

ARISTOTLE ON VIRTUE AND HAPPINESS

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Part II of II

Now, says Aristotle, there are three principal means to happiness: acquiring the real goods that constitute happiness; being virtuous, or cultivating the habit of making good choices; and being blessed by good fortune. An essential element in acquiring those real goods is the habit of making choices among the things that are presented to you in order to create that temporal whole. That is what Aristotle means by the word *virtue*, the good habit of freely choosing the right means to that end.

The other factor in happiness is good fortune, and here is what is so extraordinary about Aristotle. Almost every other moralist would say that it is quite enough to be virtuous. Aristotle says no, that virtue makes a *man* good but not a *life* good. Take the case of Priam, the king of Troy: a virtuous man, a virtuous father, a virtuous husband, and a virtuous king; but he died with his city destroyed, his wife taken into slavery, and his sons killed. Was this

his fault? No, bad fortune. He was a virtuous man, but not through any fault of his own, he did not have a good life because it did not end well. Some of the goods that belong to happiness are not within our power. One can recognize when fortune is smiling and take advantage of it. Some people are slow to take advantage of the good twists of fortune and miss those opportunities. We can make good choices and yet all kinds of accidents can happen to us, no matter how virtuous we are.

Each of these two factors, virtue and fortune (good habits and good luck) are necessary for happiness, but neither one by itself is sufficient. A man with good fortune but bad habits of choice will not achieve a happy life. A man with virtue, or good habits of choice, but beset by bad fortune will not lead a happy life. This is not only good common sense but it has a bearing on the tragic aspects of any life, even for the virtuous man, who is beset by misfortune.

Only Aristotle says that virtue is not enough. For example, other theories of happiness take the view that the purpose of organized society is to ensure the happiness of its citizens. But if virtue were enough, the state could not contribute to it. The state cannot make you virtuous. In the historic view that virtue is enough, Epictetus, the slave, is as happy as Marcus Aurelius, the emperor. But Aristotle says that a man must have some other goods that organized society can help in providing, even for the virtuous man. Take the simple case of health. You can be as virtuous as you want about watching your diet, exercising, and keeping your body clean, but if the organized society in which you live is not concerned about giving you health care and does not provide a healthy environment, your health can be ruined.

There are many other things that no individual can provide for himself that the state must provide in order to promote human happiness. But the state cannot make human beings virtuous, since virtue is a habit of good choice and the habit is formed by free choices. The state certainly can support the development of such choices, but it is never, by itself, sufficient. Only in Aristotle's theory of happiness is there any point to the state serving human welfare and promoting happiness. If virtue were enough, the state would have no function so far as happiness is concerned.

What is virtue? It is a habit of choice, says Aristotle. We are choosing all the time and we do it by habit most of the time. The number of times we are conscious of making choices is very small, but because we have habits of choice, the choices we have made become habituated. Every moment of our lives we are choosing to

do this or that. The choice is virtuous, says Aristotle, if the choice is for an important real good in terms of our life's development. The virtuous man is one whose choices are always directed to that end.

The three aspects of virtue are justice, temperance, and courage. One must desire the right end and one must make judgments, or be prudent, about the right means to it. Sometimes there are wrong means, means that are ill-adapted to the end. Prudence is an intellectual virtue judging about means. Prudence is involved in all the other virtues because the means that one chooses are the end in the process of becoming.

In the last chapter of the sixth book of the *Ethics*, Aristotle says you cannot be good without being practically wise, and you cannot be practically wise without being good. He means by *wise* not philosophical wisdom but prudence—practical wisdom. For example, there are good thieves and bad thieves, clever thieves and bunglers. The question is, Is the very clever thief, the thief who knows how to steal and get away with it, a prudent thief? No, says Aristotle, he is not a prudent thief because he cannot be prudent if he is a thief. He can be a clever thief but not a prudent thief because prudence means choosing the right means to the right end, not the right means to a wrong end. Just as you cannot be a prudent thief, you cannot be a prudent coward or a prudently unjust man, or a prudent intemperate man.

If you are prudent, you must have the other virtues, and similarly, in order to be just, temperate, or courageous, you must make a prudent judgment about means. In the case of temperance and courage, says Aristotle, you must choose between indulging in certain immediate pleasures or postponing them for the sake of a long-term good. In the case of courage, you must at times be willing to undergo certain pains for the long-term good.

