THE BIG IDEAS

Eudaimonic Happiness
The ultimate end.

Areté
The path to that end.

Olympic Games
How to win.

The Doctrine of the Mean
Vices of excess and of deficiency.

Magnanimity
The greatness of YOUR soul.

The Nicomachean Ethics

BY ARISTOTLE · PENGUIN CLASSICS © 2004 · 400 PAGES

> "Internally, too, the *Ethics* has a structure. It may be summarized thus: Our task is to become good men, or to achieve the highest human good. That good is happiness; and happiness is an activity of the soul in accordance with virtue (Book I). Virtue is therefore to be analysed, and the conditions for virtuous action determined (Books II-III); and the various virtues, 'moral' and 'intellectual', must be described (Books IV-VI and VIII-IX). Pleasure, intimately tied to virtue by more than one cord, must also be anatomized (Books VII and X). And finally, the nature of happiness and the means of ensuring it can be laid down (Book X). The key concepts here, which are not perfectly represented by the English words 'virtue' and 'happiness', will call for elucidation later on; but their structural interrelations are immediately discernible, and it is these which provide the internal frame of the *Ethics*."

from the Introduction to *The Nicomachean Ethics*

Aristotle was born in Macedonia in 384 BC. At the age of seventeen, he went to Athens where he studied with Plato at his Academy for twenty years. Shortly thereafter, he was summoned back to Macedonia to tutor the thirteen-year-old Alexander the Great.

From there, he returned to Athens where he established the Lyceum and *"explored and expounded and taught the entire field of human knowledge—logic, metaphysics, theology, history, politics, ethics, aesthetics, psychology, anatomy, biology, zoology, botany, astronomy, meteorology and the ancient equivalents of physics and chemistry."*

His writings have been extraordinarily influential since ancient times while the Lyceum *"lived on for some five hundred years after its founder's death. As a stimulus, a challenge, an inspiration and a formative influence on subsequent thought, it was scarcely matched and never surpassed."* (Recap of most epic lineage ever: Socrates taught Plato. Plato taught Aristotle. They all taught us A LOT.)

This book is named after Aristotle's son who essentially edited his lecture notes. It's fascinating to imagine Aristotle using these notes to teach 2,300 years ago.

As per the intro above, the *Ethics* has ten "Books." The first four are the most practical and where we will be spending all of our time. You know all those Aristotle quotes on happiness and habits and the doctrine of the mean? You'll find most of them in this classic.

As you can imagine, the book is packed (!) with Big Ideas.

We're obviously only going to scratch the surface of this masterpiece, but I'm excited to share some of favorites we can apply to our lives today, so let's jump straight in!

> " Moral virtues, like crafts, are acquired by practice and habituation."
>
> ~ Aristotle

THE ULTIMATE END: EUDAIMONIC HAPPINESS

"The end is no doubt happiness, but views of happiness differ

" What is the good for man? It must be the ultimate end or object of human life: something that is in itself completely satisfying. Happiness fits this description."

~ Aristotle

Since all knowledge and every pursuit aim at some good, what do we take to be the end of political science — what is the highest of all practical goods? Well, so far as the name goes there is pretty much agreement. It is 'happiness,' say both ordinary and cultured people; and they identify happiness with living well or doing well. But when it comes to saying in what happiness consists, opinions differ, and the account given by the generality of mankind is not at all like that of the wise. The former take it to be something obvious and familiar, like pleasure or money or eminence, and there are various other views; and often the same person actually changes his opinion: when he falls ill he says that it is health, and when he is hard up that it is money. Conscious of their own ignorance, most people are impressed by anyone who pontificates and says something that is over their heads. Some, however, have held the view that over and above these particular goods there is another which is good in itself and the cause of whatever goodness there is in all these others. It would no doubt be rather futile to examine all these opinions; enough if we consider those which are the most prevalent or seem to have something to be said for them."

Happiness.

That's the ultimate aim, the supreme good that we're all after. In *Happier*, Tal Ben-Shahar calls this the "ultimate currency."

But I wish we could interview Aristotle for the Optimize podcast so we can ask him to explain what the Greek word we weakly translate as "happiness" ACTUALLY means.

The word Aristotle uses to capture the ultimate aim of life is not "happiness" as we use the word, it was the Greek word *eudaimonia*.

Jonathan Barnes, the author of the Introduction to this Penguin Classic makes the *very* strong point that *"To call a man* eudaimōn *is to say something about how he lives and what he does. The notion of* eudaimonia *is closely tied, in a way in which the notion of happiness is not, to success: the* eudaimōn *is someone who makes a success of his life and actions, who realizes his aims and ambitions as a man, who fulfills himself."*

In other words, the ultimate aim of life is not "happiness" as we know it, but more of a sense of ACTUALIZATION.

