

Aristotle on What It Means To Be Happy

"Suppose there were an experience machine that would give you any experience you desired. Superduper neuropsychologists could stimulate your brain so that you would think and feel you were writing a great novel, or making a friend, or reading an interesting book. All the time you would be floating in a tank, with electrodes attached to your brain. Should you plug into this machine for life, preprogramming your life experiences? [...] Of course, while in the tank you won't know that you're there; you'll think that it's all actually happening [...] Would you plug in?"

The above thought experiment, known as the Experience Machine, was presented by the American philosopher Robert Nozick (1938-2002). In answer to the question, 'would you plug in?', I suspect (although I could be wrong) that you would decline the offer. Yet, *why* would you decline? After all, the experience being offered to you seems to tick all the right boxes: you would be happy because you would be satisfying your desires, and, importantly, there is an important element of *self-actualisation* here for you would be able to fulfil what you considered to be your potential. You might want to argue that the experience is not real, but you would not know that whilst experiencing it. The point here is that what we consider the 'good' life, the fulfilled life is something more than just ticking the right boxes; we have to be the *agent*. The Experience Machine also raises an important question that I wish to consider here: what does it *mean* to be happy? What constitutes the fulfilled life? The question itself goes right back to at least the Greeks, and Aristotle in particular, but is also a concern amongst modern circles. Consider the quote from the Conservative leader David Cameron:

"It's time we admitted that there's more to life than money, and it's time we focused not just on GDP, but on GWB - general well-being. Well-being can't be measured by money or traded in markets. It can't be required by law or delivered by government. It's about the beauty of our surroundings, the quality of our culture, and above all the strength of our relationships. Improving our society's sense of well-being is, I believe, the central political challenge of our time." (May 2006)

It may be unlikely that Cameron knew that in highlighting the importance of well-being, he is echoing the words of Aristotle over two thousand years ago. In fact, 'well-being' is not a bad translation of what Aristotle called *eudaimonia*. Other suitable modern translations use such terms as 'flourishing' or 'doing-well', whereas the more traditional translation of 'happiness' suggests a transitory state, and a feeling or an emotion rather than something far more all-encompassing. But this begs the question, is it really possible to experience an all-encompassing sense of well-being? Aristotle certainly thought so and it was a primary concern of his *Nicomachean Ethics* to determine what makes human life worthwhile. Aristotle is not unlike Plato in adopting the now common philosophical strategy of challenging people's assumptions by addressing the 'common sense' view of what makes a worthwhile life (in Greek this principle is known as *eudoxa*, the 'received opinions' of most people) and then subjecting them to philosophical analysis. The '*eudoxa*' of the average ancient Greek would not differ from what the 'average Joe' in any street today would retort if asked

the question, 'What do you aim for in life'? : happiness! However, Aristotle rightly does not treat the received opinion as meaning simply an emotional state of euphoria, for most people, when pushed, would seek to define what they *mean* by happiness and it would soon become evident that it is a rich and varied thing. Hence the word 'happiness' may not be the most appropriate word, although the most widely used translation of the Greek word *eudaimonia*.

The Good

Aristotle states at the very beginning of his *Ethics* that all human actions and choices aim at some good. This 'Good' is therefore defined as the ultimate end of the actions and choices that are made. There are, of course, many different ends as there are many different kinds of activity; the end for medical science is health, the end for economic science is wealth. The Good, however, is the *supreme* Good; that which is desirable for its own sake and is the ultimate determinant for all our other actions and choices. Aristotle points out that knowledge of this Good would have great value for us in conducting our lives in an ethical manner.

Whilst Aristotle repeats that what is understood by the Good varies in different arts and other activities, it does share the characteristic that in all cases it is the *end* for which everything else is done. However, as there are many different ends they cannot, by definition, all be the ultimate end; i.e. that which is pursued as an end in itself. What can be determined as an unqualified end in itself is happiness. Such things as honour, pleasure and intelligence are all chosen only partly for themselves because it is expected such things will also lead to the 'greater good' of happiness. For example, you may say that you would like to be very clever, but this still begs the question, *why* do you want to be clever? Presumably the response is that an intelligent person is a 'happy' person, whatever we may mean by 'happiness'. Conversely no one chooses happiness for the sake of something else, such as honour, virtue, and so on. It makes little sense to say, 'I want to be happy so that I may then be clever.'

