

Aristotle on Happiness

A Little Background

Aristotle is one of the greatest thinkers in the history of western science and philosophy, making contributions to logic, metaphysics, mathematics, physics, biology, botany, ethics, politics, agriculture, medicine, dance and theatre. He was a student of Plato who in turn studied under Socrates. Although we do not actually possess any of Aristotle's own writings intended for publication, we have volumes of the lecture notes he delivered for his students; through these



Aristotle was to exercise his profound influence through the ages. Indeed, the medieval outlook is sometimes considered to be the “Aristotelian worldview” and St. Thomas Aquinas simply refers to Aristotle as “The Philosopher” as though there were no other.

Aristotle was the first to classify areas of human knowledge into distinct disciplines such as mathematics, biology, and ethics. Some of these classifications are still used today, such as the species-genus system taught in biology classes. He was the first to devise a formal system for reasoning, whereby the validity of an argument is determined by its structure rather than its content. Consider the following syllogism: All men are mortal; Socrates is a man; therefore, Socrates is mortal. Here we can see that as long as the premises are true, the conclusion must also be true, no matter what we substitute for "men or "is mortal." Aristotle's brand of logic dominated this area of thought until the rise of modern symbolic logic in the late 19th Century.

Aristotle was the founder of the Lyceum, the first scientific institute, based in Athens, Greece. Along with his teacher Plato, he was one of the strongest advocates of a liberal arts education, which stresses the education of the whole person, including one's moral character, rather than merely learning a set of skills. According to Aristotle, this view of education is necessary if we are to produce a society of happy as well as productive individuals.

Happiness as the Ultimate Purpose of Human Existence

One of Aristotle's most influential works is the *Nicomachean Ethics*, where he presents a theory of happiness that is still relevant today, over 2300 years later. The key question Aristotle seeks to answer in these lectures is: what is the ultimate purpose of human existence? What is that end or goal for which we should direct all of our activities? Everywhere we see people seeking pleasure, wealth, and a good reputation. But while each of these has some value, none of them can occupy the place of the chief good for which humanity should aim. To be an ultimate end, an act must be self-sufficient and final, "that which is always desirable in itself and never for the sake of something else," and it must be attainable by man. Aristotle claims that nearly everyone would agree that happiness is the end which meets all these requirements. It is easy enough to see that we desire money, pleasure, and honor only because we believe that these goods will make us happy. It seems that all other goods are a means towards obtaining happiness, while happiness is always an end in itself.

The Greek word that gets usually gets translated as "happiness" is *eudaimonia*, and like most translations from ancient languages, this can be misleading. The main trouble is that happiness (especially in modern America) is often conceived of as a subjective state of mind, as when one says one is happy when one is enjoying a cool beer on a hot day, or is out "having fun" with one's friends. For Aristotle, however, happiness is a final end or goal that encompasses the totality of one's life. It is not something that can be gained or lost in a few hours, like pleasurable sensations. It is more like the ultimate value of your life as lived up to this moment, measuring how well you have lived up to your full potential as a human being. For this reason, one cannot really make any pronouncements about whether one has lived a happy life until it is over, just as we would not say of a football game that it was a "great game" at halftime (indeed we know of many such games that turn out to be blowouts or duds). For the same reason we cannot say that children are happy, anymore than we can say that an acorn is a tree, for the potential for a flourishing human life has not yet been realized. As Aristotle says, "for as it is not one swallow or one fine day that makes a spring, so it is not one day or a short time that makes a man blessed and happy." (*Nicomachean Ethics*,1098a18)

The Hierarchical View of Nature

In order to explain human happiness, Aristotle draws on a view of nature he derived from his biological investigations. If we look at nature, we notice that there are four different kinds of things that exist in the world, each one defined by a different purpose that it has:

Mineral: rocks, metals and other lifeless things. The only goal which these things seek is to come to a rest. They are "beyond stupid" since they are inanimate objects with no soul

Vegetative: plants and other wildlife. Here we see a new kind of thing emerge, something which is alive. Because plants seek nourishment and growth, they have souls and can be even said to be satisfied when they attain these goals

Animal: all the creatures we study as belonging to the animal kingdom. Here we see a higher level of life emerge: animals seek pleasure and reproduction, and we can talk about a happy or sad dog, for example, to the extent that they are healthy and lead a pleasant life

Human: what is it that makes human beings different from the rest of the animal kingdom? Aristotle answers: Reason. Only humans are capable of acting according to principles, and in so doing taking responsibility for their choices. We can blame Johnny for stealing the candy since he knows it is wrong," but we wouldn't blame an animal since it doesn't know any better.

