

The Pursuit of Happiness

CONTEXTS



ARISTOTLE

Aristotle was a Greek philosopher born in 384 B.C. He became a pupil of Plato's (another Greek philosopher) and later a member of Plato's Academy in Athens. Aristotle left Athens to become a tutor to the young Alexander the Great and eventually returned to Athens to found his own school, the Lyceum. Late in his life, Aristotle had to flee Athens because of the changing political situation. He died in exile in 321 B.C. During his life, Aristotle wrote widely in philosophy and science. This selection is an excerpt from his philosophical work on ethics called the *Nicomachean Ethics*. In the *Ethics* Aristotle discusses human nature, politics, and what one must understand about human nature in order to live a happy and good life. He focuses particularly on how reason, our rational capacity, should help us to recognize and pursue what will lead to happiness and the good life.

When Aristotle refers to the soul, understand that he considers the soul to be a part of the body. Aristotle believed that the soul dies with the body; it is not a spiritual force living on after the body dies. For Aristotle, the soul has three parts or qualities: rational, appetitive, and vegetative. The rational aspect of the soul is its highest or best quality, giving us the power to reason; the appetitive part of the soul controls our desires and emotions; the vegetative part directs the physical growth of our bodies. As you read, look for Aristotle's careful explanation of the interrelationship between our rational nature and happiness.

Happiness Is the Greatest Good

Every art and every inquiry, and likewise every activity, seems to aim at some good. This is why the good is defined as that at which everything aims.

But sometimes the end at which we are aiming is the activity itself while other times the end is something else that we are trying to achieve by means of

that activity. When we are aiming at some end to which the activity is a means, the end is clearly a higher good than the activity. . . .

Now if in all our activities there is some end which we seek for its own sake, and if everything else is a means to this same end, it obviously will be our highest and best end. Clearly there must be some such end since everything cannot be a means to something else since then there would be nothing for which we ultimately do anything and everything would be pointless. Surely from a practical point of view it is important for us to know what this ultimate end is so that, like archers shooting at a definite mark, we will be more likely to attain what we are seeking [in all our actions]. . . .

Some people think our highest end is something material and obvious, like pleasure or money or fame. One thinks it is this, and another thinks it is that. Often the same person changes his mind: When he is sick, it is health; when he is poor, it is wealth. And realizing they are really ignorant, such men express great admiration for anyone who says deep-sounding things that are beyond their comprehension. . . .

Most people think the highest end is pleasure and so they seek nothing higher than a life of pleasure. . . . They reveal their utter slavishness in this for they prefer [as their highest end] a life that is attainable by any animal. . . . Capable and practical men think the highest end is fame, which is the goal of a public life. But this is too superficial to be the good we are seeking since fame depends on those who give it. . . . Moreover, men who pursue fame do so in order to be assured of their own value. . . . Finally, some men devote their lives to making money in a way that is quite unnatural. But wealth clearly is not the good we are seeking since it is merely useful as a means to something else. . . . What, then, is our highest end?

As we have seen, there are many ends. But some of them are chosen only as a means to other things, for example, wealth, musical instruments, and tools [are ends we choose only because they are means to other things]. So it is clear that not all ends are ultimate ends. But our highest and best end would have to be something ultimate. . . .

Notice that an end that we desire for itself is more ultimate than something we want only as a means to something else. And an end that is never a means to something else is more ultimate than an end that is sometimes a means. And the most ultimate end would be something that we always choose for itself and never as a means to something else.

Now happiness seems more than anything else to answer to this description. For happiness is something we always choose for its own sake and never as a means to something else. But fame, pleasure, . . . and so on, are chosen partly for themselves but partly also as a means to happiness, since we believe that they will bring us happiness. Only happiness, then, is never chosen for the sake of these things or as a means to any other thing.

We will be led to the same conclusion if we start from the fact that our ultimate end would have to be completely sufficient by itself. . . . By this I mean that by itself it must make life worth living and lacking in nothing. But happiness by itself answers this description. It is what we most desire even apart from all other things. . . .

So, it appears that happiness is the ultimate end and completely sufficient by itself. It is the end we seek in all that we do. . . .

The reader may think that in saying that happiness is our ultimate end we are merely stating a platitude. So we must be more precise about what happiness involves.

