

An Exploration of the Good Life Through the Lens of Plato's Republic

My IB Extended Essay, written in my final year at school. The question was how adequate Plato's conception of the good life actually is. I work through the philosopher-king account in *The Republic*, then the more pleasure-friendly picture Plato gives later in the *Philebus*, then Martha Nussbaum's criticism that Plato's rational ideal writes out the vulnerability that makes a life human. I end by proposing my own position: reason in charge, but with real room left for emotion, closer to the Delphic 'nothing too much' than to Plato's philosopher stripped of desire.

Written in 2024, in my last year at school and before I started at UCL. It is up here as submitted, not rewritten. The gap in voice between this and the UCL essays is part of what it shows.

ARGUMENT IN BRIEF

1. The *Republic* makes the good life the philosopher's life, reason ruling over spirit and appetite.
2. Two problems with that. It subordinates ordinary human enjoyment to reason, and it only really answers the question for people capable of becoming philosophers.
3. The *Philebus* gives a later, mixed account, admitting pleasure into the good life, which widens the audience but stays short on anything practicable.
4. Nussbaum's criticism: Plato's rational ideal writes out exactly the vulnerability to luck and to other people that makes a life recognisably human.
5. My own position: keep reason in charge, but leave real room for emotion. Closer to the Delphic 'nothing too much' than to a philosopher stripped of desire.

Introduction

The problem of how to live well is one that everyone encounters at least once in their lives. That may sound dramatic, but it does for good reason. The potential answers to this problem have ramifications that can affect the agent and those around them. In other

words, this problem affects everyone and should be afforded the importance it is due. This is why I have decided to pursue it in this essay.

It should come as no surprise that the grand nature of the problem has led to a grand number of solutions. Existentialists tell us to value our liberty and freedom; the Utilitarians want us to maximise the overall good; the Hedonists teach us to pursue pleasure and happiness above all else; the Epicureans ask us to seek tranquillity and the absence of pain; the Stoics think that the best way to live is in a self-disciplined manner, cultivating inner virtues and responsibility. Plato gives us another answer, however. His solution is philosophy. Philosophy, specifically Plato's philosophy as presented in *The Republic*, calls upon individuals to harness the faculty of reason to help guide their lives in the right direction. For those unable to do this, the next best answer is to follow those who can.

In this essay, I shall first focus on Plato and his response. With many regarding him as the father of Western Philosophy, it makes perfect sense to begin my investigation of him. First, I shall investigate his magnum opus, *The Republic*, and critically analyse Plato's view in this work. However, *The Republic* is not the only account Plato gives us. As such, I shall look at a slightly differing account from another of Plato's works, *Philebus*, and use it to contrast *The Republic's* position. In addition to this, I shall turn to another, more contemporary criticism. The appeal of Plato and Ancient Philosophy is so vast that it has given way to many articles, books, and journals in dedication to it. The good life has been written about by multiple scholars, including Martha Nussbaum, whose work, *The Fragility of Goodness*, I shall explore in this essay. In this work, Nussbaum argues that Plato's good life provides an 'anti-tragic' conception of being human. After critically analysing this, I shall finally offer my conception of the good life by incorporating Nussbaum's criticisms and Plato's propositions to argue for moderation and a delicate balance between reason and emotion.

Plato's Conception of the Good Life in *The Republic*

Around 375 BCE, Plato produced *The Republic*. He outlined his ideal state and how it would run in this work. The basis for running this state is the assumption that all humans have three parts to their souls. The soul and the state would run similarly since the state is just the soul on a bigger scale (*The Republic* 368c–e). Thus, Plato presents us with an ethical and political work. For this essay, I shall focus on the ethical aspect and begin by examining the tripartite theory of the soul, which is essential to understand before moving on to how to live a good life.

Plato argued that the soul consisted of three parts. He argued for this by asking the reader to imagine an object expressing opposing forces within them at the same time. If we were to see this, we wouldn't say that the object expressed these opposing qualities, but rather the various faculties of the object (436b). This can be seen in the case of the soul, too. When a

child is told not to take sweets from a jar, they might be reluctant to follow these instructions since they so desperately want them. Thus, their appetite and desires take hold of them.

