

Chapter 2

The Good Life

This chapter introduces Aristotle's version of the good life. The Greek term is *eudaimonia* but I will use the words 'fulfilled', 'happy' and 'good' interchangeably when I refer to this type of life. As part of this discussion a number of key concepts e.g. the dialectic method, the function argument and *ergon* will also be explained. I will try to keep the theory (as well as the Greek terms) to a minimum and mix it up with practical examples. A theoretical background is, however, necessary for the later discussion of the applicability and usefulness of virtue ethics.¹

This chapter also contains an account of some aspects of modern life that are likely to have a negative impact on many peoples' quality of life. For example, the borderline obsession with happiness in combination with a narrow take on what type of experiences might qualify. The chapter finishes on a more upbeat note as the final sections are spent defending the idea that, if only viewed a bit more pluralistically, the good life is indeed a life many of us could lead.

Notably, this is not intended as an authoritative, or exegetic, reading of Aristotle. Rather, the contribution this essay seeks to make is to show that, if read somewhat creatively, many of the ideas in the Nicomachean Ethics (Aristotle's central work on ethics) make for a highly useful approach to modern moral problems.²

In fact it seems that Aristotle would approve of such attempts. In the Nicomachean Ethics he writes

This, then, is a sketch of the good: for, presumably, we must draw the outline first, and fill it in later. If the sketch is good, anyone, it seems, can advance and articulate it, and in such cases time discovers more, or is a good partner in discovery. This is also how the crafts have improved, since anyone can add what is lacking [in the outline].³

¹ Parts of this chapter has been previously published on the Uehiro Centre for Practical Ethics blog and as an article B. Fröding, Cognitive Enhancement, Virtue Ethics and the Good Life, *Neuroethics* (2011) 4:223–234.

² Unless stated otherwise I have used Irwin's translation of the NE. Aristotle (1999). *The Nicomachean Ethics* (translation and introduction by T. Irwin), Hackett, 2nd edition.

³ /NE1098a22-26/.

Moreover, it is clear that anyone who wants Aristotle's argument to make sense needs to stretch it a bit: the original text is both patchy and filled with repetitions and the Greek frequently indeterminate.

In some respects my reading of the *Nicomachean Ethics* diverges from the standard one. One such instance has bearing on the issues discussed in this chapter. It regards the contested issue of whether or not the happy life is a possibility for many or just a few (or indeed no one). Very briefly, my take on this is that the combination of (1) statements such as 'a lot of people can be happy',⁴ (2) Aristotle's dialectical method, and (3) Aristotle's usage of paradigm cases which are deliberately extreme in order to be as clear as possible, speaks in favour of the idea that the happy life might not be conditional on complete virtue. In practice this means that we do not have to be perfect in order to count as morally good but, rather, that one can be 'good enough'.⁵ This is not merely a theoretical point. As will be shown later on this reading has quite concrete implications both for what a good life is and its availability for the many.

2.1 The Good Life According to Aristotle

Aristotle famously argued that a life lived in line with the virtues is the best life for any human being. This is the happy and fulfilled life, the life that allows us to flourish and realise all our capacities. Notably, however, this life is not just a set of actions—it is a set of actions performed by someone who does them because she correctly sees the point in doing them.

On the Aristotelian account the virtues have both cognitive and emotional dimensions and these will be further explained and detailed in [Chap. 4](#). While modern psychologist might find some aspects of his analysis less convincing than others, Aristotle did indeed touch on something that is still a central question in ethics. Namely: is moral virtue something that can be mastered through rigorous training, or, is it a part of human nature? If the former is correct it seems that the virtues could be acquired through education and practice, thus implying that morality to an extent is about 'effort'. The latter answer, on the other hand, suggests that morality is an inbuilt quality that some agents possess and other do not or, at the very least, that we possess to different extents.

