Aristotle On Happiness

(Notes – not to be quoted verbatim)

Aristotle:

Aristotle was born in Stagira, Macedonia in 384 BCE, his father physician to the king. At 17 he went to Athens to study at Plato’s Academy, remaining there for 20 years. After Plato’s death in 347 BCE he left and by 343 he was tutor to the future Alexander the Great. In 335 he opened his own school, The Lyceum, which competed with the Academy. He died in 322 BCE having fled Athens before he was tried for the crime of ‘impiety’ – the same vague charge levied against Socrates.

Aristotle agreed with Plato, the general Greek assumption about the social nature of human beings, but objected to Plato’s concern with its abstract nature. For Aristotle, there was no need to imagine an ideal republic in the world of forms; rather we could study it through empirical observation of human beings in everyday situations and extreme conditions.

Aside from his rejection of Platonic abstractions, Aristotle’s philosophy is centred on the concept of teleology, arguably abstract in itself, the study of ‘goal-orientated behaviour. For Aristotle, all events, natural or human, are to be understood as having purpose. For example the rain falls in order that the grass grows and the grass grows to feed the grazing animals. These goals or purposes do not exist in some abstract realm nor in the mind of a transcendent God, rather they are implicit in nature. Aristotle does have a god in his philosophy, The Prime Mover, but it doesn’t exist as a creator (an efficient cause). The Prime Mover’s only activity is pure thought, only thinking about things that are unchanging which is in fact itself. In fact the PM is the perfection towards which all reality strives and is the final cause; final in the sense that it is reality’s goal or telos. What this means is that every object in the universe is unconsciously striving for perfection, to be godlike, in so far as that is possible within the constraints of its own physical makeup. Every object, everything in the universe is defined in terms of its purpose that is trying to fulfil to its maximum, to be excellent (aretê).

The Meaning of Life:

Actions are vehicles for helping us to achieve goals, getting up to shower, to eat breakfast, to go to work and so on. But is this all there is to life? If the answer is yes then Aristotle believed that life was futile, pointless, ‘a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing’. Shakespeare (Macbeth) ibid p48 However if there was some supreme good desirable for its own sake, a goal under which all other goals are subsumed in order to provide meaning for the supreme goal, then we have an obligation to ourselves to discover what that supreme goal is. That is we have an obligation to philosophise for it is only through philosophy that we can identify this supreme goal.

Accordingly, Aristotle though that all beings and all systems have built into them an entelechy, a goal orientated mechanism of self actualisation. For examples acorns strive to fulfil themselves as oak trees; clearly this is not a conscious action but an organic process. In one sense, living things other than humans have an advantage over humans as their entelechy is unconscious. An acorn may be crushed or eaten by a pig but it cannot err because it cannot choose. Humans can choose, and because consciousness is part of our essence, we must choose. We must choose goals to pursue and because we are humans we can err, make mistakes, and sometimes very big mistakes. In one sense a human being could spend their entire life pursuing false goals, and for Aristotle this would be the greatest tragedy. Death is sad but it is not tragic, but if a person looks back on their life and says ‘I have wasted my life,’ then that would be a great misfortune, something very tragic.
So what is our supreme goal if there is indeed such a thing? Aristotle says that actually we already know the answer, that what we really want out of life is happiness. The Greek word for happiness is *eudaimonie* (roughly good genius), which we might better translate into English as *well-being* or *human flourishing* (for the record I prefer the idea of flourishing). However this doesn’t really help if we don’t know exactly what happiness is or how we get there? Therefore, says Aristotle, saying that the goal of human life is happiness is the beginning of the investigation, not its end.

“I wonder how the weaver would be aided in his craft by a knowledge of the form of the good, or how a man would be more able to heal the sick or command an army by contemplation of the pure form or idea. It seems to me that the physician does not seek for health in this abstract way but for the health of man – or rather of some particular man, for it is individuals that he has to heal”. Ibid p51

So if we are to work out what the function of man is we have to know what a human being is, and for Aristotle this is simple – man is the rational animal. Our essence is named – reason – and Aristotle declares ‘the function of man is an activity of soul in conformity with reason...the good of man is an activity of his soul in accordance with virtue, or, if there be more than one, in accordance with the best and most complete virtue’. Ibid P52

The question is now what is this rational activity that will lead to happiness? Aristotle declares that in order to achieve happiness one must live a fairly long life. It cannot be a momentary pleasure or joy; ‘one swallow does not make a spring’. Additionally there is a certain amount of luck involved (remember the acorn), and there is a rather annoying list of ‘material goods’ which Aristotle says are necessary in order to be have nobly:

“There are some things whose absence takes the bloom from our happiness, as good birth, the blessing of children, personal beauty. A man is not likely to be happy if he is very ugly, or of low birth, or alone in the world, or childless, and perhaps still less if he has worthless children or friends or has lost some good ones that he had”. Ibid p52

But it gets worse. Not only must you have noble birth and personal beauty, you must also be tall, independently wealthy, and when Aristotle says no man he means MAN. In contrast to Plato, who believed in principle that women were no different to men in their ability to become philosophers, Aristotle suspects that women cannot fully pursue the activities of the soul because they do not have complete souls; they are undeveloped humans.

