

From Virtue to Freedom: The History of Happiness

CHRISTIAN LYMAN

What makes for a happy life—and what role does a governing body play in the happiness of its citizens? Aristotle argued that virtue, or the pursuit and development of intellectual and moral excellence, is the greatest contributor to a happy life. As such, Aristotle held that one of the primary purposes of government is to promote and develop virtue in its citizens. While his theories were widely accepted for nearly two thousand years, in the last few centuries, developments in moral and political philosophy have dethroned virtue and crowned freedom as the greatest contributor to human happiness. According to contemporary thought, the function of a government is not to promote virtue, as Aristotle thought, but to preserve freedom. These two competing schools of thought have given rise to questions concerning the role of government—should a government aim to generate virtue in a body of citizens, or should it strive to protect the liberty of the general populace? Hereafter, I will survey the history of happiness and its inevitable connection with political philosophy from Aristotle to the modern-day. After considering both ancient and modern perspectives, I will argue that freedom is a necessary precondition to virtue and that neither freedom without virtue, nor virtue without freedom, can lead to a truly happy life. I will also propose that

Christian Lyman will graduate from Brigham Young University in December 2020 with a BA in philosophy and a minor in business management. He will be working in management consulting after graduation with plans to attend business school in Fall of 2023. His philosophical interests include political philosophy, postmodernism, and philosophy of religion. This essay placed third in the David H. Yarn Philosophical Essay Contest.

the primary purpose of the state should not be to engender virtue in its citizens as Aristotle suggests; rather, the primary purpose of the state is to protect and preserve the freedoms necessary for virtue, thus allowing happiness to flourish.

Aristotle on Happiness

In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle seeks to discover the best way a human should live. He begins by noting that all actions have an aim. The immediate ends of our actions are obvious. I eat because I am hungry. I sleep because I am tired. But Aristotle supposes that there must be one grand and overarching end toward which all of our actions aim. This ultimate end, or “final cause,” of our actions, is pursued for its own sake. Aristotle calls this ultimate end *eudaimonia*, which can be translated as “happiness” or “human flourishing.” For Aristotle, happiness is not just a fleeting feeling or mood. Indeed, “to be happy takes a complete lifetime” (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1098a16). Anthony Kenny interprets Aristotle’s happiness to be, like virtue, “a long-term state rather than a particular activity or career” (Kenny 101). So, if happiness is a long-term state that can take a lifetime to achieve, what must we do to achieve it?

Aristotle argues that in order to achieve *eudaimonia*, we must fulfill our *ergon*, or function. But what is the function of man? Since man’s morality and rationality differentiate him from all other species, our *ergon* must have something to do with these characteristics. Aristotle concludes that the *ergon*, or the good of man, is “the active exercise of his soul’s faculties in conformity with excellence or virtue” (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1098a15). In other words, man fulfills his function and achieves *eudaimonia* through the intellectual pursuit of truth and the development of virtuous character. Thomas Nagel, of New York University, interprets the intellectual pursuit of truth as “a realized activity of the most divine part of man, functioning in accordance with its proper excellence . . . in theoretical contemplation” while the development of virtuous character can best be described as “the full range of human life and action, in accordance with the broader excellences of moral virtue and practical wisdom” (Nagel 252).

Of course, it would be difficult for man to achieve *eudaimonia* on his own. In order for man to obtain and develop intellectual and moral virtues, he needs a government that assists its citizens in developing these virtues. For Aristotle, the primary purpose of government is to “engender a certain character in the citizens and to make them good and disposed to perform noble actions” (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1099b30). Furthermore, a governmental body must “aim at the most authoritative good of all,” which

is the virtue and happiness of its citizens (*Politics* 1252a3). Indeed, “a city [or state] is excellent, at any rate, by its citizens’... being excellent” (*Politics* 1332a34). In other words, the state is only as good as the virtue of its citizens. The ideal government will provide its citizens with the societal framework needed to turn its citizens from vice to virtue.

Modern Philosophers on Happiness

Such an approach to happiness and the purpose of the state stand in sharp contrast to modern ideas on the subjects. From Machiavelli to Sartre, modern philosophers have considered freedom—not virtue—as the greatest contributor to happiness. Additionally, modern philosophers have argued that the purpose of the state is not to develop virtuous citizens, but to protect and preserve freedom.