To Aristotle it was quite clear that a combination of education, habituation and lifelong practice is the way to instil the virtues. Similarly to other forms of knowledge they will come in stages and the process is likely to be long and require considerable commitment and effort. One way of learning is to look to the example of a good man (for more on this see [Chaps. 4](#) and [7](#)). The idea is that we can recognise virtue in others without mastering the virtues ourselves (just like we can see when someone is in fine health without having a 1st in medicine) and seek to model ourselves on that. As a consequence, Aristotle denied that there might be a 'talent for

⁴ See Book 1.9 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

⁵ See also, [Chaps. 4](#) and [7](#).

morality'. He rejected the idea that some individuals could be more morally gifted and that the virtue would come easier to some because they have a certain set of other personal qualities.⁶ Aristotle had to insist that we all have a capacity for virtue and vice as he wanted to make a strong case for personal moral responsibility.

For Aristotle the moral value of an action is based on whether or not the agent can see what she is doing as making sense from the point of view of the fulfilled life. This is not to say, however, that the consequences are irrelevant and should be wholly disregarded. Consequences do matter to the virtuous agent but they are simply not the right-making feature against which ones actions are to be evaluated. In the case of the good life one has to think specifically about the quality of what one is doing and only secondarily of the causal effectiveness. For example: my bioethics mentor Professor A has had an accident and will be hospitalized for a week. Visiting people in the hospital might be a kind thing to do for an array of reasons one of which would be that it is often boring to be a patient—time passes slowly and there is little distraction from the pain. As a virtuous person I will do what is kind but not as an instrument to cheer Professor A up. While that is a positive consequence my reason for acting is for the sake of the fine and noble. Now, in most cases the virtuous action will indeed generate the best outcome but the fact that this is not always the case hardly poses a threat to the validity of the theory as such.

2.2 Eudaimonia

Aristotle argued that the supreme human good is *eudaimonia*. This is the happy and fulfilled life for *any* human being. Regardless whatever else one might want out of life, whatever one's preferences: this is the best available life. Further to that point Aristotle held that this is something that all rational humans would understand. This life is far more than just an option among other equally good alternative lives, and in the *Nicomachean Ethics* he sought to show the reader what kind of a person she needs to be in order to lead this happy life.

Eudaimonia is the ultimate justification for living in a certain way. It is rational to want *eudaimonia* as Aristotle conceived of it because it is only then we flourish, i.e. realize all our capacities and are fully human. The *eudaimon* life consists of all intrinsically worthwhile actions and as such it is always the best life available to us. Adding something to such a life will not mean an improvement because it necessarily includes all the activities that are valuable for humans. Arguably this might strike the reader as a bit odd, let us imagine the following scenario: Professor C is leading a fulfilled life when she learns that she has been awarded the Nobel Prize in chemistry. Now, is it plausible that this really would add nothing in form of fulfilment to her life? One way of interpreting Aristotle would be that it is *the theory of happiness* that has to be complete and self-sufficient. However, even if we accept *eudaimonia* as the best possible life that alone neither explains what sort of life it is, nor which activities we should engage into fulfil this end. The answer has to do with our nature and man's so called *ergon*.

⁶ In the sense of 'natural virtue'.

2.3 Ergon

To know what is good for us we need to know what kind of beings we are. For Aristotle humans, animals and plants all have souls. Not in the sense that they all have a conscious aim but more in the sense that they have an internal organization which explains how they typically behave, that “its organizational purposiveness governs all its activities”.⁷ But even though we might have different types of souls (as a result of being organized differently) we all share one thing: the well-being of any organism depends on how well it can exercise its capabilities.

Ergon is the distinctly human. It is either something that only humans can do or something that we can do better than all other animals and plants. To reach fulfilment we need to perform those skills/capacities which are special to humans and we need to perform them well. In the Nicomachean Ethics happiness for a human being is said to be the “...activity of the soul in accord with virtue, and indeed with the best and most complete virtue, if there are more virtues than one.”⁸ Recognizing that there might be a dispute as to what such a good is Aristotle said that any candidate for the good must be completely self-sufficient: therefore it cannot be e.g. wealth, pleasure or honour—as they are all means to an end. This is of course a normative account of the final good and those who do not agree have mistaken desires according to Aristotle.

It is by looking at the *ergon* that we judge the excellence of a person, an animal, a plant or a thing.⁹ Although mankind has *ergon* as a group for Aristotle, we all have the same ‘amount’, it seems reasonable to assume that he would have agreed that the more virtuous a person is the better she would be at fulfilling her *ergon*. Contrary to ‘essence’ and ‘nature’ *ergon* does not deal with identity aspects of change (physical or otherwise) but with activity—*ergon* always issue in action. It is by understanding our *ergon* that we can gain knowledge both about the connection between the soul and the virtues and about how the virtues contribute to the overall good and enables man to be happy.

