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Aristotle and the Pyrrhonian Sceptics both thought overall human happiness is controllable to some degree. However, striking differences can be found in how they suggest happiness can be controlled – Aristotle proposing near complete control over happiness, whilst the Sceptics propose the extent of our control is in reducing disturbances that make us unhappy. In this essay, I will give a full account of both the Aristotelian and Sceptic views of human happiness and their prescriptions for human life. I will then compare the degree to which both Aristotle and the Sceptics feel happiness as something controllable, before giving my opinion on which approach is more convincing.

The Aristotelian account of happiness sees human happiness as synonymous with living and doing well ¹. Therefore, it is a state of being instead of a mere transient feeling and once you know how to live well, you can be consistently happy despite external factors. He made the argument that all human actions and investigations are motivated by the pursuit of happiness. He begins by noting that many ends we pursue are often pursued for further ends. This forms a hierarchy, where ends are more important than the actions and investigations that pursue them; and further ends are more important than the ends merely acting as means ². To prevent this hierarchy continuing forever, there must be a final end which is good only for itself, to which all actions are motivated by ³. He then imposed three conditions on what the singular highest good must be:

- 1) Complete
- 2) Self-sufficient
- 3) The most choiceworthy

He argued happiness is complete insofar as it is only good in itself – unlike honour, wealth, virtue, and knowledge which are good in part for themselves, but also for the happiness and other goods they bring ⁴. Happiness is self-sufficient, as it relies only upon itself, whereas honour and wealth rely upon others to either honour us, or

¹ Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (1095a15-20)

² Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (1094a5-15)

³ Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (1094a20)

⁴ Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (1097a30-b10)

recognise the value of our assets ⁵. Finally, happiness is always the most choiceworthy: happiness is always just as desirable, whereas if wealth, honour, and pleasure are not accompanied by happiness, we would always choose happiness ⁶. Therefore, happiness is the only good to meet these criteria and thus is the highest good and thus the final end humans pursue.

Aristotle then sought to give a universal prescription for humans action for achieving this happiness, and concluded humans should live a life of virtuous rationality. His argument builds from an essentialist view of the world - understanding can be found through investigating a things nature and essential properties. In particular the good for a thing can be found in the purpose for it's existence. The belief that things have a fundamental purpose comes from Aristotle's four causes – explaining the reasons why things exist. The theory proposes all things have at least one, but often multiple, reasons for their existence. These causes are: material – the matter the thing is made of; formal – the essential properties which give a thing it's definition; efficient – the thing which imposed form onto the matter, thus bringing it to be; and lastly the final cause which is the end the thing was created for the sake of. Here, Aristotle focuses on things with a final cause. He argues that these things must have a characteristic function, as this gives them the ability to reach their given end. He then applies this to humans:

- 1) Humans must have a characteristic function
 - 2) The human characteristic function is unique to humans
 - 3) The capacity unique to humans is the activity of the rational elements of the soul
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- 4) Therefore, the characteristic function of a human is a life involving the activity of the rational elements of the soul.

Here, Aristotle proposes human beings must have a final cause and characteristic function. He noted workers (carpenters and leatherworkers) strive for the ends of

⁵ Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (1097b10-15)

⁶ Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (1097b15-20)

their professions, and rejected the idea that these individuals could have purpose and function, but the human itself has neither. Also, each part of the body has a unique function – the eyes see and ears hear, etc. – and so, intuitively, the collection of these parts must form a being (the human) which also has a unique function⁷. Finally, he argued that what is unique to humans is the capacity and activity of the rational elements of the soul – as plants and animals have life, nutrition, growth, and often sense-perception, and humans are the only beings to actively use rationality⁸. From this, he further argued that the good for a human is achieved through virtue:

- 1) For a thing with a characteristic function, the goodness of that thing is determined by how well the function is done
 - 2) A human being's characteristic function is a life involving the activity of the rational elements of the soul
 - 3) Anything that is done well is done in accordance with the appropriate excellence/virtue
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- 4) Therefore, the good for a human being is a life lived in accordance with the virtues of the rational elements of the soul.

For something with a final end, its goodness is determined by its success in reaching that end. Therefore, the goodness lies in how well it does the function which aims at that end. Therefore, as the function of a human being is active rationality, the good for a human is found through how well it actively uses its rationality. For something to be done well, Aristotle argues it must be done in accordance with the appropriate excellence/virtue, and thus the good for a human is the virtuous application of the rational elements of the soul⁹.

This gives an account of Aristotle's view on achieving human happiness – if one can develop the virtues, their rational activity will be guided towards successfully reaching the highest human good - happiness. This implies happiness as a long-

⁷ Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (1097b25-1098a)

⁸ Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (1098a5-10)

⁹ Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (1098a10-20)

term state – once we develop the virtues, then our actions will continuously and inevitably lead to happiness despite external factors ¹⁰.

