

Aristotle's View of Happiness and Its Practical Significance

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Keywords: Aristotle; The concept of happiness; Realistic meaning

Abstract: Happiness is an eternal topic and lifelong goal of human beings. So, what is happiness? How can we get happiness? Aristotle gave his answer. In order to guide people to correctly understand and effectively pursue happiness in real life, this paper elaborated Aristotle's concept of happiness and explored its practical significance in combination with reality. This paper mainly formed on the basis of literature research and inductive research. In the study of this paper, the author researched *Nicomachean Ethic*, as well as reviewed and referred some relevant research papers. Meanwhile, the author made a theoretical analysis of some actual phenomenon in the current social real life. Based on the above research, this paper hold that according to the *Nicomachean Ethic*, Aristotle mainly expounded the characteristics, elements, levels and acquisition of happiness, so as to form his concept of happiness. Combined with current social conditions, his concept of happiness still has some important practical significance. Specifically, these practical significance mainly include the following three points. First, encourage people to pursue their own happiness. Second, guide people to coordinate the relationship between material life and spiritual life. Third, improve people's cultural quality and moral level. In short, Aristotle's concept of happiness can guide people to correctly understand and effectively pursue their own happiness in real life. Based on this, this paper can also play a guiding role for people to correctly understand and effectively pursue their own happiness in real life, as well as promote the study of Aristotle's concept of happiness.

1. Introduction

Happiness is the eternal topic and lifelong goal of humans. On the two issues of "what is happiness" and "how to obtain happiness", the ancient Greek sage Aristotle had his own unique and profound thought. Specifically, in his ethical work *Nicomachean Ethic*, he deeply expounded the characteristics, elements, levels and acquisition of happiness, thus formed his own unique and rich concept of happiness.

2. Research materials and methods

This paper mainly used the methods of literature research and inductive research. The research materials included Aristotle's ethical work *Nicomachean Ethic* and some relevant research results of current Chinese academic circles, as well as some actual phenomenon in current social real life. Specifically, in the study of this paper, on the one hand, the author researched *Nicomachean Ethic*, as well as reviewed and referred some of the relevant research papers. On the other hand, the author made a theoretical analysis of some actual phenomenon in the current social real life. Based on the above two aspects of work, this paper formed.

3. An overview of Aristotle's concept of happiness

According to Aristotle's ethics book *Nicomachean Ethic*, Aristotle's concept of happiness can be

summarized as follows:

3.1 Characteristics of happiness

In *Nicomarchus ethics* (1095a15-20), Aristotle said, “what is the apex of all good that can be achieved by behavior? In terms of name, almost most people will agree that this is happiness. Both the general public and individual prominent figures say that a good life and good behavior are happiness” [1]. Happiness is the highest purpose of life, which can be explained from two aspects. First, all people without exception can take happiness as their highest purpose and ultimate pursuit of life. Second, happiness occupies the highest peak in the system of people’s good deeds.

From the above description, we can summarize the three characteristics of happiness.

3.1.1 Highest value

All kinds of human behavior have their own purposes, that is, all kinds of “good” as Aristotle said. However, happiness is “the apex of all good that can be achieved by behavior”, that is, the highest purpose and ultimate pursuit of life. In other words, happiness is the highest abstract and universal inductive provision of all human behavior purposes.

3.1.2 Universality on objects

Both the general public and the elite can pursue their own happiness. Happiness, as an eternal and supreme goal, is applicable to all people. Everyone can pursue their own happiness regardless of wealth, high and low, class, nation, country and belief. Happiness is applicable to all people, but it does not mean that it is the same level for all people, because happiness also has individual differences. Everyone has his own understanding and feelings about happiness.