Interestingly, Thucydides championed freedom over virtue two hundred years before Aristotle. Thucydides proposed that “the secret to happiness is freedom” (*History of the Peloponnesian War* 2.43). Renaissance thinkers revived this emphasis on freedom, most notably in the realm of political philosophy.

Before Niccolò Machiavelli, the ancient method of observing how things *ought* to be dominated by political philosophy. Machiavelli’s *The Prince* discarded this approach, instead of taking a look at what governments *actually* are and how they *actually* rule to maintain power. In Machiavelli’s amoral approach to political philosophy, there was no room for Aristotle’s virtue. The state had no responsibility to nurture the virtue of its citizens. In *Discourses on the Ten Books of Titus Livy*, Machiavelli lays out his concept of the two approaches to governmental policies. In the first, Machiavelli describes *vivere sicuro*, which is a government whose ultimate intent is to ensure the security of the people. In the second, Machiavelli describes *vivere libero*, a government whose ultimate purpose is to ensure the freedom of its people (Machiavelli 106). According to Quentin Skinner, Machiavelli preferred the latter. While Aristotle argued that the greatness of a government is determined by the virtue of its citizens, Machiavelli proposed that the greatness of a government is determined by the freedoms it ensured—the greater the freedom, the greater the government (Skinner 189-212).

Over a century later, Thomas Hobbes directly negated much of Aristotle’s argument for happiness. In his *Leviathan*, Hobbes writes, “the Felicity of this life, consisteth not in the repose of a mind satisfied. For there is no such *finis ultimas* [sic], nor *summum bonum*” (Hobbes 50). Clearly, Hobbes does not believe that obtaining Aristotle’s intellectual virtues leads

to happiness. For Hobbes, there isn't even an ultimate end at which human action aims. As far as happiness is concerned, Juhana Lemetti indicates that for Hobbes, "felicity is different for different people and different for one person at different times, and there seems to be no single goal in human life" (Lemetti 7). In other words, Hobbes' posits that happiness is subjective, while Aristotle argued that happiness is objective. Hobbes' rejection of Aristotelian happiness proved to be incredibly influential over the coming centuries.

Later, John Locke endorsed Machiavelli's preference for a *vivere libero* government and Hobbes' espousing of freedom. Locke's preferred form of government exists entirely "to preserve liberty, justice, the public good, and private property" (Kerstetter 5). A government able to preserve these things grants greater overall freedom to its citizens. Locke's thinking was incredibly influential on America's Founding Fathers. In the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson wrote that one of the primary functions of the American government is to protect the God-given, "unalienable rights" of its citizens, namely "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" (Jefferson, emphasis added). For the Founding Fathers, liberty and happiness were inextricably linked.

At the same time in Europe, Jean-Jacques Rousseau's writings on freedom inspired a generation of Frenchmen to revolt against their oppressive monarchical government. On the purpose of government, Rousseau wrote, "What then is government? An intermediary body... charged with the execution of the laws and maintenance of freedom, both civil and political [sic]" (Rousseau 29). With no mention of virtue and an emphasis on freedom, Machiavelli, Locke, Jefferson, Rousseau, and other political philosophers completely rejected Aristotle's argument that government exists to assist its citizens in developing virtue.

Friedrich Nietzsche also rejected Aristotle's idea that the highest good is happiness. In his seminal work, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche's protagonist proclaims, "Do I . . . strive after happiness? [No,] I strive after my work!" (Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*). And more explicitly, in *Twilight of Idols*, Nietzsche states that "Man [should] not aspire to happiness" (Nietzsche, *Twilight of Idols*). So, if Nietzsche thinks that happiness is not what man should strive for, what is? Nietzsche thought that it is power. For Nietzsche, "[happiness is] the feeling that power *increases*—that resistance is overcome" (Nietzsche *The Antichrist*, emphasis preserved). Happiness comes not from virtue, but from increased power. Power, in this sense, can be interpreted as freedom—the ability to enact one's will.

Jean-Paul Sartre also vehemently disagreed with Aristotle's theory of happiness. As discussed above, Aristotle argues that man must be progressing towards his full function in order to be happy. Sartre rejects

the claim that man even has a function. According to Sartre, “man is nothing else but what he makes of himself” (Sartre 29). In other words, man has no function to fulfill, no grand overarching purpose. Life is meaningless. The only meaning that a man’s life has is what he gives to it. So, with no specific and universal function to fulfill, what does Sartre say is the ultimate end of our actions? Like his predecessors, Sartre fervently championed freedom. Whereas Aristotle argued that we will happiness for happiness’ sake, Sartre argued that “we will freedom for freedom’s sake” (Sartre 43). For Aristotle, happiness is the ultimate aim of our actions; for Sartre, freedom.

