Ethics and the art of living

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Abstract: The concern of this short article, as the title suggests, is Ethics. More than that, it is ethics in the context of Ancient Greek Philosophy. The term "ethics" and the almost abused phrase "art of living" necessarily go together. Ethics, like the other philosophical approaches or branches, is reflective; but, aside from that, it entails practical consequences. As a philosophical activity, ethics reflects on morality. St. Thomas Aquinas understands morality as the quality of goodness or badness of human acts. Since the quality of human acts determines the individual's quality of life, it is not difficult to conceive of the connection between a reflective endeavour like ethics and the practical consequences it entails.

The phrase "art of living" presupposes the ethical question "How ought I live?" The term "art" suggests a skill that begets beauty; thus, "art of living" means skilfully beautifying one's life. This article considers a beautiful or pleasant life as one that is happy. Skill is developed through learning and practice; thus, it is in this spirit that the author wishes to share some lessons from older thinkers worth learning and practicing.

The article surveys some viewpoints going back six centuries B.C.E. and includes ethical declarations made by the intellectual heirs of Thales—the first known Western philosopher. The article ends with the views of the post-Aristotelian thinkers—the Epicureans, Stoics, and Sceptics. The information shared is lifted mostly from Anthony Kenny's <u>Ancient Philosophy</u>, Vol. 1 (2004), Samuel Enoch Stumpf's <u>Socrates to Sartre—A history of philosophy</u> (1999), and Robin Waterfield's <u>The first philosophers—The pre-Socratics and the sophists</u> (2000).

Key Words: Ethics; Epicureanism; Stocism; Scepticism; Happiness

Introduction and background of the study

Ethics is one traditional branch of philosophy. The ethicist reflects on morality. Morality, says Saint Thomas Aquinas, is about the quality of goodness or badness of human acts. Commonly, morality is conceived as a set of prescriptions and prohibitions of human acts. These moral prescriptions and prohibitions are conceived as appropriate/good and inappropriate/bad/evil, respectively. These prescriptions are practiced or seemingly practiced by a group of people in a particular socio-cultural environment at a particular time-frame. Given this conception, there are different moral norms and these norms evolve too. These are the matters that the ethicist reflects about. Given all those, we can say that a moral system is an offshoot or result of the philosophical activity called ethics. It is for this reason that ethics is sometimes referred to as moral philosophy and ethicists, moral philosophers.

The phrase "art of living" suggests a pleasant life-form practiced.

The varied groups of people existing within the contexts of different environments and time-frames entail the existence of many possible pleasant life-forms (and unpleasant ones as well). The impression that these life-forms are pleasant is in conjunction with the impression that they are happy. Thus, the happy life is the good/pleasant life; and, since there are countless ways to be happy then there are many possible good/pleasant lives.

In the Western tradition, Aristotle is the first one who clarifies the meaning and status of happiness. He identifies the ethical life as the happy life, and vice-versa. This identification greatly influenced the thoughts of his intellectual heirs—the Epicureans, Stoics, and Sceptics. Because he claimed that happiness is a good—in fact, the only good—that is an end in itself, the post-Aristotelians asked: "How can one attain the

highest level of happiness?" This question is understood as one that asks, "How can one live a happy life, thus, a good life?"

Discussion

The pre-Socratics

Worth mentioning are the intellectual predecessors of Aristotle who he examines and critiques in the first book of his Metaphysics. The first known Greek thinkers are Thales of Miletus together with his two younger town mates—Anaximander and Anaximenes. These thinkers are significant because they are the first known Greek thinkers and the first in making the attempt of breaking away from the mythological bondage prevalent in those times. Generally, the pre-Socratics are natural philosophers—that is, they all addressed the question posed by Thales regarding nature stated as: "What is the fundamental stuff/substance from which all things proceed?" Ethics, or how one ought to live, was not their primary concern. Essentially, the pre-Socratics formulated theories about the nature of the world and how it originated; thus, they are described as cosmologists due to the former and cosmogonists due to the latter.

