

CREATING THE GOOD LIFE

APPLYING ARISTOTLE'S WISDOM
TO FIND MEANING AND HAPPINESS

JAMES O'TOOLE

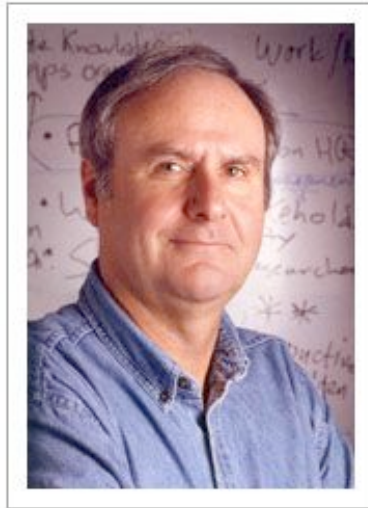
FOREWORD BY WALTER ISSACSON

MORTIMER J. ADLER

(1902 - 2001)

IN MEMORIAM

PART I of II



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We learn and grow through “reflection on experience,” as my friend and mentor Warren Bennis teaches. This book is a summary of three years of reflections on my experiences and the experiences of the many friends whom I cite in its pages. I also wish to thank those men and women for providing sterling examples of lives well led. In particular I wish to thank Larry Fisher for his thoughtful, detailed, and immeasurably useful critique of an early draft of this book. I feel about his contribution to the book the way I imagine the prolix novelist Thomas Wolfe felt about the contribution of his editor, Maxwell Perkins—that is, one step above gratitude, one short of co-authorship.

My dear friends Keith and Sheena Berwick provided unflagging support throughout the whole authorship ordeal, Sheena teaching me useful lessons about Dante and writing, and Keith providing access to the marvelous Crown Fellows and keeping channels of communication open to the Aspen Institute. Along the way I subjected Erin, Kerry, and Marilyn O’Toole to too many versions of too many chapters, cruel tests of their love and patience, both of which I shall endeavor to reciprocate appropriately. Ed Lawler, my boss at the Center for Effective Organizations, also earned countless credits for patience and forbearance, for which I am deeply appreciative. My agent, Jim Levine, is both a prince and a rock, as everyone who knows him will attest. Zach Schisgal and the cast and crew at Rodale were a joy to work with; I thank them for their professionalism. Finally, I hope Douglas and Philip Adler will be pleased to find evidence of the lasting influence of their father in this highly personal reworking of the Aristotelian lessons he taught to me and to several generations of Aspen seminarians.

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 —*Bumper Sticker* (2004)



WALTER ISAACSON

President and CEO of The Aspen Institute

FOREWORD

At a certain point in our lives, many of us step back to reflect upon or perhaps even wrestle with what it takes to lead a life that is useful, moral, worthy, and spiritually meaningful. Maybe we have noticed ourselves trimming our principles and making too many compromises in our careers, and we want to reconnect with our values. Or we sense that we have pursued success without becoming more fulfilled. Or perhaps we yearn, in an era when both business and politics seem to have come unhinged from underlying values, to understand the great ideas and ideals that have shaped history.

For Benjamin Franklin, this moment came when he was 42, half-way through his remarkable life. After building the most successful publishing empire in colonial America, he scaled back his career in order to devote most of his time to learning, civic activities, public affairs, philanthropy, and, later, statecraft. When his mother expressed puzzlement, he explained to her: “I would rather have it said, ‘He lived usefully,’ than ‘He died rich.’”

Franklin, whom I was writing a book about, inspired me, or at least emboldened me, when I decided that the time had come to make a transition in my own life at age 50. I had enjoyed a rather successful and stimulating career in journalism, and I had loved my work. But I realized that, as I rose in the ranks of corporate management, I had gotten further away from the endeavors that I found most rewarding, such as writing and the exploration of ideas. So I moved on to become president of the Aspen Institute, where, among other pleasures, I got the chance to know Jim O'Toole.

For 50 years, the Aspen Institute has been a place where successful executives and any other questing souls who choose to sign up for its seminars go to spend a week engaging with the values that are important to leadership, citizenship, and the good life. It has many programs, but at its core is a collection of weeklong retreats—restorative spas for the mind and body and soul—developed by Mortimer Adler and Robert Maynard Hutchins and then Jim O'Toole, which are based on readings and discussions about the great ideas and ideals that have informed the progress of civilization.