2.4 The Function Argument

Aristotle’s whole system is firmly grounded in the study of human nature and human motivation. Very broadly speaking the way to know what to do, according to Aristotle, is to seek the judgment of a good man. Such a good man would know what the right thing to do would be for any agent in a given situation. This is highly relevant as his ethics are about being sensitive to situations, to what the circumstances require and then to be motivated to act in the right way. In other words it is our nature that determines what fulfilment must look like for us, an assertion which brings us to the Function Argument.

⁷ Hughes G. (2001), Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Aristotle on Ethics, NY: Routledge, p. 34.

⁸ /NE1098a17-20/.

⁹ Note, however, that only humans can be happy.

The Function Argument is Aristotle's favoured method for discovering what human fulfilment consists in. This is a normative account stipulating that facts about human nature should determine what is good for a human being. The counter argument would be a straight forward conative account claiming that a person's desires should determine what is good for her. To reject the idea of any common human nature is a fairly radical position to take. That is not to say, of course, that a specific interpretation of what it is cannot be rejected but perhaps not the very existence of a set of features common to all humans. To discard the latter notion seems to be a bit more than to simply assert the freedom to choose ones moral ideals.

The description of the Function Argument is somewhat short but this was not a problem as the reader was assumed to have the necessary background e.g. from having read Plato's Republic. In fact, Aristotle made a lot of assumptions about his students and he had a quite narrowly defined person in mind.¹⁰ Already at the beginning of the teaching the student would subscribe to a certain set of values influencing the way they viewed the world. These values are called the first principles, or *archai*, examples would be laws of nature and basic intuitions of the kind that *eudaimonia* equals human good. That is not to say, of course, that this was the ethics of the Athenians only. Aristotle's claim was far stronger than that—he argued that it is valid for all of mankind and anyone who is rational would see that. It deserves pointing out, however, that he never sought to convince those who had radically different views of life that this was the only path to happiness. Aristotle was not taking on the role of the moral missionary in that sense.

In [Chaps. 4](#) and [7](#), I will discuss whether or not Aristotle's stereotypical view of who his student is and what he knows threatens to undermine the applicability of the theory as a whole.

2.5 Two Takes on Human Fulfillment

The fact that the Nicomachean Ethics is, in places, somewhat ambiguous has caused disagreement on a number of issues amongst scholars. One especially heated debate pertains to what type of activities the happy life should involve. One interpretation, the Inclusivist, is that it should include a range of activities, both the practical and the theoretical. The other view, the Exclusivist, is that true fulfilment can only be realised in one single activity namely that of theoretical contemplation (*Theoria*).

The problem is that these two views yield very different visions of who the truly virtuous being is. Is it someone who contributes to society (helps to run things) in a way that perhaps even enables others to lead morally admirable lives? Or is it a person in an ivory tower who contemplates *Theoria* in splendid isolation? A more pragmatic interpretation would be the following: it is *the theory* of *eudaimonia* that must be self-sufficient and lacking in nothing—that it must list

¹⁰ For a critique see [Chap. 6](#).

all the goods there are. In practice, however, it is the exercise of all the virtues that makes this life worth living. The conclusion of the Function Argument, i.e. that we should exercise all the virtues—both the character virtues and the intellectual virtues, supports this. In practice, the happy life for the vast majority of people will be a mix of the practical and the theoretical, leaving ample space for exercising both the intellectual and the character virtues. What the exact balance between them ought to be would presumably depend on the individual's capacity.