Similarly, we can see instances when our reason guides us. Plato illustrates the example of a drink we know we mustn't drink (439a–b). Beyond appetite and reason, Plato wants to prove that there is a third element (439e): thumos. Thumos is an awkward term to translate neatly into English, but one way might be 'spirit' or 'indignation' – it is the honour-seeking part of the soul, is courageous, brave, and the source of indignation and anger (440a–d).

Having distinguished these parts of the soul, the aim is to find which combination of these parts is the best: justice. The soul is only considered Platonically just when it expresses the cardinal virtues – wisdom, courage, and self-discipline (427e). Wisdom is when the rational part of the soul rules since it has the 'wisdom and foresight to act for the whole' (441e), and courage is when the spirited part of the soul follows the guidance of reason and resists the temptations of the appetite (441b–c). Self-discipline is achieved when all three parts of the soul are harmonious and agree that reason should rule, and 'there is no civil war among them' (442b). Platonic justice involves each part of the soul minding its business. Each part must perform its function and must act harmoniously with one another, causing concord and unity.

However, Plato must explain why his conception of the soul gives people the best chance at leading a good life. Plato argues that his conception of the good life, the philosopher's way of life, is best because, as well as being the most just, it allows the agent to experience more real pleasures. Through their use of reason, experience, and intelligence, the philosopher can experience the types of pleasures that all three parts of the soul desire. The appetitive element desires gain, the spirited element desires success, and the rational element desires knowledge (580e–581b). Experience and reason unlock all these pleasures for the philosopher since, unlike other people, he can also contemplate truth and reason (582a–d). The philosopher's pleasures are the 'most real' because of his thorough understanding of and access to the eternal, unchanging realm of the Forms, which grants him access to real truths such as knowledge, wisdom, and justice. The Forms are perfect and eternal entities, which are 'paradigmatic' for our understanding of the world in appearances and from which all objects derive their value (*The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*). Since these truths are more 'real' types of replenishment in comparison to material objects such as money, food, sex, etc. (because these items belong to the perverted realm of change and mortality), these are the more fulfilling and better types and will provide greater pleasure.

The philosopher can better orientate his life by prioritising reason and the higher forms of understanding. Others, like the tyrant, may feel they are living the best life but are not. They are greedy for more and constantly unsatisfied with what they have. Plato argues that only

the philosopher can appreciate what he has, be liberated from his desires, and find solace in the joys of wisdom and knowledge.

Analysis

Plato's conception of the good life can be seen as problematic. Firstly, the problem of achieving this philosopher-like state must be addressed. According to Plato, only those lucky enough to be born into the guardian class and with the capacity for reason to allow the soul to live in harmony can begin the necessary training to become philosophers. But Plato doesn't offer any solutions for those 'non-philosophers'. He suggests that one of the tenets for the city to live by would be self-discipline (*The Republic* 431c–432a), in which all three city classes would agree to let the guardians rule. But how can a non-guardian seriously be expected to live a good life if their personal autonomy is sacrificed for the 'good of the city'? Living this way for the city's greater good might sound grand and idyllic initially, but it will become tiresome and laborious with time. Plato completely disregards those unable to lead the philosopher's life, making his conception of the good life elitist and exclusionary. Indeed, a good life would be one that all could follow.

However, even the 'philosophers' don't seem to have a 'good' life. Plato's proposition, which involves a complex breeding system (457b–466d) followed by a long and arduous education (376c–412a and 524d–541a) for the young philosopher, seems unrealistic with what we'd expect from people. It seems hard to believe that any young child would have the mental resilience to keep up with the tricky and demanding educational process which Plato's system requires. Even with this knowledge, it's hard to understand how this would be sufficient to lead a good life. Surely, a good life would demand something other than constant knowledge input. The poets and artists in Plato's city would be banished (595a–608c), so entertainment (the equivalent of today's films and TV shows) would not be present in philosophers' lives. Indeed, they must live like hermits, detached from society and with no personal property (415d–421c). The philosopher's life seems to be one void of pleasure, with no ability for the philosopher to enjoy themselves and this so-called 'good' life that they must lead. Even when Plato argues that philosophers have access to more real Forms of pleasure, it's unclear how these abstract 'pleasures' can be related to and be tangible in everyday life.