3.1.3 Objectivity in content

The ancient Greeks’ concept of happiness is an objective concept of happiness. In their view, happiness is objective. Happiness in the objective sense refers to a state of life. It emphasizes the real conditions and contents necessary for happiness, such as “good life” and “good behavior”, this does not mean the subjective feeling of happiness, but good material living conditions and noble moral qualities. It also refers to the objective and excellent state of life. This objective and excellent state of life is the happiness that Aristotle wanted to talk about. That is to say, Aristotle’s view of happiness is different from current view of happiness. Current people talk about happiness, not only referring to material living conditions, but more refers to the feeling of happiness.

3.2 Elements of happiness

Aristotle concluded at 1101a14-16, “a happy person should be such a person whose activities embody perfect virtue, and it also has sufficient external goodness. Further, he not only has these for a period of time, but has them all his life” [2]. It can be seen that happiness should include three elements as follows: moral activities, sufficient external goodness and the complete continuation of the above two for life.

3.2.1 Ethical activities

In Aristotle’s view (1103a5-10), “virtue should also be defined according to the distinction between souls. We point out that one of them is the virtue of reason, and the other is the virtue of ethics. Wisdom, understanding and wisdom are the virtue of reason, while generosity and moderation are the virtue of ethics” [3]. According to this, the activities in line with virtue can also be divided into two categories: one is the activities in line with ethical virtue, and the other is the speculative activities in line with rational virtue. Then, in order to realize the happiness mentioned by Aristotle, on the one hand, people should live rationally and be a wise person. This has something in common with “virtue is knowledge” said by Socrates [4]. On the other hand, people should also use morality to restrict their words and deeds and be a moral person. [5]In current words, we should have both knowledge and morality. In short, we should have both virtue and ability.

3.2.2 Sufficient external goodness

In 1098b10-15, Aristotle believed that external goodness was an important supplement to human happiness. Good things could be divided into three parts, one was called external goodness, and the other two were called soul goodness and body goodness [6]. External goodness generally referred to some conditions other than human beings, such as money, status, honor, children, friends, etc. However, Aristotle usually classified the goodness of human body into external goodness. At this time, Aristotle's external goodness was relative to human soul. That is to say, Aristotle's external goodness included two parts. Specifically, one was external goodness people's goodness, such as origin, status, wealth, children, friends, etc. The other part was the physical goodness outside the soul, such as good appearance, health, physical strength, etc.

This external good was also called luck or lucky good. Because the acquisition of these things often depended on external factors or conditions, including too many elements of luck. They were not planned and reasoned by people, but also unstable and changeable. For example, people's birth is beyond their choice, which is determined by their predecessors. In addition, people's natural appearance is also natural, although modern cosmetic surgery technology is developed, it is not natural after all.

Aristotle put forward "external good" as an important supplement to happiness, which was intended to make up for Socrates's theory of sufficient virtue. Socrates believed that virtue was a sufficient condition for happiness, and even equates virtue with happiness. He believed that as long as there is virtue, there is happiness, and external goodness has no effect on virtue. Aristotle's proposal of external goodness as an important supplement to happiness reflected a revision of Socrates's theory. Of course, he still adhered to the position of rationalist ethics in ancient Greece and believed that "activities in line with morality are the main aspect of happiness", which reflected the compromise nature of his ethics and "the middle way" that he called.

3.2.3 The above two will last for a lifetime

Aristotle believed that only a person who has perfect virtue and sufficient external goodness all his life could be happy. The reason why Aristotle said so was that there were many uncertainties in the process of life, and no one's life was windy. Therefore, only in the end could we judge whether a person's life was happy. In addition, there were some accidental factors related to happiness in the process of life, which was the so-called "moral luck" problem. If people regarded some external luck related to happiness as a sufficient and necessary condition for happiness or as something universal and inevitable, people would lose the motivation to pursue realistic happiness and fall into the trap of fatalism, which was not what Aristotle wants to see. In addition, Aristotle's purpose of putting forward this element of happiness was mainly to guide people to devote themselves to the main aspect of happiness, that is, to carry out virtuous activities. In short, Aristotle's happiness was lifelong happiness, not temporary luck or happiness.

