

Aristotle's Way – Edith Hall

Notes and Takeaways

Aristotle (A) was an ancient thinker who lived from 384 to 322 BCE

He lived in Athens, Lesbos, Assos, Atarneus, Pella, Mieza, other parts of Macedonia, and ultimately Chalkis where he died in 322 BCE

He personally taught Alexander the Great, and served as the intellectual mind for Phillip II (Alexander's father)

He moved to Athens at age 17 and studied under Plato

His father Nicomachus was a doctor and taught Aristotle much about the human form

Hedonism and strictly seeking pleasure all the time is flawed in that it can corrupt all men

- o Instead A promotes pleasure as a part of the journey to happiness, but not the end all be all
- o A believed that happiness was not god sent and that gods did not involve themselves in human affairs

A felt that happiness could be analyzed, like the subject matter of any other branch of knowledge

He felt that happiness could be widespread throughout society because he felt it could be attained after some level of study and effort

Thinking in the Aristotle way means using our understanding of human nature in order to live in the best way possible

- o This means that nature itself and not a concept beyond nature (such as gods) were the fundamental basis for analysis of affairs and decisions
 - This analysis consists of examining: communal society, love, death, and other pragmatic thoughts involving life

A put human experience at the center of all his thought

A insists that creating happiness is not a matter of fanatically applying big rules and principles, but of engaging with the texture of life **THIS IS THE KEY**

People who are impatient get things done; people who never take risks live limited lives, people who evade the truth and do not express pain or joy at all are psychologically and emotionally stunted

A did not believe in the Marcus Aurelius, Seneca and Epictetus teaching of stoicism

- o He believed this view on life did not encourage the same joy in life
- o He felt true stoicism did not leave enough room for humanness and hope

A believed that humans are nothing more than the most advanced animal and what separates us from the rest is practical action and thought

Aristotle believed in enjoying life with taste and drink and engaging in all the bounty of society

Aristotle believed that all opinions must *always be open to revision*

- o He directly applied this to the state and said “it is impossible that the structure of the state can have been framed correctly for all time in relations to all its details”

He believed in keeping the body fit and strong and also kept his mind sharp

- o “Only ideas gained through walking have any worth at all”

He felt that god was an answer many were looking for and needed

- o “Nobody can live with death before his eyes if he thinks that oblivion lies at the end”
- o Aristotle felt that humans seek an answer and for many, the comfort of god or gods are a way for people to explain the atrocities of life, and specifically death

Aristotle did not believe in god, but stated he did not know what to put in His place

- o The author interjects with her own story “I still longed to be a good person, live a constructive life, and ideally leave the planet in a better place than I had arrived in it”

Aristotle’s first focus: Happiness

- o **“The ultimate goal of human life is, simply happiness which means finding purpose in order to realize potential and working on behaviors to become the best version of yourself”**
- o Whether the best version of yourself is a loving father/mother, pious worshiper, husband/wife, friend, public servant, leader - finding this “meaning of life” for yourself and then working towards what you define as that best version will bring happiness

Aristotle was not a utilitarian (seek to maximize the happiness of the greatest number) he believed each person finds happiness in different ways and everyone should experience their journey on their “own path”

He felt that life itself was distinguished as having an “active mind”

- o A was convinced that most people received their pleasure from learning things [Agree]
- o He believed that achieving higher level thinking and learning only was accomplished through *self-conscious habit*

He believed that specifics are key and a need to a focus on these specific topics brought progress in attaining self-contentment; generalities would never get anyone anywhere

A believed that people should be self-sufficient

- o A believed it impossible to be self-sufficient without financial independence
- o Only when individuals can live without economic support from anyone else are they truly able to think for themselves and not required to pander to anyone else’s whims
- o Being able to live well requires to act as an *independent agent* in a moral sense and not be obligated to any other

A believed that anyone had the power to take responsibility for their own happiness and decide to live well

Aristotle’s second focus: potential

All living things are in the process of continuous change and development

- o He recognized that some changes take months, some years, and others even decades

A felt that an unplanned life is less worth living

Life is a form of activity and each person exercises his activity upon those objects with those faculties which he likes the most and can achieve the best result

A believed that the greatest experts are those who practice common sense and have accumulated experience on the topic

Aristotle's third focus: decision

Life is completely unfair and fate is not providential

- o Bad people will succeed and good people will suffer

Certain people are able to harness good fortune from diligent work and constantly learning and advancing their mind