Plato's Conception of the Good Life in the *Philebus*

The question of where pleasure fits into our lives is more thoroughly explored in Plato's *Philebus*. This dialogue between Socrates and the interlocutors, Protarchus and Philebus, is set around the nature of the good life. This was one of Plato's final dialogues and contains a

development of ideas since *The Republic*. Despite claiming that 'for human life intellect is far, far better than pleasure' (*Philebus* 66e), the interlocutors agree that the best human life would combine pleasure with reason.

A life of sole pleasure would be inadequate since, without memory or reason, one would not be able to recognise that you were enjoying any pleasures (21b–c). The characters also recognise that the opposite, a life of intellect with no pleasure, would be undesirable (21d–e). Some compromise must be reached. Therefore, the best answer is some combination of the two, resulting in a mixed life (22a–b).

The rest of the dialogue categorises true and false, pure and impure, and where the various pleasures occur. Pains accompany most pleasures and are therefore impure (44d–50e), and many pleasures can be false (when their intensity is greater/lesser than anticipated) (36e–40d, 41a–42c and 42c–44b). Very few pleasures can be seen as wholly pure, derived from the perception of beauty. These include beautiful colours, figures, scents and musical sounds (51b–e). Intellectual pleasures can also be pure 'provided that they seem to us to contain neither hunger for any information nor any initial pains as a result of hunger for information' (52a). These pleasures are free from any mixture of pain but are rare, and most individuals don't experience them.

After the analysis of pleasures comes the analysis of knowledge. Knowledge is divided into four categories (55d–59b): guesswork, common mathematics, philosophical mathematics, and dialectic. Dialectic is the highest form of knowledge since it is the science which comes closest to the truth (58c–59a).

From these investigations into pleasure and knowledge and based on the three criteria of beauty, moderation and truth, the interlocutors decide that the best life consists of all forms of knowledge, true and pure pleasures, pleasures of the self-restrained man, and pleasures moderated by virtue. All forms of knowledge are included because all forms of knowledge are needed to understand both the perfect, eternal, mathematical realm of the forms and the imperfect and changing realm of appearances. Not all pleasures are included because, through the faculty of reason, one can gauge their damaging effects (63d–64a).

Ultimately, intellect and reason (dialectic) are ranked as the third most important components of the good life, with pure pleasures ranking only fifth. First is moderation; second is proportion, beauty, and sufficiency; fourth is all other forms of knowledge and impure pleasures sixth (66a–c).

Analysis

While *The Republic's* account of the good life depends on the running of the state, the *Philebus's* account does not, and is in no way a political text. This allows the ingredients of the good life, as given in the *Philebus*, to vary from those of *The Republic*. *The Republic* offers little to no meaningful advice on how those non-philosophers can lead their lives. At the same time, the *Philebus* does not discriminate against any people in society, implicitly suggesting that all can achieve this good life.

The *Philebus's* account of the good life varies from *The Republic's* in what it prioritises. *The Republic* emphasises harmony, arising in the soul from reason ruling over appetite, yet in the *Philebus*, moderation is seen as the ultimate characteristic. While the two may appear identical, there is a difference – intellect and reason rank higher than pure pleasure, but reason is no longer given the dominant position it once was. The interlocutors (Socrates included) even recognise the banality of a life led solely by reason (21e). The focus is shifted from a life guided by knowledge restraining reason to one that involves moderation and truth dominating knowledge and pleasure.

Moderation can be argued to be some feature of the good life in *The Republic's* when the tyrant's insatiable appetites, which render him unhappy, are criticised (*The Republic* 571a–580c). It is indeed implicitly valued, but it is not the leading factor. The *Philebus* gives moderation greater prominence in defining what a good life constitutes. As well as moderation, *The Republic* underplays the role of pleasure in the good life, which the *Philebus* does not. Pleasure is needed in the *Philebus* to make the good life more interesting – it requires some form of entertainment.

Despite these criticisms, *The Republic's* account of the good life can be defended. *The Republic* shows us what happens when the good life degrades into its various imperfect forms (545c–588a). These degradations occur when reason loses its dominance within the soul. The danger of the *Philebus's* account of the good life is that the extra room given to pleasure might mean a greater chance for reason to be usurped from its position in power.