Thales

Although ethics is not their primary concern we find scattered declarations ethically relevant and ascribed to a number of pre-Socratic thinkers including Thales himself. Anthony Kenny (2004, 256) informs us that "Thales is credited with an early version of 'Do as you would be done by': asked how we could best live, he replied, 'if we do not ourselves do what we blame others for doing'...

Heraclitus

Oracular utterances of a similar kind are to be found in Heraclitus: 'It is not good for men to get all they want; 'a man's character is his destiny'." If memory serves us well, there is another declaration credited to Heraclitus by some author/s that roughly states: "Men judge some things good and others bad, beautiful and ugly, just and unjust; but, God sees all things good, beautiful, and just." This proclamation's ethical message is: It is better (or, godly) not to be judgmental. Robin Waterfield (2000, 36) adds: "Heraclitus believed that good people would be repaid with a better lot in the afterlife—or perhaps they were the only ones who

gained an afterlife, while other souls perish as water." Other pre-Socratic thinkers took ethical stances on particular moral issues. We are referring to philosophers like Xenophanes, Pythagoras, and Democritus.

Xenophanes

Xenophanes is the first critical philosopher and theologian. He criticized the poet-theologians—Homer and Hesiod for their anthropomorphic stance—that is, ascribing human qualities to non-humans. More than that, he resented the poet-theologians' ascribing immoral acts, such as, adulteries, deceptions, and stealings, to the gods and goddesses. Xenophanes "praises the conventional virtues of piety, duty towards one's native city, and a life of moderation." (Waterfield 2000, 22-25)

Pythagoras

Pythagoras is popularly known for his dietary prohibitions, such as, "Do not eat beans," his idea that purifying the soul is possible by studying music and philosophy, and his teachings on metempsychosis—that is, reincarnation or the transmigration of souls. (Waterfield 2000, 87-88) All these are related and suggest that the form and quality of one's current lifetime depend on the way one's previous lifetime was led and lived. Given that conception, all lifetimes of a particular individual, for instance, form a continuum and, therefore, are all interrelated and intertwined.

Democritus

Democritus is a contemporary of Socrates, perhaps a year younger or older. He is viewed as a pre-Socratic, however, since his concern follows the tradition started by Thales. He developed the atomic theory of Leucippus. Kenny (2004, 256) informs us that Democritus is against the practice of sacrificing animals in rituals; and like Pythagoras he is also against consuming or devouring animal flesh. He adds that "it is not until Democritus that we find any sign of a philosopher with a moral system." We will notice that his ethics is contrary to his atomic theory that considers chance as the reason why things, including the world, exist.

Kenny (2004, 256-258) tells about the eloquence of Democritus on ethical topics—sixty pages of fragments—devoted to moral counsel

including some others that are controversial. He developed an ethical system obscurely related to his atomism that affirms chance and discounts purpose. On the contrary, his ethical theory stipulates on the purpose of life and delves into the nature of happiness (**eudaimonia**, usually translated as "well-being"). His conclusion suggests that the "ideal life is a life of cheerfulness and quiet contentment; thus, he is known as the laughing philosopher." It is worth noting that prior to Democritus, happiness was just implied but not mentioned at all. Democritus, however, mentions happiness explicitly: "it [happiness] was to be found not in riches but in the goods of the soul, and one should not take pleasure in mortal things." Happiness, therefore, is either a consequence or a twin to the ideal life-form—a life of cheerfulness and quiet contentment. "He praised temperance, but was not an ascetic. Thrift and fasting were good, he said, but so was banqueting; the difficulty was judging the right time for each. A life without feasting was like a highway without inns." (2004, 258)

