, by stating that religion leads to Nihilism and that devoting one's life to pursuing some other-worldly greatness like God or heaven would only lead to wasting one's true existence on Earth⁹. In essence, Nietzsche would have believed that the path to morality and 'the good life'

⁶ "Nihilism," Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy | An Encyclopedia of Philosophy Articles Written by Professional Philosophers, accessed July 9, 2022, <https://iep.utm.edu/nihilism/>.

⁷ "Philosophy of Religion (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy)," <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/philosophy-religion/>.

⁸ Leonard O. Goenaga, "Platonic and Christian Theology: A Paper Analyzing the Relationship Between Platonic Thought and Christian Philosophy," , December 22, 2008, <https://leonardooh.wordpress.com/2008/12/22/168/>.

⁹ Dominic Yates, "Nietzsche on nihilism," (master's thesis, Birkbeck University of London, 2020), <https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/id/eprint/40217/1/%5bDominic%20Yates%5d%20MPhilStud%20thesis%20FINAL.pdf>

synthesised from Plato's theories is detrimental to how one should truly live and behave.

ii. Nietzsche's Existentialism

Nietzsche was an egoist¹⁰: he believed that the most moral action is that which aligns most with the actor's personal desires or motivations. As such, Nietzsche's conception of 'the good life' differed from Plato's as it was centred around one's own desires and goals. He emphasised fulfilment of one's own potential in a more selfish, individualistic sense, as opposed to Plato's promotion of fulfilment of one's potential for the wellbeing of the city.

Nietzsche believed that morals or value systems aren't backed by anything and that objective moral systems are meaningless¹¹. Since the age of enlightenment, Nietzsche states, people's belief in God, heaven, or religion providing a meaning of life has faded¹². In other words, there is no specific way one should behave to act morally or live the good life anymore, and this naturally causes despair and hopelessness. Nietzsche's response to this despair is the Übermensch, a conceptual figure that represents the ideal for every human.

¹⁰ Derrick P. Nantz, "Nietzsche on Naturalism, Egoism and Altruism," (master's thesis, Georgia State University, 2007), https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=&httpsredir=1&article=1029&context=philosophy_theses.

¹¹ "Friedrich Nietzsche (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy)," Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, accessed July 9, 2022, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/nietzsche/>.

¹² Lewis Call, "Nietzsche as Critic and Captive of Enlightenment," (PhD diss., University of California, Irvine, 1995), <http://rousseaustudies.free.fr/articleNietzscheCritic.html>.

iii. Egoism and the Übermensch

Nietzsche stated that “man is a rope stretched between the animal and the Superman”¹³. In other words, the ideal life is one spent trying to become the Übermensch. However, to understand the Übermensch we must first understand ‘the Last Man’, the antithesis to the ideal. The Last Man constantly seeks comfort and security, avoiding risks and trading ambition for convenience. He blindly accepts the moral expectations imposed by others. Everyone around him is following this standard so he will be accepted in society, and he doesn’t need to face the confusion and uncertainty of questioning this moral standard. As such, he is a typical member of the societal ‘herd’, dependent on others for defining his values and content in stagnation. The Übermensch represents the opposite of these ideals. He is fundamentally independent from society. He doesn’t seek the opinions or validation of others, but he creates his own ethos. He also pursues his goals however he sees fit, aligning with Nietzsche’s egoist moral perspective.

It is important to note however that the Übermensch is a highly exaggerated figure. His attitude towards Last Men is more akin to disgust than disregard, as he looks down upon the herds and everyone else who isn’t pursuing the same journey he is¹⁴. He sees those who aren’t doing what he is doing as weaker, destined for mediocrity and stagnation, and he sees himself as fundamentally superior to them. Furthermore, his independence also takes on an egoistic slant, as not only does he pursue his goals how he sees fit, but he sees himself as only having commitments to

¹³ Friedrich W. Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra: Translated by Thomas Common* (<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1998/1998-h/1998-h.htm>, 1999), Prologue Op.4

¹⁴ Friedrich W. Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra: Translated by Thomas Common* (<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1998/1998-h/1998-h.htm>, 1999), Section LVII.

himself. He doesn't have any commitments to fulfil societal roles, or even help friends and family — his only commitment is to fulfil his own desires¹⁵.

Therefore, the Nietzschean conception of 'the good life' can be seen as the relentless pursuit of one's own goals with complete disregard for moral expectations and commitments to others. There is no meaningful objective moral standard for people to live by, so 'the good life' entails shaping one's own moral standard by pursuing one's desires, embracing risks, and acting entirely for oneself.