3.3 Levels of happiness

In Aristotle's view, happiness also had levels. He distinguished between the first happiness and the second happiness.

3.3.1 First happiness

In *Nicomachean Ethic* (1177a15-20, 1178a20-21), Aristotle said, "it was a realistic activity in line with his own virtue and could constitute perfect happiness. As it was said, this activity was speculative activity" [7], "Therefore, the activity of God was the highest happiness, perhaps only speculative activity, and the activity of people of the same kind was the greatest happiness" [8]. Speculative activity was an activity in line with rational virtue. Aristotle regarded it as the first happiness, which shew that he still adhered to the position of rationalist ethics. On this point, he inherited Socrates's view. Of course, although he advocated speculative activity, he didn't think that speculative activity alone could obtain the first happiness. Therefore, in *Nicomachean Ethic* (1178b30-1179a5), he also said, "as a person, speculation always required external conditions. The

nature of speculation is not self-sufficient. He required physical health and the supply of food and other goods. In other words, the supreme blessing couldn't lack external goodness, which didn't mean that happiness needs to stand on many things. Self-sufficiency couldn't be found in excess, and so did practice [9]." This shew that he agrees that speculation needs appropriate external material conditions as support, otherwise speculation wouldn't be carried out and the first happiness wouldn't be obtained.

3.3.2 Second happiness

In Aristotle's view (1178a9), "ethical activities came second [10]" (Miao Litian,1990). In other words, he believed that moral activities in line with ethical virtue were the second happiness. Aristotle regarded moral activities as the second happiness, which on the one hand conformed to the Greek rationalist ethical tradition, on the other hand, it also shew that he didn't ignore and abandon morality. He believed that morality was also a constituent element of happiness.

Aristotle's distinction between the first happiness and the second happiness could be understood from two aspects. First, moral activities were one of the elements of happiness. The acquisition of happiness also required moral activities. Second, the status of moral activities was lower than speculative activities. In other words, Aristotle still followed the tradition of rationalist ethics in ancient Greece, putting the speculative activities in line with rational virtue first and the moral activities in line with ethical virtue second. He didn't do so to deliberately create the opposition between speculative activities and moral activities. On the contrary, he wanted to reconcile the two. Because the first happiness and the second happiness belonged to virtuous activities, but their respective virtues were different: the first happiness was rational virtue, and the second happiness was ethical virtue. However, from the common ground, both were indispensable elements of happiness, which couldn't be ignored in the process of pursuing happiness.

3.4 The acquisition of happiness

In *Nicomachean Ethic*(1099b10-20), Aristotle said, "It was obvious that happiness was not a gift from God, but was obtained through virtue, learning and cultivation. It was also one of the most sacred things. Because the reward for virtue and the purpose of the best were known to all, they were sacred and blessed. It could be shared by all people and resided in all people who lost their desire to approach sex through learning [11]. In other words, Aristotle believed that happiness was not innate, but was acquired through learning and cultivation, which gave people, especially those with poor innate ability, the motivation and hope to pursue happiness and avoid falling into the trap of fatalism.

4. The practical significance of Aristotle's view of happiness

4.1 Encourage people to pursue their own happiness

Aristotle said that happiness was the highest purpose of life [12]. Therefore, as a primate of all things and with the common essence of mankind, everyone should pursue his own happiness. In addition, from the three characteristics of happiness expounded by Aristotle, all people could also pursue happiness.

First of all, happiness had the universality of objects. No matter how different and different everyone's external environment and their own internal conditions were, everyone had the right and freedom to pursue their own happiness. Although in current society, there is a large gap between the rich and the poor, and there are some unfair phenomena in social competition, the problems of interest groups and interest solidification do exist. However, despite all these problems, everyone can still start from their own reality and obtain their own happiness through their own struggle.