Kenny adds an important detail about the contributions made by Democritus to the ethical views of succeeding Greek thinkers particularly Socrates. He says, "In some ways Democritus set an agenda for succeeding Greek thinkers. In placing the quest for happiness in the centre of moral philosophy he was followed by almost every moralist of antiquity. When he said, 'the cause of sin is ignorance of what is better', he formulated an idea that was to be central in Socratic moral thought. Again, when he said that you are better off being wronged than doing wrong, he uttered a thought that was developed by Socrates into the principle that it is better to suffer wrong than to inflict wrong..." (2004, 258-259)

Although it is true that Democritus made ample contributions to the ethical views of the later thinkers, "he did not explore the most important concept of all for ancient ethics: that is, **arête** or virtue." (Kenny 2004, 259) Again, like eudaimonia, arête too does not have an exact English translation; and, at times it is translated as excellence. Socrates, however, is known to have devoted his endeavours to virtues especially in Plato's early dialogues. But it is not Socrates who started taking serious notice of "virtue." It was his older contemporaries—the first humanists—who were interested in people and became popular due to their relativism. They are called the Sophists.

The Sophists (Protagoras)

The term "sophist" means intellectual or wise. The Sophists emerged in Athens during the 5th century BCE. During this time, individuals identified themselves with their **polis** (Greek city-state); but, the Sophists were a different breed of men. They were cosmopolitan in the sense that they considered themselves citizens of Greece and not of any particular polis. They were the first professional teachers because they charged their students; and, itinerant because they travelled from one place to the other. They came to Athen as teachers, diplomats, ambassadors, or on official business. They were the main source of a new type of education and significantly helped in cultivating Greek enlightenment by encouraging Athenians to reflect deeper about their own customs, lives, and thoughts. Their coming to Athens was very timely since this was the time of Pericles, when democracy replaced aristocracy. Protagoras was the first and most famous among them (Stumpf 1999, 30-31) and the others include Gorgias, Prodicos, Hippias, Thrasymachus, Antiphon, Euthydemus, and Dionysodorus. (Waterfield 2000, 205-284) Our treatment of the Sophists will be limited to Protagoras only due to space limitations. Furthermore, among the Sophists, it is the views of Protagoras on virtue that we consider as the most appropriate for our purpose.

The Sophists, with the exception of Gorgias, claimed to teach arête or virtue—that is, the ability to be good at some branch or branches of expertise. (Waterfield 2000, 206) The branch of expertise Protagoras is concerned with is political expertise. He also taught his students good citizenship and on this basis he claimed that civic virtue can be taught, not inherited only because one comes from a ruling family. Waterfield (2000, 209-210) informs of Protagoras' view on political expertise and explains why it is a virtue—that is, an excellence. For Protagoras, there is no society possible without political expertise. In our natural state we are unprotected so people need society to be protected; and, law is essential for the species so that justice and decency are enforced on everyone. His concept of political expertise includes the notions of justice and decency—the ability to respect others and deal fairly with them. For Protagoras then, political expertise that he claims to teach is a conjunction of intellectual and moral excellence.

Socrates

Samuel Enoch Stumpf writes about the ethical claim of Socrates stating that knowledge is the same as virtue. Virtue is concerned with "making the soul as good as possible." Being so, it is first necessary to know what makes the soul good. Thus, knowledge and goodness are closely related. Socrates also links knowing and doing; and so he says, to know the good is to do the good: knowledge is virtue and ignorance is vice or evil. These claims now allow Socrates to go interestingly further: No one indulges in vice or commits evil knowingly; wrongdoing is always involuntary since it is a result of ignorance. At first sight, this appears to contradict common sense because we commonly think that people performing wrongdoings know these as such, thus, done deliberately and voluntarily. Socrates argues that people commit mistakes but do not do so deliberately despite knowing these to be evil. We do evil acts thinking these are good in some way. When he says knowledge is virtue, he had in mind a particular meaning of virtue—that is, fulfilling one's function. As rational beings, our function is behaving rationally. Together with this, we have the desire to be happy or to achieve the soul's well-being which is achieved only through proper behaviour. Due to this desire we choose acts with the hope that these will bring happiness, thus, we choose acts that are questionable. Thieves, for instance, know stealing is bad but steal anyway hoping it will bring them happiness. His equating ignorance and vice refers not to the ignorance of the act but of the ability to produce happiness—the ignorance about one's soul. Some forms of behaviour appear to produce happiness but in reality do not. Wrongdoing is, thus, a consequence of an inaccurate estimate of modes of behaviour, the inaccurate expectation that certain kinds of things or pleasures will produce happiness. True knowledge is required to distinguish what appears to give happiness and what really does. When Socrates claims that vice is ignorance and involuntary, he means no one deliberately chooses to damage, destroy, or disfigure one's human nature. Right actions always harmonize with true human nature. And because he thinks that human nature's structure is constant, he also thinks that certain modes of behaviour and moral values are constant too. (1999, 40-42)