It seems that our unique function is to reason: by reasoning things out we attain our ends, solve our problems, and hence live a life that is qualitatively different in kind from plants or animals. The good for a human is different from the good for an animal because we have different capacities or potentialities. We have a *rational* capacity and the exercising of this capacity is thus the perfecting of our natures as human beings. For this reason, pleasure alone cannot constitute human happiness, for pleasure is what animals seek and human beings have higher capacities than animals. The goal is not to annihilate our physical urges, however, but rather to channel them in ways that are appropriate to our natures as rational animals.

Thus Aristotle gives us his definition of happiness:

...the function of man is to live a certain kind of life, and this activity implies a rational principle, and the function of a good man is the good and noble performance of these, and if any action is well performed it is performed in accord with the appropriate excellence: if this is the case, then happiness turns out to be an activity of the soul in accordance with virtue. (Nichomachean Ethics,1098a13)

Happiness as the Exercise of Virtue

In this last quote we can see another important feature of Aristotle's theory: the link between the concepts of happiness and virtue. Aristotle tells us that the most important factor in the effort to achieve happiness is to have a good moral character — what he calls "complete virtue." But being virtuous is not a passive state: one must act in accordance with virtue. Nor is it enough to have a few virtues; rather one must strive to possess all of them. As Aristotle writes:

He is happy who lives in accordance with complete virtue and is sufficiently equipped with external goods, not for some chance period but throughout a complete life. (Nichomachean Ethics,1101a10)

According to Aristotle, happiness consists in achieving, through the course of a whole lifetime all the goods — health, wealth, knowledge, friends, etc., that lead to the perfection of human nature and to the enrichment of human life. This requires us to make choices, some of which may be very difficult. Often the lesser good promises immediate pleasure and is more tempting, while the greater good is painful and requires some sort of sacrifice. For example, it may be easier and more enjoyable to spend the night watching television, but you know that you will be better off if you spend it researching for your term paper. Developing a good character requires a strong effort of will to do the right thing, even in difficult situations.

Another example which is becoming more and more of a problem in our society today is the taking of drugs. For a fairly small price, one can immediately take one's mind off of one's troubles and experience deep euphoria by popping an oxycontin pill or snorting some cocaine. Yet, inevitably, this short-term pleasure will lead to longer term pain. A few hours later you may feel miserable and so need to take the drug again, which leads to a never ending spiral of need and relief. Addiction inevitably drains your funds and provides a burden to your friends and family. All of those virtues—generosity, temperance, friendship, courage, etc, that make up the good life appear to be conspicuously absent in a life of drug use.

Aristotle would be strongly critical of the culture of "instant gratification" which seems to predominate in our society today. In order to achieve the life of complete virtue, we need to make the right choices, and this involves keeping our eye on the future, on the ultimate result we want for our lives as a whole. We will not achieve happiness simply by enjoying the pleasures of the moment. Unfortunately, this is something most people are not able to overcome in themselves. As he laments, "the mass of mankind are evidently quite slavish in their tastes, preferring a life suitable to beasts (Nichomachean Ethics, 1095b 20) Later in the Ethics Aristotle will draw attention to the concept of *akrasia*, or weakness of the will. In many cases the overwhelming prospect of some great pleasure obscures one's perception of what is truly good. Fortunately, this natural disposition is curable through training, which for Aristotle meant education and the constant aim to perfect virtue. As he puts it, a clumsy archer may indeed get better with practice, so long as he keeps aiming for the target.

Note also that it is not enough to think about doing the right thing, or even intend to do the right thing: we have to actually do it. Thus, it is one thing to think of writing the great American novel, another to actually write it. When we impose a form and order upon all those letters to actually produce a compelling story or essay, we are manifesting our rational potential, and the result of that is a sense of deep fulfillment. Or to take another example, when we exercise our citizenship by voting, we are manifesting our rational potential in yet another way, by taking responsibility for our community. There are myriad ways in which we can exercise our latent virtue in this way, and it would seem that the fullest attainment of human happiness would be one which brought all these ways together in a comprehensive rational life-plan.