¹⁵ Derrick P. Nantz, "Nietzsche on Naturalism, Egoism and Altruism," (master's thesis, Georgia State University, 2007), https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=&httpsredir=1&article=1029&context=philosophy_theses.

4. Analysis of Existential Nihilism

i. Implications

The implications of the Nietzschean definition of the good life are fairly straightforward. Firstly, there is no objective moral standard — everyone can and should do as they please. Secondly, people should act out of their own desires, regardless of how selfish they are. Lastly, people who are closer to the Übermensch should view themselves as superior to the masses.

ii. Chaos and disharmony

An intuitive result of the lack of an agreed-upon moral standard is disagreement about what is right and wrong. In practice, especially in contemporary cases where societies are large and difficult to monitor, a shared moral standard is needed to ensure consistency of governance. The most prominent example of this is laws: each member of every society must adhere to the law. The fairness or moral standing of specific laws can be argued, but in practice the law is accepted as the moral standard which everyone must abide by. Whilst Nietzsche's highly individualistic conception of morality may be beneficial for individual pursuits of the good life, it wouldn't be applicable today as it would cause disharmony. If two people disagree, there is no way to assess whose case warrants backing and whose is in the wrong as they are each morally correct according to their own standards. Therefore, the implication that there is no objective morality, whilst applicable for individuals in their own personal pursuit of the good life, couldn't be implemented in society today.

iii. Extreme isolation and individualism

The second implication is similar to the first in that on an individual level, there are no major issues with its implementation. However, when analysed on a macro-level, it would cause problems. If everyone acts selfishly and only to further themselves, many elements that hold a society together would fall apart. There would be a general lack of trust and a refusal to collaborate in good faith, which may help certain individuals get ahead of others, but would slow down innovation, growth, and progress of society as a whole. Furthermore, people's relationships with others would break down, potentially creating masses of lonely, isolated people with no meaningful bonds.

iv. Superiority

The idea of some people being superior to others is one that we can historically prove as being difficult and dangerous when implemented. The most well-known example of this is the Nazis, who used Nietzsche's Übermensch as inspiration to declare the Aryan race as superior, similar to how the Übermensch is superior to the masses¹⁶. Whilst the Übermensch is not associated with racial, gender, or religious superiority, Nietzsche's conception of him as above and better than the 'rest' can easily be misconstrued as so. Therefore, this idea, because of how easily it can be misconstrued and associated with traits like race or religion, is another reason Nietzsche's definition of the good life and morality is not entirely applicable in modern society.

¹⁶ Charles M. Yablon, "Nietzsche and the Nazis: The Impact of National Socialism on the Philosophy of Nietzsche," LARC @ Cardozo Law, n.d.<https://larc.cardozo.yu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1215&context=faculty-articles>.

Conclusion

Both the Platonic Idealist and Existential Nihilist conceptions of the good life, as synthesised by analysing each theory and combining them with their conceptions of morality, have their strengths and weaknesses with respect to applicability in contemporary society.

The former is centred around hard reason, the key component of pursuing the virtues and attaining the good life, and is rigorous and demanding. It requires consistently intense education in order to develop the necessary skills to comprehend the objective moral standard that we must all obey in order to live the good life. However, it is this rigidity and difficulty that creates practical issues in implementing this conception of the good life.

The Existential Nihilist approach addresses basically all of these issues. It emphasises personal freedom of every member of society, enabling them to break out of the constraints of societal roles and objective moral standards. However, it is highly individualistic in nature, which may lead to the dysfunction and harm of society as a whole if adopted by every individual.

From these analyses, it is evident that the Existential Nihilist conception of morality and the good life is perhaps more suitable for application on an individual level than on a societal level. The opposite is seemingly true for the Platonic Idealist conception of the good life. Therefore, whilst each theory on its own may not be entirely applicable to contemporary society, elements of the two can be taken and combined to best allow for societal progress and individual flourishing. The extreme freedom

and flexibility of the Existential Nihilist 'good life' can be applied on an individual level, creating the most room for people to fulfil their true potential without the constraints of having to conform to specific virtues or behaviours. The emphasis on acting virtuously to be moral in the Platonic Idealist conception can be applied on a larger societal level. This would ensure that whilst people may be pursuing their own desires individually, this does not come entirely at the expense of maintaining a functioning society with relationships, connections, and collaboration that benefit society as a whole.

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