Plato and Aristotle

Plato's ethics follows the Socratic framework. There is an objective Good, absolutely true for all, at all times, and in all places. Plato's basic claim that clearly portrays the Socratic method of linking knowing with doing is: "If one knows the nature of the good life, then one will naturally act in such a way to try to achieve it." However, we notice that his claim is stated conditionally; so, knowing is not always necessary to live/lead the good life. There are other means to lead the good life even if one did not know its nature. One is through the guidance of those who know; another is copying or imitating those who know; and lastly, by leading the good life by chance.

The influence of Socrates does not end there. The idea of function or **telos** Socrates invokes to defend his ethics is further treated by Plato. He extends the idea of function by relating this to the virtues necessary for the sustenance of the Republic—his ideal State. According to Plato, the human being possesses a tripartite soul. It is made up of the rational, spirited, and appetitive components. On the level of the individual the three components should be in harmony to possibly lead the good life. On the level of the state the three components should be in harmony to attain justice. Justice is doing one's role—the people who are by and large more rational than spirited or appetitive are trained to be the rulers: the philosopher-kings/queens. The more spirited ones become the soldiers and protectors of the state and inhabitants. Those who are predominantly appetitive become the trades people and producers. They are the only ones allowed to possess property. If everyone did what they are fit to do and do their special tasks then this leads to a harmonious and just state. "Justice is the harmony of virtues of temperance [trades people], courage [soldiers], and wisdom [rulers]. (Stumpf 1999, 69)

So we see here that Plato did not only consider the individual but made an attempt to portray how an individual may fit into the bigger picture, to that of the ideal State. The ideal or the Good for Plato is to be discovered through knowledge—or the mind's ascent—for the Good is separate from the world of experience. For him the Idea or Supreme Principle of the Good is in the World of Forms.

Aristotle's ethics, on the other hand, revolves "around the belief that people, as everything else, have a distinctive 'end' to achieve or a function to fulfill. For this reason, his theory is rightly called *teleological*." (Stumpf 1999, 92) Being so, Aristotle appears to be a recipient of the Socratic claim that the human being's function or

telos is to be rational and behave rationally. And from Plato, he inherits the idea that "the good person is the person who is fulfilling his or her function as a person." And like the condition of Plato's State, he also believes that "nothing is called good unless it is functioning...The particular kind of action implied here, if one has in mind Aristotle's analysis of the soul, is the rational control and guidance of the irrational parts of the soul. Moreover, the good person is not the one who does a good deed here or there, now and then, but the one whose whole life is good, 'for as it is not one swallow or one fine day that makes a spring, so it is not one day or a short time that makes a man blessed and happy." (Stumpf 1999, 93)

