



Mortimer J. Adler

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THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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Happy is the man who, in the course of a complete life,  
attains everything he desires, provided he desire nothing  
amiss.  
—St. Augustine

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## ARISTOTLE'S *ETHICS*

### BOOK I: THE THEORY OF HAPPINESS

#### Part II of II

by Mortimer J. Adler

**T**he 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 cooperative, 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. **TGIO**

**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**

(An old letter we thought you might enjoy)

Dear Dr. Adler:

I am writing on behalf of a group of construction workers (mostly, believe it or not, plumbers!) who have finally found a teacher worth listening to. While we cannot all agree whether or not we would hire you as an apprentice, we can all agree that we would love to listen to you during our lunch breaks. I am sure that it is just due to our well-known ignorance as tradesmen that not a single one of us had ever heard of you until one Sunday afternoon when we were watching public television and Bill Moyers came on with SIX GREAT IDEAS. We listened intensely and soon became addicted and have been ever since. We never knew a world of ideas existed. The study of ideas has completely turned around our



impression of education. We only wish we had not wasted 25-35 years in the process. But we do have you to thank for the next 35-40 years that we have before us to study and implement the great ideas into our lives and into the lives of our communities. We have grown to love the ideas behind our country's composition, and since reading and discussing numerous of your books, we have all become devout Constitutionalists. We thank you and we applaud you. We are certain that the praise of a few plumbers could hardly compare with the notoriety that you deserve from distinguished colleagues but we salute you just the same. One last thought—we may be plumbers during the day, but at lunch time and at night and on the weekends, we are Philosophers at Large.

God bless you!

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**As always, we welcome your comments.**  
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