

Aristotle's *Ethics*: The Theory of Happiness - I

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The Humanities represent man's concern with man and with the human world.

In that concern there is no more important problem than the age-old one which was first discussed systematically here, in Greece, more than two thousand years ago.

The problem I refer to, which the ancient Greek philosophers thought deeply about, is this one: What makes a human life good -- what makes it worth living and what must we do, not just merely to live, but to live well?

In the whole tradition of Western literature and learning, one book more than any other defines this problem for us and helps us to think about it. That book of course is Aristotle's *Ethics*, written in the fourth century before Christ. Aristotle was a student of Plato. Plato had founded the Academy of Athens, which was the great university of ancient Greece. Aristotle studied and worked there for about twenty years. He was called by Plato "the intellect of the school."

Unlike Socrates, Aristotle was interested in the study of nature. He was unlike Socrates in another respect. When he, too, was accused of un-Athenian activities, he decided to flee, saying "I will not let the Athenians offend twice against philosophy."

The subject treated in this book is called "ethics" because *ethos* is the Greek word for character, and the problems with which this book deals are the problems of character and the conduct of life. The *Ethics* is divided into ten parts. I am going to deal only with the first part, in which Aristotle discusses happiness. But before we begin, let me remind you of a famous statement about happiness that occurs in the opening paragraph of the American Declaration of Independence.

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal and that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights: that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. That to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed..."

Have you ever thought what it means to say that it is every man's natural right -- not to be happy -- but to engage in the pursuit of happiness? What do we mean when we say that one of the main objectives of good government is to see that no man is interfered with -- more than that, that every man must be helped by the state in his effort to lead a good life, a worthwhile life, a humanly satisfying life?

That fact that every man has a right to pursue happiness suggests that happiness is attainable -- in some degree -- by all men. But is this happiness the same for all men? Is each of us pursuing the same goal when we try to live in such a way that our lives will be happy ones? To answer these questions it is necessary to understand the meaning of happiness -- what constitutes a happy life.

And to do that, we must, first of all, clear our minds of certain misconceptions about the meaning of the word happy -- Every day of our lives, we use the word "happy" in a sense which means "feeling good," "having fun," having a good time, or somehow experiencing a lively pleasure of joy. We say to our friends when they seem despondent or out of sorts, "I hope you will feel happier tomorrow."

We say "Happy New Year" or "Happy Birthday" or "Happy Anniversary." Now all of these expressions refer to the pleasant feelings -- the joys or satisfactions which we may have at one moment and not at another. In this meaning of the word, it is quite possible for us to feel happy at one moment and not at the next. This is not Aristotle's meaning of the word. Nor, when you think about it for a moment, can it be the meaning of the word in the Declaration of Independence. Thomas Jefferson and other signers of the Declaration had read Aristotle and Plato. This was part of their education.

Both Aristotle and the Declaration use the word happiness in a sense which refers to the quality of a whole human life -- what makes it good as a whole, in spite of the fact that we are not having fun or a good time every minute of it.

A human life may involve many pleasures, joys, and successes. On the other hand, it may also involve many pains, griefs and troubles and still be a good life -- a happy life. Happiness, in other words, is not made by the pleasures we have; nor, for that matter, is happiness marred by the pains we suffer: Aristotle helps us to see this by two things he says about happiness.

The first will shock you, perhaps. It shocked me the first time I read it many years ago. Aristotle tells us first that children cannot be happy. Young people, he says, precisely because they are young are not happy, nor, for that matter, unhappy. Here is what he says:

A boy is not happy owing to his age; boys who are called happy are being congratulated by reason of the hopes we have for them. For there is required not only complete virtue, but also a complete life, since many changes occur in life, and all manner of chances, and the most prosperous may fall into great misfortunes in old age.

In other words, what Aristotle is saying is that what is required for happiness is "a complete life" which obviously no young person has while he is still young. He makes the same point in another way. He refers to the story of Croesus and Solon, as told by the ancient Greek historian, Herodotus. Croesus was King of Lydia, and one of the richest and most powerful rulers of his day. Solon was one of the wisest men of Greece. Here is the story of their conversation.

Solon set out upon his travels, in the course of which he came on a visit to Croesus at Sardis. Croesus received him as his guest, and lodged him in the royal palace, and had his servants conduct him over his treasures, and show him all their greatness and magnificence. And when Solon had seen them all. Croesus said, 'Stranger of Athens, I have heard much of your wisdom and of your travels through many lands. I am curious therefore to ask you, whom of all the men that you have seen, you consider the most happy?' This he asked because he thought himself the happiest of mortals: but Solon answered him without flattery: 'Tellus of Athens, sire.' Astonished at what he heard, Croesus demanded sharply, 'And why do you consider Tellus the happiest of men?' To which the other replied, 'First because his country was flourishing in his days, and he himself had sons both beautiful and good, and he lived to see children born to each of them, and these children all grew up; and further because, after a life spent in what our people look upon as comfort his end was glorious. In a battle between the Athenians and their neighbors near Eleusis, he died gallantly upon the field. And the Athenians gave him a public funeral and paid him the highest honors.'

