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The Good Life

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Professor Carl

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Catholic Intellectual Traditions

The Good Life

Throughout generations the world has constantly progressed through medicine, and technology which has led to our inevitable evolution. But, a part of society that has not changed is our main individual goals of reaching “the good life,” as shown as evidence in literature. Authors like Plato, Aristotle, and those of the Bible wrote about the importance of happiness, virtues, and education as they pertain to this journey to “the good life.” Many feel that what they state is still pertinent today. Plato and Aristotle take time to focus on what can enrich the individual in this life that will make them better and, as a result, society better. The authors of the Gospel focus on a similar idea, but focus on God wants to see in a person that can help them reach his ideal “good life” for them. Though each propose excellent ideas on happiness, education, and virtues, I argue that Plato and Aristotle’s individualistic proposals for reaching the good life are more important than the Gospel’s idea of putting the pleasure of God before the individual.

In the Gospel, The Book of Exodus describes Jesus’ presentation of the notorious Ten Commandments to the Israelites and Moses on Mount Sinai. These commandments were presented as a guide for Christians and Israelites to live a morally good life in the eyes of God. For example, they include “you shall not kill,” and “you shall not commit adultery” (Exodus 20:13-14). These are common morals that not only enrich the individual, but also allow the people around them to continue their own personal journeys to the good life undisturbed as well. I understand why God would claim these to help his people, but I do not understand why he gets

selfish with some of his other commandments. For example, he says “You shall not have other gods besides me” (Exodus 5:3), and “You shall not invoke the name of the Lord your God in vain” (Exodus 5:7) Then, to make the Israelites follow these he uses the power of fear for persuasion. God even admits, he will inflict “punishment for their ancestors’ wickedness on the children of those who hate me, down the third and fourth generation” (Exodus 20:5). In translation, he is saying if you betray me, your children and your children’s children will pay for any violation of these commandments.

Worship out of fear does not lead to the good life. Worship out of love and adoration is much more plausible for an individual’s happiness. People should have a set of standards to use as a guide to the good life, but it should be standards they set for themselves. Obviously, people need to abide by societal standards of not killing and not stealing. But, following someone else’s standards, like God’s, should be up to the person and they should not be condemned for it. Someone should not have to go through the journey in fear that if they make one mistake they will be sent to damnation, and the generations that follow them will have the same fate.

Similar to the Ten Commandments, in the Book of Matthew, the people are presented with the eight Beatitudes. Each beatitude begins by stating a virtuous or even non-virtuous characteristic of a person, and ends with the mercy they are shown by God for this particular characteristic. For example, “Blessed are the clean of heart, for they shall see God” (Matthew 5:8). The other Beatitudes follow this format, and the list presents the idea that God, though demanding, is merciful. The list itself gives a person incentive to worship out of adoration and love. Dishearteningly, though, at the end, Jesus says, “Rejoice and be glad, for your reward will be great in heaven” (Matthew 5:12). I said this was disheartening because a

person should not want to be virtuous out of desire for a reward, they should do it out of the goodness of their hearts.

Being a virtuous person does lead to the good life. But, if the intention is to receive a reward, then it has become a selfish act. Some may say the intention does not matter if it keeps the peace, but to achieve the good life you must reach happiness. The simple act of enriching someone else's life should bring a person this happiness. Doing something selfish may get a person to happiness eventually, but the benefit for the psyche is greater if the intention is kindness. A person should especially not do something to advance themselves in the eye of another. In this case the person they need to please is God.

Aristotle captured my belief that virtues lead to the good life, and he excluded the need to please another person, like God, in the process. Therefore, I agree with what he states in the *Nicomachean Ethics* when he says, "It is virtuous activities that determine our happiness, and the opposite kind that produce the opposite effect." (Aristotle 23) I see wanting to please someone else, as stated in the Book of Matthew, as the opposite effect that Aristotle is describing here. Aristotle also says "people seem to seek honour in order to convince themselves of their own goodness" (Aristotle 9), which further supports this theory. Virtues are extremely important to gaining the good life, but not if it means that you are secretly only looking out for yourself.

In the same passage, Aristotle also claims "wealth is obviously not the good we are seeking, because it serves only as a means; i.e. for getting something else" (Aristotle 9). The *Nicomachean Ethics* touches on several ways to obtain the "good life". For example, putting the needs of community as a priority, and the idea that not everyone has the same definition of happiness, but I feel that this point about wealth is crucial to understanding what happiness is. Wealth is not happiness, wealth is a way to obtain happiness. As a college student, I understand

that people are concerned that their majors will make them enough money to give them a stable, happy life. Therefore it is easy to make the misconception that money is happiness, but it is just a vehicle to a person's happiness.

Similar to Aristotle, God did not play any part in Plato's the *Allegory of the Cave*. In this story, Plato describes human beings in a "cavelike dwelling" (Plato pp.3 line 514) fixed in the same position since childhood. They stare at shadows on the wall created by the fire that they do not even know is behind them. Since they have been there for so long, they sincerely believe that this is their "good life" —the truth. One day, one of the dwellers escapes and begins to explore the outside world, in which he realizes that this has been the truth all along. When he goes back and tells the others he gets rejected. Plato uses this story to describe the power of education and truth as a part of the "good life." The more educated a person is about what goes on in the world, the more they can choose what makes them the most happy. Education provides options for optimizing happiness, whereas being uneducated gives less options until a person is exposed to more of the truth. The "good life" is at a person's fingertips they just have to be willing to adventure outside of the knowledge they already have.

Plato furthers this idea by saying, "Education isn't what some people declare it to be, namely, putting knowledge into souls that lack it, like putting sight into blind eyes" (Plato 518d). I believe this one line sums up all of what Plato is trying to say in *The Allegory of the Cave*. He is saying a person cannot gain perspective on the truth unless a person gains knowledge in life. You cannot just tell them it exists for it to enrich them, they must experience it themselves to gain the knowledge. This knowledge does not necessarily mean reading a biology book and understanding cellular respiration; this does not bring perspective and happiness. Plato wants us have a desire to expand our knowledge for our own benefit. Learning about cellular respiration,

though a conglomerate of excellent facts to know, is not the key to the “good life”. I believe in what Plato said, because by seeing the truth around me I gain the greatest perspective on what brings me the most happiness.

My own happiness can be defined through the parts of my life that bring me strength, and motivation. My family, my friends, my happy place, my hopes, and my dreams are what I see as a means to my “good life.” I need to be a selflessly virtuous person, as well as a truth seeking person through knowledge and adventure to obtain this. Though I believe in God, and I believe what he provides for us is extraordinary, I have a hard time making him the means to my “good life.” Therefore, the perfect combination of Plato and Aristotle’s theories on the “good life” depict precisely what I want – happiness.

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