2.6 The Good Life is an All-Inclusive

Aristotle does not seem to want to leave anything good or nice for the vicious. For example, when he builds up the Function Argument Aristotle seeks to contrast his vision with competing views of the happy life. He wants to show that his version includes all the good things and, further, that to exercise the virtues is pleasurable. Commenting on Aristotle's wish to pack all that is good into the happy life Roger Crisp writes

By incorporating into his position the generally accepted view that wealth, power and so on are honourable in themselves, he advances his eudaimonistic aim of showing that the happiness constituted by virtue is 'lacking in nothing'. Finally, it is clear that wealth, power, and indeed honour, have value only as elements within the virtuous life itself. It is the noble which really matters, though the noble will be partly manifested in the actively virtuous possession of great wealth and other external goods.¹¹

2.7 Unhappiness in the Modern Society

Thus far we have looked at happiness and the good life from an ancient perspective. Below this will be compared and contrasted with the perspective of the modern society.¹² Somewhat gloomily, however, I propose to begin by discussing why so many claim to be so unhappy.¹³

Over the last two decades an increasing number of people—young and old, women and men, even children—appear to have grown increasingly unsatisfied.¹⁴

¹¹ Crisp R., Aristotle on Greatness of Soul, in Kraut R. *Blackwell Companion to the Nicomachean Ethics*, Blackwell, 2006. p. 14.

¹² Note that the studies quoted below draw on subjective self-assessment of well-being and satisfaction.

¹³ For a broader discussion on reasons see, for example, C. Lasch (1979), *The Culture of Narcissism*, New York: Norton; Z. Bauman (1991), *Modernity and Ambivalence*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press; Z. Bauman (1993) *Postmodern Ethics*. Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell; Z. Bauman (2000) *Liquid Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity.

¹⁴ See for example The UN Human Development Report 2011 <http://hdr.undp.org/en/statistics/>; International Living's Annual Quality of Life Index 2011; Eurobarometer 75 http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb75/eb75_publ_en.pdf.

The fact that a great many rate their own levels of contentment and happiness as low has, however, triggered a rather fierce debate as to the cause and effect as well as to how accurate a tool self-assessment polling really is. The subject of this essay is of course the *philosophical aspects* of what a happy human life plausibly could be taken to be. None the less I think that a few concrete examples from this rather polarised debate can shed some light on this.

Consider the following case: in spite of objectively being among the best off in the world a relatively large number of Swedish teens and young adults rank their level of well-being comparatively low. When polled they report that they suffer from anxiety, stress and unhappiness.

One example is the WHO report ‘Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC)’ which is based on national studies of young people’s health and well-being. Some 40 countries participated in this study the aim of which is to “gain new insight into, and increase our understanding of young people’s health and well-being, health behaviours and their social context”.¹⁵ When asked to rank their life satisfaction Swedish children and teens scored significantly lower than the other Nordic countries. According to the national 2005/2006 report 43 % of 15–16 year olds said that they felt down at least once a week (to be compared with 25 % in 1985 for example). The 2007 Status Report summary states that

Self-reported mental ill health—such as anxiety, worry, or anguish and continuous tiredness—has decreased to some degree in several population groups since the beginning of the 21st century, having previously shown an increasing trend for some years. In certain groups, however, mental ill health has continued to increase since the years of 2000–2001, in particular among young women.¹⁶

A follow-up study (released in 2011) again confirmed that mental health and overall well-being continue to decrease among Swedish teens. The survey, carried out by the Swedish National Institute of Public Health, has very high statistic quality. The response rate was 83 % which means that over 172,000 pupils in grade 6–9 completed the questionnaire. While the majority of all students have good mental health it is clear that the level of mental ill increases the older the students get and, further, that girls report more mental ill health compared with boys.¹⁷ These results are echoed in others studies e.g. ‘MTV Well-being Study’ which polled 5,200 16–34 year olds in 14 countries on their own perceived sense of well-being. Although Swedes ended up high in the ranking overall it is interesting to note that only 27 % said that they were happy (compare e.g. with Argentina 75, Mexico 71 and Indonesia 62 %).¹⁸

¹⁵ <http://www.hbsc.org/>.

¹⁶ FHI, Swedish National Institute of Public Health, summary of Status Report 2007: Public Health and Social Conditions.

¹⁷ For the full report see <http://www.fhi.se/Publikationer/Alla-publikationer/Kartlaggning-av-psyisk-halsa-bland-barn-och-unga/>.

¹⁸ MTV International Wellbeing Study.

