

Aristotle's Concept of Human Flourishing: Implication for Post-truth Value Perspective on Materialism

Cornelius Gbenga Fasiku, PhD. and Amos Ameh Ichaba, PhD.

Department of Philosophy,
Kogi State University, Anyigba
Gbenga.fc@ksu.edu.ng

Department of Philosophy,
Kogi State University, Anyigba
Ichaba.aa@ksu.edu.ng

Abstract

At the very opening of Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics, he posited that every art and every investigation, and similarly every action and pursuit is considered to aim at some good. Hence, the Good has been rightly defined as 'that at which all things aim'. In his understanding, all intermediate goals, also referred to as instrumental goals, must tenaciously aim at a final goal, which he identifies as human flourishing. However, changes in societal composition have allowed many people alternative ways in deciding the pathways of their flourishing or happiness, while at the same time neglecting traditional and cultural moral bases appropriate for guidance. This leaves open the questions of what is good and worthwhile to pursue in one's life. In this paper, we argue that, the idea of human flourishing has changed today as it has become predominantly of vain pursuit and living undifferentiated life of pleasure with all sorts of materialistic tendencies. The analytic method has been adopted to explore the potentials of the ideas enshrined in Aristotle's concept of human flourishing for post-truth value disposition on materialism. Our position in this paper, therefore, is that in order to attain the teleological vision of happiness, our idea of human flourishing should not be defined by vain pursuits especially as seen in our world today. Human flourishing is only sustained through right desire with the right reason and good choice of action and not mere materialism.

Keywords: Aristotle, Human flourishing, Materialism, Post-truth rationalization, value perspective

Introduction

One of the functions of philosophy is to clarify propositions by offering arguments to sustain such propositions. In clarifying the concept of post-truth value perspective, two things come to mind: (i.) that the concept of truth has become unsatisfactory in explaining the kind of relationship that exists between human beings and the world. (ii) That the traditional concept of truth (to be clear), which certifies the correspondence between the human representations of reality and reality itself, has seemed too rigid, too anthropocentric, to actually account for the complexity of the real.¹

Thus, post-truth rationalization as a puzzling subject has become part of the world's epistemologies today. The term was invented to unravel the peculiarities involving truth and lies, in some perspectives, which appeared to have become predominantly understated and delicate to the point of fading. At times, truth and lies become undifferentiated and confusing depending on the angle one adopts. Without doubts, no one would dispute the preference of truth to lies, but occasionally, truth is incontestably impossible to establish and this leaves room for individual validation and interpretation, which is why post-truth rationalization, somewhat justifies the idea that there is “something” beyond the truth. Is there something beyond the truth? And if so, what is it exactly? In the field of value perspective, no accurate answer can be given to these worrying questions, as such; post-truth as a concept appears to have resulted from the dissatisfactions about the definitions and boundaries of truth and lies. Most of the debate around the idea of post-truth value perspective has been an effort at arriving at a more comprehensible and distinct ethical as well as axiological standpoint exclusively from a nonconventional perspective. Thus, the position established in this paper doesn't take a stand on whether there is anything exceptional about our

¹. Angelo C. Tiziana. (ed.) *Post-Truth Philosophy and Law*. (London: Routledge, 2019) 1.

current relation to truth norms and shared values; rather, it uses post-truth perspective as a discursive tool in evaluating the contemporary view on happiness or human flourishing. However, a contemporary reflection on the dialectics between the particular and the universal conceptions of human flourishing as a paradigm of life gives an indication to the undifferentiated pleasures to be desired and pursued for the sole purpose of their being pleasant and not in accordance with the actual dictate of Aristotle's ethics. This paper will endeavor to show that, in contrast to the times when Aristotle wrote his famous works on ethics - *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Magna Moralia* respectively, the status and perception of human flourishing has changed. Today, human flourishing with its materialistic tendencies has become predominantly vain pursuit with the sole aim of estranging the individual from the knowledge of the truth of their situation. In the context of Platonic terminology, it has become the discourse of the Cave that prevents individuals from attaining their ultimate goals which is the excellent use of reason.

