

Aristotle on Happiness

For two millennia man has sought the highest good for himself—happiness. The notion of happiness remains vague and manifold, yet all men want it. It is spoken of indiscriminately as a state of mind, a level of prosperity, the reward of good behavior, and an outcome of familial harmony. Even when the great categorist, Aristotle himself, analyzed happiness he was unable to delineate it in any rational manner. Aristotle's analysis of happiness in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Rhetoric* differ and illustrate the indeterminability of happiness.

In modernity happiness is a difficult term to define, yet it is most often equated with a pleasurable state of mind. One is happy that they receive something, or do something, or because they are in a certain place; in short, happiness is as variable as the winds. In this context happiness correlates to pleasure in a much stricter way than it did in the world of Aristotle. The Greeks had a peculiar concept of goodness and virtue. Their concept of virtue—*arête*—was a functional one. If a horse ran well it was virtuous. If a man functioned well as a man he was virtuous. In this sense, the virtue of the ancients was amoral. Consequently, their conception of happiness was functional as well:

But presumably to say that happiness is the supreme good seems a platitude, and some more distinctive account of it is still required. This might perhaps be achieved by grasping what is the function of man. If we take a flautist or a sculptor or any artist his goodness and proficiency is considered to lie in the performance of that function; and the same will be true of man, assuming that man has a function. (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1097b)

Aristotle inherited this functional sense of happiness, or *eudaimonia*.

Eudaimonia is most often translated as happiness. However, implicit in the Greek conception of *eudaimonia* is a kind of functional success or fulfillment which happiness lacks because of its shifty, state-of-mind manifestation in modernity. Aristotle even negates happiness as a state of mind, “We said, then that happiness is not a state...” (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1176a). To really approach what *eudaimonia* means to Aristotle one must probe the accounts of it that he put forth in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Rhetoric*.

Aristotle refers to his great ethical work as *ta êthika*, a phrase which translates into “Matters to do with Character.” Aristotle was fascinated by character and held the highest good to be the perfection of man on an individual level. This brief idea shifts the whole underpinnings of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. The main purpose of Aristotle’s ethics is not the greater morality of society but the increasing fulfillment and success of the individual man. Aristotle holds as a premise that man will inevitably do what is in his own best interest which is the right and natural course of events. So, he affirms, helping man achieve his goals in the most expert and excellent manner will increase the overall dignity and function of society. In this way, Aristotle’s ethics are a humble, bottom-up approach contrasted to a transcendent, top-down morality.

For a Greek to be *eudaimôn* he would have to possess wealth, be held in high regard, have a successful family, and generally do everything well; he would be excellent in all the ways in which a man could be excellent. If a man possessed all these characteristics then it would be fitting to say that he was happy. Theoretically such a man might be in severe depression and would still be *eudaimôn* because of his objective merits. Similarly, in the modern world a man might be poor, disliked, have a dysfunctional family, and be unsuccessful in all his endeavors yet if he internally felt happy then it would be so. People

would say of the modern man that he was lowly but happy whereas the Greeks would not even consider calling him *eudaimôn*.

In general, such was the understanding of happiness when Aristotle came into his own. Aristotle offered an addendum to this notion of *eudaimonia*. For Aristotle the primary distinction of man is his intellect. Man is the one who thinks of thinking. If *eudaimonia* is the fulfillment of all the ways in which a man can be excellent then it must incorporate Aristotle's philosophical innovation. In Book X of the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle conjoins the traditional sense of *eudaimonia* with contemplation and concludes that the highest good, the greatest happiness for man, is in the realization of his intellect. Contemplation, then, is the end all and be all of happiness, "Thus happiness is a form of contemplation" (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1178b). Though this conception of happiness is intuitive for philosophers, the common man had trouble accepting it.

Aristotle holds the highest good to be contemplation but he doesn't easily break with the common Greek conception of *eudaimonia*. In his *Rhetoric* he sums up *eudaimonia* in a more traditional manner, "Let happiness, then, be virtuous welfare, or self-sufficiency in life or the pleasantest secure life or material and physical well-being accompanied by the capacity to safeguard or procure the same" (*Rhetoric*, 1360b). This definition seems to be a far cry from the abstract contemplation that he proffers in the tenth book of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Aristotle gets even more specific in his delineation of happiness:

If, then, happiness is some such thing, its elements must be: Gentle birth, a wide circle of friends, a virtuous circle of friends, wealth, creditable offspring, extensive offspring and a comfortable old age; also the physical virtues (e.g. health, beauty, strength, size and competitive prowess), reputation, status, good luck and virtue (or also its elements, prudence, courage, justice and moderation). (*Rhetoric*, 1360b)

Aristotle seems to be in a completely different frame of mind when he speaks of *eudaimonia* in the *Rhetoric*; he doesn't even mention contemplation. He peripherally deals with intellectual abilities but estimates their worth in terms of usefulness alone.

A number of questions arise in response to both of the models of happiness expounded by Aristotle. The model of happiness in the *Rhetoric* deals with those elements that help to make man's life fulfilled and though this is inextricable from success, happiness has to be something more abstract and internal. One can have all the successes possible but if his attitudes are callous and his sensitivities dull then he won't truly be happy.

The other conception of happiness set forth by Aristotle falls short as well. Contemplation as the ultimate aim of human life fails to excite the masses. Aristotle's understanding of contemplation is not defensible as a true account of happiness. This fallacy emerges as the consequent to the premise that happiness consists in performing functions well. If a human's unique function is the use of his reason then it logically follows that the exercise of his reason will give the most enjoyment. This might make sense if man's only function was the use of his reason but given the fact that man performs the function of eating, drinking, making love, and generally interacting with the environment in manifold ways, the function of reason loses its cogency as the paramount idea of happiness.

Aristotle couldn't accept that the body might play a role in happiness. He had great disdain for the body and wished happiness to rest in the domain of the mind alone, "Anybody can enjoy bodily pleasures—a slave no less than the best of men—but nobody attributes a part in happiness to a slave..." (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1177a). This lackluster argument against the possible role of pleasure in regards to happiness only accentuates the limited nature of Aristotle's conception of happiness as contemplation.

Before Aristotle happiness could be objectively surveyed. With Aristotle's innovation happiness becomes internalized and abstract. In this way, Aristotle's conception of happiness resembles the modern conception more and more. However, Aristotle himself seems to be a bit ambiguous about his conception of *eudaimonia*. Aristotle acknowledged the difficulties that would arise from this subject matter, "Therefore in discussing subjects, and arguing from evidence, conditioned in this way, we must be satisfied with a broad outline of the truth" (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1094b). Happiness is as difficult to define in modernity as it was in the time of Aristotle but, as Aristotle so cogently outlined, "Happiness, then, is found to be something perfect and self-sufficient, being the end to which our actions are directed" (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1097b). Perhaps this fact alone—that happiness is the motive of all our actions—will serve to elucidate it as the goal of the good life.

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