Clearly, modern philosophers fundamentally disagree with Aristotle’s theory of happiness and the purpose of government. Aristotle claims that the greatest contributor to happiness is virtue, while modern philosophers propose that it is freedom. Aristotle claims that the main purpose of the state is to promote virtue amongst its citizens, while modern philosophers propose that it is to preserve the freedom of its citizens. So who is right? Which contributes more to happiness—virtue or freedom? And what is the primary purpose of the state? My own answers to these questions shall be laid out hereafter.

Freedom Over Virtue

Aristotle defines moral virtue as “a state of character concerned with choice, lying in a mean, in relation to us... as a man of practical wisdom would determine it” (*Nicomachean Ethics* 2.6). In other words, moral virtue is acting out the “golden mean” between two vices. On the other hand, freedom is defined as the ability to enact one’s will. So which of the two contributes more to happiness? I propose that while both are necessary for true happiness, freedom contributes more to happiness than virtue. Additionally, I contend that freedom is also prior to and necessary for virtue and happiness.

Freedom precedes both virtue *and* happiness, making it the greater first and ultimate contributor to happiness. A certain degree of happiness can be achieved through freedom without virtue, but no degree of happiness can be achieved through virtue without freedom. Virtue simply cannot be without freedom. Therefore, freedom is the greater contributor to happiness.

The human spirit yearns for freedom in a way that does not yearn for virtue. The yearning to be free, to enact one’s will, is a universal human desire ingrained in the human psyche, whereas virtue is not. Man’s innate desire for freedom is evident from a young age. From birth, a baby strives

to enact his will. Often, when a baby's desires remain unfulfilled, he gets upset and cries. In this situation, the baby does not have the freedom necessary to enact his will, sparking negative emotion in the baby and causing him to cry. When a baby gets what he wants—*whether that desire is virtuous or not*—he is happy. He is happy because he is granted freedom—his will has been enacted. Any negative human emotion can be traced back to a perceived lack of freedom. In the baby's case, whether his desires are virtuous or not is irrelevant. All that matters is that he is able to enact his will. If he is able to enact his will, he is happy. If he is unable to enact his will, he is sad. Clearly, virtue is irrelevant to the baby's happiness. He only desires the freedom necessary to enact his will. Through freedom alone, a certain degree of happiness can be achieved. Virtue is not needed.

Additionally, evidence of the universal human desire for freedom can be seen in our concept of criminal punishment. For thousands of years, the default punishment for those who commit serious crimes has been to throw them in prison. Barring the death penalty, prison is the most effective and efficient way to limit and reduce a man's freedom. While prison results in an extreme reduction of a man's freedom, the death penalty results in the complete and utter annihilation of a man's freedom. The fact that deviance is punished by reducing man's freedom is evidence enough that man highly values and greatly desires his freedom. If it were not a natural inclination of man's soul, the threat of prison—and death—would be meaningless and ineffective. On the contrary, people go to great lengths to avoid prison and the death penalty. By limiting what men most want, criminal punishment of prison or death effectively deters crime. Unquestionably, freedom is a universal and innate desire of men.

On the other hand, no happiness can be obtained through virtue without freedom. Virtue is predicated on freedom because without freedom, virtue could not be developed. Virtue must be developed under the conditions of freedom. Any choice requires the freedom to choose one thing over another. Imagine a state where generosity is outlawed. In this hypothetical state, its citizens are not allowed to donate money to the poor or be generous with any of their belongings. If someone came across a beggar, he, by law, could not give money to that beggar. No citizen in this society would have the freedom to develop the virtue of generosity. Of course, this example is extreme, but the principle holds nonetheless—freedom is required for virtue to exist. Virtue certainly can lead to happiness. But if the freedom to develop virtue is not in place, then virtue cannot be, and thus happiness through virtue also cannot be. Therefore, freedom, because of its ability to lead to a degree of happiness independent of anything else, must be the greater and prior contributor to happiness.