Aristotle's View on Human Flourishing or Happiness

In the field of moral philosophy, few thinkers have had the effectiveness and historical reach of Aristotle. Of different classical views on human flourishing (*eudaimonia*), it was Aristotle who laid out the first systematic work on *eudaimonia* in particular and ethical theory in general, and subsequent schools of philosophy walked in his footpaths.² His works on ethics conscientiously address critical questions. For instance, in the opening page of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle says that every being has a specific and unique good to that being, an end. He says: "all knowledge and all work are aimed at some good".³ Referring to a number of practices and human arts, he argues further that there are actions which are carried out only for the sake of something else, since

² Julia Annas. "Virtue and Eudaimonism", *Social Philosophy and Policy* 15, no.1 (1998): 37-51.

³ Aristotle. *The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. J.A.K Thomson (New York: Allen and Unwin, 1976), Book 1.

such actions are undertaken for the sake of an end; the end of such actions is more desirable. It is a final activity, or the product of such an activity, which Aristotle seeks in order to give an account of what the human good consists of.

For him, instrumental ends, i.e. those ends pursued for the sake of something else, are less desirable than final ends, those ends for which the instrumental ends are chosen. This final end (*telos*) means the purpose and goal of life to which all of human actions are directed. Thus, for the human species, it is interpreted as the direction in which life is lived. The rationale behind Aristotle's ethical discourse is to illustrate "the good for man". So, man's teleological end is the perfection of his rational activity (which, according to Aristotle, differentiates humans from animals). Aristotle, following Socrates and Plato, maintains that man's end is this rational activity directed towards human perfection, that is, to the good. The focus, here, is on activity and accomplishment rather than a mere sensation of pleasure or satisfaction.⁴ The perspective of human flourishing or happiness according to Aristotle is not necessarily that of "the life of enjoyment" "pleasure" or "the life of money-making".⁵ This means that human flourishing or happiness in Aristotelian sense is not the same as sensual pleasure, though the two words are occasionally used interchangeably by later scholars and commentators. They may be "parts of human happiness or of its antithesis".⁶ Given the primacy Aristotle attached to human flourishing as an activity in accordance with reason and which is also the moral end men ought to pursue, pleasure, cannot be said to be the ultimate end of happiness.

⁴. Robert C. Solomon. "Abstract of Comments: Nietzsche's Ethic", *Nous* 18, no.1 (1984):66.

⁵. Edward E. Uzoma. "Happiness as an End: A Critique of Aristotle's Rational Eudaimonism," *Inkanyiso: Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 10, no.1 (2018):52

⁶. Sterling P. Lamprecht. *Our Philosophical Tradition: A Brief History of Philosophy in western Civilization*. (New York: Appleton Century Crofts Publishers, 1955), 61.

Aristotle further maintains that happiness as an activity chosen for its own sake must manifest virtue or excellence, not merely pursued for amusement or pleasure.⁷ Man is placed above other beings in the hierarchy of existence as his capacity for rationality is seen as a proof of his objectively *sophisticated and higher* status. It is by this that he surpasses and rules all other forms of life which Aristotle presumes the development of this faculty will give man accomplishment and happiness. Therefore, happiness for man is not only what is innate in him, but what is exclusive to him which is rationality. Invariably, the good for man (or *eudaimonia*) must be the life of reason and its development.

While many might think that the life of reason is a reflective and inactive academic life, Aristotle suggests that it is also the active life, not a withdrawal from life and not a sedentary contemplation.⁸ Thus, the central concept of Aristotle's ethics is the concept of virtue which is simply seen as a “rational activity, activity in accordance with a rational principle”.⁹ Therefore, happiness does not entail worthless amusement but rational activities in agreement with virtue. But if happiness consists in activity in accordance with virtue, it is reasonable that it should be activity in accordance with the highest virtue; and this will be the virtue of the best part of us (reason).¹⁰ It is the activity of this rational part of us (which is the divinest and purest) “in accordance with the virtue proper to it that constitutes perfect happiness”;¹¹ men thus become more transcendent when they live out the life of contemplation in which human flourishing is the goal.

