

Understanding Ageing and Happiness: An Eudemonistic Approach

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Abstract

Although the end of a life does not have to be old age, of course, old age always at the end of life. The whole discourse can be analysed in the light of Aristotelian exploration by examining the notion of ageing and happiness. In spite of this fact that the relation between ageing and happiness receives not much attention by some of the ancient philosophers. It is quite unfortunate not because of old age is the final stage of a complete life but old age and ageing are the crucial issues while revealing how nature fit into the ethical matters. Aristotle implicitly points out that old age is of unique importance in relation to happiness. The idea that if someone meets unhappy end, it is difficult to call him that he is happy and a complete man. The main objective of this paper is to undermine the complexities involve with ageing and highlights the positive factors of unending good with self-awareness and ethical insights.

Keywords

Ageing, Happiness, Virtue, Pleasure, Intellectual Insight, Vital Heat, Logotherapy!

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Ageing became a matter of discussion in the society which is purely driven by science and technology. The people who rely on facts will never realize the meaning of respect, love and care and its importance in human life. The stereotype mindset is responsible for dividing the human life into two main stages i.e., capable and incapable. There are both positive as well as negative sides of each factor and mostly depends upon the people and their approach towards the society. Generally ageing can be interpreted as a state of physical deformities, dependency and helplessness. Moreover, it is believed to be state of wisdom, enlightenment and *moksha* (liberation). Reflective being continuously engage himself in the process of realizing the ultimate goal of each activity. It is undeniable fact that motion is a part of human life but we are not sure enough to claim whether motion (heat) is imparted to the human being by divine agency or social institution or it is an inherent quality of human life. Here the questions are asked, who is a happy man?, “is my life a worthy at all?” ‘How I claim my life a good life?’, ‘what makes my life more desirable?’ etc. are blinking to the eyes of human life continuously and constitutively. This reflective approach of human life makes life an ideal and practically significant by the very idea of both constitutive and expressive of the very life it is all about.

Inquiring about ageing raises number of questions to our mind like, “what is ageing?”, who are the people coming under ageing category?”, ‘what are the determining factors of ageing?’ etc. It is not easy to find proper solution to address these questions. It denotes a later stage of human life and changes occur in rate and degrees through the various fixed process. “There is, of course, a vague biological boundary line, but the ‘concept of ageing is a statistical one, and no valid means of measuring it in the individual are available’”.¹ Biological understanding is unable to provide the clear definition of ageing since there are many such factors such as social, economic and political etc. are responsible for determining it. Age refers to a particular number but the number cannot be considered ‘the basic parameter’ for understanding the concept of ageing.

The objective of this research work is not to analyse the general notion of the concept of ageing rather it is to highlight old age and ageing are the privileged issues when it comes to revealing how nature fits into ethical matter as discussed by various philosophers particularly Aristotle. Before analysing the concept of ageing and its relation with happiness in Aristotle’s Ethics, it would be necessary to provide the ideas about the nature of happiness in relation to ageing. Literally the Greek word happiness is known as eudemonia according to Aristotelian Ethics. The Greek word ‘*eudaimonia*’ is a combination of two words *eu* and *daimôn*, *eu* stands for ‘good or virtuous’ and *daimon* means ‘The divine spirit’. Thus, *eudemonia* means