If I have virtue, I must be making prudent choices in terms of what is really good for my whole life and to do that I must not only have temperance and courage, I also must have justice. If I am unjust, I am not really thinking about what is good for me. When I act unjustly, it indicates that the direction of my whole life is not toward the *totum bonum*, but toward something else—toward the accumulation of wealth, as if wealth were an end, not a means, or toward the accumulation of power, as if power were a real good. If that is the case, I cannot be temperate or courageous in the full meaning of those terms. Although I appear to be injuring only others, in fact I am injuring myself as well.

Why should I be just? I should be just because being just is part of pursuing my own happiness. The pursuit of happiness is cooperative, not competitive. Happiness is the only thing that you can pursue without doing other people in because of pursuing it. If you pursue power as an end, for example, you may step on other people in the course of pursuing it. If you pursue unlimited wealth as an end, you may be tempted to step on other people in the process of doing that. But if you pursue happiness, you cannot possibly step on anybody else. In fact, you will help those within the range of your conduct to pursue happiness also. Happiness is the only completely cooperative pursuit.

Those two points—that the pursuit of happiness is cooperative and that virtue is not enough—are not only good answers to the moral question, but also provide a very important understanding of an extraordinary line in the Declaration of Independence. “We are endowed with certain inalienable rights,” Jefferson wrote. “Among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” Locke enumerated the basic rights as life, liberty, and estates. Jefferson dropped the word *estates*. James Mason, in drafting Virginia’s constitution, said that among the rights are the rights to pursue and *attain* happiness. Jefferson dropped the word *attain*. *We* have a right to pursue happiness, Jefferson said, but not a right to attain it because obviously it is not within our power to attain it. He must have understood Aristotle’s meaning of happiness. In other words, Jefferson is saying in that extraordinary line that we are endowed with certain inalienable rights and, among these, are life, liberty and the right to anything else we naturally need in order to pursue happiness.

Among those things are certain goods that society can help us achieve. Jefferson says that, to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men. For example, I have a natural need for knowledge. Do I have a right to knowledge? No, because no state can give me knowledge. What I do have a right to is help from the state in gaining knowledge. I have a right to schooling. I am deprived if I am deprived of schooling. Schooling is an instrumental but not indispensable means to knowledge. I could, in fact, gain knowledge without schooling, but I am helped in my pursuit of knowledge by the advantages of schooling. The state at that point is an accessory to my pursuit of happiness.

Is power over other men a real good? If we really did need power in order to pursue happiness, we would then have a natural right to it. Jefferson tells us that the state should try to secure our natural rights. But how can it secure the right of all its citizens to have power over others? That is not cooperative, but conflictful and

competitive. If I have power over you, you do not have power over me. One of us has to be dissatisfied. The goods that are really good for us are the ones that all of us can possess without excluding anyone else from possessing them. Power is not that kind of good.

An understanding of that fundamental proposition in the Declaration of Independence is closely connected with Aristotle's conception of happiness and of natural rights. Natural desires indicate what is really good for us as opposed to what is apparently good for us merely because we desire it. We have a natural right to those goods which by nature we need in order to lead a good life.

Are the only things that we should desire those which we need by nature? Is every man's happiness identical with everyone else's? The answer is no, because in the complex lives we lead, we are different individuals with different temperaments and different wants. We have the same needs but different wants. Among our wants are many innocuous things. They are innocuous because we can want and get them without interfering with the pursuit of happiness by others. The individual pursuit of happiness is the same for all in that it involves striving for the same real goods. It is different in that we have different acquired desires which are not inimical to our pursuit of happiness or injurious to others. We are proscribed from wanting that which can be achieved only by injuring others or that which prevents us from achieving the *totum bonum*.

Another way of saying this is in terms of what I call the main activities of life: sleep, work, play, leisure, idling, and rest. Sleep consists of all biologically necessary activities: eating, slumbering, washing one's self, cleaning one's self, exercising. Those activities occupy a certain amount of time and involve some of the real goods—the health and vigor of one's body. Whereas sleep is biologically necessary, work is only economically necessary. I use the word *work* in a limited sense: that which is necessary to gain the means of subsistence. In this sense, work is purely a means to an end. Subsistence-work has no justification except that it is exchanged either for money or for the commodities which are the means of subsistence. If you are not equipped with inherited wealth, then you must spend at least six or eight hours a day in sleep and six to eight hours a day in work. That leaves another eight or ten hours of free time.

The next two basic activities are playing and leisuring, or more correctly, playing and leisure-work. Playing is good because it is an activity in which we engage simply for the pleasure of doing it. It is the only activity that has no extrinsic end. When play is relax-

ing or when play removes the strains of tension, it is therapeutic play, it is not real play. Real play is done for its own sake.