I have already discussed how freedom is necessary to develop moral virtue. But what about intellectual virtue? Intellectual virtue is the act of developing one's cognitive and rational capabilities. This is done through education of all kinds; from reading to experimenting, experiencing to discussing. But what is needed for a man to develop intellectual virtue? He must have the freedom to explore.

Much of our knowledge is obtained through experience. Without a generous degree of freedom granted to man, his capability to develop intellectual virtue is extremely limited. Imagine a man born in a very large cardboard box with only the necessities for life. He cannot leave the cardboard box. He stays in this box his entire life without realizing that an entire world exists on the outside. What can he learn? Very little. As he grows, he might develop instinctive senses to a certain degree and understand cause and effect on a primal level. But his rational capabilities will go completely undeveloped. He will not learn anything, and thus not reach his full potential as a human being, never achieving *eudaimonia*. This thought experiment shows how one's development of intellectual virtue is largely dependent on freedom. Limited freedom results in limited learning. And limited learning is a far cry from human flourishing.

Freedom and Virtue Applied to the State

Now let us take what we have learned about freedom and virtue and apply it to political theory. What is the main purpose of the state? As modern philosophers have proposed, the main purpose of the state is to preserve and protect the freedom of its citizens, not develop their virtue.

Aristotle seriously overestimates the government's capabilities to develop virtue in its citizens. His quixotic view overlooks a fundamental aspect of human nature—we learn much better by our own free will than by obligation. This is especially true regarding virtue. As I discussed above, virtue is not an innate desire of human beings. In fact, developing virtue goes against our most primal desires. So if we are to develop virtue, it must be meaningful. Virtue is only meaningful if we embrace it by our own free will. We must be granted the freedom to embrace it or reject it. If the government forces someone to do what is right, it is not nearly as meaningful as if that person chose to do right on his own. Forced virtue is nothing more than temporary virtue. It will quickly disappear when it is not obligated. Forced virtue forges no real change in the heart of the individual. The desire to do good must come from within and cannot be thrust upon citizens by some outside force. Any external appearance of improvement in an individual is the result of fear and nothing else.

Compliance with virtue must be voluntary, so a state's attempts to force virtue upon its citizens would be futile.

The state has proved itself to be an incredibly ineffective teacher of virtue. It fails miserably at changing vicious people to virtuous people. However, the state has the potential to be quite effective at discouraging citizens from infringing on the rights of others. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the federal prison system. The state is very good at throwing criminals in jail, thus keeping them from further infringing on the rights of others. But the state is incredibly ineffective at developing virtue in otherwise vicious criminals. There are currently 2.3 million prisoners in the United States prison system. Clearly, the state succeeds in preserving the freedoms of law-abiding citizens and punishing those who seek to limit the freedoms of others. Of those 2.3 million prisoners who are released, 66 percent are rearrested within three years. Approximately 77 percent are rearrested within five years of release (Durose). This alarmingly high rate of recidivism is clear evidence that the state fails at promoting the development of moral virtue in its most vicious citizens. Earlier, I gave the hypothetical example of a state that outlawed giving to the poor. What if the opposite occurred? What if a state existed that outlawed *not* giving to the poor? In this hypothetical state, people would be forced to donate to every beggar they encountered. In this state, no one would truly develop generosity through their donations to a beggar because they would have no choice. The development of virtue must be voluntary and cannot be forced. If a government forces virtue upon its citizens, it is not true virtue because no true internal change occurs. A citizen acting virtuously only out of obligation is not truly acting virtuously. Virtue must be voluntary. So if the government cannot promote the development of virtue in citizens, what can? I argue that the role of a nation's moral development lies with religion and similar institutional communities.

Religion, as a voluntary institution, is by far the most effective developer of virtue that man has at his disposal. Generally speaking, religion teaches moral principles and encourages practitioners to implement these principles in their lives. Religion teaches that mankind must hold itself accountable to a higher being. This incentivizes mankind to act more virtuously. And, as Aristotle taught, it is only by *acting* virtuously that we *become* virtuous. Of course, religion is not the only institution promoting virtue. Secular charities, youth community groups, and countless other nongovernmental social institutions promote and develop virtue in citizens. However, these secular institutions are not as effective as religion is in promoting virtue. Religion can offer purpose and meaning in our lives. Religions put forth tenets that promote virtuous living. These tenets hold worshippers accountable for their morality better than any

government ever could. Religion is far more successful at convincing man to shed his vicious nature than any government could be. Government is most effective at preserving freedom, not promoting virtue.