Such findings have received a lot of attention from Swedish politicians, journalist and the general public alike.¹⁹ The discussion regards both the possible causes and the reliability of such findings and it appears safe to assume that there are many complex factors at play here and no one explanation covers it all. A contributing factor, however, might be an implicit or explicit expectation that a good and successful life must not involve experiences like failure and disappointment.²⁰

2.8 The Praise Cult

An increasing number of child psychologists, for example Dr Carol Craig (Chief Executive of the Centre for Confidence and Glasgow), worry that there is a tendency among teachers and parents to tell young people that the most important thing in life is whether or not they feel happy. Dr Craig has argued that the exaggerated focus on building self-esteem leaves adults overly afraid of criticising the children. “Parents no longer want to hear if their children have done anything wrong. This is the downside of the self-esteem agenda. The problem is that if you tell parents that it’s incredibly important that children feel good all the time, we will get people going out of their way to boost children’s self-esteem all the time”. The concern is that absence of criticism will cause the children to become narcissistic and leave them ill-prepared to form lasting relationships.²¹

The well-known Danish child psychologist and family therapist Jesper Juhl has voiced similar views

A healthy self esteem is a deep existential quality that enriches people and makes it possible for them to enrich the lives of other people. Self confidence is a very good thing when it comes to our development of skills—practical, personal, academic, sport and so on. But a strong self confidence does not give you more self esteem. The current trend among European parents is to constantly praise children—no matter what and how they do. This does not strengthen their self esteem it only pumps up their egos. Personal feedback is much better—both for parents and children—and it strengthens self esteem on both sides.²²

¹⁹ For a broader discussion on some of these aspects see e.g. M. Alvesson (2006), *Tomhetens Triumf*, Atlas och Liber, Sweden; L. Teurell and B. Sigrell (2011), *Jag, mig och mit—om narcissism i vår tid*, Lind & Co, Sweden; J. M. Twenge and K. Cambell (2009) *The Narcissism Epidemic: Living in the Age of Entitlement—America in the Age of Entitlement*, Free Press, USA; J. M. Twenge (2007), *Generation Me: Why Today's Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled—And More Miserable Than Ever Before—Why Today's Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled—and More Miserable Than Ever Before*, Free Press, USA.

²⁰ For a complete report and literary review covering the period 1945–2009, see the Health Committee of the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences report “Time trends in mental health of children and adolescents”. *Barn och ungdomars psykiska hälsa i Sverige* (April 2010).

²¹ From an interview in *The Observer*, 15.03.09.

²² http://www.familylab.de/files/Artikel_PDFs/Presse_PDFs/children_are_competent.pdf.

Assuming that most parents seek to do what they believe best for their children this trend seems to imply that many parents and other adults believe that being criticised (even in a constructive, sensitive and appropriate manner) would somehow be incompatible with them being happy. But what do we really mean when we say ‘happiness’ and when we talk about a happy, or a good, life? Is it the case that we in society today tacitly, or otherwise, subscribe to the idea that a happy life equals an uncomplicated life largely void of challenges?

2.9 Is Feeling Sad a Disease?

In the last two decades a substantial revision of criteria for clinical depression and various other mental disorders have taken place. If the new criteria are correct they would indicate that people are not only less happy than previously thought but in fact that a large number of them meet the criteria of clinical depression. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this has proven highly controversial and is the cause of heated debate. At one end of the scale it is argued to be a society wide social construction of disease and a medicalisation of the human condition. At the other end, it is considered evidence of the advancement of medicine and science: finally we are beginning to understand mental disease and unhappiness in a way that can actually help people, remove stigma and alleviate suffering.²³

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder (DSM) is published by The American Psychiatric Association (APA) but is used all over the world as a reference work on the classification of mental health disorders for both children and adults. The current version is the fourth, revised, edition (DSM-IV-TR) and DSM V is expected to be published in May 2013.²⁴ While often referred to as the ‘shrink bible’ the DSM is far from uncontroversial. For example, the definition of depression as an illness of the brain best explained in biological terms has received a lot of attention. The critics have, amongst other things, argued that the symptoms are so broadly defined that people mistakenly think they have them, that the symptoms are not reliable indicators of mental illness and that the focus should be on the causes rather than the symptoms.²⁵

American psychotherapist Gary Greenberg (to use but one example) questions the usefulness of the revised criteria suggesting that it conflates ‘ordinary sadness and general blues’ with mental illness. In his 2010 book “Manufacturing Depression” Greenberg explains that according to the DSM definition what begins as a normal condition of life, i.e. feeling sad, becomes diagnosable as the illness

²³ For a discussion see e.g. I. Hacking (1999) *The Social Construction of What?* Harvard University Press; I. Hacking, *Making up People*, London Review of Books, Vol 28. No. 16, pp. 23–26.

