Aristotle: What Is Real Happiness

We may wonder and ask ourselves what real happiness is. How can one’s life be gratified? How can one be happy? Aristotle gave us an ample answer through a system of ethics. ?????????? (eudaimonia) is a state of happiness, serene or fulfillment. It is actually the well-being of an individual. The Greek words: “?? (EU)” means “good” and “?????? (Dimon)” means soul. So, in ancient times it meant good soul. It is a state in which a person is able to make righteous decisions without reappraising them. Every human being’s actions are ultimately a sequel of good that exists in them. Whether this good is explicit or it is implied, it directs toward eudaimonia (happiness). The prime goal or summum bonum of life is to have a good soul and to have a good relationship with the inner guiding spirit that we all have. Eudaimonia can be experienced in a sense of joy and in a sense of well-being that comes when one is flourishing. It means striving to express the best in one’s self.

Every art practice and faculty aims to achieve an end and this end must be good. So, the good is that in which all things aim. The good is the end of a practice. The good at the end of architecture, for example, is a house, whereas, in some instances, the practice of the art itself is the end such as mastering a musical instrument. We wish to practice these arts for the sake of their ends and not just for the sake of doing them otherwise there would be a process at Infinitum. So, all activities must have an ultimate end and ultimate telos and hence the supreme good must exist for humans. Aristotle clarifies what is good. Perhaps all the things are considered to be good in virtue are derived from the ultimate good or maybe they all contribute to it. The ideal good is attainable and practices able and knowing it would allow us to achieve it. However, the good must have the greatest degree of finality, honor, wealth, intelligence, and health. Despite being pursued their own concomitant ends, they are ultimately all pursued the sake of happiness. It is possible that happiness is the practice of all good, the absolute end. Some equate happiness with pleasure howbeit, Aristotle would fiercely reject this claim and argue that it may be true with animals, humans have higher ends. What we identify as happiness can vary depending on circumstances. The poor would regard wealth as merriment while the sick would regard health as happiness. However, Aristotle refers to it simply as an activity in conformity with virtue.

Material wealth may be acquired for the purpose of attaining something else and pursuing honor is not connected to any characteristic of the person himself but how others perceive him. Aristotle believes that the soul consists of two parts: one irrational and the other capable of reasoning. Human beings' capacity for reason separates them from animals. Aristotle argues that a good life for a human being would focus to a significant extent on contemplation and learning or acquiring the intellectual virtues which include: science, intelligence, and theoretical wisdom etcetera. Aristotle linked intellectual virtues with scientific knowledge as we know it today. But, spending life in contemplation is not enough. Aristotle claims that a person who lives a good life also acts rightly and develops the appropriate state of character from which to perform the righteous actions.

Arete (Greek: ?????) means ‘to live with virtue’ and it is something closer to expressing the best version of yourself. There is a gap between who you are capable of being in a moment and what you are actually being and in that gap is anxiety, depression, and regret. Close the gap.

Live with virtue and the virtuous activity is experiencing joy, fulfillment, and pleasure.

Aristotle uses the word ‘Olympics’ as a metaphor and he asks that in the Olympics who is awarded with the prize. Is it the one with better looks? No, it is the one who is competing, who is in the arena, is striving hard, and giving the best. The same thing happens with life. You cannot just talk about ideas and keep forming them in your own mind. They need to be acted upon. They need to be acted upon consistently. Consistency is the key. Nothing can be achieved without putting enough effort. One virtuous act would not take you to the state of eudaimonia, you need to string together a series of virtuous acts congruously over a longer period of time and then you would experience the joy and welfare. Aristotle says that virtue as a vice of deficiency and a vice of excess. So, virtue can be found right at the mean. This means that virtue is not too much and not too little.

One of the virtues Aristotle listed in his book is courage. According to him, it is the midpoint of being too brave and being impulsive. A courageous individual would face the dangers and would proceed with caution instead of imprudently diving in. He says that every human being possesses different tendencies. Some may tend to fall in a way and some tend to fall in another way. You need to know yourself better and everyone must know where their tendencies lie. The virtuous mean is quite challenging to reach. In order to stay in mean, try to tend both ways and not just too much in a single way. It is a constant iterating process. Patience is another virtue described by Aristotle. It regulates temperament. There is a thin line between being immodest and being humble and that thin line is called patience. Sometimes people get very much friendly with their companions that might lead to discomfiture, and sometimes there is very little interaction between friends. Having and maintaining an impartial and balanced attitude amongst friends is a virtue of friendliness. Some other important virtues are Liberality, magnificence, proper ambition, truthfulness, wittiness, modesty, righteousness, and righteous indignation. The person should always profess the truth, spend freely but not excessively, should take decisions justly, and so on. Good people must aspire to have these virtues.

Magnanimity means great soul. A great soul is one of Aristotle’s virtues. According to his dogma of mean, either you could have a great soul or you could have a woeful soul. You could either be magnanimous or pusillanimous. A person with a magnanimous soul, according to Aristotle, would be the one who knows what he’s capable of doing, he then aims for it and then actually act upon it. And if you are not willing to do the work, you are conceited. The worst case would be that if you are capable of doing something but you do not see it and do not value yourself enough to strive to do those things. You could have done great things instead you are pusillanimous. Let out the best version of yourself, the optimistic one. There is a divine potential in everyone that will be expressed uniquely. All these virtues provide us with an understanding of where we ought to go in our lives.

According to Aristotle, human lives well when he acts right and possesses all of the virtues. But, some elements of a good life, are not completed within a person’s control. People get rewarded when they thrive and compete well. In order to compete well, express the best version of yourself and then experience a good soul. And in order to express your best optimistic version, know yourself well. Get to the truth of the matter. Believe in yourself and keep doing great things consistently. You are what you repeatedly do.