Now that we have established that the primary purpose of government is to protect and preserve freedom, we must now ask ourselves how much freedom the government *should* preserve. Drawing upon the ideas of John Locke, a government should protect and preserve a citizen's freedom inasmuch as his freedom does not infringe on the freedom of other citizens. The government must exist to protect life, liberty, and property. For example, if someone murdered me, he would be infringing on my natural right to live. But who, or what, could stop someone from killing me? The government, by threat of a deprivation of rights through the violation of law. I have a right to money that I have earned through labor. But who or what could prevent someone from stealing my money, thus infringing on my freedom? The government. Thus, the government should govern only inasmuch as it maintains the freedom of its citizens and prevents one citizen from infringing upon the God-given rights of another. This kind of government, championed by modern philosophers, is most effective at preserving freedom.

Conclusion

In conclusion, freedom and virtue are both required to achieve maximum happiness. Although freedom precedes virtue, more virtue inevitably leads to more freedom which leads to more happiness. When the social fabric of a society becomes more virtuous, it needs less government oversight. Less government oversight results in increased freedom. Without an increase in virtue, however, less government oversight can easily lead to corruption, anarchy, and iniquity. Aristotle's ideas on happiness are important and influential, but incomplete. Modern philosophers built upon Aristotle's ideas but championed freedom over virtue. Unfortunately, Aristotle was mistaken in assuming that the state could effectively promote virtue in its citizens. Rather, the burden of developing virtue in a society's citizens should fall primarily upon the shoulders of religion and other such social institutions. Modern philosophers recognized Aristotle's errors and advocated that the state should focus on protecting freedom instead of promoting virtue. Truly, this should be the focus of the state. The history of happiness and how to achieve it is complex and controversial. It is clear, however, that both virtue *and* freedom are required in order to achieve true *eudaimonia*.

Works Cited

- Aristotle, *Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*. Vol. 2, Princeton UP, 1984.
- Durose, Matthew R., Alexia D. Cooper, and Howard N. Snyder, *Recidivism of Prisoners Released in 30 States in 2005: Patterns from 2005 to 2010* (PDF, 31 pages), Bureau of Justice Statistics Special Report, April 2014, NCJ 244205.
- Hobbes, Thomas. *Leviathan*. Penguin Books, 1968.
- Jefferson, Thomas. *Declaration of Independence*. U.S. National Archives. Retrieved April 4, 2019.
- Kenny, Anthony. "Happiness." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, vol. 66, 1965, pp. 93-102.
- Kerstetter, William Edward. *John Locke's Conception of Freedom*. Boston UP, 1943.
- Lemetti, Juhana. "Hobbes, Aristotle, and Human Happiness." *Language and the Scientific Imagination*. 11th International Conference of ISSEI, 2008.
- Machiavelli, Niccolò. *Discourses on the First Decade of Titus Levy*. Penguin Classics, pp. 103-106.
- Nagel, Thomas. "Aristotle on Eudaimonia." *Phronesis*, vol. 17, no. 3, 1972, pp. 252-259.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Antichrist*. Translated by H. L. Mencken, Project Gutenberg, 18 Sep. 2006, www.gutenberg.org/files/19322/19322-h/19322-h.htm. Accessed 22 Jun. 2020.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Translated by Thomas Common, Project Gutenberg, 7 Nov. 2008, www.gutenberg.org/files/1998/1998-h/1998-h.htm. Accessed 22 Jun. 2020.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Twilight of Idols*. Translated by Anthony M. Ludovici, Edited by Oscar Levy, Project Gutenberg, 7 Jun. 2016, www.gutenberg.org/files/52263/52263-h/52263-h.htm. Accessed 22 Jun. 2020.
- Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *The Social Contract*. Penguin, 1968.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Jean-Paul Sartre : Basic Writings*. Edited by Stephen Priest, Routledge, 2001.
- Skinner, Q. *Visions of Politics, Volume II: Renaissance Virtues*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2002.
- Thucydides. *History of the Peloponnesian War*. Penguin Classics. 2.43.

Works Consulted

Van Doorn, Maarten. "Friedrich Nietzsche On The Secret Ingredient For Happiness." *Medium*, 14 Jun. 2018, <https://medium.com/the-understanding-project/friedrich-nietzsche-on-the-secret-ingredient-for-happiness-643da473d919>. Accessed 18 Dec. 2019.