Thus, Solon admonished Croesus by the example of Tellus. When he had ended, Croesus asked angrily, 'Is my happiness, then, so little to you that you do not even put me on a level with private men?'

'Croesus', replied the other, 'I see that You are wonderfully rich and are the lord of many nations, but as for your question, I have no answer to give until I hear that you have closed your life happily. For assuredly he who possesses great store of riches is no nearer happiness than he who has enough for his daily needs. For many of the wealthiest men have been unfavoured of fortune, and many whose means were moderate have had excellent luck. The wealthy man, it is true, is better able to content his desires, and bear up against sudden calamity. The man of moderate means has less ability to withstand these evils, from which, however, his good luck may keep him clear. If so, he enjoys all these following blessings: he is whole of limb, a stranger to disease, free from misfortune, happy in his children, and comely to look upon. If in addition to all this, he ends his life well, he is truly the man who may rightly be termed happy. Call him, however, until he die, not happy but fortunate.'

Retelling this story of the meeting between Croesus and Solon, Aristotle stresses the point that a life must be completed -- finished -- before we can truly judge whether or not it has been a happy one. "But must no one be called happy while he still lives?" Aristotle asks. Must we, in Solon's words, "see the end"?

Not quite: for, as Aristotle makes plain, it is possible for an old man to look back at his life, almost completed, and say that it has been good. This may seem strange to you at first, but when you think about it for a moment you will see that it really is not.

One example will make this clear to you. You go to a football game. At the end of the first half, you meet a friend of yours in the aisle. He says to you, "Good game, isn't it?" If it has been

well-played so far, your natural response would be to say, "Yes." But if you stop to think for a moment, you will realize that all you are in a position to say, at the end of the half, is that it is becoming a good game. Only if it is well played all through the second half, can you say, when it is all over, that it was a good game.

Well, life is like that. Not until it is really over can you say, "It was a good life" -- that is, if it has been well lived. Toward the middle, or before, all you can say is that it is becoming a good life. Here is Aristotle's way of making this point: "Certainly the future is obscure to us, while happiness, we claim, is an end and something in every way final...If so, we shall call happy those among living men in whom these conditions are, and are to be fulfilled

Aristotle's *Ethics*: The Theory of Happiness - II

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The main point we have seen so far is that, for Aristotle, a happy life is a good life. In other words, happiness is good. But other things are good, too -- such things as health and wealth, knowledge and friendship, and a good moral character. We recognize all these things as good. All of us want them, and would regret being deprived of them. How does happiness stand in relation to all these other goods? And how are they all related to happiness? Aristotle tells us a number of things which enable us to answer this question. He says, in the first place, that all men agree in speaking of happiness as the ultimate good, the highest good, the supreme good. We can understand what this means when we realize that happiness is that state of human well-being which leaves nothing more to be desired.

A happy man, Aristotle would say, is the man who has everything he really needs. He has those things which he needs to realize his potentials. That is why Aristotle says that the happy man wants for nothing. Aristotle then points out that this cannot be said of other goods.

Thus a man might have health, but not sufficient wealth. Or, he may have both wealth and health -- but he may lack friends. Another man may have great knowledge -- but still lack other human perfections.

Perhaps now, we can see what Aristotle means. According to him, although a man possesses one or more of the things which his nature craves, he may lack others, and then he cannot be considered happy. There would be some real goods missing which he should desire and try to obtain.

This leads Aristotle to his definition of the happy life as a life made perfect by the possession of all good things such as health wealth, friendship, knowledge, virtue -- all these are constituent parts of happiness. And happiness is the whole good of which they are component parts. That is how happiness is related to all the other goods.

You can test the truth of this insight for yourself in the following very simple way: Suppose someone asked you why you wanted to be healthy. You would answer by saying: because being healthy would enable you to do the kind of work you wanted to do. But then suppose they asked you why you wanted to do that kind of work? Or why you wanted to acquire some of the world's wealth? Or why you wanted to learn things. To all such questions your ultimate answer would be: because you wanted to become happy. But if you were then asked why you wanted to become happy, your only answer would be: because you wanted to become happy.

This shows you that happiness is something you seek for its own sake, whereas you seek all the other goods ultimately for the sake of happiness. Happiness is the only good of which this is true. It is the only good which we seek for its own sake, as Aristotle says.

Happiness is desirable in itself and never for the sake of something else. But honor, pleasure, reason, and every virtue we choose indeed for themselves, but we choose them also for the sake of happiness, judging that by means of them we shall be happy. Happiness, on the other hand, no one chooses for the sake of these, nor, in general, for anything other than itself. Happiness, then, is something final and self-sufficient.

And now, in the light of this definition of happiness, you can see why Aristotle says that the pursuit of happiness takes a whole lifetime, and that happiness is the quality of a whole human life.

I am going to assume now that you have begun to understand what Aristotle means by happiness and why, in his view, its pursuit takes a whole lifetime. But you may still be wondering how one becomes happy in the course of one's life -- what one has to do to engage effectively and successfully in the pursuit of happiness. Aristotle's answer to this question is very interesting. Let me tell you the answer first, then try to explain it briefly.