For more than a decade, Jim has served as a stimulating moderator, director, conceptualizer, and guiding force of these Aspen Institute seminars. The model he developed in his book *The Executive Compass*, which shows the way we must balance values when making decisions, serves as a framework for many of our discussions. He is now the Mortimer Adler Senior Fellow of the Aspen Institute.

The starting point for most of these seminars is Aristotle's definition of "the good life." Aristotle provides the foundation, as Jim explains so well in that book, for such fundamental ideals as justice and fairness, which should guide our approach to business and everyday values. He likewise helps shape our notion of community, which is key to the moral quality of looking at the world from a perspective larger than the self. But he also provides a personal component: He explores how mature men and women may find the components of a good life if they embark on a diligent search, what Jim so aptly calls a *mid-course self-examination*.

When Jim was in his fifties, he undertook his own mid-course self-examination. He was inspired by Aristotle's understanding that most people can find happiness if they put aside their youthful fantasies about money and celebrity and seek instead to attain the awareness and knowledge, as well as the sense of companionship and community, that can lead to a complete life offering true fulfillment.

In this book, Jim not only explains the practical wisdom of Aristotle; he also shows how a variety of people, both famous and not, embarked on quests that led them closer to achieving a good life based on awareness and values rather than on riches and fame. These illustrative examples, some inspiring and others cautionary, make this book a practical self-help guide that is based on timeless wisdom rather than trite maxims. As Aristotle informs us, “Happiness is activity in accordance with virtue,” and that requires engaging in contemplation. Aristotle speaks comfortably and clearly (in a manner that is sometimes missing these days) about ethics, about right and wrong, about virtue and vice. So, too, does Jim.

I think you will find Aristotle’s wisdom and Jim’s pragmatic application of it useful, provocative, and inspiring. And if you do, I hope that you will consider signing up for one of the seminars that Jim and his colleagues have created at Aspen over the years. You can do so at <http://www.aspeninstitute.org>

Aristotle’s core insight, which Jim explores in this book, is that the path to making virtue part of our character—acquiring a “general disposition to do what is best”—begins by critically examining the nature of our desires, understanding which of them is truly a component of the good life, and realizing how these fit into the concept of a good society. This is what the Aspen Institute seminars help participants to do.

The first step in pursuing the Aristotelian ideal of the good life is reflecting on what that concept means, both to you and to others. As Jim has shown, in his life and his seminars and now in this book, that step can be exciting and enriching.

INTRODUCTION

ARISTOTLE’S INSIGHTS ON PLANNING A LIFE

Like many of my generation, men and women born in the years immediately after World War II, I found myself in my fifties full of questions and doubts. I didn’t feel I had accomplished enough in my first five decades, and I wasn’t sure how to make the best use of the time remaining to me. Conventional concepts of “the good life” seemed wanting in meaning, purpose, and practicality. I struggled to find an alternate definition of happiness

that meant something to me personally and would give direction to the rest of my life. I found it in an unexpected source: Aristotle.

You may well ask what possible relevance the ideas of a Greek philosopher who lived more than 300 years before Christ have to the challenges facing modern men and women. It's a fair question, one I often have asked myself. The answer is that, in his career as a teacher and a consultant to leaders of ancient Athens, Aristotle thought long and hard about what it means to live a good life and how much it takes to finance it. His thoughts on this matter are particularly applicable today given the baby boom generation's anxiety over insufficient retirement savings and shaky investments: Aristotle shows how we can find happiness at almost any level of income. Moreover, he argues that the ability to find true contentment correlates only tangentially with the amount of money one has cached away. Unlike so many of today's "life advisors," Aristotle integrates financial planning with the broader task of life planning.

And, unlike pop psychologists, Aristotle does not offer a monolithic scheme whereby everyone can carve out a good life. He does not impart a magic, one-size-fits-all formula that pretends that all people are the same or that the conditions we face are givens, not variables. Instead, Aristotle offers practical and time-tested guidance to thoughtful people about how they can undertake their own life-planning exercises. In essence, he teaches us to fish rather than serving us a packaged fish stick TV dinner. His advice is essential because planning how to make the rest of our lives satisfying turns out to be an even harder task than financial planning. His ancient teachings remind boomers that we are not the first generation to have neglected the task of life planning. The accumulated lesson of history in this regard is clear and unequivocal: Failure to engage in effective life planning is as risky in the long run as failure to engage in financial planning. In fact, the two cannot be separated—trying to plan how much we need in the future, absent the context of what will provide us with meaning and happiness, is an exercise in fiction and futility.

