

The necessity of eudaimonia



Defining the Good Throughout history, many people have attempted to define what it is to be good. They have tried to explain what it is like to live a good life and what it means to be a good person. Many have tried to offer their own insights into what being good really is. Some philosophers have spent most of their lives pondering and arguing their idea of what being good really is. Some philosophers are thick headed about the subject and will refute anyone else's idea of what being good is.

Other philosophers were more open minded about what being good is and would accept other's ideas and maybe even include other people's ideas in their own hypothesis. But, there really is no real answer to what being good is. The philosophers who listened to others and accepted other people's ideas might get a little closer to describing good, but even they could not fully define it. The word good is far too obscure to give one true definition to. Instead it will always live as a word with no true meaning.

In order to find what the good and apply this, the primary concern of political theorists such as Aristotle whom will be the subject of this research, is to determine by what form of ordinance or law, would succeed the state. And he claims that unity of the Polis really leads to the Eudaimonia, which is the real happiness. Aristotle saw the pursuit of the good of the polis, the political community, as a branch of ethics, the pursuit of the human good as a whole. He called this ultimate goal for human beings eudaimonia, which is often translated as “ the good life. He begins the Nicomachean Ethics with the claim that all human activities and pursuits aim at the good.

He means for this to be understood as a claim about how human activities contribute to the human function. Ethics is therefore dependent upon theory of human nature, for to be a good person is to succeed in making actual in one's character the unique potential of being human. For this reason, Aristotle's ethics, is an ethics of character, which in judgments of moral condition focuses on the enduring pattern of personality rather than on isolated acts or intentions.

Aristotle's notion of soul as the principle of actuality of a living body requires that his notion of goodness be oriented to this life rather than to an afterlife. According to Aristotle the definition of political success means the general happiness of the citizenry. Aristotle believes that putting together the excellent character within the citizenry is the first and most important step towards solidifying the happiness of the state as a whole, which gives us the idea of The unity of the Polis leads to Eudaimonia.

The basic structure of Aristotle's philosophies are derived by gathering as much information about the history of a subject as possible taking from the good and removing the bad Aristotle thought he could develop superior political theories. The conclusion Aristotle came to in his effort to write the perfect constitution was that it was necessary to first pay attention to the development of the parts of a society (the citizens). Once the parts are in harmony the emergence of the whole is the next logical step.

In developing political theory Aristotle begins by addressing issues of personal character on a microscopic level believing that in turn this will assist the state on a macroscopic level. Developing character or as Aristotle

refers to it, human excellence is an activity of the soul, rather than the physical body. Aristotle refers to the cultivation of human excellence as an activity of the soul because on a spiritual level he believes the soul to be the whole of an individual, similar to his belief that on the political level the state is the whole of a group of citizens.

The soul of the citizens forms the soul of the city and unity is the only way to provide this. Aristotle's ideas concerning the relationship between the cultivation of character and the maintenance of a just, free, and orderly political system can be most clearly seen in book VIII of *The Politics* when he discusses the value of gathering the minds of the youth. Aristotle proposes that the constituents of a nation establish the character of government and depending on the goodness of the character formed a political structure either sinks or swims.

What Aristotle is saying is that in order to put together a political system of maintained justice, freedom and order, society must start with the right materials. The right materials are young minds trained to pursue the virtues that comprise excellent adults. The sentence at the end of the first paragraph of book VIII of *The Politics* shows the value Aristotle placed on excellent character being a fundamental part of excellent government where he says the better the character, the better the government and the healthier unity towards the eudaimonia.

The issue of government policy concerning character formation and the implications of politicians passing legislation specifically aimed at improving moral character as a means of eliminating social ills. Aristotle proposes a

theory of eliminating social problems beginning by improving the parts of society as means of improving the whole. He suggests that we begin to do the right things with regards to small matters and through time we become accustomed to doing what is right, and we begin to take pleasure in it.

Aristotle suggests that to strengthen the formation of character among the very young is vital for the future of the nation and both men believe that public interest and private virtue are interdependent. Which leads to the hypothesis that perhaps character reduction is a natural result of letting the common man play too big a role in politics. To Aristotle there are two types of excellences, intellectual excellence, which according to Aristotle is gained and cultivated from teaching, and moral excellence, which is the result of habit.

Intellectual excellence is acquired only through time and experience and moral excellence is acquired through practice. Showing these two excellences is the basic work for reaching the good life. According to Aristotle we come to a point of excellence by going after an intermediate state of pleasure and pain. There are both an excessive and defective level of actions and passions, true excellence is the state of being able to self moderate one's intake of pleasure and tolerate a certain level of pain.

Aristotle believes the cultivation of character is necessary for three main reasons. The first reason Aristotle believes cultivating a strong character is crucial is because if a citizen is not living a well-balanced life in pursuit of the most excellent virtues, he will never achieve the good life or eudaimonia. To reach eudaimonia one must live their entire life in a constant balanced

pursuit of the virtues Aristotle mentions as those which are worthy of deriving true happiness for instance courage, moderation, justice, honour, generosity, pleasure etc.

Aristotle's view of achieving national excellence was based on establishing a constitution that would enable the polis as a whole to achieve eudaimonia. Reaching eudaimonia on an individual level is crucial from a political standpoint because a state is only as worthy as its constituents are. A nation as a whole has no hope to achieve eudaimonia unless its constituents have achieved this level of excellence. The second reason Aristotle sees character building as crucial in the rise of an excellent state is because it is a process, which requires habituation and practice.

According to Aristotle habituation and practice are invaluable traits in the pursuit of eudaimonia. Aristotle states that no moral excellences arise in us by nature, rather we are adapted by nature to receive them, and through habituation and practice we perfect the virtues of excellence. It is only by habit and practice that we are able to perfect the virtues that make us well rounded citizens. According to Aristotle there are many ways to fail but few to succeed, and only by becoming a master of the proper virtues through habituation could one achieve excellence.

Aristotle believes a good constitution is vital because the way in which the legislators draft the constitution forms the habits of the people. The third way in which we can see the value Aristotle places in character development lies within the way in which he relates the importance of educating the youth with the development of the state. Aristotle lived in Athens towards the end

of the Peloponnesian wars; the vicious internal tensions within Greece revealed the inadequacies of both the radical democracy of Athens and the communal, democratic and militaristic government of Sparta.

Because of the deficiencies of the political structures surrounding Aristotle he became determined to develop a constitution that took all the positive from past political designs and eliminated the negatives. Educating Hellenic youth in a manner that would impress a life of adherence to the guidelines of this ultimate constitution was therefore an obvious goal. Aristotle had a strong belief that citizens should be educated in a manner that moulds their minds to suit the form of government under which he or she lives, meaning that every government developed its own individual character and the better the character the better the government.

Aristotle felt strongly that legislators that did not direct their attention to the education of youth did harm to the constitution. By neglecting to form character at a young age politicians miss an opportunity to emphasise the values of true virtue and the desire to live a life in pursuit of eudaimonia. Concluding the theory of Aristotle's Book VII of the Politics states that each government has a unique character, which is a direct representation of the format of the constitution, therefore creation of a constitution that developed a nation in motion towards the state of eudaimonia was necessary to Aristotle.