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## ARISTOTLE'S PHILOSOPHY OF HUMAN LIFE

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In recent years, ethics has left the purely academic setting and has entered the fields of public administration, business, environment, politics, and so forth. Speaking very generally, ethical writings attributed to Aristotle have come down to us in three forms, known respectively as the *Nicomachean*, the *Eudemian*, and the *Great Ethics*. In this paper, I am focusing on a character required for a person to achieve happiness in his or her everyday conduct and thereby to live a virtuous life. I will outline what is the ultimate aim of Aristotle's ethical human life or virtuous life. Ethical training, according to Aristotle, is an indispensable foundation for political life, or rather perhaps for justice, virtues and citizenship. Today, the demand in politics requires that boundaries of personal morality be redefined.

This paper is then concerned with the philosophical aspects of the morality of public and political life. I will set out what constitutes good (bad) and right (wrong) behaviour in human life and why.

### **The basis of what is morally good/virtuous for man**

Every man's action and every man's pursuit in life is said to aim at some good; and for this reason, the good has rightly been declared to be that at which all things aim<sup>1</sup>. If there is any one end at which all deliberative activities ultimately aim at, I ought to make an attempt to determine at all events to outline what exactly this end is and what difference it makes from the other ends. If asked to name one common and ultimate aim in human life, one end to which all our actions are directed, everyone would doubtless agree in replying 'happiness'. Well, so far as the word goes there is general agreement that happiness is actively in accordance with perfect virtuous life. I am then led to an analysis of the nature of virtue and to a discussion of the two species of virtue, that is, intellectual and moral virtue.

Intellectual virtue owes both its inception and its growth chiefly to instruction, and for this very reason an individual needs time and experience to be able to attain it. Moral goodness, on the other

hand, is the result of habit, from which it has actually got its name, being a slight modification of the word 'ethos', which means a character. The ethical aspect of any man appears through the development of his or her character<sup>2</sup>. A character makes it obvious that none of the moral virtues arises in man by nature. All those faculties with which nature endows us, are first acquired as potentialities by chance, and only later they result to our actualisation. In all, we are adapted by nature to receive them, and are made perfect by habit. This is evident in the case of the virtue or goodness that we acquire. We do acquire virtue by first exercising it, just as it happens in the arts. Anything that we have to learn to do we learn by the actual doing of it. Similarly, we become just or fair by performing just or fair actions. As we also become morally good, it is by performing morally good judgements and acting upon them accordingly. As a matter of fact, to discover the nature of moral principles is an intellectual task, similar to the discovery of mathematical truths. Just as the latter cannot be known by untrained man, though he or she may accidentally hit upon the correct action. So the former cannot be known either. In order to discover what is moral, a man must first be trained in order to be able to acquire certain kinds of knowledge, that is intellect. It is as a result of training or education that one has the capacity to know what is morally virtuous life. Similarly, a doctor will never know which medicine is said to be good for curing a sick person without having been educated and trained to become a medical doctor.

The highest, or final purpose, is the rational perfection of man through the control of the intellect over the senses. Since every man's task is to become good, or to achieve the highest human good, that is, happiness which is an activity of the soul in accordance with virtuous life. I then understand virtue in this context as a characteristic of a person whose actions are in such a way that are generally regarded praiseworthy or morally good.

Only the consequences or results count when assessing a certain belief, action, practice, etc. in terms of their being morally right or wrong. For example, an action is right if it results in the general happiness, and wrong if it does the reverse. For example, virtue cannot always be a good condition between extremes such as murder, betrayal, adultery, etc. are not subject to the mean at all.

Now the question is, how would we know that one course of action will be more right than any other or how would we know that a

certain act will bring about happiness as the result of committing it rather than any other act.

To answer this question, for both Plato and Aristotle, ethical and political questions are posed in terms of such actions as the good for man, the ultimate good, or what is good in itself ought to exist for its own sake. Both Plato and Aristotle believed that this enquiry leads both to a way of *life* for the individual and to a conception of a good society. As we all know that the approach of virtue based theory is one of the oldest in moral decision-making. By means outdated, this approach, which is very influential among early Greek Philosophers, has received renewed attention in recent years. For instance, the mission is to maintain a high level of integrity in life which is an absolute necessity just like keeping the good of the people and taking care of their welfare to make them happy is a practical and rational wise thing to do.