Secondly, happiness had the highest value. Happiness was the apex of the purpose system of life and the ultimate pursuit of life. The confluence of all purposes of life lay in happiness. Therefore, in this complex and changing society, we should always remind ourselves to pursue happiness. We could neither lose our way in real life and get farther and farther away from happiness, nor give up

ourselves due to temporary difficulties or setbacks, so as to miss happiness.

Thirdly, happiness had objectivity in content. Happiness was not only a subjective feeling, but also related to objective living conditions and living conditions. Happiness was not illusory and unpredictable, it had some real content. With these real contents, happiness is real. In current highly competitive and dramatically changing society, we can't self-anesthetize ourselves in the face of cruel reality and engage in "Ah-Q" style spiritual victory method. Instead, we must take practical action and pursue happiness through continuous efforts.

In addition, in terms of the way happiness was obtained, because happiness was not determined by nature, but was obtained through acquired learning and cultivation. Therefore, no matter what the inherent internal and external conditions were, everyone could pursue his own happiness through his own efforts the day after tomorrow. In terms of real life, although there were practical problems such as the gap between the rich and the poor and the solidification of interests, people could also get their own happiness through the day after tomorrow.

In short, because Aristotle's happiness had the above characteristics and ways of obtaining, it can encourage people to pursue their own happiness.

4.2 Guide people to coordinate the relationship between material life and spiritual life

The three elements of happiness put forward by Aristotle were "virtuous activities", "external goodness" and their lifelong complete persistence. "Virtuous activities" included moral activities in line with ethical virtue and speculative activities in line with rational virtue. In essence, both belonged to spiritual activities, which reflected people's spiritual life and people's moral level and cultural quality. The "external good" referred to conditions other than people, including origin, status, money, honor, appearance, etc. In the "external good", money and honor belonged to material life. Although they were external to people, people could also obtain them through their own efforts. In other words, Aristotle's happiness was a unity of spirit and material. From the perspective of the relationship between the two, virtuous activities were the main aspect of happiness, and external goodness was an important supplement to happiness. In that case, if you want to get the happiness he said, on the one hand, you need to have moral activities, that is, you should pay attention to improving your spiritual cultivation and enriching your spiritual life. On the other hand, we should have sufficient external goodness, that is, we should meet our material needs and improve our material living standards. In other words, for happiness, both spirit and material are indispensable, and we should not favor one over the other, but should give consideration to both and balance each other. Therefore, in current materialistic society, people generally attach importance to material rather than spirit, Aristotle's concept of happiness is conducive to guiding people to coordinate the relationship between material life and spiritual life.

4.3 Improve people's cultural quality and moral level

In Aristotle's view, speculative activities in line with rational virtue were the first happiness, while moral activities in line with ethical virtue were the second happiness. Aristotle believed that virtuous activities were the main aspect of happiness. In that case, both speculative and moral activities belonged to happiness. Therefore, in the process of pursuing happiness, if we want to practice moral activities, we should pursue both the first happiness and the second happiness. First, happiness more reflected people's rational wisdom and cultural quality, while second, happiness more reflected people's moral quality and moral level. In Aristotle's view, knowledge and morality were indispensable for happiness. In other words, Aristotle's concept of happiness implied the need to improve cultural quality and moral cultivation. Therefore, in the process of practicing Aristotle's concept of happiness and pursuing happiness, we must also improve our cultural quality and moral level.

5. Conclusion

According to the relevant contents in *Nicomachean Ethic*, we can see that Aristotle mainly expounded the characteristics, elements, levels and acquisition of happiness, so as to form his own

rich and unique concept of happiness. Combined with current social conditions and the conditions of the times, his concept of happiness still has some important practical significance. Specifically, these practical significance mainly include the following three points. First, encourage people to pursue their own happiness. Second, guide people to coordinate the relationship between material life and spiritual life. Third, improve people's cultural quality and moral level.

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