⁷. Aristotle. *The Nicomachean Ethics*, BK 10:258

⁸. Solomon. “Abstract of Comments: Nietzsche's Ethic”, 67.

⁹. Aristotle. *The Nicomachean Ethics*, BK 1,7

¹⁰. Uzoma. “Happiness as an End: A Critique of Aristotle's Rational Eudaimonism,” 53

¹¹. Aristotle. *The Nicomachean Ethics*, BK 1,7

For Aristotle, the goal of human flourishing consists in activities which promote virtue and unlike the lower animals; man's rationality- which sets him apart from everything else- is put into use to actualize this ultimate good in man- the ultimate good, which consists in the excellent use of his rational powers. It is obvious that Aristotle's position is a slight modification of Plato's explanation of human nature. Plato had earlier pointed out that human nature has the rational part and many irrational elements (the passions, emotions, desire etc.). The irrational or the non-rational parts of human nature are, in part, beyond the power of reason to control and are in part subject to control by reason.¹² In all, Aristotle alleged that contemplative activities such as thinking, learning with the determination to understand and know rather than mere pleasures and other external things are the key to human flourishing or happiness.¹³ This is to say that the chief good for humans is a life of contemplation; a life lived in accordance with reason. Other external goods like wealth, fortune, prestige, beauty and good friends, even though they contribute to human flourishing; they are secondary and not the ultimate in Aristotle's ethics.¹⁴

Human Flourishing and the Contemporary Rationalization of the Concept

The chief or final good (*summum bonum*) is defined by Aristotle as “*eudaimonia*” which is translated as human flourishing or happiness. The word “happiness” or “human flourishing”, has to do with the complete well-being of the mature and excellently developed man.¹⁵ But the Hedonists and their intellectual progenies-the Enlightenment

^{12.} Lamprecht. *Our Philosophical Tradition*, 62

^{13.} Emmett Barcalow. *Moral Philosophy: Theory and Issues*, (Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1994), 71

^{14.} Richard M. Ryan and Frank Martela. “Eudaimonia as a Way of Living: Connecting Aristotle with Self-Determination Theory” 2016 https://selfdeterminationtheory.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/2016_Ryan_Martela_HandbookofEudaiwell-being.pdf

^{15.} Lamprecht. *Our Philosophical Tradition*, 61

rationality and the utilitarians-pushed the term human flourishing or happiness strongly toward its subjective end and through their insistence on happiness as an inner *and* subjective experience; they effectively dethroned happiness from its position as the highest individual good. The Utilitarians and some enlightenment thinkers stated explicitly that happiness alone has the highest value and, as such, was the good that was to be maximized.¹⁶

However, the Enlightenment thinkers often did not differentiate evidently between the genuine satisfaction of desires and the judgment about whether enough of our desires have been attained. In this way, Immanuel Kant's ethics offers us a workable definition of happiness as—the satisfaction of all our desires.¹⁷ Other definitions of Kant, however, go in the direction of positive emotional states of satisfaction. In the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* for instance, he explicitly states that happiness is the absolute well-being and satisfaction with one's state.¹⁸ It is imprecise therefore if he meant a sensation of satisfaction, or a judgment that one is satisfied, or both. As such, many Enlightenment thinkers followed Kant's direction with regards to the question of happiness, whether satisfied desires are equivalent to or automatically correspond with positive emotional condition.