The good news is that we can dismiss Aristotle’s prejudices and still find benefit in his theory. We can still question whether happiness is dependent on the material conditions he lists and whether that access is down to luck. And we can also look closely at the rational activity that he talked about; the soul in accordance with virtue.

**The Virtues:**

There are two kinds of virtue: moral and intellectual. Moral virtue (*ethike*) derives from habit (*ethos*), and intellectual virtue derives from a combination of education and genetics.

Moral virtues are involved with the passions and actions, and the key to excellence is moderation: “Excess and deficiency are wrong but the intermediate amount is praised and right” Ibid p54

This notion is ‘The Golden Mean’ and works on the principle that for every type of action or emotional expression there is the possibility of excessive or deficient behaviour. The correct behaviour, the virtuous behaviour is the Golden Mean. So for example in the pursuit of pleasure, self-indulgence would be excessive, a feeling of emptiness would be the deficiency, and temperance would be the virtue.
In some ways the chart above is trivial and limiting, perhaps even pointless. After all we know that courage is morally superior to rashness or cowardice but what is a courageous act, a tasteless act, a niggardly act? For Aristotle the important point is that moral philosophy isn’t scientifically exact, that the golden mean isn’t mathematically the mean that is in fact a movable point. Practical morality is situational and so a courageous act one day in a given situation may not be courageous the next in a slightly different situation. This means that practical morality is experimental; we must engage in life, make a few mistakes, and learn what a virtue is. After much practice a person can develop habits of courage, temperance and so on, creating for themselves a moral character. In doing this we flourish through our will to habitually perform virtuous actions, acting out of practical wisdom.

It is important to understand that Aristotle’s world was very different from ours and a clue lies in the language he used. When Aristotle spoke of actions performed in the pursuit of honour or avoidance of grace, he says that excess is vanity, the deficiency is being small-souled (mikropsychia), and the mean is being great-souled (megalopsychia). These two terms don’t have an English equivalent but we can glean some understanding of them from Aristotle’s examples:

“The great-souled man, then, exhibits his character especially in the matter of honours and dishonours. When he receives great honours from good men he will be moderately pleased…but honour from ordinary men on trivial grounds he will utterly despise... (The great-souled man) does not do many things but only great and notable things...he will not hesitate saying all that he thinks, since he looks down on mankind...nor is he easily moved to admiration because nothing appears great to him”. ibid p58

‘Small–souledness’ is very similar to our idea of humility and ‘great-souledness’ seems much like pride, but the latter man will seem quite obnoxious by our standards.

The Soul:

Remember that Plato had divided the soul into three parts, reason, spirit and appetite. Aristotle too divides the soul but in a more complicated way:
As you can see the soul is divided into two parts with a further four subdivisions. All living things share in the vegetative, animals and humans share in that and the appetite, but is only humans which have a rational soul. Calculative reason is that form of reason that deliberates over which actions are to be performed in specific circumstances. Over time this deliberation becomes habitual in the person of practical wisdom. In other words if calculative reason can exert dominance over the irrational then that part of the soul might become rationalised.

If we return to Aristotle’s notion of human happiness we can say that it is the supreme good for humans, and this state is as a result of achieving one’s function as a human. That function is “ an activity of soul...in accordance with virtue, or if there is more than one, in accordance with the best and most complete virtue.”

**Intellectual Virtue:**

Aristotle calls this virtue the best and most complete, and it has to do with the aspect of the soul that is pure reason. If the virtue of calculative reason is practical wisdom, then the virtue of pure reason is philosophical wisdom. Pure reason contemplates those features of reality about which we can do nothing. It produces “theoretical knowledge or philosophical contemplation”:

“Only the life of contemplation is desired solely for its own sake; it yields no result beyond the contemplation itself, while from all other actions we get something more or less besides the action itself...Since then it is reason that in the truest sense is the man, the life that consists in the exercise of reason in pursuit of theoretical wisdom is the best and pleasantest for man, and therefore the happiest.” Ibid p61

If the human being is the rational animal and if reason is the human essence then philosophical contemplation is the highest goal of human life, the function of our existence and that which brings us happiness; the happiest human being is the philosopher who engages actively everyday with practical wisdom.

**Summary:**

- Aristotle’s philosophy is guided by the central idea of teleology or purpose
- By determining the function of an object we can evaluate its success
- In order to know what the ‘good life’ is for a human we need to know what their function is
- For Aristotle the function, the goal of a human is happiness
- Happiness involves rationality and sociability
- Because we are free, unique in having choices, it is easy for us to choose false goals and therefore misconstrue happiness
- Therefore in order to avoid the greatest of all tragedies it is important to philosophise.
- Philosophy leads Aristotle to the conclusion that the function of ‘man’ (specifically) is an activity of the soul in accordance with virtue
- This activity is philosophical contemplation; happiness requires the pursuit of philosophical excellence
- This excellence (practical wisdom) is situational and contextual, and can only be found through experimentation
- It involves striving for a middle ground between excess and deficiency, between what Nietzsche called the ‘Dionysian frenzy’ and the ‘Apollonian (cool intellectual aloofness.’
- The person who has both the intellectual and physical skills (and luck) to achieve such a balance is able to be happy