

Aristotle and the Good Life

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'Aristotle,' I was informed by a literary agent I came across a while ago, 'is not "sexy".' If that means boring, irrelevant, unexciting, I strongly disagree. But this comment alerted me to the fact that Aristotle's image is unfairly tarnished, which is bound to have the unfortunate effect of stopping people tapping into the rich veins of wisdom to be found in his work. I'd like to start by quickly addressing the main reasons for this lack of 'street cred':

He had some pretty silly views about some things (women, slaves and so on), and this is often taken to imply that he can't possibly be relevant to us. But it doesn't follow that since his ideas on some things were silly, his ideas on all things were silly. They most certainly were not. All bodies of thought are likely to suffer from cultural influences that will not stand the test of time.

He gave reason a central place in human life, and modern perspectives tend to be sceptical of this (see P for psychoanalysis, postmodernism). We should indeed be humble about what reason can achieve. But it doesn't follow that, because our reasoning abilities are limited, they therefore have little value. Although limited, the ability to reason is a central feature of human life and should be treated as such.

His style is neither clear – which is why there are so many interpretations of his work – nor easy to read: it has been described as having 'a dry conciseness that makes one imagine one is perusing a table of contents rather than a book; it tastes for all the world like chopped hay'. But it is worth persevering: many gems are hidden among the hay.

Finally, he is let down by traditional translations of key terms. *Eudaimonia* should not be translated as 'happiness' – Aristotle is not talking about a state of mind. And 'virtue', with its connotations of Victorian chastity, sets our minds running along the wrong track. But I have to acknowledge that suitable alternatives are not always available.

I believe that Aristotle's ideas are invaluable and entirely relevant to people who want to live a rich, rewarding life in the modern world. One of the themes I have found most useful is his discussion of what such a life might involve. In this article I would like to review each of the main ingredients considered by Aristotle and defend a reading of his 'recipe' for a good life.

The ingredients of the good life

It is often pointed out – to the point of being a cliché – that one of the difficulties of living in the modern world is the crumbling of traditional certainties and ensuing confusion

about what values to hold and what aims to pursue. Time is limited, and we are torn between competing aims: career, family, personal development, education, success, money and so on. Often we have no clear way of negotiating these: for each piece of advice, a conflicting one is forthcoming from another source. The prevailing ethos is that these kinds of choices are wholly subjective and should be made on the basis of some kind of feeling or intuition – but how to decide whether to trust that? In the light of this predicament, Aristotle's discussion of the good life is at the very least food for thought. His view that there are certain things that just *are* essential to living a fully human life, and to that extent are non-negotiable, challenges the 'givens' of a relativistic age.

Like other philosophers of his time, Aristotle talks about the ultimate good being *eudaimonia* – a good life, a flourishing life, a fulfilled and worthwhile life. As he himself acknowledges, however, simply naming it does not tell us much about what sorts of ingredients are required for such a life, so he starts by considering various popular contenders – money, success, pleasure, relationships. His discussion of this topic is an excellent starting point for reflection, on our own or in the context of philosophical counselling.¹

Money and success

Money is clearly only a means to an end, therefore it can't be the main good. On the other hand, Aristotle does not advocate a life of renunciation – a moderate quantity of material comforts is necessary for our well-being. And a truly blessed life would be prevented by great misfortune. But what really determines the quality of our lives is not our circumstances themselves but what we make of them – just like a general takes the most strategically appropriate decision with the army at his disposal, or a shoemaker makes the best possible shoes with the leather he is given, to use Aristotle's metaphors. Success (or honour) can't be the main good either, since (a) it's too dependent on other people and the whims of fortune, and (b) we don't just want to be honoured and recognised – we want to be recognised by people we admire and for a good reason (or at least we should).