Next, I will look to compare Aristotle's account of happiness to that of the Pyrrhonian Sceptics. There is a distinct difference in focus between the two schools. Where the ultimate human motivator for Aristotle is happiness, the Sceptic Sextus Empiricus argued the ultimate motivation appeared instead to be freedom from disturbance. Sextus proposed that these disturbances arise from inconsistencies between our beliefs and the perceptions we have of the world. For every argument, there can often be made an opposite argument of seemingly equal weight and validity. These contrasting arguments cause doubt over which alternative to assent (commit) to. In wanting to find the correct answer, these doubts cause disturbances which reduce our overall welfare.

Therefore, Sextus proposes a methodology for reducing these disturbances through indifference, which included four steps to achieve freedom from a given disturbance:

- 1) Investigation of conflicting views
- 2) Awareness of the equally plausibility of these conflicting arguments
- 3) Suspension of judgement
- 4) Freedom from disturbance

This methodology begins with the recognition of conflicting views and thus the investigation into the arguments for them. In doing so, we inevitably find equally plausible/implausible arguments in support of both views. Here is the place where disturbance is usually caused, but in accepting the equal weight of the arguments, we cannot help but suspend judgement of which view is correct. By doing so, the doubt is not disturbing, as we accept either that both outcomes could be true or false – thus our indifference for the outcome prevents disturbances arising ¹¹.

Sceptics do not, however, believe it is possible to completely free oneself from disturbance. External disturbances and compulsions are beyond our control and are

¹⁰ Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (1099b10-30)

¹¹ Sextus, *Outlines*, IG 307

inevitable. Instead, indifference prevents further disturbance from these factors. In suspending judgement about the goodness or badness of these factors, we become indifferent to their existence or non-existence and so their existence no longer disturbs us.

This brings us to the first major difference between the two schools in terms of our capacity to influence happiness. Aristotle's work explicitly argues that the development of the virtues guides actions and beliefs to better achieve happiness. On the other hand, Sceptics view is of a more limited impact of our actions and beliefs on happiness, as we are able only to reduce some disturbances. While Sceptics appear to believe indifference allows us to increase happiness by removing negative influences in our lives, the explicit notion of happiness pursued by Aristotle suggests a greater ability to remove things that reduce happiness as well as to gain things which positively increasing our happiness.

An interesting note on the Sceptical approach comes from M.F. Burnyeat in his discussion on the Pyrrhonian Sceptics. The writer mentions that the Sceptics appear to argue that step 3 in the four steps leading to freedom from disturbance is involuntary – accepting that two conflicting arguments are equally weighted forces us to suspend judgement ¹². This poses a potential challenge for the Sceptical methodology as the fact that suspension of judgement is forced upon us may in itself cause disturbance. The Sceptics accept that things appear to us a certain way, and we develop intuitions based upon these. The approach doesn't appear to explain why this process of suspension of judgement necessarily leads to freedom from disturbance as the very fact that we are forced to suspend judgements on intuitions and perceptions of the world does not imply that we are indifferent to the outcome. If a moral argument is posed with potential dire consequences for how we should act in the world, it doesn't follow that in accepting that it may be impossible to determine the truth, we are necessarily then indifferent to the outcome. The Sceptics overlook the fact that indifference may not be as easy as they think, and the lack of indifference means that the suspension of judgment may itself cause disturbance. This would mean that the Sceptic view may not be able to control happiness to much

¹² Can the sceptic live his scepticism? (pp. 205-235)

degree at all – as we are still disturbed by the conflicting views but just have suspended judgement on which argument to assent to.

However, the Sceptics may argue that Aristotle's focus on happiness as the ultimate goal to pursue actually limits our ability to be happy. The paradox of hedonism suggests that in pursuing the goal of happiness, the fact that we haven't reached happiness disturbs us, and therefore makes us less happy. This would suggest that Aristotle, in arguing that humans should ultimately seek happiness, may actually have the opposite effect than intended on human happiness. The Sceptics avoid this paradox in seeking indifference, as when things make us unhappy, we do not further make ourselves unhappy through wishing they were gone.

Overall, I see the Pyrrhonian Sceptics as slightly more convincing than Aristotle. Aristotle appears to conflate the ideas of achieving the ultimate end through the successful application of the characteristic function of a human with being happy. The notion that a hammer is good does not necessitate that the hammer would be happy (if sentient), and the same goes for a human. Further, the assumption that a human has a final cause seems to rely on intuition, whereas the Sceptics focus on preventing further disturbances by worrying about the truth. Therefore, the much more limited capacity to limiting disturbances appears more convincing than the ability to achievement of a long-term state of happiness through a development of character.