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## CREATING THE GOOD LIFE

APPLYING ARISTOTLE'S WISDOM  
TO FIND MEANING AND HAPPINESS

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FOREWORD BY WALTER ISSACSON

**MORTIMER J. ADLER**

(1902 - 2001)

***IN MEMORIAM***

**PART II**

## DOES HAPPINESS HINGE ON HAVING ENOUGH MONEY?

Because we boomers are by far the largest generation in history, commercial producers of goods and services cater to our wants and needs. Magazines like *Fortune*, *Business Week*, and *U.S. News & World Report* annually devote entire issues to the subject of our retirement planning, focusing on how to calculate future income and expenditures, how to formulate prudent investment strategies, the prognosis for Medicare's coverage of health care costs, and where to find an affordable dream retirement home. This is practical stuff, particularly given the nasty stock market tumble in 2001 and with few experts predicting a return to the bullish heights of the late nineties.

Yet, though effective *financial planning* is obviously essential, many boomers are starting to realize that it's only part of the task we face. We have begun to notice that many people a decade or so older than us are not finding great satisfaction in their retirement, even when they have adequate incomes.

In private, these retirees admit they are unhappy, bored with watching television, and at a loss for how to fill their abundant free time in rewarding and useful ways. Worse, we note that many people who retire seem to age visibly almost from the moment they are no longer part of the action at work. In light of those object lessons, it is dawning on many of us that, in addition to financial planning, we need to engage in equally robust *life planning*. For, if truth be told, few of us have a clear or realistic view of how we intend to live good, meaningful lives in our remaining decades. *Money* magazine's 2002 special issue on retirement planning offers its readers "Thirty Questions That Can Change Your Life," 29 of which are financial in nature, with the remaining question addressing the short-term issue of "spending enough to make life enjoyable now." That ratio is probably indicative of the amount of effort we boomers devote to financial, as opposed to life, planning.

Sadly, experience demonstrates that those who misallocate their planning efforts in such a lopsided way end up with a lot of miserable, wasted time on their hands, no matter how well funded it is. This fate begins to feel worse than death the older we get and the less time we see remaining for us to find happiness. Psychologists say we live in fear of death, but Aristotle sees us fretting less about dying itself than worrying we will die or become incapacitated before we have had our innings. What most of us fear, in fact, is growing too old to do the things we have always wanted to do and to achieve the goals we long have wanted to achieve. Worse, some older men and women find themselves without goals, living lives that have lost their meaning. Owner of the L.A. Lakers, Jerry Buss,

recently was quoted as saying, “I’ve accomplished all I’ve ever wanted to do.” For his sake, let us hope he was either wrong or exaggerating, for this sounds too much like the suicide note of Kodak’s founder, George Eastman: “My work is done, why wait?” Truly, was there no more for Eastman to do in life? Aristotle argues that no one has “done it all.” And he finds it sad in the extreme that there are so many men and women quietly killing themselves by killing time. He wants us to live. And not just live, but live well.

Today, too many people who could be more fully engaged in life are settling for second best by killing time. To help us avoid that dreary prospect, this book offers Aristotelian advice about how to draw up an effective life plan for finding true and lasting happiness. I don’t mean to suggest that Aristotle should be read as the last or only word on how to lead a good life. But the wisdom he offers is essential for navigating the moral thickets of adult life. Aristotle shows us that a robust life plan requires a clear view of our ultimate goal. He demonstrates that those who don’t know what the good life entails are not likely to find it. This insight is critical for those of us in midlife because, although we may have abandoned the unrealistic financial expectations generated in the roaring nineties, there are distressing signs that we have not set aside the values that drove our behavior during that era of excess. Too many of us still cling to the belief that the good life depends on obtaining ever more material goods, prestige, power, career success, sensual pleasure, and social approval. Aristotle helps us to ask if, indeed, those conventional goals are consistent with leading the good life. And, if they are not, he helps us to identify goals more likely to bring us happiness.