Not only must the Good possess the highest degree of finality, but it must also be *self-sufficient*. That is to say it is something which by itself makes life worth while. Aristotle is pointing out that man is not a solitary animal; he defines his happiness in terms of his relationships with others, that is his family, friends and fellow countrymen. Consequently the one thing that is both sought for its own sake and is self-sufficient is happiness. If it is self-sufficient then nothing can be added to it, and so you would be self-fulfilled only when *nothing* else, whether it is winning the lottery, falling in love with the person of your dreams, immortality, and so on, would make you *more* fulfilled, for there is no 'more' that can be added. A fulfilled life cannot be improved upon.

Aristotle's logic proceeds as follows: With all As (A being activities) we strive for Bs (B being that particular aim for that activity) and so B is superior to A. However, as B is not the 'ultimate end', then B is also for the sake of C (C being the next aim), which is for the sake of D, and so on. Aristotle's argument is that this process, if it were to go on *ad infinitum*, effectively constitutes an unsatisfied desire, which one could hardly equate with 'Good' in the ultimate sense. Therefore, there has to be a Good that is desired *for its own sake* and not for some other end. Adopting this view, if an individual sets out with the goal of attaining a university degree, for example, the

attainment of the degree would not satisfy his or her desires because the desire would then be for something else, such as to make money to pay off the university fees. Consequently, there must be some ultimate Good at the end of this, otherwise we are faced with an infinite regress of desires until, at any rate, we die.

The difficulty with this view, so early on in his work, is that the logic is fallacious and this can be demonstrated by ‘the roads to Rome fallacy’:

Every road leads to some town
Therefore, there is a particular town to which all roads lead.

As you can see the second premise does not logically follow from the first and neither does it do so with Aristotle’s version:

Everything has an aim
Therefore, there is one goal, the Good, to which every aim is directed

Aristotle wants to say that we all want to be happy, as in fulfilled, and that we all have different ideas of what it means to be happy, which is reasonable, but is it then correct to say that we all want the *same* happiness? Whilst there is certainly something in this analysis of what it means to be ‘satisfied’ or ‘happy’, the assumption that there must be an ultimate Good, as opposed to a series of never-ending but various goods, is open to scrutiny. This problem is accentuated when we consider the fact that presumably *all* activities must be aiming towards the same end. Suppose you have three people in a room, Person A likes to eat grapefruit every morning, Person B paints pictures of wheelbarrows, and Person C cannot walk past a mirror or window without looking into it. Now to ask these people why they engage in such activities would result in a series of responses and it would seem a little odd if ultimately they conclude that it is to live a fulfilled life yet, Aristotle would argue, it is also satisfactory to settle for Person A saying ‘because I like the taste of grapefruit’, Person B saying ‘because I can only draw wheelbarrows’ and Person C saying ‘because I’m incredibly vain’. But could all three ever come up with the same ultimate purpose for their actions?

We can talk of ‘many goods’ in that we all may have an individual idea of what is good, but this seems very different from saying there is one overall ‘Good’. In fact, when we reflect upon it, is not most of our lives taken up with the mundane, interspersed with transitory states of happiness and unhappiness? What would it really be like to be living a lasting sense of well-being, of the ‘Good’, and how would we distinguish this from the mundane? Surely the mundane is a relative term, as is the Good. To a caveman, *eudaimonia* would be a nice, safe, warm cave somewhere. For many people in a famine-stricken country, *eudaimonia* would be regular meals. *Eudaimonia* seems to be that which we have not got and, once we have got it, then it becomes the mundane. The Good, then, is not some objective state over and above other states that can be attained and maintained, but in itself something that is transitory in that it becomes transformed into a state of ordinariness through the possession of it. Aristotle rightly admits that when dealing with people there are always going to be a variety of opinions as to the nature of the Good. Ethics is not a science like geometry and, as such, there can not be such a great a degree of precision.

Aristotle is only too aware that people differ greatly over what they mean when they say they strive for happiness; for some it is synonymous with wealth, for others it is status. Also, a person's views can change. Someone who falls terribly ill may alter their view of happiness from the striving of wealth to that of health. Likewise, younger peoples' views of happiness frequently are more self-centred until they marry and have a family. Aristotle urges caution in supposing that the study of such subjects as ethics or politics can provide us with any definitive conclusions in the same way science does, and, importantly, he remarks that there are two kinds of knowledge: known to us and known absolutely. This idea that knowledge can be divided into two kinds has remained a tenet of philosophy to the present day and, in more modern, post-Kant, terminology, the former, 'knowledge known to us', are synthetic *a posteriori*, whilst the latter, 'known absolutely', are analytic *a priori*. For Aristotle, ethics – which is a branch of political science – constitutes synthetic *a posteriori* knowledge and, therefore we must adopt an inductive approach to the study of what is happiness. Having admitted this, however, Aristotle does not seem to fully endorse his own point!