Furthermore, while the *Philebus* does not explicitly clarify who can pursue the good life, *The Republic* does. While it may seem ruthless, *The Republic* is honest, making it abundantly clear that only those with the capacity to be reasonable can lead a good life. The *Philebus* needs to specify who can lead this good life and provide a straightforward process to achieve it. *The Republic* recognises that the good life is not easy to achieve, so specific parameters must be placed upon the philosophers even after their extended education. These parameters (415d–427c) make the whole ordeal of attaining the good life less ambiguous for the reader. The *Philebus* lacks this and therefore cannot give as comprehensive of an account of how to live well.

Martha Nussbaum's Critique of Plato's Conception of the Good Life in *The Republic*

Martha Nussbaum's *The Fragility of Goodness* attempts to show that the 'goodness' of our lives is often dependent on things out of our control. Her analysis of the plays by the Ancient Greek tragedians Aeschylus (*The Fragility of Goodness*, ch. 2 and 3) and Euripides (ch. 13) show us that the quality of our lives is down to much more how we navigate them. This makes the human life 'tragic' (in the style of a tragedy) and therefore fragile and open to being knocked down by what life throws at it.

In Chapter 5, Nussbaum criticises Plato's account of the good life. His good life supports the philosopher's life (*The Fragility of Goodness* 151), which requires the objective 'god's eye perspective' (160) from which we can critique and fix our existing lives. One can attain this position only through the power of reason and a sufficient education. Nussbaum's position is sceptical and questions just how valuable this position is. Plato's project of achieving a supremely rational being freed from the shackles of their appetites and desires is perhaps one we might not want. In reaching for this position, Plato detracts from human life the elements that make it quintessentially human. The 'denigration of so much that we value' (160) creates an anti-tragic response that makes Plato's good life seem too undesirable and unachievable.

But what exactly are those things that 'we value'? Nussbaum argues that these things are the sorts of things that tragedy celebrates and acknowledges: the vulnerability, the wild emotions, and uncontrollable thoughts that are all present in the lives of the characters in tragedy and real life. Plato, instead, argues for a life led by reason, which may seem 'otherworldly' or even impossible. As such, it is unclear how achieving a Platonic higher plane of existence would be possible since it requires removing the subjective human experience from the worldview. Nussbaum argues that to know what's best for human life, one must look through the lens of 'human interpretations and ways of seeing' (160). This involves appreciating the subjectivity of human life and all the flaws and mishaps that come with it. In removing the human element from the human good life, Plato argues for an unachievable life that is in many ways undesirable and not at all human.

Thus, Nussbaum's argument is one on the side of subjective humanity. Nussbaum wants to put the human back into a human life. She argues that in doing this, we must celebrate not only our mental strength and fortitude but also our vulnerability, subjectivity, and fragility.

Analysis

I believe that Nussbaum's criticisms do hold substance. When reading *The Republic*, we seem to face some obstacles she points out. Indeed, the first half of book ten attempts to justify the expulsion of poets from the good life and the ideal city. Poetry, for Plato, appeals to the emotions and to the part of the soul which 'remembers our sufferings and is never tired of bemoaning them' (*The Republic* 604d). Plato argues that we should feel disgusted when seeing an emotional actor portraying a character on stage since 'in our private griefs we pride ourselves on just the opposite, that is, on our ability to bear them in silence like men' (605d). Plato's 'good life', then, seems to remove the human, subjective and fragile experience from human life. Plato's 'good life' does appear to be more robotic than humanlike in this regard.

However, an argument can be made for Plato and *The Republic*. Nussbaum is an Aristotelian, and Aristotle, in Book One of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, makes it clear that humans are unique because of reason. So, in placing such a significant emphasis on reason, Plato does the opposite of what Nussbaum claims. Plato exaggerates and gives reason precedence because it differentiates humans from other animals. By eliminating emotions that appeal to the lower parts of the soul and can hinder our lives, Plato is creating a more streamlined good life that allows humans to live it to the best of their abilities.

Indeed, a life led by reason can have its upsides. While it might seem bland, a life led by reason, claims Plato, allows the philosopher to avoid the undesirable lives of the timocrat, oligarch, democrat, and tyrant (*The Republic* 548a–580a). Only the philosophic, rational life can guarantee true happiness since it allows individuals to reflect on their experience and experience all types of pleasures (582a–d). Only through reason can the philosopher access the realm of the forms, gain knowledge, and live the 'pleasantest life' (583a).