## A PHILOSOPHY FOR THE REST OF US

Aristotle knew his audience. He was writing neither for the nobility nor their hand servants, neither for the Fortunate Few (those who seemed perfectly content because they “had everything”) nor the Unfortunate Many (those forced to be satisfied with what little they had). In Aristotle’s day, most models for living the good life were derived from the experiences of the rich and famous of his time: kings, queens, conquerors, and Olympic laurelists. Today, our role models are updates of the same types: successful politicians, billionaires, movie stars, and sports figures. Call it Philosophy for the Few. Doubtless, the lifestyles of the rich and famous are glamorous, but Aristotle tells us we run a risk when we attempt to emulate them. When we establish the Fortunate Few as exemplars of the good life, we may doom ourselves to discontent if we don’t make it in their terms. Aristotle also asks if the Fortunate Few are in fact happy, a question no less relevant today.

The postmodern antidote to Philosophy for the Few is Philosophy for the Many, as dispensed on afternoon television. This egalitarian approach is predicated on the assumption that the sources of happiness are relative and universal: in a word, “whatever.” Aristotle’s philosophy supports modern relativism to the extent that he believes in the right of the Many to live as they wish. But Aristotle says we should not emulate the Many if we have the opportunity and ability not to. His politically incorrect conclusion is that the Rest of Us should not seek contentment in what the unambitious or intellectually limited would find satisfying.

In fact, the ambitions and preferred lifestyles of most people are no closer to Joe Six-pack’s than to Donald Trump’s. That is why Aristotle does not address himself to either the Many or the Few. His is a Philosophy for the Rest of Us, people who want more but who are not wanting. His audience is mature, thoughtful people who have a healthy dissatisfaction with the way they are currently living. In a nutshell, he says that what is needed to find happiness is the enrichment of our lives. By enrichment, he means seriously endeavoring to develop our full and highest potential as human beings. Aristotle’s central point is that life is about development. It is not just about growing up during adolescence at one end, then retiring comfortably at the other; instead, it is about growing and learning throughout the course of our lives. He shows us that happiness comes about as the continual growth of our minds, character, and humanity. Truly happy people are engaged in realizing the full diversity of their highest, most human capabilities.

Aristotle observes that all people are born with great potential for growth in many fields and endeavors, and that those who are happiest at the end are the ones who are able to look back on a full life of having exercised their many innate capacities. In contrast, the unhappiest men and women are those who, in old age, come to realize they will die without having sufficiently realized their potential. Although we understand this point intuitively, few of us know what we should do to realize our potential. Aristotle’s contribution is to help us to overcome the convenient rationales we use to resist doing so.

The problem is that his philosophy flies in the face of what we “know” about the Fortunate Few, who, by all accounts, find success by narrowing the focus of their lives in order to develop a single talent or interest. Aristotle does not take issue with the fact that highly successful people develop their unique talents; he simply recognizes that the Rest of Us are neither superbly nor uniquely talented in one field. Instead, we often have many talents and diverse interests, and experience shows that those who develop that wide range of inherent potential are happiest in the end.

Indeed, because even the most narrowly talented will become happier if they enrich their lives, he tells us there is no sound rationale for the Rest of Us to overly narrow our life experiences.

Aristotle's intent is, first, to help the Rest of Us break the unconscious habit of measuring our lives by the standards of the Fortunate Few, then to help us plan effectively to fulfill our potential in a way that will bring us true and lasting happiness. That first task turns out to be the hardest for people who have had a lifetime of conditioning in the Philosophy of the Few.

## DISCIPLINE: THE ESSENCE OF CHARACTER

To Aristotle, the question of how we can most effectively realize the opportunity of our lives comes down to what might be called the ethical issue of character. He tells us we must be "virtuous" to be happy. But when he speaks of people with excellent character, he doesn't mean they necessarily follow the moral precepts of any religion or subscribe to a code of secular ethics. Rather, virtuous men and women have an overarching purpose in their lives—a rule or higher principle—which all their wealth, power, and actions serve or to which all are subordinated. The trick is to identify that good end, then to discipline ourselves to pursue it. The key is found in the word discipline. People of excellent character are able to pursue happiness effectively because they discipline themselves to reject facile definitions of the end worthy of pursuit. Then, regardless of temptation, they focus their actions and behavior on achieving their self-defined good end.