Happiness is something which accompanies certain activities. It is a byproduct of the way in which people rationally or prudentially engage in their relationship with each other. Although this changes from person to person, to be happy, people should prescribe conduct in accordance with the virtuous, courageous, moderate life with good temper, that forbids conduct which is vicious. To decide what is the best possible life for any man, one must ask what is a proper function of him or her in life. Once good, then you will be able to perform man's functions excellently. The ability to control, it can be either by thought, desires, passions, emotions, etc. So the rational or wise person will be the one who can control his or her desires, thoughts, passion, emotion by rationally adopting the mean between extremes in their daily conduct.

### **Aristotle's practical wisdom**

Man's possession of rationality helps to determine the function of man in his or her human life, since the work of a man is accomplished in accordance with practical wisdom and moral virtue that ensures that the aim is right. The practical wisdom applied is the means to its end which enables a man to be able to point out the end, and then do what conduces to it<sup>3</sup>. Whatever the truth about ends and means, that is, *phronesis* and moral virtue, are closely and reciprocally related in the sense that neither can exist without the other. It is then evident that it is impossible to be genuinely good without any wisdom of how to be morally good. Otherwise, the

function of the *phronimos* has been succinctly summed up by Ackrill as follows:

The *phronimos* has to decide what to do in particular and in often complicated circumstances. A person must be able to seize the facts, weigh them up, consider alternatives, and reach the right decision. This requires experience, an eye for what is and what is not essential, a sense of what is fitting<sup>4</sup>.

The *phronimos* is, in general terms, one capable of deliberating well about what will benefit himself, not just in separate actions but regarding the good life in general. A more practical implication of this concerns the knowledge of such things as the relevant areas of happiness.

A brief reminder of what Aristotle has said about the subject of the philosophic human life, which outlines the true nature of happiness, the final goal of human life, which is chosen for its further end, is becoming happy at the end of the day. If happiness is an activity according to virtue, it must be in accordance with the highest of the virtues (if there are many virtues, then according to the best and most perfect of them), that is, the virtue of humanity's best part, and we philosophers, Aristotle's followers, no longer need to be told what this is.

In a nutshell, what is good for man, must be the ultimate end or object of human life: Something that is in itself completely satisfying. Consequently, if there is any one thing that is the end of all actions, this will be the practical good if there are more than one<sup>5</sup>. If there is only one final end, this will be the Supreme Good of which everyone is searching; and if there is more than one, it will be the most final of the (supreme good).

Happiness, more than anything else, is thought to be such an end we always choose and never for any other reason, but for the sake of our happiness. It is a generally accepted view that the perfect good is self-sufficient, being the end to which our actions are directed. Happiness, therefore, being found to be something final and self-sufficient, is the end all actions aim at. From the point of view of self-sufficiency, I do not mean that which is sufficient for a man by himself, one who lives a solitary life, but also for parents, children, wives, and in general for his friends and fellow citizens, since man is born for citizenship. Yet it needs the external goods as well; for it is impossible, or not easy, to do noble acts without the

proper equipment. It is an end for all purposeful actions. This means that, it is understood to be a sense of satisfaction that comes from doing well in a particular activity, or more generally, in human life<sup>6</sup>. A person might not be happy wholly independent of worldly factors like wealth, health, etc. Not all things that makes people feel good are good in themselves. There is a denial that happiness does result from moderate behaviour. For example, there are many cases where immoderate behaviour is more likely to give rise to happiness. In a war or any competitive event one wins or defeats his or her enemies, and as a result become happy at the end of the day. Irrational people, for example, are more happy than any other people on earth. They do things without reasoning. For instance, to keep their goodness, some people become irrational by maximising harm instead of minimising harm for the others to be happy likewise.

For the benefit of those who do not know, and of course, thirsty for wisdom, and may care to learn from me, the lesson is of how to live in peace with themselves and in peaceful co-operation or, as the case may be, in competition with their neighbours. Always with tolerance for their strange ways, with respect for their weird ideas, and with some sympathy for their real suffering here and now, as if they are all brothers and sisters of the same Mother Earth who needs our constant care.