²⁴ For the online draft version of DSM V please see <http://www.dsm5.org/Pages/Default.aspx>.

²⁵ Other hotly debated DSM definitions include ADD (Attention-Deficit Disorder) and ADHD (Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder).

depression after two weeks. He also points out that it follows from the description of symptoms in the DSM that 30 % of the adult US population is depressed. In other words, that they match enough of the criteria on the list to have a diagnosable mental disorder. Using similar definitions, the WHO writes that 50 % of all women and 25 % of all men will at some stage of their lives suffer depression.²⁶ Depression related illness is considered a leading cause of disability and WHO forecast that “By the year 2020, depression is projected to reach 2nd place of the ranking of DALYs calculated for all ages, both sexes. Today, depression is already the 2nd cause of DALYs in the age category 15–44 years for both sexes combined”.²⁷ (DALY or Disability Adjusted Life Years i.e. the sum of years of potential life lost due to premature mortality and the years of productive life lost due to disability).

In addition to the problems relating to the criteria for diagnosis the long-term risks of, for example, anti-depressants are not sufficiently researched. A 2012 report on the long-term effects of treatments for depression published by The Swedish Council on Health Technology Assessment (SBU) highlights several problematic aspects.²⁸ For example, that there is no or low evidence for the lasting positive effects of anti-depressants and that the long-term impact is under-researched.²⁹ Clearly the DSM alone cannot be blamed for the lack of research but the current situation makes an open, and inclusive, debate on diagnosis criteria as well as suitable treatments, all the more important.

Evidently the task of this essay is not to discuss the medical aspects. It is none the less hoped that the last paragraphs have gone some way to indicate how entrenched the debate this field really is. Leaving the broader question of whether or not society is engaging in ‘the social construction of disease’ we shall now return to the philosophical question of what a happy life plausibly could be taken to be.

2.10 A Good Life in a Modern Society

As explained above it appears that a lot of people are unhappy and that the jury is out on both the causes and the best treatments. From a philosophical perspective, however, I would like to suggest that the problem is two-fold. Many people seem obsessed with happiness and the pursuit thereof and, at the same time, deeply mistaken about what a happy life for a human being can be taken to be. Perhaps one should instead begin by pondering the following: is it really the case that feeling bad sometimes is always a bad thing and, further, if such moods automatically ought to be considered evidence of illness. Understandably, this can sound provocative but this is neither an attempt to glorify suffering, nor to construct a bootstrap argument.

²⁶ WHO is currently working on an updated version of symptoms.

²⁷ http://www.who.int/mental_health/management/depression/definition/en/.

²⁸ Summaries and penultimate draft published on their web 2012-01-11.

²⁹ For more information see <http://www.sbu.se/sv/>.

Arguably, sadness and suffering—even lengthy spells of it—is a normal reaction to things like bereavement and loss. If a beloved spouse passes away, one ought to feel extremely sad maybe even depressed. This is not being ill, it is being human. The fact that we might (the effects are not really clear) get drugs that can alleviate the symptoms—rather than addressing the actual problem—is not in itself a good reason to take them. Perhaps we just have to live through it, adjust to the new reality, learn to cope and eventually find new joys. An alternative is to devise of strategies of how people can be helped to cope better with their circumstances (regardless of the causes). It appears plausible that a combination of drugs (if required) and therapy and ‘coaching’ which will help us reflect and gain self-knowledge, and in turn, increase acceptance might have a positive effect. Perhaps we can then escape the melancholia that poison our minds and make us give up hope.

It is of course perfectly possible to conclude that mankind is a gloomy bunch courtesy of our genetic make-up and that this, no fault of our own, is in fact our natural state. Evidently it does not follow from the fact that something is natural that it should be preserved or even that it is positive. Consider for example the case of modern healthcare and how that enables both humans and animals to overcome all kinds of ailments and disease which in a state of nature would have been detrimental to both life and well-being. This would then speak in favour of enhancement through drugs and technology. Before jumping to that conclusion, however, it might be worthwhile to take a closer look at what kind of experiences and pursuits a happy life for beings such as us might involve.