Throughout this book, I offer examples of contemporary Americans who, consciously or not, are Aristotelian in the self-disciplined ways they pursue happiness. These ordinary, yet extraordinary, people demonstrate how each of us can apply Aristotle's lessons to our personal pursuit of the good life.

Consider William Mayer, a former bank executive, who felt he was ready to "retire" at age 50. At that point, he made an Aristotelian decision. He concluded he would be happiest in the long run if he divided his time into equal thirds: the first devoted to his personal development and to his family, the second to nonprofit institutions, and the third to his continuing business interests. A decade later, he has disciplined himself to stick with this life plan. He has engaged continually in formal and informal educational activities and is an avid skier, chef, and devoted family man. Among his many nonprofit activities, he serves as a trustee of the University of Maryland; significantly, he gives time and knowledge to such organizations as generously and thoughtfully as he gives money. In his remaining time, he runs a venture capital firm. From an Aristotelian perspective, Mayer is virtuous not so much because of

what he does, but because he consciously planned how to live a good life, then dedicated himself to the hard work of following that plan in the face of distractions and temptations to do otherwise.

Similarly, Dr. Grace Gabe was enjoying a successful medical career in her early fifties, when she realized she had developed only a part of her potential. She found it rewarding, but not sufficient for happiness, to be a respected physician. So in the prime of her career and once her kids were out of the nest, she gave up the practice of medicine to devote herself to becoming a violinist. Her daily “practice” now is on her instrument, and she performs regularly with a chamber group. Dr. Gabe also has coauthored a book about families and is an avid devotee of the arts, constantly learning ever more about opera, drama, painting, and sculpture. A decade after she “retired,” Dr. Gabe enrolled in a full load of undergraduate English courses at Harvard, studying poetry, early Shakespearean plays, Dante, and the Bible as literature—in effect, studying what she had missed years earlier in her technical, premed training. And, no, she isn’t rich.

In his late fifties, attorney Norton Tennille set aside a successful D.C. law partnership to create an innovative educational enrichment program for disadvantaged students in Philippi, a tough suburb in Cape Town, South Africa. Prior to 1994, black South Africans were forced to live in such segregated shantytowns, often located on the fringes of all-white cities. Although free to live where they want, today’s poor people raised in those ghettos lack the skills and job opportunities needed to move elsewhere. Visiting Cape Town in the mid-nineties, Tennille understood the sad reality that the end of apartheid was not leading to a great improvement in the standard of living for most African city dwellers. But how could one person, acting without significant resources, begin to make a dent in the vicious cycle that condemns so many to a life sentence of poverty? Tennille sensed that education was the key. He began by organizing an after-school debate program, encouraging high school students to learn more about the important policy issues facing their new democracy. Through debate, the students learned how to speak and write better English, to polish their study and research skills, and to develop the habits and discipline to help them get into universities and, ultimately, find good jobs.

Gradually the program has grown, and now Tennille and his wife, Jane, manage a variety of educational enrichment activities, ranging from supporting nine preschool crèches; to offering grade school and high school art, science, environmental, and cultural programs; to providing leadership and career development projects for high school graduates. Norton Tennille today has a lower standard of living and no longer gets the rush from being part of the “inside the beltway” action, but he has a higher quality of life,

one in which he is using a fuller range of his many talents and helping hundreds of others to develop theirs.

One needn't leave one's country or give up one's career to find meaning and purpose in life. Buie Seawell, an ordained Presbyterian minister and practicing attorney who along the way has served as chief aide to a United States senator and later to a governor of Colorado, still has a hand in the political arena, performs the odd wedding, and keeps his legal credentials current. But in his fifties, he realized that the one activity he could continue to engage in successfully throughout his entire life is learning. And because the best way to keep learning is through teaching, he took a post on the faculty of the University of Denver's business school, where he teaches in a critically acclaimed ethics program designed to prevent future corporate scandals like the Enron/Arthur Andersen debacle. Significantly, in midlife, Seawell came to understand how to plan for and consciously pursue the good life as the result of reading Aristotle.