Despite these upsides which Plato proposes, Nussbaum seems confident that the life Plato describes is one that not many people would even want. But in a sense, that is the whole point. The philosopher's life isn't even one many can access, let alone enjoy. It doesn't matter if a minority of people find that lifestyle desirable because only a minority can live that way in the first place.

My Proposition of the Good Life

I have shown Plato's conception of the good life with its flaws and weaknesses and Martha Nussbaum's criticism of this with its faults and shortcomings. Due to the nature of this essay, I can't go into detail about my conception of the good life, but some start can be made.

Plato's goal was to create the best life for human beings. He does this by celebrating what makes humans unique from the rest of the animal kingdom: reason. His emphasis on nurturing the rational side of humans, which only a few have the potential to wield, does seem to me to bring out the best, which makes us distinctly human. However, I believe there is another distinctly human feature which Plato overlooks.

The role of emotions in human life is both a blessing and a curse. While appetite and thumos may be regarded as emotions, Plato gives them no real precedence beyond this. Plato recognises the drawbacks of entertaining emotions and overindulging in pleasures, but his hostility towards them is precisely what Nussbaum picks up on. Emotions can even enhance human life, in my experience, and give us a different insight into things, without which we may be compared to an apathetic and careless robot. The best solution combines the two perspectives, which could create a good life.

We need a balance to combine a Platonic and Nussbaumian conception of a good life. While picking up on the intense focus on a life led by reason, some room should also be made for the emotions and exploring their pleasures. It must be noted, however, that I am not advocating for a precisely equal split between the powers that reason and emotion hold over our lives. The type of good life I am proposing is still a rational enterprise with a little more profundity and humanness than the one Plato suggests. Living your life according to reason and incorporating human emotions can achieve a less robotic, more realistic, desirable good life. Perhaps one of the maxims to live by would be one that Plato would most likely have been familiar with: 'nothing too much'. This ancient maxim found in the temple of Delphi perfectly encapsulates the message of this project: to strike the perfect balance between harnessing reason and opening yourself up to emotions, all things should be done in moderation.

Analysis

One of the main issues with my conception is the need for more clarity in explaining how to achieve a good life. Plato's works guide how individuals can nurture their souls and be educated to lead the philosophic good life. My conception offers no practical steps to achieve this good life or concrete examples of such a good life.

Secondly, while it may be true that Plato doesn't incorporate human emotions as much as I am advocating for in *The Republic* or the *Philebus*, this is not true in other works such as *The Symposium*. While this may not be wholly relevant to this essay, it is important to note that Plato's ideas don't begin and end with *The Republic* and the *Philebus*.

Perhaps what can be said is that my position is one of moderation, nearly akin to Cephalus' propositions in the opening scenes of *The Republic* (*The Republic* 415d–427c). Living in a delicate balance between the grandeur of rational thinking and the strength of our human

emotions is a fine art that will put people on the right track to living the good life.

Conclusion

In conclusion, searching for what it means to live a good life is a tricky and complex journey. *The Republic's* solution offers some consolation but prioritises reason at the expense of any noteworthy human enjoyment. Even then, this only applies to those who can become philosophers. For those non-philosophers, Plato offers no real answer. The *Philebus* attempts to extend the message of the good life to everyone but provides no practical answers that can be implemented in everyday life. Emotions, still, aren't afforded the precedence that might be required in a truly good human life. Martha Nussbaum picks up on some of these shortcomings and my proposed good life attempts to reconcile the Platonic and Nussbaumian views into one coherent position. By considering the benefits of the Platonic good life and reconciling them with any Nussbaumian criticisms, one can offer a more well-rounded and holistic solution for leading a good life.

The ancient idea of a good life is one that many researchers have explored, and as such, this essay falls neatly along previous explorations. Beyond Martha Nussbaum, other contemporary (and less contemporary) authors and writers have written on the subject. However, due to this philosophy EE's requirements and word count, I could not supplement my work with additional perspectives and better emphasise existing ones. Moreover, an investigation into the good life featured in Platonic texts beyond those analysed in this essay would be helpful.

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