### **Aristotle again on man's function**

To say, however, that the Supreme Good is happiness will probably appear a truism; I still require a more explicit account of what constitutes happiness out of any man's function. Perhaps then, I may arrive at the correct answer by ascertaining what is man's function. In order to achieve happiness, all this may suggest that philosophy or practical wisdom is, after all, firmly embedded in ethics, and in particular, Aristotle is offering a fairly characterised account of utilitarianism: The only ultimate good thing in the world is the happiness of sentient beings generally. This only ultimate moral rule is one enjoining us to maximise the sum of happiness<sup>7</sup>. Happiness is to be an individual's goal, not in the generous sense that an individual has to aim at a general increase in the commodity, but in the selfish sense that an individual seeks the enlargement of his or her own portion of it. Anybody who has some function or business to perform, is thought to reside in that function; and similarly, it may be held that the good of man resides in the function of man, if he has a function.

It goes without saying that happiness is something which accompanies certain activities. It could be a bi-product of the way in which we engage in our relationships with other people. But you could find men selfishly producing things for themselves, not for others, because they themselves want happiness. I can also stress the fact that the actual behaviour, that counts as a courageous act, will vary from person to person. This theory might be called egoistic *eudaemonism* and is worlds away from the noble sentiments of Bentham and Mill (like every version of the utilitarian doctrine, the preference utilitarian believes that something is morally good if and only if it results in the greatest happiness for the greatest number; or more importantly for utilitarian theorists, bad if it results to the detriment of the majority) and it is, I think, well removed from anything that we might be tempted to think of as a system of morality. To be able to decide what is the best possible life for man, one must ask what is the proper function of man.

I suppose, Aristotle's account of happiness is as follows: A man is 'happy' if and only if, over some considerable period of time, he or she frequently performs with some success the most perfect of typically human tasks. Man, as a rational animal, has a task which is therefore a rational activity. Man acts rationally either insofar as man bases his actions in some way upon reasoning, or insofar as he indulges in some sort of systematically going through logical or reasoning process which is a tool of clear thinking that is required for happiness in human life. This man, in the first place, is said to be following or obeying his reasons, and in the second case, he is said to be exercising or putting his reasons into practice. As the goal of rational human conduct is *eudaemonia*, that is, the goal of morality to develop in the individual the dispositions or virtues that lead to man's happiness.

Everyone has to have the necessities of life, and of course, being human, a man will need physical well-being<sup>8</sup>. For human nature cannot be sustained on thought alone. Therefore, good health, food and other amenities are indispensable. Of course, in their relations with each other, men must act in accordance with justice, courage and all the other virtues, making agreements, offering services, and so forth, and must acquire *phronesis*, that is, a practical good sense. For the moral virtue is inseparable and mutually dependent. Philosophers themselves, insofar as they are humans who lives among other men, choose to act morally<sup>9</sup>. For the preference utilitarian, the general happiness is to be calculated by considering what action, on balance and after reflection of the

relevant facts, maximises individual preferences. Putting this very differently, as human beings we cannot live only on water, or air, on the contrary, we also need food of the mind and the spirit; and that we will be able to find true human happiness, flourishing, and well-being (*eudaemonia*), not by pursuing excessive accumulation of material goods, but by "taking care of our soul" first and foremost through the right kind of Aristotle's philosophy of human life.

On this account, doing unethical acts is morally wrong, it is contrary to the life that leads to happiness at the end of the day.

Ethics enables man to pursue the highest human good. But it is commonplace that not all ascriptions of goodness to men or to actions are ascriptions of moral goodness. For example, good cricketers (South African Cricket Squad in the World Cup in England: 1999) who hold good catches and wins every match does not necessarily mean that they are moral men performing moral acts. The highest good or the good for men, which forms the object of the ethics, is surely goodness simplicity or moral goodness. I can now infer that ethics is not concerned with any skill or technique or expertise or accomplishment. So in order to achieve the highest human good towards which the ethics guides us, we must exercise that expertise to the best of our ability. The expert man will, for the most part, be a moral man. Each man desires his own good hence he desires happiness, and this, on analysis, turns out to be the excellent performance of typically human tasks. Such tasks are kinds of rational activities, and secondly, the kind of rational activity is all that most of us will attain. It is further seen that this sort of rational activity coincides fairly closely with what we are inclined to regard as moral activity. Thus anyone who has a correct and complete notion of what he desires and who acts as he must, on his desires, will usually act morally.

Morality is a constraint on practical reasoning, that is, morality rejects certain kinds of behaviour even though individuals might have many prudent reasons for engaging in them.

According to Aristotle, only by doing good, do we become good. How could you expect to be good while acting against what would make you good? Like patients who listen carefully to what the doctors say, but carry out none of their instructions? Those will never achieve health of their bodies, neither will they achieve health of their souls if they do not take the prescription into consideration and of course, that is to take care of their souls.