Thus, having outlined the Enlightenment conception of happiness, and its evolutionary trajectory, the tragedy therefore, concerns the perspective of happiness as the highest individual good that the Enlightenment bequeathed us. It is assumed that humans are entitled to

^{16.} Jeremy Bentham. *An Introduction to the principle of Moral and Legislation*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996)

^{17.} Immanuel Kant. *The Metaphysics of Morals*. Mary Gregor (ed. and trans.) with Introduction by Roger J. Sullivan. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 73

^{18.} Kant. *The Metaphysics of Morals*, 393

pursue and attain happiness.¹⁹ This is evidenced by the fact that the pursuit of happiness is protected as a fundamental human right.²⁰ As such, in the era where “post-truth” rationalization is becoming the predominant feature of the world and the pursuit of happiness is fundamental to human right, the question of living the life of human flourishing or happiness seems to have become pertinent. This is due to the reason that human flourishing intrinsically involves a connection with the truth and the universal which can also be relativized. As such, the notion of a fulfilled life or “human flourishing” should not exclude individual good which is subjective as it has constantly been entwined with the theory of individual pleasure, satisfaction and fulfillment.

However, changes in societal composition have allowed many people alternative ways in deciding the pathways of their happiness, flourishing and satisfaction while at the same time, contravening and neglecting traditional and cultural moral bases appropriate for guidance. This leaves open the questions of what is good and worthwhile to pursue in one's life. For the individual, these questions raise concerns about the qualities of what a good life or human flourishing comprises and gives rise to fulfillment and well-being which is exclusively determined by the individual.

While J.S Mill casts doubts on the effectiveness of a direct pursuit of indirect happiness; Kant's pessimism goes even further in doubting the achievability of the quest for and realization of such happiness in its entirety from an individual rationalization with good reasons to believe that such rationalization of indirect happiness runs into a far greater problem in its realization than the Aristotelian conception. The

^{19.} Pelin Kesebir and Ed Diener, “In Pursuit of Happiness: Empirical Answers to Philosophical Questions,” *Journal of Happiness Studies* 3, no. 2 (2008): 117

^{20.} Ann Conkle. “Serious Research on Happiness” in *Association for Psychological Science*, 2008, <https://www.psychologicalscience.org/observe/serious-research-on-happiness>

complexity and dilemma, as acknowledged by Kant is that such happiness is explicitly designed not to produce a high level of continuing positive feelings, but instead to keep one striving for external material goods, events, or states of affairs (or striving for one's progress), many of which are not good for our ultimate flourishing but are mere interpretations of our differential reproductive success and interpretations of *people's evaluations of their lives and existential realities which encompass both cognitive judgments of satisfaction on the one hand and on the other hand, sentimental appraisals of moods and emotions at a point in time.*

Materialism as Contemporary understanding of Human Flourishing

In our day, the concept of happiness or human flourishing has totally been misconstrued as materialism has become associated with happiness and individual flourishing.²¹ Of course, on a larger scale, the trend is mostly common among the developing countries which are being enthusiastic of the western world. Materialism has been considered as a vital means for understanding and defining our success through acts of acquisition and possession of material goods for our happiness and wellbeing. Intentions to purchase goods and services are driven by how we have so much construed these material possessions as the heart of human flourishing or happiness. Our possessions reflect who we are.²² Going through social media today, from Facebook reels to short videos and Tiktok, one can only shake one's head in shame and disgust at the videos and comments made by the youths of today exhibiting and showcasing material

^{21.} Helga Dittmar, Rod Bond and Megan Hurst, "The Relationship between Materialism and Personal Well-Being: A Meta-Analysis" *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 107, no. 5 (2014): 879-924

^{22.} Cf David G. Mick. "Are Studies of Dark Side Variables Confounded by Socially Desirable Responding? The Case of Materialism." *Journal of Consumer Research*, 23 (1996):106–119. doi:10.1086/209470 and Russell W. Belk. (1983). "Worldly Possessions: Issues and Criticisms" *Advances in Consumer Research*, 10 (1996): 514–519.

possessions (whether genuinely acquired or not) as the standard of happiness, human flourishing and wellbeing. Social media has become a hydra-headed monster where this ugly trend is displayed thereby leading to unhealthy competitiveness, rivalry and jealousy without any caution and this is seemingly becoming uncontrollable among the youths and there is a serious doubt if there will be a solution or reversal of this ugly and horrible tide. When one follows closely the proceedings on the social media, it is nothing short of a disaster waiting to happen. What is more perturbing is that our youths have thrown caution to the wind. We are glorifying the evil of sexual perversion, fraudulent activities (money laundering, internet fraud, Yahoo-Yahoo, ritual killing etc.) in the name of human flourishing or happiness or living up to the contemporary understanding of the concept.