happy or virtuous life. If *eudemonia* is the ultimate end of one's life then it must be having an desirable means for it. The attainment this end require that one has cross the long river of temporal desires like wealth, honour, position, property, successful family etc. Perfection can be prevailed if one is able to maintain a balanced in between body as well as mind. Happy life is not only a successful life but a worthy life that is the primary reason each human aspires for it. Eudemonia focuses on two important issues such as: what should be the aspiration of human being? What is determining factor through which the qualitative life can be realised? In the beginning of *Eudemonic Ethics*, Aristotle is curious about the nature of good life and its methods of acquisition. 'We are offered five candidate answers to the second question (by nature, by learning, by discipline, by divine favour, and by luck) and seven candidate answers to the first (wisdom, virtue, and pleasure, honour, reputation, riches, and culture)'² But these are not the reliable means for which one can rest on it. According to Aristotle, happy man is one who is able to realise the perfect virtue in his actions. It is an end in itself for which existence can be understood as meaningful or virtuous. At first glance happiness and pleasure are appears to be identical but the distinctions between these two cannot be ignored. To quote the words of Aristotle, "Pleasure is defined as the unimpeded activity of a disposition in accordance with nature"³ Pleasure is thought to be an activity which produces either good or bad outcome. Happiness is defined as a virtuous activity of human soul which require a complete life. Aristotle in his *Nichomachean Ethics* strongly recommend that "one shallow does not make a spring, nor does one day, and in the same way, one day or a brief period does not make someone blessed or happy."⁴ Various factors are responsible for making the person life a happy and blissful namely, they must have endowed with excellent character and intellectual capacity, surrounded by good friends and possessor of external goods (wealth, power and position). In his famous book *Nichomachean Ethics*, Aristotle quotes Solon's word 'if you wonder whether someone really is *eudaemon*, then wait to see the end'.⁵ Complete life seems to be ambiguous due to its long enough but it becomes matured (both ethical and intellectual maturity) over a period of time. In Ancient time old age is equated with wisdom because of their uniqueness and strong determination which remain throughout the ages.

Aristotle in his book *The Metaphysics*, *Posterior Analytics*, and *Nichomachean Ethics* clearly elucidates the fact that experience⁶ plays a vital role in the process of acquisition of knowledge and wisdom. Intellectual virtue may not be developed in a mechanical manner, it needed time to grow naturally. In this contest, Aristotle cited a quotation that 'some of the practical intellectual virtue

depends on perception. Hence, these states actually seem to grow naturally, so that while no one seems to have natural wisdom, people seem to have natural consideration, comprehension and judgment. As Aristotle depicted and famously concludes, “experience has given them an eye.”⁷ Aristotle does not claim that people get wiser ever with increasing years. His own conception of analysing ageing which appears to be matured perhaps in the middle age. In spite of differences of opinion with respect to ageing he positively acknowledged the importance of later stage of human life. Philosophically, ageing is adored because of its intellectual insight and ethical experience. Aristotle in his *Rhetoric* clearly emphasizes the attitude of older people towards life that “older people are pessimistic and cautious because of their experience of life vicissitudes.”⁸ This is an undeniable fact that regulation and order are necessary for maintaining a harmonious life but over and above virtue is a continuous process which leads to a noble life and overcome pessimism.

To have a happy life one has to be virtuous in his action. Virtue is considered as dynamic state which constantly encourages person to act rationally. Virtue is not a feeling of pleasure or pain, but a disposition which rendered a condition to perform well. In the words of Aristotle, is a disposition “By disposition I mean conditions in virtue of which we are well or ill-disposed in respect of the feelings concerned.”⁹ As a teleological being humans are purposively engaging in cultivation of right virtues. Virtue is treated as the mean in between two extreme situations namely courage is the mean in between fear and confidence, temperance is the mean in between pleasure and pain, magnanimity is the mean in between honour and vanity etc.

An important question is raised among ancient Schools that whether virtue is necessary and sufficient condition for happiness. The Platonists, Stoics, Epicurean affirms that virtue is the necessary and sufficient condition for happiness but Aristotle disagreed with this interpretation on the ground that virtue is not necessary and sufficient condition for knowledge rather it is considered as the constitutive and instrumental to happiness with the help of common consensus. A virtuous person will nobly bear even the greatest calamities, but even though virtue ‘shines through’ severe misfortunes.’¹⁰ Since virtue is the constitutive elements of happiness there are many other factors such as reason, communal life and morality which are necessary and sufficient conditions for happiness and wellbeing. The centrality of human life in a community pertains happiness because people live in a community overcomes their shortcomings and identifying the inherent states of mind. Solitary life of course does not lead a happy life.