An obvious question: Why shouldn't readers simply pick up a volume of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and read it on their own, without my filter and interpretation? Clearly that would be preferable if it weren't for the fact that his writings can be tough sledding for modern readers. Aristotle's language can seem arcane, but the real problem is that he didn't have a word processor! When he wanted to redraft a chapter, he had to hire a scribe, who would scratch the master's words on a scroll, a costly and time-consuming process. What has come down to us in the main, then, are probably Aristotle's first or second drafts, his notes, or possibly student transcriptions of his lectures. In short, Aristotle is hard to read, and his words require careful attention, analysis, and interpretation.

That kind of close reading is particularly difficult for those of us who attended college in the sixties and seventies. In general, we were the first university-educated generation who didn't study the classics of Western thought and literature. Early in the 20th century, Plato, Aristotle, and the other great thinkers of the Western tradition were at the core of higher education; but as the century progressed, their works were relegated to the periphery of the curriculum. By the 1960s, Plato had been replaced by Herbert Marcuse, and Aristotle had been replaced by Norman O. Brown. I'm not sure our professors did us any favor by making such trendy trades.

So, for philosophical virgins who have never read classical philosophy and for those who don't have the patience to tackle Aristotle's *Ethics* on their own, these pages are my interpretation of what Aristotle says practical people need to ask themselves if

they want to lead a good life. As an advisor to professionals and politicians, he took special care to describe how 4th-century B.C. Athenians might apply his philosophy to the conduct of their daily lives. In doing so, he anticipated many of the core findings of modern psychology and economics. But as practical as he was, he was not compelled to face such modern issues as dual-career families, the management of large business corporations, high technology, income tax, and IPOs. To bridge the millennia, I've attempted to show how his insights are applicable to the challenges faced by practical people in the 3rd millennium A.D. Consequently, this book is as much a transposition of Aristotle's thoughts to a modern context as it is a summary of what he said way back then. Think of it as "Variations on Themes by Aristotle."

## ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

Aristotle offers a disciplined way to frame the question, How can I make the best use of the decades I have remaining? Because most people have little experience answering such questions, he encouraged his own students to begin their personal analyses with reference to the lives of the Fortunate Few, men and women of their era who had most successfully achieved wealth, fame, power, and pleasure. This initial test was designed to help them determine if such individuals were models worthy of emulation. Following that precedent, we, too, examine the lives of high-profile members of the boomer generation—politicians like Rudy Giuliani, Bill and Hillary Clinton, and George W. Bush, and business moguls like Carly Fiorina, Larry Ellison, and Jim Clark—asking ourselves if we could become happy living as they have chosen to live. In doing so, we must keep in mind that our goal is not to emulate the lives of the rich and famous; instead, the purpose of the exercise is to help us clarify what paths to happiness we want to pursue. Aristotle asks the Rest of Us to test ourselves to see if we really believe that fame, wealth, power, or excessive sensual pleasure will make us truly happy.

In the early chapters of the book, we critically examine Aristotle's controversial conclusion that what is missing in the lives of most adults is the fulfillment of our potential—and what we must therefore do is to engage in developmental activities leading to that fulfillment. Because this conclusion is neither obvious nor what most people want to hear, we must examine his reasoning, seeking to answer as far as possible the thoughtful objections his critics offer to it. We analyze the pros and cons and costs and benefits of the many other, traditional ways in which people typically seek to be happy: accumulating and spending money, pursuing leisure-time physical pleasures, and persevering with unfinished quests for power, acclaim, and approval.



Having done that analysis, we then are able to ask the personal question, Would Aristotle's alternative path bring me happiness? Assuming the answer is yes, the last chapters deal with practical applications of Aristotle's philosophy to our own lives. It would be convenient if we could simply skip to these easier and more practical chapters; alas, they are useless without the benefit of the harder and more analytical chapters that precede them. Moreover, because his ideas have become an intrinsic part of Western thought, his conclusions may sound like platitudes if they are taken without a review of the logical process by which he arrives at them. Indeed, it is through the process of understanding how and why he reaches his conclusions that we develop the self-discipline to make the changes in our lives that may make us happy. As actor Will Smith wrote in 2002:

Recently I read Aristotle's *Poetics*. It made me reevaluate all of the things I thought I knew, and it really sparked a fire in me.... It made me realize that there's no reason to reinvent the wheel. Every emotion you'll ever feel, everything you're gonna do in your life has been done for thousands of years.... That book made me reevaluate every aspect of my life.