Pleasure

Pleasure is certainly not the main good, and people whose main interest lies in bodily pleasures are described as living 'lives that are fit only for cattle'. But Aristotle ends up defending pleasure in two ways: (a) even purely bodily pleasures are good in moderation – we are embodied creatures, and too little appreciation of bodily pleasures can

Eudaimonia is addressed in books I and X of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Additionally, pleasure is discussed in book VII and relationships in books VIII and IX.

actually hinder our pursuit of a good life. It is only excessive indulgence that is damaging and distracts us from more worthwhile pursuits. Also, (b) there are different kinds of pleasures, and the best kind is that deriving from being involved in some worthwhile activity. Notice the direction of the causal arrow: value → pleasure rather than pleasure → value. An important question here is: can we really say that doing something worthwhile just *is* pleasant? And if we conclude that worthwhile and pleasant experiences don't always coincide, to which should we give priority in our life? An Aristotelian answer might be that in order to have a truly good life we should aim for a balance of both – but this might not be as easy as it sounds.

Relationships

Relationships are very important in a good life. Aristotle says that we'd be hard pushed to describe someone who is totally solitary as having a good life, and that nobody would choose to live without friends, even if they had all the other goods. So a good life should include other people, although again this is not the main good. He recognises three types of relationships: the useful, the pleasant and the ones based on mutual admiration. The first two are incidental – the person is loved only insofar as s/he provides some good or pleasure; the third is the most solid and therefore most important. But we could add that the capacity to be alone is also important, and that some individuals may choose solitude for the sake of other pursuits, such as contemplation.

Reason and the Virtues

The main good for a human being is reason, since it is the characteristic human capacity, the one we don't share with other animals. There are different readings of this, but a plausible one is that although none of our capacities should be neglected, the specifically human ones should be given a special place. So a good life should certainly contain some enjoyment connected with our biological nature, but our higher faculties should be given more importance. What about our capacity to feel deep emotions, to love, to be moved by art, music, nature? We could say – in an Aristotelian spirit, I believe – that it's the whole package (senses, emotions, reason) that characterises us as human beings, and should therefore be valued and cultivated. But reason should still keep hold of the reins.

Aristotle divided reason into *theoretical* (concerning the contemplation of unchangeable truths) and *practical* (to do with choosing wisely in the sphere of what can be changed). It is controversial which of these he thought was most important, but we could – again in an Aristotelian spirit, I think – (a) redefine theoretical reason to cover activities related to acquiring knowledge and understanding, and (b) say that both intellectual pursuits and choosing wisely are essential if we want to live well. Without the conducting role of practical reason (or wisdom), the whole ensemble could easily fall into chaos.

Theoretical and practical reason (or the *intellectual virtues*) are a central part of the good life. But the other requirement of a

fully rational life is that in order to flourish as human beings we need to develop the *virtues of character* that allow us to *feel* and *act* according to reason. There are spheres of life that we find it difficult to deal with, and being virtuous is about becoming skilled at handling these, getting it right in situations in which it is easiest to get it wrong. Getting it right involves 'hitting the mean' in our feelings and actions, in everything we do. Excess and deficiency are opposite ways of getting it wrong. In order to live well therefore we should adopt appropriate ideals, learn to identify the appropriate course of action through rational deliberation and train ourselves to feel and act accordingly.

Discussion

Our provisional 'recipe' for a good life, therefore, could involve enough basic goods, some success and recognition, some pleasure and enjoyment, some love and friendship, but most importantly learning/understanding choosing wisely and developing the virtues of character. The suggestion that not any old values will do and that we can reason about this seems mildly risqué in a relativistic ethos, and needs to be defended. Aristotle's theory unfortunately rests largely on the notorious 'function argument', according to which everything in the universe had a purpose, dictated by the essential nature of a thing or creature: just like the purpose of an acorn was to develop into an oak tree, that of human beings was to develop their unique human capacities, the most important of which was the ability to reason.

At first sight this looks most unpromising. Science has made it impossible for us to follow Aristotle in this respect. As Richard Dawkins describes, 'Nature is . . . pitilessly indifferent. This is one of the hardest lessons for humans to learn. We cannot admit that things might be neither good nor evil, neither cruel nor kind, but simply callous – indifferent to all suffering, lacking all purpose.' (p. 96) If we embrace a scientific worldview (which Aristotle would have strongly approved of) we won't be able to share any certainties about universal purpose. But if we start to look we may find that, given the kinds of beings we are, there are constraints to what could be considered a good, flourishing life, and that some things are likely to promote and others to hinder its achievement.