The essential nature generates some sort of energy in the human being to find out the purpose behind everything that man wants. Aristotle rightly pointed

out that “as a natural being, the human organism is constructed by the individual’s vital heat or *pneuma*”.¹¹ The vital heat act as the essence of human organism and determines the various functions. *Pneuma* is considered as heat because it kindles the fire within the human being and helps us to maintain a well-balanced life. Vital heat loses its charms once a person attains old physiological age. And so old age is after a fashion, ‘metaphysically bad’, because it can be defined in terms of a loss of one’s principle for being. Being old means being at a stage where the unifying principle is retreating and the manifold and unorganised process of decomposition have become unruly.¹² Older people do not appear to be liable to friendship. They prefer to choose to their age group who have the similar aptitude and interest. In his *Nichomachean Ethics*, Aristotle portraying the negative effect of being old by saying “older people and sour people do not appear to be prone to friendship. For there is not much pleasure to be found in them”¹³ Since they already had the experience of pleasure and pain so, it is quite obvious for them to take precautionary measure before approaching new things. Above all the heat is the dominant factor for which life is considered as active and creative and if that heat started loses its spark, then we fear to take challenges in life. This might be the solid reason when Aristotle is worried about the association in between older generation and younger generation. In his *Politics* he strictly emphasizes the role of an educator that ‘educator should be careful what tales or stories the children hear, for all such things are designed to prepare¹⁴ the way for the business of later life.’ Now the question can be asked, Does the reduction of vital heat stand as a barrier for older generation to realise happiness? The immediate reply is that the person who is endowed with never ending quality (virtue) need not be affected by physiological changes. In spite of different philosophical approach both Plato and Aristotle agree on a common point where they accepted that perfect goodness has a sort of inherent stability (Being good is otherwise known as being happy). As Aristotle stated that vital heat and emotion decline naturally with age which does not affect the individual’s happiness. With old age, desires diminish, enabling a person to act with greater self-control through rational analysis rather than mere impulse or character.

Old age appears to be ambiguous in nature, at one time it provides us the information about the loss of physiological strength which seems to be very much natural with age but on the next moment we get the real meaning of ageing i.e., it is calm, precise, calculative and determined. Aristotle explicitly emphasizes the fact that one can be considered as virtuous and noble not only by nature but also by habituation and reason. These features of human development and ageing can be explicated through three main maxims. Firstly, human life is divided into temporal

stages which has its characteristic of strengths and weaknesses as well as suitable activities. Second stages are determined partly by one does with what nature provides potentialities and partly by the nature. Third, it is morally acceptable how one fares at a later stage, when it comes to its strengths, weaknesses, and activities, depends partly on what one did at an earlier stage.¹⁵ These three maxims mentioned above can be treated as the three different features of human development and ageing. These features of human life give us the clear message that if a person is not able develop a good habit in the earlier stage of life (one's late teens), he will lead the remaining life by regretting it.

The overall expression can be projected in the light of the image shown below.



Nurturing the passion to discover the secret to a long and happy life.

II

Ageing and happiness are inherently connected, especially for those who sincerely practice virtue and live life meaningfully. Ageing becomes burdensome and troublesome when life is driven solely by material pursuits at the cost of self-realisation. Aristotle says that experience plays a pivotal role for the development of wisdom that seems to grow naturally, while no one seems to have natural wisdom. Aristotle rightly pointed out that nobody blames those who have natural physical deficiencies but people blame those who do not concern about themselves not engaging themselves in a productive manner by utilising their skills. As it is mentioned in Aristotle's *The Nichomachean Ethics* that is

“Nobody would criticise a person who is blind by nature or as a result of disease or injury-he would more likely to be an object of pity- but anyone would blame a person whose blindness is due to heavy drinking or some other self-indulgence. Thus, physical defects for which we are responsible are blamed, but

those for which we are not responsible are not blamed. And if this is so, then in the case of moral defects too, those that are blamed will be ones for which we are responsible”.¹⁶

There is a sharp division between ageing and maturity. Everybody is ageing, everybody will become old, but not necessarily mature. Maturity is an inner growth. Maturity is something that you bring to your life, it comes out of awareness. When a person ages with full of awareness he becomes mature. Mere engagement does not lead to happiness rather one has to be aware of and involves in it to make necessary adjustment with the due course of time. It is necessary to keep the mind active if one has to enjoy the youthful body. Maintaining an active and adoptable mind is considered to be the key factors in staying young, focused and sustaining longevity. Ageing attitude can be slow down through healthy diet and physical exercise. Lack of physical exercise not only disturb the life cycle but also affect the behaviour and attitude. Similar is the case with our mind if it is not used on the regular interval then our neuron and neural connection started deteriorating which makes us sterile and also developed stagnation.

