

# In pursuit of happiness

Business



Humans have a need to understand the fundamental aspects of human existence, such as our purpose on Earth and the meaning of life itself.

Aristotle, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, argues that happiness is the goal of human action. In this day and age, however, there are a plethora of products, objects, and activities that claim to make one happy, from expensive, luxurious cars to miracle cleaning products. Although he mentions that one does require a certain amount of physical goods in order to be happy, Aristotle wrote that happiness is the habit of virtuous actions. It is not achieved by buying magical window cleaner or a new Mercedes-Benz; rather, it requires effort and practice. Based on this understanding, true happiness must be earned. Not everyone achieves it and not everyone is capable of real happiness.

All of what humans do has some purpose. For example, one eats good food in order to be healthy, and one competes in a sporting event in order to win. Aristotle believes that all of these objectives must be traceable to one common good, something that is the culmination of all we do. He says that only happiness is an end in itself; it alone is sought for its own sake and not for some other purpose beyond it. Thus happiness must be the Supreme good, the over-arching ideal that all people strive to achieve through their deeds. Aristotle says that happiness must be the fulfillment of the purpose of man. Humankind alone among the living creatures has the use of reason. Therefore, the full exercise of reason must be essential to true happiness. Otherwise, there would be no difference between humans and other animals.

Reason alone is not happiness, but it is impossible to be happy without the use of reason. Aristotle defines happiness as “ activity of the soul in accordance with virtue...” (Bk. 1, 1098a) In other words, virtuous action leads to true happiness.

It is important to note, that it is not mere virtue that leads to happiness, but actions in accordance with virtue. Thus, Aristotle claims, a sleeping person cannot be happy because he never acts. To achieve happiness, reason must be used as a means of discerning the right action and choosing to carry it out. Virtue always appears as moderation: neither excess nor defect. For example, the virtue of courage falls between rashness (excess) and cowardice (defect). Similarly, between extravagance and stinginess lies the virtue of generosity.

Use of reason is the only way to determine the golden mean in each situation, and thus do what is right. As the function of a good musician is excellence in playing music, the function of a good man has to be excellence in carrying out virtuous actions, using reason as his guide. Aristotle states that virtue, rather than being a mere emotion or an innate faculty, is a state of character that makes a person good and well-equipped to carry out his function; one that makes him excel at being human. However, since virtue is not inborn, nor is it something that simply comes upon one, as is emotion, there has to be a process by which it is learned or acquired. Aristotle says that people are made to receive virtues, and then they are perfected within a person through habit. Thus “ the virtues we get first by exercising them, as also happens in the case of the arts as well.

” (Bk. 2, 1103a) So virtue requires constant practice and habit to perfect, much like a violinist must constantly practice to achieve excellence. A person is virtuous not because he does one good act, but because he habitually does what is good. For all of the reasons described—that happiness is action of the soul in accordance with perfect virtue and that this is obtainable only through use of reason and practice—it follows that children cannot be truly happy. Due to their age, they cannot be expected to carry out the rational processes necessary to find virtue, nor have they the experience required in order to be really virtuous. This may seem strange to the modern ear, but it is the logical conclusion to the path of reasoning that Aristotle follows.

He declares that one requires a complete life in order to be truly considered happy. Aristotle teaches that happiness is the supreme goal of human actions. Since people were placed on Earth with a purpose, it follows that the best possible execution of that role would lead to the most perfect happiness. This excellence, or virtue, is a golden mean between the vices of excess and defect. Use of the rational capacities inherent to humans is essential to finding this mean in each situation and thus being able to choose right actions. Since virtues come through habitual good deeds and use of reason, it follows that children cannot truly be called happy.

Happiness can only come through a life lived as well and as fully as possible, “ for one swallow does not make a summer, nor does one day; and so too one day, or a short time, does not make a man blessed and happy.” (Bk. 1, 1098a) ? References Aristotle. *Ethica Nicomachea*. Trans.

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