(Which, btw the way, is one of the reasons why Martin Seligman evolved his philosophical framework (and book titles) from "Authentic Happiness" to "Flourish.")

True happiness, in the Aristotelian sense, MUST include the successful actualization of our potentialities. THAT is the ultimate purpose of life. The highest good. The *summum bonum*.

Which leads us back to Barnes and another one of his brilliant points: "*It will not do to replace 'happiness' by 'success' or 'fulfilment' as a translation of* eudaimonia*; the matter is too complicated for any such simple remedy, and in what follows I shall continue to employ the word 'happiness', guarding it with a pair of inverted commas. But it is worth considering Aristotle's recipe for* eudaimonia *with the notion of success in mind. The* Ethics*, we are thus supposing, is not telling us how to be morally good men, or even how to be humanly happy: it is telling us how to live successful human lives, how to fulfill ourselves as men."*

And, all of that hints at why VIRTUE is so important—which leads us to our next Idea on HOW we go about achieving *eudaimonia*.

THE PATH TO EUDAIMONIA: ARETÉ

"*But what is happiness? If we consider what the function of man is, we find that happiness is a virtuous activity of the soul*

Bur presumably to say that happiness is the supreme good seems a platitude, and some more

" But what is happiness? If we consider what the function of man is, we find that happiness is a virtuous activity of the soul."

~ Aristotle

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 — or in general any class of men who have a specific function or activity — his goodness and proficiency are considered to lie in the performance of that function. But is it likely that whereas joiners and shoemakers have certain functions or activities, man as such has none, but has been left by nature a functionless being? Just as we can see that eye and hand and foot and every one of our members have some function, should we not assume that in like manner a human being has a function over and above these particular functions? What, then, can this possibly be? Clearly life is a thing shared also by plants, and we are looking for man's *proper* function; so we must exclude from our definition the life that consists in nutrition and growth. Next in order would be a sort of sentient life; but this too we see is shared by horses and cattle and animals of all kinds. There remains, then, a practical life of the rational part. (This has two aspects: one amenable to reason, the other possessing it and initiating thought.) As this life also has two meanings, we must lay down that we intend here life determined by activity, because this is accepted as the stricter sense. Now, if the function of man is an activity of the soul in accordance with, or implying, a rational principle; and if we hold that the function of an individual and of a good individual of the same kind — e.g. of a harpist and a good harpist and so on generally — is generically the same, the latter's distinctive excellence being attached to the name of the function (because the function of the harpist is to play the harp, but that of a good harpist is to play it well); and if we assume that the function of man is a kind of life, namely, an activity or a series of actions of the soul, implying a rational principle; and if the function of a good man is to perform these well and rightly; and if every function is performed well when performed in accordance with its proper excellence: if all this is so, the conclusion is that the good for man is an activity of the soul in accordance with virtue, or if there are more kinds of virtue than one, in accordance with the best and most perfect kind."

That might be the longest passage we've shared.

I'm sharing it to a) show the logical coherence of Aristotle's thinking and b) let him articulate his logical framework for why "happiness is a virtuous activity of the soul."

As per our last Idea, the ultimate aim in life—why we do ANY and EVERY thing—is to achieve happiness. But not "happiness" as we tend to think about it. Happiness in the deepest sense of flourishing and succeeding in actualizing our potential.

We know that *eudaimonia* means more than just happiness. Break it down and you'll see that it LITERALLY means "good" (*eu*) + "soul" (*daimon*).

Or, as Aristotle states it here, happiness is "a virtuous activity of the soul."

In short: want eudaimonic happiness? Live with virtue. Which leads us to my favorite word. *Areté*. As we've discussed, although the word *areté* directly translates as "virtue" or "excellence" it has a deeper meaning—something closer to expressing the best version of yourself.

When? Right now. And now. And now. And now.

For how long? Well, that leads us to the paragraph that immediately follows the one referenced above. Aristotle says: "There is a further qualification [for attaining eudaimonic happiness]: in a complete lifetime. One swallow does not make a summer; neither does one day. Similarly, neither can one day, or a brief space of time, make a man blessed and happy."

Translation: Eudaimonic happiness doesn't happen in a day or a week or a month. We're never exonerated. It takes a lifetime of excellence to actualize.

P.S. You know that Aristotle quote *"We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit."*? Well, he didn't actually say that. He said what I just quoted above about the swallows. It was Will Durant who paraphrased that wisdom so poetically. (Sleuthing here.)