Sholomo Breznitz, a prominent neuroscientist from Israeli advocates that brain needs lots of stimulation in order to be active. During the conversation with Eduard Punset for the Spanish Television programme *Redes*, Breznitz points out that:

There is a tension between what is good for someone and what they want to do. This is because, especially older people, like to do thing as they have always done them. The problem is that when the brain develops ingrained habits, it does not need to think anymore. Things get done quickly and efficiently on automatic pilot, often in a very advantageous way. This creates a tendency to stick to routines, and the only way of breaking these is to confront the brain with new information.¹⁷ Collins Hemingway and Shlomo Breznitz in their book *Maximum Brainpower: Challenging the Brain for Health and Wisdom* suggests that mental training is beneficial on many levels:

“You begin exercising your brain by doing the certain task for the first time,”. “And at first it seems very difficult but as you learn how to do it, the training is already working. The second time, you realise that its easier, not harder to do, because you’re getting better at it. This has a fantastic effect on a person’s mood. In and of itself, it is a transformation that affects not only the results obtained, but also his or her self-image.”¹⁸

Mind started functioning when we try to resolve the unsolved gulf. One can involve in any kind of activities (dancing, playing with kids, singing, reading novels,

cooking and many more) to keep the mind active. Not only the result oriented constructive activities keep the mind alive but it also creates the self-image. The effects of mental workout and training have been scientifically demonstrated. Collins Hemingway and Shlomo Breznitz stated that “our neurons start to age while we are still in our twenties. This process is slowed, however, by intellectual activity, curiosity and a desire to learn stimulates one’s passions. Furthermore, a more positive outlook in this regard will yield greater mental benefits.”¹⁹ Apart from the scientific demonstration of mental training, there are also number of external factors which are solely responsible for proactive behaviour of mind such as adaption of modern techniques and learning strategies, sophisticated lifestyle at an early age, consumption of junk foods, both positive and negative influence of external surrounding etc.

Stress is considered as one of the factors that causes premature ageing because of the crisis wears down the body much faster. Stress degenerates mental activities severely which causes most health problems. Also, stress weaken the cell structures promoted by cellular ageing known as *Telomeres*.²⁰ One can easily notice the symptom of stress that challenges in our daily lives such as anxiety with highly psychosomatic, depression, insomnia etc. In order to overcome these challenges, it is necessary to involve in the daily activities through mindfulness. Mindfulness can be reached through a state of meditation that keep the good things and discard the irrelevant activities. Stress has both positive and negative aspects, negative aspect of the stress is called intense stress which is not the purpose of our discussion. But positively it has a longer impact on longevity which is beneficial both for the mental as well as physical health. Victor Frankl, a famous Australian Psychiatrist, profounder of Logotherapy²¹ describes that freedom is something an intrinsic quality which man possesses by virtue of being human. Human freedoms go through alone without any help and it inspires man for the rest of his life. The whole discourse concluded with that people might think old age present challenges and opportunities *visa-a-vis* happiness that are all its own where happiness depends on living a longer life with positive feelings.

Conclusion

To conclude the whole discourse keeping in the view that by taking psychological happiness in the sense of feeling good rather just having life satisfaction. Life satisfaction is something attitudinal pleasure (state-of affairs) or instrumental good as Aristotle rightly pointed out. According to Feldman, the famous psychologist, only the intrinsic attitudinal pleasure is itself a good life. All actual positive feelings are to be counted positively even in old age also. The positive feelings and the intellectual virtue which never fades its essentiality with the due

course of time. Moreover, everybody is ageing and will become old but necessarily mature. Maturity is something that comes out of awareness and active involvement both mentally and physically. Nurturing the passions to make something miracle and discover the secret to a long and happy life. Many diverse desiderate e.g., self-acceptance, self-determination, self-realisations, relatedness, capability, relationship do valuable for the instruments of being happy. Old age brings with challenges but the opportunities inhere with old age cannot be ignored.

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