Aristotle speaks of happiness in the context of human action. He says: "Human action should aim at its proper end. Everywhere people aim at pleasure, wealth, and honor. But none of these ends, though they have value, can occupy the place of the chief good for which people should aim. To be an ultimate end an act must be self-sufficient and final, 'that which is always desirable in itself and never for the sake of something else' and it must be attainable by people." Stumpf adds, "Aristotle seems certain that all people will agree that happiness is the end that alone meets all the requirements for the ultimate end of human action ...Happiness, it turns out, is another word or name for good, for like good, happiness is the fulfilment of our distinctive function; or, as Aristotle says, 'Happiness...is a working of the soul in the way of excellence or virtue'." (1999, 94)

Unlike Plato who claims that the Good is elsewhere and not in the world of experience, Aristotle claims that the good is right here and found in each and every person. All it takes is to discover what it is, put it into practice, and determine the right "amount." Aristotle teaches us that virtue is the "golden mean"—that is, the mean between two extremes. He says that the extremes are vices for one is a lack and the other is an excess. Courage, for example, is the mean between cowardice (lack) and foolhardiness (excess). "Virtue, then, is a state of being, 'a state apt to exercise deliberate choice, being in the relative mean, determined by reason, and as the man of practical wisdom would determine.' Therefore, virtue is a habit of choosing in accordance with a mean." We have to point out that everyone's mean are not the same; likewise, there is no mean for every act. (Stumpf 1999, 94-95) For example, being well-fed is the mean between starvation and gluttony. The amount of food that will make one say "I am well-fed" will not necessarily be the same as the amount required to make another say the same thing. Also, promise-keeping has no mean. We either keep or break a promise. And, there are no right amounts of adultery or stealing.

In conclusion Aristotle claims that "if happiness is the product of our acting according to our distinctive nature, it is reasonable to assume that it is acting according to our highest nature, and 'that this activity is contemplative...' This activity is the best 'since not only is reason the best thing in us, but the objects of reason are the best of knowable objects.' Moreover, contemplation 'is most continuous, since we can contemplate truth more continuously than we can do anything.' Finally, 'we think happiness has pleasure mingled with it, but the activity of philosophic wisdom is admittedly the pleasantest of virtuous activities'." (Stumpf 1999, 96)

Aristotle wrote two ethical works—The Nicomachean Ethics and the Eudemian Ethics. In the former, he identifies "happiness with the pleasurable exercise of understanding. Happiness...is the activity of the soul in accordance with virtue, and if there are several virtues, in accordance with the best and most perfect virtue." Aristotle classifies virtue into two types: moral and intellectual; and, the latter are more superior he says. And among the intellectual virtues "understanding, the scientific grasp of eternal truths, is superior to wisdom, which concerns human affairs. Supreme happiness, therefore, is activity in accordance with understanding, an activity which Aristotle calls 'contemplation'." (Kenny 2004, 276)

Kenny adds that although "the Eudemian Ethics does not identify happiness with philosophical contemplation it does, like the Nicomachean Ethics, give it a dominant position in the life of the happy person. The exercise of the moral virtues, as well as the intellectual ones, is, in the Eudemian Ethics, included as part of happiness...The Eudemian ideal of happiness, therefore, given the role it assigns to contemplation, to the moral virtues, and to pleasure, can claim, as Aristotle promised, to combine the features of the traditional three lives, the life of the philosopher, the life of the politician, and the life of the pleasure-seeker. The happy man will value contemplation above all, but part of his happy life will be the exercise of political virtues

and the enjoyment in moderation of natural human pleasures of body as well as of soul." (2004, 276-277

The post-Aristotelians

Philosophy became increasingly important after Plato and Aristotle who both contributed to the development of the "Hellenistic Age." At this point philosophy spread in the Mediterranean area. People saw philosophy as a tool to help them lead better lives. The most popular philosophical schools are known to this day as Epicureanism, Stoicism, and Scepticism. Common to all these is the notion of **ataraxia**—peace or tranquillity of mind/inner tranquillity for the Epicureans and the Stoics; and, complete restfulness as a result of apathy or indifference for the Sceptics. Literally, these schools were concerned with the "art of living."