QUESTIONS ARISTOTLE HELPS US ANSWER

What questions can Aristotle help us to answer? I can attest that Aristotle has helped me to think more clearly about the following:

What does it mean to lead a good life?

What is true happiness?

How can I choose between (a) something pleasurable that I want now, and (b) something immediately less pleasant that I really need for long-term happiness?

How much wealth do I need for leading a good life?

What is personal excellence, and how do I achieve it?

Is ambition necessary, or is it a trap?

How can I be a success in my specialized career and, at the same time, a well-rounded person with a wide range of interests and knowledge?

What is the relationship between virtue and happiness (do I have to be saintly to be happy)?

How do love, friendship, luck, health, and religion contribute to the pursuit of happiness?

To be happy, what should I be doing that I am not doing now? And what am I doing now that I should stop doing?

What's next?

Aristotle helps us to work through such personal questions, but he doesn't stop there. To him, happiness isn't a selfish pursuit; rather, it occurs in a social context. That's why he also helps us to address the following questions about our roles in families, in communities, and, to use a modern concept, in workplaces, as well:

To what extent does personal happiness entail a relationship with a community of others?

How do I resolve the tensions between family and work?

What can I pass on to the next generation? (To paraphrase Jonas Salk, "How can I be a good ancestor?")


Will philanthropy make me virtuous and, perhaps, happy?

How can I create the opportunity to be happy for the people who work for me?

What is a fair distribution of financial and psychic rewards among those who participate with me in an enterprise?

How can I create a successful business without harming others, or turning myself into a moral midget in the process?

These are questions many members of my generation have failed to answer—in some cases, have failed even to ask. For evidence, one need look no further than Enron’s Jeff Skilling, Tyco’s Dennis Kozlowski, and the heads of other scandal-plagued American corporations. In this regard, Aristotle is the ultimate realist. He understands that the greatest barrier to finding happiness is our unwillingness to ask ourselves tough moral questions, because honest answers to those questions would require us to change our behavior. He recognizes that almost all of us fervently seek happiness, yet we just as determinedly resist doing the things that would allow us to find it. Overcoming that paradoxical, self-defeating behavior is the challenge of midlife, and it is the central issue his moral exercises address.

If Aristotle doesn’t provide answers to life’s big questions, he at least shows why we need to ask them, and helps us to frame our personal inquiries in ways that increase the likelihood that we will find satisfying answers for our families, communities, organizations, and selves. Such answers, as subjective and diverse as they will be, are what amounts to wisdom in this life. And because our answers differ, there is no easy way to summarize here in a pithy phrase or even a paragraph what the good life ultimately entails. If wisdom were so quickly attained and compactable into nuggets of information, it would be available on the Internet. Aristotle shows us that it takes a bit of mental effort to find true happiness. 

James O’Toole received his Doctorate in Social Anthropology from Oxford University, where he was a Rhodes Scholar. He served as a Special Assistant to Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare, Elliot Richardson, as Chairman of the Secretary’s Task Force on Work in America, and as Director of Field Investigations for President Nixon’s Commission on Campus Unrest. He won a Mitchell Prize for a paper on economic growth policy, has served on the prestigious Board of Editors of *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, and was editor of *The American Oxonian* magazine.

At USC he has held the University Associates’ Chair of Management and served as Executive Director of the Leadership Institute. He has been editor of *New Management* magazine and Director of the Twenty-Year Forecast Project (where he interpreted social, political, and economic change for the top management of thirty of the largest US corporations).

From 1994-97 O’Toole was Executive Vice President of the Aspen Institute. He also has served recently as Managing Director of the Booz Allen & Hamilton Strategic Leadership Center, and Chair of the Center’s academic Board of Advisors.

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O'Toole's research and writings are in the areas of leadership, individual growth and development in the workplace, corporate culture, and philosophy. He has addressed hundreds of major corporations and professional organizations and is the author of fourteen acclaimed books.

James O'Toole has moderated leadership seminars at the renowned Aspen Institute for the last thirty years. He has recently developed a seminar based on his new book, *Creating the Good Life*.

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