

Why Aristotle Still Matters?

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Readings

from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*

If happiness is activity in conformity with virtue, it is to be expected that it should conform with highest virtue, and that is the virtue of the best part of us. Whether this is intelligence or something else which, it is thought, by its very nature rules and guides us and which give us our notions of what is noble and divine; whether it is itself divine or the most divine thing in us; it is the activity of this part when operating in conformity with the excellence or virtue proper to it that will be complete happiness.

from "Aristotle on the Divinity of a Human Life", by Aryeh Kosman

It's not that our lives cannot be lived virtuously without attention to the divine. There are perfectly decent lives that make no reference to it; some of everyone's best friends are atheists. But to some of us, a life that includes the gratitude, worship and sanctification that comes through recognizing and invoking the grace of the divine is a richer and happier life, just as a life of erotic or culinary or aesthetic prosperity is.

So there is an act of reaching out to the divinity of the world which I think is accomplished by seeing just how things are: no more or less. It's accomplished therefore by our noetic capacity to grasp the world by a kind of letting go of the world, and that noetic capacity Aristotle thinks is divine in us, if we let it be.

Sermon

Raise your hand if you would like to be happy?

Well, the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle knew that everyone wants to be happy. But how does one get to be happy?

These days there are college courses, books, and scientific studies on the question. Or we could just go back to Aristotle.

If we do, we should first note this: The Greek word in Aristotle's writing that is most often translated as "happiness" is *eudaimonia* – which literally means "good spirit" so perhaps is better translated as "human flourishing."

So, thinking of happiness in such terms – as about spiritual flourishing – bring to mind one or two of the happiest people you know.

Or bring to mind times in your own life when you have been particularly happy – not simply amused (nothing wrong with being amused or entertained), but more deeply happy... with a sense of spiritual flourishing.

Now ponder for a moment what you think the conditions or cause of that sense of deep happiness or flourishing might be.

Well, as you may have begun to glean from the readings, Aristotle asserted, to perhaps oversimplify, that what leads to human flourishing or happiness is a life of virtue – which in the Greek (the word is *arête*) has to do with fulfilling the purpose of a human life. For example, the virtue of a kitchen knife is to be sharp enough to cut well; the virtue of a baseball player is to hit and field well. When it comes to human beings in general, virtue, fulfilling our purpose, is in Aristotle's view to use our reason to discern the morally right way to live and act in relation to others... and then to act accordingly.

So – with Aristotle's notions in mind, return to my first question: What sort of people in your experience, seem to be the most truly and enduringly happy? And what in your life has given you the deepest happiness or satisfaction?

For me – yes, it is certainly the case that I feel happy around the dinner table with family, or during a good run through the woods on a beautiful fall morning, or when the Red Sox win. And Aristotle acknowledged that a completely happy life, a life of enduring flourishing, includes the more ordinary pleasures of life, of hearth and home, good health when we have it, and so on.

But all these, pleasant enough and good, are not sufficient in Aristotle's view to an even more fully flourishing or happy life, a life in which to a significant extent we fulfill the unique *arête* or virtue of being human by acting rightly in relation to others.

So beyond the lovely happiness of hearth and home, of a beautiful day in the woods or by the shore, I think of the happiness that is evoked by those times when I seem to have been of use to another person, or given or received forgiveness, or helped to serve a meal at Father Bill's, or contributed even in a modest way to some larger cause.

Now, why Aristotle today? Well, I started thinking about Aristotle again, and one of my college philosophy professors, Aryeh Kosman. I was moved to then purchase a book of his essays on Plato and Aristotle, and also found the essay on line from which I read earlier.

Not only was it a pleasure to reengage with Aristotle and with Professor Kosman, but I pretty quickly saw just how relevant Aristotle still is to our lives these thousands of years later.

As I read the *Nicomachean Ethics* and Prof. Kosman's essays, I almost felt I was back at Haverford College sitting along with a dozen or so other students around a seminar table, really engaging with whatever text we were reading, sometimes arguing a point with each other or with the philosopher at hand, no matter how historically esteemed, or with our professor, no matter how currently esteemed and really, really smart. For the point was to engage in what I've come to call conversations about things that matter... that might lead to lives that matter. And those conversations around a seminar table – using our reason! – were bracing, often illuminating, sometimes

inspiring; and little did I know, also excellent preparation for the Unitarian Universalist ministry and the conversations about things that matter we have around our own Parish House parlor.

But back to Aristotle.

For though his scientific speculations are mostly dated, and his views for example on the nature women and on the practice of slavery are worse than dated, the heart of his reflections on the nature of the good life, happiness, and ethics remain deeply relevant.

So, digging a little deeper.

It is easy enough just to affirm, as we have, that a life of happiness, genuine flourishing, includes using our reason to seek to live according to the best and highest virtue or moral excellence as a human being.

But what does the exercise of virtue look like, and how do we become such a human being?

