



Mortimer J. Adler

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THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

Aristotle was asked how much educated men were superior to the uneducated: “As much,” said he, “as the living are to the dead.” —Diogenes Laertius

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ARISTOTLE'S *ETHICS*
BOOK I: THE THEORY OF HAPPINESS

Part I of II

by Mortimer J. Adler

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, whom we discussed in the preceding film, 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.”

Part II, next issue.

NOTE:

This article is a transcription from a video cassette entitled, "**Aristotle's Ethics** - Book I: The Theory of Happiness Encyclopaedia Britannica's Classical Greece - Lesson 3." (1962) Written and presented by Mortimer Adler, this is an ideal program for students and children. (30 min. video in color, with animation and music) \$30.00 donation.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Hello Max,

Robert Putnam wrote an article "Bowling Alone" in 1995, <http://muse.jhu.edu/demo/journal_of_democracy/v006/putnam.html> which talked about social capital and its decline in the United States.

He now has a book out with the same title, and a web site, <<http://www.bowlingalone.com>>

By analogy with notions of physical capital and human capital—tools and training that enhance individual productivity—the core idea of social capital theory is that social networks have value.

Participation in civic organizations such as bridge clubs, league bowling, and great books discussion groups have declined significantly since the 1950s and 1960s. Putnam believes that the vigor of civic life is a strong predictor of the performance of democratic government.

If you aren't already familiar with this, I think you might be interested in it. What are the implications for The Center in particular and democracy in general?

The experiments we're trying with the Center: the newsletter, the Online seminars, and so on, are ways of building new communities with new

technologies. These are good and should continue. But I don't think they are an adequate substitute for physical associations such as Boy Scouts, school PTAs, or neighborhood discussion groups. And without improvements in civic involvement of whatever kind, I think it will be very difficult to improve and strengthen democracy in the U.S.

Putnam does not have any quick list of easy fixes. He acknowledges there is continuing debate about why civic engagement differs from place to place and from time to time. I think it is worth further thought and investigation.

Regards,

Greg Shubert

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As always, we welcome your comments.
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