There is yet another activity few people engage in which is required to live a truly happy life, according to Aristotle: intellectual contemplation. Since our nature is to be rational, the ultimate perfection of our natures is rational reflection. This means having an intellectual curiosity which perpetuates that natural wonder to know which begins in childhood but seems to be stamped out soon thereafter. For Aristotle, education should be about the cultivation of character, and this involves a practical and a theoretical component. The practical component is the acquisition of a moral character, as discussed above. The theoretical component is the making of a philosopher. Here there is no tangible reward, but the critical questioning of things raises our minds above the realm of nature and closer to the abode of the gods.

The Golden Mean

Aristotle's ethics is sometimes referred to as "virtue ethics" since its focus is not on the moral weight of duties or obligations, but on the development of character and the acquiring of virtues

such as courage, justice, temperance, benevolence, and prudence. And anyone who knows anything about Aristotle has heard his doctrine of virtue as being a “golden mean” between the extremes of excess and deficiency. Courage, for example, is a mean regarding the feeling of fear, between the deficiency of rashness (too little fear) and the excess of cowardice (too much fear). Justice is a mean between getting or giving too much and getting or giving too little. Benevolence is a mean between giving to people who don’t deserve it and not giving to anyone at all. Aristotle is not recommending that one should be moderate in all things, since one should at all times exercise the virtues. One can’t reason “I should be cruel to my neighbor now since I was too nice to him before.” The mean is a mean between two vices, and not simply a mean between too much and too little.

Furthermore, the mean is “relative to ourselves,” indicating that one person’s mean may be another person’s extreme. Milo the wrestler, as Aristotle puts it, needs more gruel than a normal person, and his mean diet will vary accordingly. Similarly for the moral virtues. Aristotle suggests that some people are born with weaker wills than others; for these people, it may actually be a mean to flee in battle (the extreme being to get slaughtered or commit suicide). Here we see the flexibility in Aristotle’s account: as soon as he begins to lay down some moral rules, he relaxes them in order to take into consideration the variety and contingency of particular temperaments.

Aristotle’s doctrine of the mean is well in keeping with ancient ways of thinking which conceived of justice as a state of equilibrium between opposing forces. In the early cosmologies, the Universe is stabilized as a result of the reconciliation between the opposing forces of Chaos and Order; the Greek philosopher Heraclitus conceived of right living as acting in accordance with the Logos, the principle of the harmony of opposites; and Plato defined justice in the soul as the proper balance among its parts. Like Plato, Aristotle thought of the virtuous character along the lines of a healthy body. According to the prevailing medical theory of his day, health in the body consists of an appropriate balance between the opposing qualities of hot, cold, the dry, and the moist. The goal of the physician is to produce a proper balance among these elements, by specifying the appropriate training and diet regimen, which will of course be different for every person.

Similarly with health in the soul: exhibiting too much passion may lead to reckless acts of anger or violence which will be injurious to one’s mental well-being as well as to others; but not showing any passion is a denial of one’s human nature and results in the sickly qualities of morbidity, dullness, and anti-social behavior. The healthy path is the “middle path,” though remember it is not exactly the middle, given that people who are born with extremely passionate natures will have a different mean than those with sullen, dispassionate natures. Aristotle concludes that goodness of character is “a settled condition of the soul which wills or chooses the mean relatively to ourselves, this mean being determined by a rule or whatever we like to call that by which the wise man determines it.” (1006b36)

Conclusion

From what has been said, we can highlight the following features of Aristotle's theory of happiness:

<http://www.pursuit-of-happiness.org/history-of-happiness/aristotle/aristotle-on-happiness/>

- Happiness is the ultimate end and purpose of human existence
- Happiness is not pleasure, nor is it virtue. It is the exercise of virtue.
- Happiness cannot be achieved until the end of one's life. Hence it is a goal and not a temporary state.
- Happiness is the perfection of human nature. Since man is a rational animal, human happiness depends on the exercise of his reason.
- Happiness depends on acquiring a moral character, where one displays the virtues of courage, generosity, justice, friendship, and citizenship in one's life. These virtues involve striking a balance or "mean" between an excess and a deficiency.
- Happiness requires intellectual contemplation, for this is the ultimate realization of our rational capacities.

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Other Internet Resources

Online *Nicomachean Ethics*: <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/nicomachaen.html>

Aristotle's Ethics. <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aristotle-ethics/>