So if we struggle with Aristotle's exercises, we need only keep in mind that they are necessary to get us into shape for the big event of our lives: planning what we should do to find the fulfillment that thus far has eluded us.

One contemporary writer claims that the purpose of philosophy is "consolation." Aristotle disagrees: Consolation is the purpose of money; the purpose of philosophy is to serve as a practical guide to action. He called his action-oriented subject "ethics," but that term may be misleading to modern readers. Today we typically think of ethics in the context of making such decisions as when doctors should pull the plug on terminal patients or when it's okay for lawyers to double dip. Although the importance of such questions shouldn't be minimized, and Aristotle himself was concerned with their Classical Era equivalents, he meant something more by the term. Aristotelian ethics concern moral decisions related to how we should allocate the limited time of our lives. We each must plan how we will allocate our energies among such activities as earning, learning, playing, being with friends and family, and participating in our community. As we make these choices, Aristotle warns, we will fail to achieve "the chief good"—that is, we will fail to be happy—if we pursue the wrong ends.

To Aristotle, ethical thinking begins with a conscious identification of the long-term consequences of continuing along one's present course of action. If we believe those consequences will be negative, the task then is to apply our moral imaginations to

creating better alternatives. But most of us don't create those alternatives, or if we do, we don't act on them. Though most of us wish to pursue the good life, we nonetheless say, "I'll wait until I'm rich," or "I'll wait 'til I retire." But that is almost always too late. Aristotle says that the time to begin leading the good life is now. One reason most people don't start while there is still ample time to complete the journey is because they don't know how to begin. That's because the common methods for choosing where to head in life—"going with your gut," reading signs from "On High," doing what "Mom" did—are too subjective and risky to give us the confidence needed to act. The value of Aristotle's ethical philosophy is that it provides a logical rationale and time-tested framework to get us going where we know we should be headed.


Aristotle also shows us that a reason we fail to find happiness is that we are looking in the wrong places. We commonly assume that happiness is a transient feeling, the presence of pleasure and the absence of pain, but he shows us that true happiness is, in fact, mental not physical, enduring not ephemeral, and rational not emotional. Happiness, Aristotle demonstrates, is what good people do, the sum of the best activities of which humans are capable. It is not, as commonly assumed, what we feel or what happens to us.

Aristotle concludes that if we don't know what happiness is we are destined not to find it. But if we have some understanding of "the chief good," he asks, "Will not that knowledge have some influence on our lives? Shall we not, like archers who have a mark to aim at, be more likely to hit on what is right?"

The exercises described in these pages are designed to help readers identify their own bull's-eyes of life—and to put to use Aristotle's insights on how they can improve their skill at hitting them.

## GETTING STARTED

In helping adults develop life plans, mythologist David Oldfield begins by assigning a useful exercise that readers of this book might try as a "warmup" for the tougher Aristotelian exercises in the chapters to follow. Oldfield suggests that we each prepare a one-page "map" visually illustrating the course of our life. The intent of this symbolic map is to show graphically where we have been, where we are now, what roadblocks we have had to overcome, and what life-changing experiences we have had along life's journey. Importantly, the map should illustrate where we plan to go next and indicate our ultimate target (the destination where we believe we would find true happiness). Because this assignment is not as easy as it may seem, and we are unlikely to find the results fully satisfactory on the first try, it may be helpful to do this exercise with

a friend or a group of friends at similar stages in life. In the course of the chapters that follow, the questions Aristotle raises should help us to develop robust action plans relating to the parts of our maps concerned with the future. 

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## WELCOME NEW MEMBERS

**Gregg Hodge**

**Cynthia Martone**

***We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.***

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