HOW TO WIN AT THE OLYMPIC GAMES

" By common consent, the beginning is more than half the whole task, and throws a flood of light on many of the aspects of the inquiry."

~ Aristotle

"Now our definition is in harmony with those who say that happiness is virtue, or a particular virtue; because an activity in accordance with virtue implies virtue. But presumably it makes no little difference whether we think of the supreme good as consisting in the *possession* or in the *exercise* of virtue: in a state of mind or in an activity. For it is possible for the *state* to be present in a person without effecting any good result (e.g. if he is asleep or quiescent in some other way), but not for the *activity*: he will necessarily act, and act well. Just as at the Olympic Games it is not the best-looking or the strongest men present that are crowned with wreaths, but the competitors (because it is from them that the winners come), so it is those who *act* that rightly win the honours and rewards in life."

The Olympic Games started in Olympia (not too far outside of Athens) in 776 BC.

What'd you have to do to win? You had to COMPETE.

You couldn't just show up and strut around. And so it is with virtue. You can't just KNOW these ideas. You have to LIVE them. *Theory* is rudimentary philosophy. *Practice* is the advanced work.

I'm reminded of Donald Robertson's *The Philosophy of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy*: *"The ancients conceived of the ideal philosopher as a veritable warrior of the mind, a spiritual hero akin to Hercules himself, but since the demise of the Hellenistic schools, the philosopher has become something more bookish, not a warrior, but a mere librarian of the mind."*

Here's to leaving the library and heading into the Olympic arena that is our lives.

THE DOCTRINE OF THE MEAN

"A cardinal rule: right conduct is incompatible with excess or deficiency

" This much, then, is clear: in all our conduct it is the mean that is to be commended. But one should incline sometimes towards excess and sometimes toward deficiency, because in this way we shall most easily hit upon the mean, that is, the right course."

~ Aristotle

First, then, we must consider this fact: that it is in the nature of moral qualities that they are destroyed by deficiency and excess, just as we can see (since we have to use the evidence of visible facts to throw light on those that are invisible) in the case of health and strength. For both excessive and insufficient exercise destroy one's strength, and both eating and drinking too much or too little destroy health, whereas the right quantity produces, increases and preserves it. So it is the same with temperance, courage and the other virtues. The man who shuns and fears everything and stands up to nothing becomes a coward; the man who is afraid of nothing at all, but marches up to every danger, becomes foolhardy. Similarly the man who indulges in every pleasure and refrains from none becomes licentious; but if a man behaves like a boor and turns his back on every pleasure, he is a case of insensibility. Thus temperance and courage are destroyed by excess and deficiency and preserved by the mean."

Ever heard of "the doctrine of the mean"?

Well, this book (and that passage in particular) is the source of it. In fact, walking us through the idea that "virtuous activity of the soul" is achieved by aiming at the *mean* between a vice of deficiency and a vice of excess is the essence of HOW to live with virtue.

Aristotle walks us through a range of virtues to demonstrate this doctrine of the mean and help us achieve *areté*. The #1 virtue we look at? Courage. And then temperance or self-control. Those are what he calls "moral virtues." Then we have "intellectual virtues" like wisdom and prudence.

In the realm of "fear and confidence," if we have too much courage, we're no longer virtuous. We're rash. Too little courage on the other hand and, of course, we're cowards.

In the realm of "pleasure and pain," too little self-control and we're "licentious." Too much? We're bores. While in the realm of "anger," our virtuous mean is "patience." Too little and we're "irascible." Too much patience and we have a "lack of spirit."

" So too it is easy to get angry-anyone can do that-or to give and spend money; but to feel or act toward the right person to the right extent at the right time for the right reason in the right way-that is not easy, and it is not everyone that can do it. Hence to do these things well is a rare, laudable and fine achievement."

~ Aristotle

Know this: *"For this reason anyone who is aiming at the mean should (1) keep away from that extreme which is more contrary to the mean, just as Calypso advises: 'Far from this surf and surge keep thou ship.' For one of the extremes is always more erroneous than the other; and since it is extremely difficult to hit the mean, we must take the next best course, as they say, and choose the lesser of the evils; and this will be most readily done in the way that we are suggesting. (2) We must notice the errors into which we ourselves are liable to fall (because we all have different natural tendencies...), and we must drag ourselves in the other direction; for we shall arrive at the mean by pressing well away from our failing—just like somebody straightening out a piece of wood."*

Quick question: What direction do *you* tend to fall when you miss the mark? Shall we drag ourselves in the other direction?! (Yah? How?)