We are peculiar creatures: our bodies have needs and experience the world through particular senses, with certain things giving us pleasure and others pain; we experience decay and eventually die; we have the capacity to reason about ourselves and the world we live in; we tend to be social animals; and so on. Given all this, can we come to any general conclusions about what sorts of things tend to be conducive to a good life?

Nussbaum (1993) thinks so. She writes about spheres of human experience that occur in any human life, 'and in which more or less any human being will have to make *some* choices rather than others, and act in *some* way rather than some other.' (p. 245) Dealing with these spheres of choice, frequently connected with the 'shared conditions of

human existence', with our 'finitude and limitation', is not always easy. Having a good life involves choosing and acting well in relation to these areas in which 'human choice is both non-optional and somewhat problematic'. (p. 248)

A common objection to this kind of project is that even if these experiences are indeed shared, it does not mean that there is a single answer to how we should conduct our lives. This should be conceded, but does not entail a retreat into relativism. An Aristotelian 'recipe' does not describe a unique combination that holds true for everybody, and could be realised in different ways, both in terms of the exact balance of ingredients and of how to go about realising each ingredient. This 'multiple realisability',² however, does not mean that there is endless room for manoeuvre, and not all answers will be equally acceptable.

We are finite beings and sadly our lives are of limited duration. Developing all human capacities to the full is simply not an option, so we have to prioritise and choose. The values that tend to lead to a flourishing life are like generalised headlines and don't give us a clear clue about what we should concretely aim for in our life, therefore it is important to learn to 'translate' general principles into specific understanding and action in particular situations. Practical reason allows us to make that link by helping us to choose the goals that are most appropriate to our situation, given our talents, inclinations, skills and current opportunities. According to Wiggins (1980), we could have a broad description of what we want:

a good life, a satisfying profession, an interesting holiday, an amusing evening – and the problem is . . . to see what really *qualifies* as an adequate and practically realizable specification of what would satisfy this want. Deliberation is . . . a search for the *best specification*. (p. 228)

There is a world of difference between this fleshing out – which will juggle human characteristics, personal traits and circumstances, particular contexts – and the view that we can simply choose our values in life. Clarifying what 'the good life' means in any particular case is a valuable aim in life and in philosophical counselling. The appropriate attitude to have, in true Aristotelian spirit, is a mean between 'anything goes' and a totally prescriptive one.

Practical applications

There are many exercises that could be used to explore the topic of the good life in a systematic way (see for example LeBon, 2001). The following are some examples:

- Do you agree with the provisional 'recipe' we ended up with? What would you add or take away? Why? Write your own revised list. Would Aristotle approve of it?
- Every day for a week, record all the activities you engage in, and whether they are means to ends or ends in themselves. Begin by dividing a sheet of paper into two

columns. On the left write down a description of the activity, and on the right M for means and E for end. If it is a means, what is the end it aims at? You can identify the end by asking 'why?' until you have reached something that you want for its own sake. (Of course, an activity could be both.)

- Are you clear what you mean by each of the values on your list? Are there any clashes between them (either in principle or because of time constraints)?
- If you looked back at the end of your life, would you be satisfied with having lived by these values? Is there something missing?
- How do the values on your list fare in relative importance? Compare them in pairs. Take two at a time and ask yourself: 'if I had to choose between A and B, which would I choose?'
- To what extent are you realising these values in your life at the moment? Rate each value 1-5, where 1 = not very much and 5 = fully.

But the answers to the above questions should be seen as providing only clues to value, and should be probed and examined rather than passively accepted. After generating initial values, we should explore:

- Whether those values withstand scrutiny
- Our particular mixture of talents, abilities and inclinations
- The reality of our circumstances
- whether, in the light of this, chosen ideals are appropriate
- What ways to develop them are especially fitting
- Whether in practice goals match values and ideals
- How conflicts can be resolved
- How choices can be made
- Any gains and losses resulting from this

Reflecting on ideals and connecting them to reality is only the first step in the search for the good life. A full Aristotelian therapy will involve cultivating practical wisdom and the virtues of character, managing emotions and developing self-control.

References

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² This expression is of course associated with Putnam(1975) and the very different context of the 'mind-body problem'.