In addition, there has also been some debate in recent scholarship as to whether or not Aristotle was actually proposing *one* Good or, more accurately, when Aristotle talks of the Good, or *eudaimonia*, this should be seen as a 'package' of activities (the so-called 'inclusive' view) rather than one single thing (the so-called 'dominant' view). For the former view, J.L. Ackrill¹ argues that *eudaimonia* must consist of a package of worthwhile things which are desired for their own sake, although also part of the all-inclusive package of *eudaimonia*. Whereas, the latter view has been proposed by, amongst others, Richard Kraut² who criticises Ackrill for seemingly suggesting that Aristotle would have adhered to the view that *eudaimonia* is some sort of pick and mix collection of activities lacking an overall coherence and rationale. The jury, it has to be said, remains out on this one and the reader will have to make up his or her own mind.

Higher and Lower Pleasures

Aristotle states that how a person understands happiness is dependent upon the kind of life that person leads. He outlines three kinds of life: Firstly there are those who lead a 'bovine' existence in which happiness is equated with sensual pleasure. These people, Aristotle believed, consisted of the majority. Secondly, there are those men of state affairs for which happiness is associated with honour, although Aristotle notes that honour itself seems a superficial goal and it is rather that people seek to be honoured because of their virtue. Finally, there is the contemplative type for whom happiness is synonymous with the true Good, *eudaimonia*. Aristotle also remarks upon the businessman who seeks wealth but this cannot be seen as an end in itself for wealth is attained as a means to something else; what wealth can purchase. Here Aristotle is subscribing to the notion that there are such things as 'higher' and 'lower' pleasures, which was a distinction later famously outlined by the English utilitarian philosopher John Stuart Mill (1806-73). Aristotle, of course, belonged to a rather elite set and so it would have been reasonably clear to him what would be regarded as higher pleasures. He would, no doubt, shun the gambling halls in favour of the theatre. The modern-day equivalent would perhaps be the distinction between drinking fifteen pints of lager at a night club in Newcastle or a night at the opera. However, such distinctions can be very blurred, for example the trend for the middle

classes to go to football matches and Aristotle himself – like most of Greek elite society – would not have been averse to the occasional ‘drinking party’. Aristotle’s point may not be that there are higher and lower pleasures in the ‘pleasure-seeking’ sense, but rather in what *accompanies* the pleasure. For example, studying philosophy may well be regarded as a pleasure (or an excruciating pain) but in addition to this there is a *worthwhile* element in that it is a quest for knowledge. A fulfilled life will be an enjoyable one, but also a worthwhile one. The problem still remains, however, that such terms as ‘worthwhile’ and ‘fulfilled’ are incredibly vague and seemingly diverse.

Happiness and Function

To simply say that happiness is the highest Good is, Aristotle readily admits, something of a cliché. In order to provide a clearer account he relates it to what he understands as the proper function (*ergon*) of a human being. The relation of *eudaimonia* to function is an important one. For example, if the function of a car is to get you from A to B then to ask the question ‘is that car good?’ is to ask ‘does it perform its function well?’ Similarly, if we want to say that a human being is good it is the same as saying, ‘does he perform his function well?’

Aristotle does raise the point that some might question the idea that a human being has a function as such, but argues that, in the same way that parts of the body – the eye, ears, and so on – have particular functions, then it follows that man as a whole has a function. Similarly, the fact that people of a certain trade, whether it be a shoemaker or a sculptor, also have a function, which is to perform their profession as best they can. But what is the unique function we possess as human beings?

For Aristotle it seemed obvious that just as the parts of the body – hands, eyes, feet etc. – have a function it makes sense to talk of the body as a whole having a function. To resolve what that function is we need to look for what distinguishes human beings from other creatures. This cannot be mere biological survival and growth because this is something shared with other life forms, so nor can it be a life of sensations because other animals possess this too. Rather, what is distinctive is the possession of reason and so, Aristotle concludes, this must then be the proper function of the human being.