Aristotle tells us that the most important factor in the effort to achieve happiness is a good moral character -- what he calls "complete virtue." But a man must not only be virtuous, he must also act in accordance with virtue. And it is not enough to have one or a few virtues. He must be completely virtuous and live in accordance with complete virtue. Aristotle makes this point most emphatically.

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.

What does this mean? Remember, first of all, that happiness consists in accumulation, through the course of a whole lifetime all the goods -- health, wealth, knowledge, friends, etc., that are essential to the perfection of human nature and to the enrichment of human life. This requires us to make choices every day of our lives, and carry out our choices in action. We must choose between this and that thing which we want, or between this and that course of action. We make a right choice whenever we choose the greater of two goods or the lesser of two evils. But

sometimes the lesser good is enticing and promises immediate pleasure, while the greater good involves effort and pain on our part. Let us take an example.

There are times when we may be faced with the choice between enjoying the company of friends or calling it off because it is late and we have important work to do the next day. Here is a choice to be made between good things. The immediate pleasures of the evening are attractive -- but the work to be done tomorrow is more important. Still, it may take quite an effort of will to call it a night.

And so we see that having a good character consists in nothing more than being willing to suffer some immediate pains or being willing to give up some immediate pleasures for the sake of obtaining a greater good later on. It consists in nothing more than making the right choices. And right choices are always those which calculate on what is good in the long run. They are hard to make. But if we do not make them, we are likely to have some fun from day to day for a while -- and in the long run ruin our lives. In the process of building our lives. Aristotle says we must keep our eye on the future -- and on the result we want to achieve for our life as a whole, counting all the days to come. What he teaches us is that we cannot become happy by living for the pleasures of the moment. We often have to choose between having a good time and leading a good life. And this is something, Aristotle says, most men do not do.

To judge from the lives that men lead, most men seem to identify the good, or happiness, with pleasure: which is the reason why they love the life of enjoyment. The mass of mankind are evidently quite slavish in their tastes, preferring a life suitable to beasts.

I would like to conclude this brief account of Aristotle's theory of happiness by mentioning two points which will help us to test our understanding of that theory. Both points bear on the difficult question of whether happiness is the same for all men. Most people -- in Aristotle's time and in ours -- do not think it is:

With regard to what happiness is (men) differ, and the many do not give the same account as the wise. For the former think it is some plain and obvious thing, like pleasure, wealth, or honor. They differ, however, from one another -- and often even the same man identifies it with different things, with health when he is ill, with wealth when he is poor.

Moreover, as Aristotle points out, most people think that happiness is, for each man, whatever he himself thinks it is, and that there are as many different notions of happiness as there are different men, each of them as right as any other. In other words, of all the different notions of happiness that men have, one is not true and all the rest false. That is what most people think!

But, Aristotle contends, on the contrary, that there is only one true conception of happiness and that when happiness is truly conceived, it is the same for all men, whether they think so or not.

One example will suffice to help you see what he is driving at: and then you can decide whether or not you agree with him -- as I do.

Consider the case of the miser. The miser thinks that happiness consists solely in accumulating and hoarding a pile of gold. To achieve this end, he ruins his health, lives in isolation from other human beings, does not take part in the life of his country -- and is subject to wild fears and constant worries. There the miser sits fondling his gold. Is he a happy man or is he miserable?

Aristotle would say that the miser is completely miserable -- the perfect type of human misery. For he has thwarted most of his normal human cravings, and stunted his human development! He has deprived himself of most of the good things of life -- health, knowledge, friendship and many other forms of human activity -- in order to acquire wealth: wealth which he does not put to good use but simply gloats over.

True, he thinks that his happiness consists in the possession of gold. But that is a mistaken judgment on his part. It has led him to do violence to his own nature and to ruin his life.

The second of the two concluding points I want to make has to do with the criteria by which we can tell whether something is truly a part of happiness when that is rightly conceived. Suppose, for example, that someone thinks that happiness consists in having power over other men, and not being subject to the power of anyone else. Some men, we know from history and experience, actually think this -- and want power more than anything else. They think it is most essential to their happiness. What is wrong with such thinking? You can readily see what is wrong. If power over others were truly an element in human happiness, then happiness would not be attainable by all men. Because if some men attain it, that would preclude other men, subject to their power, from becoming happy. Everyone cannot be on top -- and if you have to be on top in order to be happy, only some men can achieve happiness at the expense of others. Hence, if everyone has a natural right to the pursuit of happiness, and if that means that happiness must be attainable by all, then we know at once, do we not, that power over other men cannot be a part of human happiness -- for if it were, happiness would not be attainable by all. The pursuit of happiness must be co-operative, not competitive.

We do not have the right view of it unless we see it as something which men can help one another to achieve -- instead of achieving it by beating their neighbors. This is the deepest lesson we can learn from Aristotle about happiness, and it was, I should think, a lesson which was not lost on the framers of the Declaration of Independence. You remember I said that Thomas Jefferson and other signers of the Declaration had read Plato and Aristotle -- this was part of their education.

Thus we see a link between ancient Athens and our own nation; a link in that chain of continuity we call Western Civilization.