Epicureanism

Epicureanism proposes a simple approach to life. The founder is Epicurus who taught by example as to how it is to live best. He lived on brown bread and water and met his friends in his garden—The Epicurean Garden. He professed that pleasure and joy cannot produce evil; but, pleasure depends on how we treat things in life. There are natural and necessary things (food and drink) and these are to be taken in moderation; natural and unnecessary things (love and marriage) that are to be avoided as much as possible; and, unnatural and unnecessary things (fame, honor, power) that must be avoided completely. Epicurus also distinguishes between two types of pleasures—the intense and not intense. He recommends that intense pleasures like alcohol and sex lead to pain, thus, must be avoided; while, pleasures that are not intense include friendship and playing with children. The real aim in mind must not be the pursuit of pleasure but the freedom from worry or ataraxia. This inner tranquillity is best achieved through philosophical contemplation and not through pursuing physical pleasure. Happiness is not a private affair but can be achieved among individuals helping out each other. (Stumpf 1999, 101-105)

Stoicism

Stoicism was founded by Zeno. Stoicism teaches us to be free from passion in order to attain true happiness. Stoics are known for their great fortitude (patience) and self-control (discipline). Stoicism flourished around the same time as Epicureanism. The Stoic teachings evolved and the latter Stoicism of Marcus Aurelius is different from the early Stoicism of Zeno; however, its ethical teachings are fairly consistent. Stoics in general hold that freedom is to accept our fate and resign to Nature's control, not make choices; it is not the power to alter our fate but the absence of emotional disturbance. In the same sense, happiness is achieved through wisdom—the wisdom of being able to control our passions and resign to Nature. Wisdom makes one virtuous and virtue makes one happy. Happiness, therefore, does not come from choice. It is an innate quality of natural existence. (Stumpf 1999, 105-111). Epictetus, one of the famous Roman Stoics, said—if our memory serves us right—"To be happy, we must depend on things within our control but if we depend on things beyond our control then we invite unhappiness. Another famous Stoic is the Roman Emperor from 161-180 C.E., Marcus Aurelius. If our memory serves us right again, he said, "Do not curse death, just peacefully accept it." According to him, one can attain the highest level of happiness if one can take things as they come for the mark of a superior man is to be able to take things as they come. In that case, achieving happiness may also depend on superiority.

Sceptism

The recognized founder of Scepticism is Pyrrho/Pyrrhon. Sceptics (meaning, seekers) claim that knowledge is not trustworthy. We cannot be certain of anything because the same things appear to different people and one cannot know what is right. Pyrrho, therefore, recommends that we must remain in a state of suspension—the state of uncertainty leading to the extent of disavowing knowledge or apathy. He adds, instead of saying "this is so," we must simply say, "it appears to me" or "it may be so."

By being apathetic—having no opinion—the wise will be renouncing all desires and preferences; and, no action will be possible for these depend on desires and preferences. As a result, the wise will live in complete restfulness—serenity of the soul, free from all delusions including the thought that some beliefs and opinions are better/superior to others—thus, attains happiness.

Conclusion

In the midst of all the complexities of everyday life, the hopeless pollution of the environment, the unbearable noise of vehicles, and other factors that complicate existence, all hope is not gone to improve things—not outside ourselves but within us. After presenting several models or options of life-forms and ethical theories, we hold some confidence that one of these will be appropriate for certain circumstances. We do not claim that these are all the choices we have—absolutely not—since these are just some of those formulated and thought about during the Ancient Greek era. Beautifying or making our lives more pleasant is a reasonable priority that all of us can consider given the fact that we may only live once.

And leading a life of goodness—we observe from the lessons the old guys gave us—is a common reason why lives are pleasant. We can also figure out on our own how we can "design" our lives. We can probably start by considering how it is to experience silent joy, something contagious, pervasive, and profound. I remember a mother, smiling and tirelessly looking at her baby for hours—a good-happy moment to begin with!