Does it make sense, at least for the modern reader, to talk of human beings as having a function? Using analogies with carpenters and sculptors does not quite work for those who have a particular trade inevitably have a function attached to this: a sculptor’s function, by definition, is to sculpt. Yet the ‘role’ of a human being is not so clearly defined; it is not a skill, a trade, or a socially-defined role as such. Likewise, the analogy of parts of the human body with the whole body is no more effective for the parts of the human body relate to a greater whole which is the human organism, whereas the body is not part of a greater organism that we are aware of. Whilst humans may have a role as defined by society, which may therefore be seen as a ‘greater organism’ in this sense, we are not entirely defined by it, but at least to some degree are the definers.

The whole concept of human beings having a function, or an ‘essence’ of some kind, was well challenged by the French existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) in his work *Existentialism and Humanism* (an AS text, incidentally) when he

compared human beings with the function of artefacts and, specifically, the paper knife:

“If one considers an article of manufacture – as, for example, a book or a paper-knife – one sees that it has been made by an artisan who had a conception of it...Thus the paper-knife is at the same time an article producible in a certain manner and one which, on the other hand, serves a definite purpose, for one cannot suppose that a man would produce a paper-knife without knowing what it was for.”³

Whereas a paper-knife has essence before existence, a human being has “existence before essence”; that is, a human is not designed for a specific purpose (in Aristotle’s terms, *telos*) by a divine artisan. Without God, the human creates his own essence, he or she is free to define his or her own purpose. The scholastic Christian theologian, St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) – himself an avid reader of Aristotle – re-defined the concept of function in religious terms by arguing that human beings do indeed have purpose because they have a divine artisan that is God. Aquinas developed the idea of human function to argue for an objective (God-given) morality referred to as the principle of natural law. Nature, being ‘God’s signature’, provides us with guidance as to how to fulfil our purpose (humans also being an integral part of nature). Natural Law still dominates Catholic moral thinking and has been considered a valuable approach to dealing with moral issues that do not have a biblical precedent. For example, the most discussed application of the Natural Law argument within the Catholic Church relates to sexuality and, Aquinas argues, through a process of a rational determining of God’s purpose in nature we are able to conclude that the final cause of the sexual act is the procreation of children and, therefore, any action taken to frustrate this final cause – such as contraception, homosexuality or masturbation – is morally wrong. The obvious weaknesses of such an approach include the fact that, despite our reasoning skills, it is difficult to determine what is ‘natural’. For example, in a state of nature, one human may kill another for the sake of preservation which seems to go against the Christian virtue of ‘turn the other cheek’.

In addition, David Hume made this important observation:

“In every system of morality which I have hitherto met with, I have always remarked, that the author proceeds for some time in the ordinary way of reasoning, and establishes the being of a God, or makes observations concerning human affairs; when of a sudden I am surprised to find, that instead of the usual copulations of propositions, *is*, and *is not*, I meet with no proposition that is not connected with an *ought*, or an *ought not*. For as this *ought*, or *ought not*, expresses some new relation or affirmation, it is necessary that it should be observed and explained; and at the same time that a reason should be given, for what seems altogether inconceivable, how this new relation can be deduced from others, which are entirely different from it.”

Here Hume is stating the ‘is-ought’ fallacy. For example, it is a fact that slavery still exists in some form or other in a number of countries: that is an ‘is’. However, the fact itself is morally neutral; it is only when we suggest that we ‘ought’ to rid the world of slavery that we are making a moral judgement. The fallacy rests in asserting

that the 'ought' statement logically follows from the 'is', but there is no reason for this to be the case. In the same way, even if it can be argued that it *is* a fact that humans naturally possess reason and this is what distinguishes them from other animals, it does not logically follow that we *ought* to exercise our reason to live a fulfilled life

It has been suggested that translating '*ergon*' as function is unsatisfactory and that a better translation would be something like 'characteristic activity'. Whilst this may make the analogies with artefacts, human organs and so on less appropriate this does not alter Aristotle's primary aim here in saying that human beings have something distinctive and unique about them, that this is associated with a fulfilled life, and this should therefore be the basis for ethics. As Professor Richard Norman has noted:

"It is distinctive of us as human beings that we are the only species capable of destroying all life on this planet, by means of a nuclear war, but that is no reason why we should do it. Why, then, from the fact that rational activity is distinctively human, should it follow that we ought to live according to reason?"⁴