- o It all comes down to taking responsibility for one's own life
- o One must choose purposive choice that *rests* within yourself

A man should not be judged by what he does, but rather by why he does it

A recommended setting "founding goals" that are tough but achievable and within your own abilities

- o Always consult and listen to expert advisors in the area you have interest
- o The man who follows good advice is himself good

Relationships with loved ones outweigh moral scruples

Time spent worrying about things which you cannot change is a waste of time and mental effort

Aristotle's fourth focus: communication

To make others understand the speaker must make his own character right and put his listeners in the right frame of mind

Good cheer buoyancy and affability are invaluable

Great humor is also essential

- o Banter is welcomed if done tastefully

Aristotle fifth focus: self-knowledge

The path to happiness comes through taking on the project of becoming a *great-souled man* of being magnanimous (courageous, self-sufficient)

It is imperative to avoid judging yourself harshly or descending into self-castigation

Anger can sometimes be virtuous and legitimate

- o The best form of anger is that of the quick-tempered who displays it openly and is then done with it, "out of sight, out of mind."

Bitterness is the most troublesome form of bad temper

- o Admit this anger to yourself and then express to actual perpetrator and don't harbor it as a grudge

A was okay with revenge as long as it was conducive to happiness and the only way a wrong may be righted is with revenge [Don't necessarily agree with this]

People who slight you or your friends are almost always motivated by envy

- o Slight can take three forms: contempt, spite and insolence
- o Those who criticize others constantly always have a problem with self-respect

A does not regard wealth itself as special

- o The only way to use wealth well is through generosity

A truly generous person is always liable to the *vice* of giving away too much money and/or time irresponsibly which must be guarded against

Aristotle's sixth focus: intentions

It is great practice to never write or say anything to anyone that would be uncomfortable to you if it was made public (or appeared in the newspaper)

A person living well will always tell the truth when something significant is at stake, when it is unimportant (swapping stories with friends) then it is not critical that truth must always persist

Aristotle's seventh focus: love

Adultery is unacceptable because it erodes trust with the person you care about most

Friendship is one of the most indispensable requirements of life

Hold a vision of the future with your spouse, talk about the goals and what you want to accomplish together

You can always spot a bad person because they will choose material gain over a friend's welfare

He explains that bad things happen to people for two reasons

- o Human error
- o Random accident

He felt that most stress comes from unfairness of luck or chance in human life

A thinks it is proper that fathers love their children more than they are loved by them

Aristotle's eight focus: community

Regulation of property ownership causes discontent in a community

People look after things because they enjoy the sense of private ownership and because things have value to them

Humans are but animals with a few distinctive characteristics discussed in detail above

Aristotle's ninth focus: leisure

Aristotle insisted that leisure was far more important than work and that people often misuse and waste leisure if they are not educated in constructive pastimes

- o He uses the Spartan culture in peace time as an example, they only were ever trained for war, and when boredom set in they began eroding their society

In today's world A would find it odd that when people ask "what do you do?" people always respond with their work or title; A would want people to respond with their greatest leisure hobby

A believed that only in leisure could full human potential be realized

- o Leisure is therefore wasted if not used purposively

He was very aware that people are generally not social prepared for making good choices about how to spend their leisure

- o In his view, teaching people how to spend this time nurturing thought and personal growth is exactly how to build a strong, happy individual

Compulsive working around the clock harms physical and mental health

More free time makes more self-education possible

Exercise was key to the growth of a person because a physically strong person is able to work on his "mental game"

Aristotle's tenth focus: mortality

Thinking about happiness inevitably causes one to think about death

A believed that "death is the most terrible of all things, for it is the end"

A undoubtedly saw death as final as most agnostics would today

He believed that understanding life and happiness meant thinking about a pervasive sense that acknowledgement of mortality and confrontation with full implications can be used effectively to help us live and die well

A would tell people to use memories in a disciplined methodical way to cope with aging and the loss of loved ones

There is a big difference between remembering something randomly and deliberately recollecting

- o It is the latter that separates humans from all other species

Aristotle believed that God is actualized thought, or thought in action, a temporary joy that all humans can experience

- o This is pure happiness or pleasure

A believed that believing in an afterlife should not be discouraged even though he himself did not believe, he felt anything that brings comfort and happiness when people are suffering should be acknowledged

Final A wisdom: change is constant, so constantly work to grow, change and better oneself as one ages to pursue and achieve ultimate happiness