Well, everything that I praise seems to be praised because it has a certain quality and stands in a certain relation to something else; for I also praise the just man, a moral or ethical man, the brave man, and in general the good man and virtuous man, because of the actions and effects that they produce. For praise is concerned with goodness, in the widest sense, praise is for an appreciation of quality of the agent, and an encouragement to maintain and improve this quality.

Inasmuch as Aristotle's philosophy of human life, has to be adopted by a state with knowledge that different classes of citizens are to learn. Aristotle's ethics, moreover, lay down laws as to what people ought to do and what things they shall refrain from doing. Justice as a virtue among others, consists in acting fairly or impartially in a matter of division of material goods or other advantages. Aristotle makes his meaning of justice clearer (Richard McKeon, *The Basic Works Of Aristotle*, New York: Random House, 1941, pp. 1002-1022).

A just man is said to be a doer, who chooses what is just and distributes either between himself and another, but not to give more of what is desirable to himself and less to the other, but to give what is equal according to proportion; and similarly in distributing between two other persons. The end of this wisdom of goodness must include the means to the ends of all the others. Therefore, the good of man must be the end of justice, stable society, moral and ethical society, with norms and values for its citizenship. For even though it be the case that the good is the same for the individual and for the state. Nevertheless, the good of the state is manifestly a great and more perfect good, both to attain and to preserve. To secure the good of one person only is better than nothing, but to secure the good of a nation or a state is a nobler and more divine achievement. As I noticed earlier on, happiness does seem to me to require the addition of external prosperity, and this is why some people identify happiness with good fortune, though some identify it with virtue.

## **Conclusion**

Not surprisingly, many of the points in this article are of the practical wisdom needed in order to be happy. I set out to discover how the goodness of man is attained. Aristotle claims that men have a great many desires, thoughts, beliefs, and purposes in their actions they perform, but they do not all regard all of them as being of equal value. But there is one end at which all deliberative actions



ultimately aim at, that is 'happiness'. Happiness, is something final and self-sufficient, and is the desired end for any moral act. I regard happiness as self-sufficiency, when it all by itself makes a life choice worthy. When happiness is added to any other goodness, for example, to just or temperate action, it makes that good more choice worthy. This argument to Terence Irwin (1984:2), seem to present happiness as one good among others, and no more good than it. For the addition of any other happiness makes happiness more choice worthy<sup>10</sup>. It is evident then that any man ought to have some acquaintance with Great Ethics in his or her life which provides a framework of an account of the moral virtue of happiness.

## Notes

1. According to Aristotle's doctrine of happiness, there is one end at which all deliberative activities are aiming at human happiness which I understand to be a sense of satisfaction that comes from doing well in a particular activity in life.
2. Every man has the problem of transforming his natural character into moral one. See Fritz Berolzheimer: *The World's Legal Philosophies* (New York, 1968), p. 68.
3. Aristotle retained these ideas from Plato's idea of "phronesis" as indispensable basis of morality. See Guthrie, W.K.C., *A History of Greek Philosophy* Vol. 6. London, 1981: 345-352.
4. See McKeon Richard, *The basic Works of Aristotle: Ethica Nicomachea*, 1094a - 1154b. See also Ackrill, *Ethics*, 257, note on 1142a25.
5. According to Aristotle, happiness fits this description. See *The Ethics of Aristotle* translated by J.A.K. Thomson (1955:73).
6. See Jones, Sontag, Beckner, and Fogelin, *Approaches To Ethics* (New York, 1962), p. 47-74.
7. The happiness which Aristotle (the precursor of the English Utilitarians, Bentham and J.S. Mill) expects the virtuous agent to pursue is not, as the utilitarians would have it, but rather the individual happiness of the agent himself. See J.A.K. Thomson: *The Ethics of Aristotle: the Nicomachean ethics* (Penguin Classics), p. 31.
8. Happiness according to Roger Scruton (1986), is the fulfillment which requires both physical health and the flourishing of the individual as a rational being.
9. Aristotle is saying, this is a climax of the whole consistent work that ought to be met for the nature of happiness and the best life for men. See especially 77a 28ff., 78a 10-19, 78b 5-7, 33-35.
10. Indeed, Plato uses this sort of argument, and he argues, the pleasant life is more choice worthy when combined with intelligence than it is without it. See T. Irwin: *Nicomachean Ethics* (Indiana, 1985), p.226-7.

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