Another important factor to note is that there has been a huge cultural transformation in Nigeria owing largely to westernization and globalization. This transformation has caused a huge crack in the traditional cultures which is strongly being felt in the departure from the traditional one to a more contemporary one and the same contemporary culture has been bridged by different dynamisms. Deviations from traditional culture towards contemporary ones make materialistic tendencies and rationalization and consumer society like ours an incompatible one and people might yield to such pressures. It is a known fact that social media has a major and significant effect on consumer performance and this influence differs across cultural climes.²³ The influence of social media also contributes largely to the introduction of western individualistic culture in virtually every part of the world. Such effect is also found to be a determining element in our attitudinal acceptance of whatever ideology is imported and we strongly believe

²³. Manchanda Rimple, Abidi Naseem and Mishra K. Jitendra. "Assessing Materialism in Indian Urban Youth" *Management*, 20, no.2 (2015), 183

that Africans generally are ill-prepared for some of these ideologies. In spite of cultural as well as religious advocacies, materialism has become an embryonic and an emerging attribute of our consumer society. Of course, this emergent culture of materialism in our society has been considered as a path distancing the youths from their culture.

Conclusion

Aristotle considers human flourishing not as a passive state of life but as an active state which by itself is self-sufficient and makes life desirable.²⁴ Thus, in providing a contemporary explanation for this definition, this paper draws from Aristotle's various and essential arguments in support of human flourishing or happiness as active state of life. One is that there are certain ways of living that are suggestive and reflective of a good life and when these qualities are embraced and lived, the result is happiness in the fullest of senses understood as subjective well-being or human flourishing.²⁵ Thus, a person pursuing virtuous living is expected to feel fulfilled and satisfied with his or her life, including not only positive effect, but also a sense of meaning, connection, and depth.

Secondly and importantly also, happiness and well-being are, for Aristotle, not the primary aims of living (that is from a hedonic view); rather these subjective experiences are byproducts of living well, which presupposes a virtuous activity of the soul and reason. In particular, his clarification of human flourishing offers a teleological vision of human nature with purposeful and decisive character whereby the essence of man harbors some specific inner mechanisms required to develop in a peculiar way towards its actualization. This full actualization of man's potentialities and the creation of new potentialities are seen as features of

^{24.} Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1097a

^{25.} Colin Strong, "Human Flourishing through Behaviour Change" Eds. Mireia Las Heras, Marc Grau Grau and Yasin Rofcanin, *Human Flourishing: A Multidisciplinary Perspective on Neuroscience, Health, Organizations and Arts*. (Switzerland: Springer, 2023).

man's diligence in life.²⁶ As the human person is born, he/she possesses the drive to undergo development through natural processes. According to Aristotle, human flourishing or happiness is attained when a man lives in accordance to his nature; the inclination to continue to develop through actualization of his potentials through and by following natural process. According to him, happiness is a virtuous activity of the soul which guides man's actions towards excellence (Life of flourishing).²⁷ Therefore, central to this life of flourishing and excellence is a virtuous activity. Hence, human flourishing or happiness is preserved and sustained through right desire with the right reason and good choice of action and not mere materialism.

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²⁶. Purissima E. Egbekpalu. (2021). "Aristotelian Concept of Happiness (Eudaimonia) and its Conative Role in Human Existence: A Critical Evaluation", *Conatus - Journal of Philosophy*, 6, no.2, (2021): 78

²⁷. Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk 2.

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