P.S. The next time you miss the mark of virtue, recall that the opposite of being virtuous is, technically, being "vicious." Then just say "needs work!" and remember: *"Moral virtues, like crafts, are acquired by practice and habituation."*

THE GREATNESS OF YOUR SOUL

"Greatness of soul, as the very name suggests, is concerned with things that are great, and we must first grasp of what sort these are. It makes no difference whether we consider the disposition or the person who corresponds to it. Well, a person is considered to be magnanimous if he thinks that he is worthy of great things, provided he *is* worthy of them; because anyone who esteems his own worth unduly is foolish, and nobody who acts virtuously is foolish or stupid. The magnanimous man, then, is as we have described him. The man who is worthy of little consideration and thinks that he is such is temperate, but not magnanimous, because magnanimity implies greatness, just as beauty implies a well developed body... The man who thinks that he is worthy of great things although he is not worthy of them is conceited; but not everybody is conceited who has too high an opinion of his own worth. On the other hand the man who has too low an opinion is pusillanimous: and it makes no difference whether his worth is great or moderate or little, if his opinion of it is too low. Indeed the man whose worth is great might be regarded as especially pusillanimous, because what would his behaviour be if his worth were not so great? So although the magnanimous man is an extreme as regards the greatness of his claims, as regards its rectitude he is a mean, because he estimates himself at his true worth. The others show excess and deficiency."

That's from "Book IV: Other Moral Virtues" in which we explore other virtues like magnificence (which literally means being great and generous with the use of money) and friendliness.

" Rash people are impetuous, eager before danger arrives but shifty when it is actually present; whereas courageous ones are keen at the time of action but calm beforehand."

~ Aristotle

But what I want to focus on is this whole "greatness of soul" business. This passage is the one that jumped out at me the most. I was most struck by the concept of being "pusillanimous"—where you actually ARE capable of great things but you don't properly see it.

To bring the point home, how about a quick etymology lesson.

First, we have *magnanimity*. That beautiful Greek word is made up of two other Greek words: *magnus* ("great") and *animus* ("soul"). Magnanimity = GREAT SOUL!!

The opposite of magnanimity? *Pusillanimity*. (Just saying that word in my head makes me wince!) That comes from two Greek words as well. *Pusillus* ("very small") + *animus* ("soul"). These days we define *pusillanimity* as "showing a lack of courage or determination; timid."

Magnanimous. Pusillanimous.

In this context, Aristotle tells us that to be magnanimous is to properly see your great worth—your ability to do GREAT things worthy of tremendous honor and praise. Aristotle describes this as the best person of all. They see their potential properly and they act in accordance with that.

"Those states that are praiseworthy we call virtues."

~ Aristotle

Of course, if we think we're capable of doing great things but we're actually *not* capable of doing them (and/or not willing to do the things necessary to achieve them), we're conceited. That's the vice of excess.

Falling into that zone is (clearly) not without risk. But, for the moment, let's assume that we're properly grounded and striving to live with humility while dedicating our lives to serving something bigger than ourselves, etc. Then, we must open our eyes to the possibility that we're missing the mark on the *other* side of the mean—we're not seeing our true greatness and we're being too timid in pursuit of those great things.

Magnanimous. Pusillanimous.

A GREAT soul or a very small soul. Which would you like to be?

As we ponder that question, Eric Butterworth comes to mind. In *Discover the Power Within You* he tells us: *"You may say, 'But I am only human.' This is the understatement of your life. You are not only human—you are also divine in potential. The fulfillment of all your goals and aspirations in life depends upon stirring up and releasing more of that divine potential. And there is really nothing difficult about letting this inner light shine. All we must do is correct the tendency to turn off our light when we face darkness."*

Gandhi also comes to mind. You know what they called him? *Mahatma*. You know what *mahatma* means? "Great soul." It's from Sanskrit *maha* ("great") and *atman* ("soul").

Sound familiar? THAT's the kind of *great soul* we're talking about. I hereby challenge you, my dear friend, to step into the greatness of your soul. Here's to your *magnanimity*.

Let's Optimize our lives, actualize our potential and change the world together.

With eudaimonia and areté,

Brian Johnson
Heroic Philosopher CEO

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About the Author of This Note

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Brian Johnson is the Founder + CEO of Heroic. He's spent half of the last 25 years as a Founder/CEO and the other half as a Philosopher. Brian loves integrating ancient wisdom and modern science to help YOU become the best, most heroic version of yourself so we can create a world in which 51% of humanity is flourishing by 2051. Learn more at heroic.us.