As I've suggested already, we exercise virtue by discerning through reason the right and proper thing to do, and then doing it. For Aristotle is quite clear that we can't just think about what's right – that doesn't make us a virtuous or good person. We have to do something!

Further, the general idea of virtue can be more fully understood through particulars, and Aristotle spent a good deal of time on particular virtues: generosity, courage, self-control, truthfulness, justice, and so on. And he explicated each virtue in terms of his doctrine of the mean. For example, courage is the mean between the extremes of recklessness and cowardice.

His general point in all this, though, is that we develop these particular virtues through habit. We are not, in his view, born with them, but must learn by doing what our reason tells us is right until it becomes second nature.

To use our Unitarian Universalist first principle to make the point: It may well be that we are born with “inherent worth and dignity” but we must learn how to manifest that inherent worth and dignity through practice of such virtues as courage, generosity, truthfulness, and so on.

Think of the children in our lives. Parents, grandparents, teachers, guide children into good habits which at first may feel awkward to the child, but then become, again, what we call second nature.

I clearly recall, for example, our daughter Sandra's great-grandmother, when Sandra was but two or three years old, handing something back and forth with her and modeling “please” and “thank you.” It was a sort of game, but also developed a morally good habit. For such a habit is one that we eventually realize is part of a beautiful way of living, a way of living that feels good to us as individuals, *and* that contributes to healthy families and communities. Such a habit is, in short, a morally good habit.

And actually, more than just “second nature” it seems to me that we might say that developing these socially useful, ethically good habits helps us to align with a higher part of our being, that divine part of our being as Aristotle named it... simply conscience as we might also say.

To put it another way, we could say that habits becoming second nature align us with our true nature.

So, yes, when we offer a helping hand or serve others in any way not only do we feel better, but we feel more aligned with something, however we choose to articulate or understand it, something larger than our little individual selves.

So, how about this shorthand, paraphrasing Aristotle and Kosman: that the highest and best life, a life of human flourishing, is a life lived from that of God within us.

To illustrate a little further, we'll move forward a couple of centuries from Aristotle to Jesus. For as I've pondered all this this week, Jesus's story of the Good Samaritan returned to mind.

Most of you recall the story. A lawyer questions Jesus about getting eternal life; and it turns out the two of them agree on the scripture that it has to do with loving God wholeheartedly and loving your neighbor as yourself. But then the lawyer asks Jesus, okay, who is my neighbor?

Which leads to Jesus's parable of the man who was robbed and beaten and left to die on the street. Then the high officials from the temple each in a hurry, pass by, pretending not even to see. But a Samaritan (who Jews did not get along with, who would have been the last person Jesus's Jewish listeners might expect to be the "good neighbor")... a Samaritan is the one to stop and help the man, bring him to an inn, leave extra money for the innkeeper if he needed it to help take care of the man.

Turns out position and title didn't matter at all. Turns out what group or party you were part of didn't matter at all. What mattered, as we might put it, was this: Who was living from that divine part of themselves? In this case it wasn't the supposedly pious religious officials, it was the despised Samaritan.

So then – what about us? What about now? How, in the current cultural and political environment, can we cultivate a life of virtue, a life lived according to our highest and best natures? How can we live more like the Samaritan? More like those friends of ours who seem so happy, so deeply content?

And how might we help to cultivate a political environment more conducive to shared human flourishing? (Remembering that for Aristotle ethics and politics were thoroughly intertwined, since we live our human lives in community.)

Well, on one level, it is quite simply the same way a musician gets to Carnegie Hall or the Wang Center: practice – as we've said, practice the sort of habits that we know, through our reasoned discernment, through our experience, are the better habits of living with a generous, kind, courageous spirit seeking justice and fairness in the wider world.

And at the same time on another level, cultivating the experience of being part of something much larger than our individual selves: certainly the polis, the larger community, but also the natural world, and also, if we choose to name it so, the mystery some call God.

Finally, then, this:

I expect many if not most of us, wherever we are on the political spectrum, find much of the political conversation and behavior in our nation these days to be debased, even vulgar. But though it is okay, even important, to name it as such... we don't have to become it. As Gandhi probably did not say (but certainly lived) we must be the change we want to see. In other words, we can choose the higher way, the better way, even as we are firm and courageous in our ethical and political opinions and actions. Among other things, we can seek, as it is sometimes put, to disagree without being disagreeable.

Fact is, from the outset of our American republic, there have been stark divisions of opinion and party, and sometimes vicious name-calling. And sometimes, like our times, it is worse than at others.

Yet the only way to reach a better day is not to sink to the lowest level of discourse, but to reach for and speak and act from the highest – in ourselves and in one another.

Just might work, as our actions, our lives, ripple into our families, community, nation, world.

And we might also be happier along the way – which will itself also be of benefit to the larger communities of which we are a part.

So may it be.