Most people think that the only way they can fill time is sleeping, working, and playing. That is wrong. A life built upon only those three things is really an aborted life. Imagine that you had to sleep six hours a day and you did not have to work for a living. What would you do with the rest of your time? Play?

So we come to the fourth kind of activity, leisure-work. Most people do not have wealth without toil, though some are very fortunate to earn their subsistence by doing what they want to do. They are fortunate because although they may think they are working for a living, they are really not. They are engaged in leisure-work and getting paid for it. They would continue to do exactly what they are doing if wealth were secured for them. If that is not the case, they are working, not leisuring. I earn my living by editing, writing, lecturing, and teaching. If I did not have to earn a living I would do exactly the same things. I would not change my life at all. (If people didn't pay me to lecture, I'd pay them to listen.) A good life need involve no subsistence-work. A good life must have three things: sleep, in its broadest sense; play; and leisure-work.

What is the essential character of leisure-work? Subsistence-work is for an extrinsic compensation. But leisure-work is intrinsically rewarding. It does not have to be extrinsically compensated. It is the kind of activity that produces the things which make a life good. As Aristotle says, one plays for the sake of work and works for the sake of leisure.

The two other activities of life are idling and rest. Idling is a very important element. When the motor of an automobile is turning over but the gear is not engaged, the car is going nowhere; it is idling. When I come in a room and sit down with an empty stare on my face, I am idling. I do that a certain amount of time every day because all kinds of things occur to me. I sit there and do nothing; I don't try to think but I let the motor run without going anywhere. Many creative things happen in idling.

To understand the meaning of the last activity, rest, one must refer to Genesis. On the seventh day, Genesis says, God rested. You know that God did not sleep, work, play, leisure, or idle on the seventh day. What did God do? When He rested He looked at the world and said it was good, very good. He admired it. Rest, to put it another way, is contemplation. The third commandment is to keep the Sabbath day holy as a day of rest. In Orthodox Judaism, not an ounce of work is done on the Sabbath. You can't even light

the stove. You can't cut a piece of bread. You must do nothing. If these things have to be done, they have to be done by a Gentile, not by a Jew. The only thing you can do on the Sabbath is pray. The day is spent in prayer, which is rest. Most of us have very little of it in our lives.

The greatest of the goods of happiness are the things we create in our leisure pursuits. All leisure activities are creative. The leisure worker learns, grows morally, intellectually, and spiritually. For example, friendship is a creative activity. Do you think friendship is easy? No, friendship is a hard job. You cannot have a large number of good friends because you have to devote time to them, you have to devote thought to them, and you have to devote activity to them. It is a creative activity that is spiritually enriching, but it is work, leisure-work.


Sex can be sleep, play, work, or leisure. When it is performed as a biological necessity, it is sleep; when it is performed just for sexual, sensual pleasure, it is play; when, as in prostitution, it is performed to earn a living, it is work; and when it is performed as an aspect of love, it is leisure. So you cannot look at the activity and say what it is. You have to ask how it is being done and for what reason it is being done.

Augustine, in a single sentence, sums it all up by saying, "Happy is the man who has all that he desires provided that he desires nothing amiss." In other words, he has desired what he ought to desire and not desired what he ought not to desire. The Aristotelian way of saying this is: "Happy is the man who has all that he desires virtuously." Moral virtue is the habit of desiring nothing amiss.

The Christian view, of course, is that this life is a vale of tears and suffering, and at its best, happiness in this life is a very poor thing indeed, mixed with tragedy and grief. As creatures of God with immortal souls, our end is not in this life, but hereafter. Our end is the vision of God, if we achieve what Christians call *salvation*. For this end, ordinary moral virtue is not enough. You must have the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity. How do you acquire these theological virtues? By what you do? Not at all. They are gifts of God's grace. The doctrine of grace and salvation is very strict. You cannot earn salvation, but you can predispose yourself by what you do to be receptive to divine grace.

The pursuit of eternal happiness is quite different from the pursuit of temporal happiness. Can one and the same man aim at these two ends, one in this life and one in the next life? Is it possible to live

so that one can achieve a good earthly life and also achieve eternal salvation? I do not see any conflict between those two, particularly if you have God's grace. If you do not have God's grace, you may achieve one but not the other.

If you think of happiness as a whole life—twenty-four hours a day, so many days a week, so many weeks a month, so many months a year and so many years to a life—it is a temporal whole, and virtue consists in making those choices from moment to moment that will produce a whole good life, if it is attended, of course, by the accidents of good fortune. 

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR



Max,

One idea for the website: an area that has pictures of members' Great Books libraries. My humble, but highly valued one, is attached. Other members like myself may find it interesting to see others' libraries.

Paul Baier

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