There are, in fact, many other things that are distinctive of human beings that other creatures do not possess such as gambling, giving money to worthwhile causes, writing poetry, lying, getting drunk, and so on, yet it is one thing to say these are unique to humans and another to say that we should do them. Aristotle may respond to this argument by admitting that humans engage in these activities but, in some cases (lying for example), humans are not using their reason well, which begs the question how can we know we are using our reason well? Would not the elusive jewel thief be exercising his reason well in always being one step ahead of the police? In addition, Aristotle argues that the unique characteristic that humans possess is applicable to *all* humans. There is no differentiation between scholars and sportsmen, soldiers and artists, etc. Nor, for that matter, men and women, yet Aristotle argues, in that women – and slaves for that matter – though possessing reason have it to a lesser degree than men. Rather, the proper function of women is to obey men, and for slaves to obey their masters. Evidently Aristotle believes that only free men possess reason to a sufficient degree, but even here account has not been taken of the differing temperaments and natural abilities that might suggest one individual would consider what amounts to a fulfilling life to be very different from another. Whilst it is difficult to determine from the text, it seems that Aristotle did not mean to say that other human activities, such as eating, sleeping, exercise, sex, and so on, are unimportant, but rather they do not in themselves constitute a fulfilled life. Rather it is the *intelligent* actions that matter most, which is reminiscent of the utilitarian philosopher JS Mill's concept of higher and lower pleasures that I referred to earlier.

When you need a Friend

As stated earlier, Aristotle saw man as essentially a social animal. For Aristotle, friendship is an essential ingredient for a well-lived, well-functioning, flourishing and virtuous human life. Humans are naturally social beings, he argued, and strong relationships are an essential component of a good life and a good society. True friendship was a single soul dwelling in two bodies. In the same way he believed that the Good was something that is a means in itself and not a means to an end, so the

same can be said for true friendship. There are other kinds of friendship, of course, such as friends in a work environment, or friends you share a pleasure with such as football, but *true* friendship does not rely on something else, something external, to glue that friendship together: you love someone for who they are themselves. Some have argued that it is a wonderfully idealistic picture of friendship, and led the Renaissance scholar Montaigne to declare that true friendship was only likely to occur once every three centuries! However, Aristotle is surely correct to assert that friendship is quite capable of being conducted with a concern for personal gain or pleasure.

Leaving aside the practicality of establishing and maintaining true friendship and, indeed, what is meant by true friendship, the question needs to be asked why would true friendship be a *good* thing? Whilst the Greeks and Romans frequently sung its praises, many philosophers throughout the ages have seen a conflict between friendship and morality. Nietzsche, for example, saw friendship as a problem rather than a solution, and the Scottish empiricist David Hume, who delighted in the coffee house atmosphere of the Edinburgh enlightenment and had many strong friends himself, questioned how it could benefit in terms of benevolence towards mankind as a whole. Friendship is seen more as a retreat from society rather than necessary *to* society! The moral philosopher Immanuel Kant saw no place for friendship in his universalistic ethics. Strong relationships, therefore, do not seem to be a necessary condition for a good society, and may actually work against society and its morals. If one were to think of a community with particularly strong relationships the mafia immediately springs to mind!

Well-being, the 'good life', does not appear to be an objective thing. Ironically, whilst many, or most, would not plug in to Nozick's Experience Machine it is curious how many of us deceive ourselves into believing we are happy, especially in Western society where we are told we have every reason to *be* happy. Perhaps what life is about has little to do with well-being, but the true life is one that is, as Nietzsche would see it, struggling and angst-ridden sprinkled with occasional moments of sheer joy. According to the American Declaration of Independence, life, liberty and pursuit of happiness is an inalienable right. The *pursuit* of it is okay, but God forbid we should *find* it.

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¹ Ackrill, J.L., 'Aristotle on Eudaimonia' in A.O.Rorty (ed.) *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*, University of California Press, 1980, pp. 15-33

² Kraut, Richard, *Aristotle on the Human Good*, Princeton University Press, 1989.

³ Sartre, Jean-Paul, (1992 [1946]), *Existentialism and Humanism* (London:Methuen), tr. Philip Mairet

⁴ Norman, Richard, *The Moral Philosophers: An Introduction to Ethics* (OUP), p.46