Perhaps the best approach is to ask what the specific purpose or function of man is. For the good and the excellence of all beings that have a purpose—such as musicians, sculptors, or craftsmen—depend on their purpose. So if man has a purpose, his good will be related to this purpose. And how could man not have a natural purpose when even cobblers and carpenters have a purpose? Surely, just as each part of man—the eye, the hand, the foot—has a purpose, so also man as a whole must have a purpose. What is this purpose?

Our biological activities we share in common even with plants. So these cannot be the purpose or function of man since we are looking for something specific to man. The activities of our senses we also plainly share with other things: horses, cattle, and other animals. So there remain only the activities that belong to the rational part of man. . . . So the specific purpose or function of man involves the activities of that part of his soul that belongs to reason, or that at least is obedient to reason. . . .

Now the function of a thing is basic, and its good is something added to this function. For example, the function of a musician is to play music, and the good musician is one who also plays music but who in addition does it well. So, the good for man would have to be something added to his function of carrying on the activities of reason; it would be carrying on the activities of reason but doing so well or with excellence. But a thing carries out its proper functions well when it has the proper virtues. So the good for man is carrying out those activities of his soul [which belong to reason] and doing so with the proper virtue or excellence. . . .

Since our happiness, then, is to be found in carrying out the activities of the soul [that belong to reason], and doing so with virtue or excellence, we will now have to inquire into virtue, for this will help us in our inquiry into happiness. . . .

To have virtue or excellence, a thing (1) must be good and (2) must be able to carry out its function well. For example, if the eye has virtue, then it must be a good eye and must be able to see well. Similarly, if a horse has its virtue, then it must be all that it should be and must be good at running, carrying a rider, and charging. Consequently, the proper virtue or excellence of man will consist

of those habits or acquired abilities that (1) make him a good man and (2) enable him to carry out his activities well. . . .

Now the expert in any field is the one who avoids what is excessive as well as what is deficient. Instead he seeks to hit the mean and chooses it. . . . Acting well in every field is achieved by looking to the mean and bringing one's actions into line with this standard of moderation. For example, people say of a good work of art that nothing could be taken from it or added to it, implying that excellence is destroyed through excess or deficiency but achieved by observing the mean. The good artist, in fact, keeps his eyes fixed on the mean in everything he does. . . .

Virtue, therefore, must also aim at the mean. For human virtue deals with our feelings and actions, and in these we can go to excess or we fall short or we can hit the mean. For example, it is possible to feel fear, confidence, desire, anger, pity, pleasure, . . . and so on, either too much or too little—both of which extremes are bad. But to feel these at the right times, and on the right occasions, and towards the right persons, and with the right object, and in the right fashion, is the mean between the extremes and is the best state, and is the mark of virtue. In the same way, our actions can also be excessive or can fall short or can hit the mean.

Virtue, then, deals with those feelings and actions in which it is wrong to go too far and wrong to fall short but in which hitting the mean is praiseworthy and good. . . . It is a habit or acquired ability to choose . . . what is moderate or what hits the mean as determined by reason. . . .

But it is not enough to speak in generalities. We must apply this to particular virtues and vices. Consider, then, the following examples.

Take the feelings of fear and confidence. To be able to hit the mean [by having just enough fear and just enough confidence] is to have the virtue of courage. . . . But he who exceeds in confidence has the vice of rashness, while he who has too much fear and not enough confidence has the vice of cowardliness.

The mean where pleasure . . . is concerned is achieved by the virtue of temperance. But to go to excess is to have the vice of profligacy, while to fall short is to have the vice of insensitivity. . . .

Or take the action of giving or receiving money. Here the mean is the virtue of generosity. . . . But the man who gives to excess and is deficient in receiving has the vice of prodigality, while the man who is deficient in giving and excessive in taking has the vice of stinginess. . . .

Or take one's feelings about the opinion of others. Here the mean is the virtue of proper self-respect, while the excess is the vice of vanity, and the deficiency is the vice of small-mindedness. . . .

The feeling of anger can also be excessive, deficient, or moderate. The man who occupies the middle state is said to have the virtue of gentleness, while the one who exceeds in anger has the vice of irascibility, while the one who is deficient in anger has the vice of apathy. □

Big