2.11 The Possibility of Many Good Lives

There is a tendency to talk about the happy life in the singular. Such an approach does not, however, seem particularly compatible with the modern, democratic ideal of pluralist values. A more palatable idea to most people is that there are several versions of the happy and good life which, while they have a lot in common, also involve different activities and pursuits.

Ancient Greece was, in spite of being the cradle of democracy, hardly a bastion of pluralism and inclusiveness in the sense relevant to this discussion. It has been greatly contested whether or not Aristotle recognised that there could be more than one version of the good life. As previously mentioned the account given here diverges from the standard one in some respects. One aspect concerns the type of activities that should be involved, another aspect is the level to which the virtues have to be mastered for a life to count as happy. Very briefly my position is the following: *in practice* the good life is about more than philosophical contemplation in an isolated ivory tower. It is also about acting in accordance with the other, more practical, virtues and about participating in society. For the good life to be a real possibility for the many, and not only people like Plato and other great philosophers, seems to presuppose that it consists of a mix of politics (i.e. practice) and philosophy (i.e. theory) and that the exact balance of the two blocks depends to a large extent on the individual. Further,

and this is more controversial: an agent who possesses a large number of virtues and is continent with regard to the rest can well be leading a happy life. The person would of course exercise the virtues and seek to improve herself at all times but the point is that she would not have to be perfect in every regard. In short, one both needs to conduct one's life well and interact in society and be able to stand back and reflect on oneself, life and the world and see how it fits in with the bigger picture. For this to be possible, however, the individual has to be out there in society something which would expose her to an array of potentially negative experiences.

2.12 The Mixed Life

Very broadly speaking then there are two, incompatible, descriptions of the happy life which curry favour in today's society. One is to view a good life as a string of uninterrupted, pleasurable experiences, something which requires an extremely sheltered existence. The other view is that a good life is filled with experiences, encounters and interaction. But as we expose ourselves and introduce others into our lives we also become susceptible to disappointment, loss and so on. Evidently I neither wish to imply that pain and suffering are good states in themselves, nor that we ought to accept social injustice, poverty, violence and disease as a natural part of a human life. Quite to the contrary I would argue that we should work both on improving ourselves as well as society and promoting happiness and well-being on a large scale. My point is rather that even if we are successful in this project it seems that in light of what we know about human nature and human co-existence a good life will be a bit of a mixed bag. In all likelihood it will involve anger, loss, failure, rejection, pain and disappointment but it will also offer pleasure, warmth, joy and success. It would be perplexing if the conclusion is that the fact that we are human does not mean that we cannot have good and happy lives. Arguably, the problem is not so much an exaggerated focus on happiness—if anything, to strive to be happy seems a fine and noble goal³⁰—but rather a too narrow understanding of what type of experiences a happy human life could involve.

2.13 It is Good Enough to be 'Good Enough'

The good life for most of us would be a mixed life in two regards (1) it contains both political and contemplative activities and (2) it does not presuppose perfection. In practice the good life is more than contemplation, it is also about acting in accordance with the other virtues and participating in society. So in actuality there can be many different versions of the happy life. We master the virtues to different extents but once we are above a certain threshold level we are in the race so to speak. That said all the virtues need to be mastered to some extent. Having a few

³⁰ <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/nicomachaen.html>.

of the virtues to the full extent does not make up for have none of certain others. So generous thieves or brave gluttons or witty choleric are, despite their qualities, not virtuous agents. On a similar note virtue has a best before date. To keep their moral fitness and to continue leading the good life the person has to work hard—the virtues need to be exercised and she must try to improve herself. To engage in and exercise the virtues willingly and with pleasure, for the sake of virtue, that is the best life for any human being.³¹

This position is, however, far from uncontroversial. On the one hand Aristotle never says outright that a person who does not master the complete set of virtues could be called virtuous, but on the other he writes that a lot of people could be happy and if the criterion for happiness truly is complete virtue then it is very hard to see how that could be true. Like many other issues in the *Nicomachean Ethics* it is not entirely clear what Aristotle really intended. None the less, especially given his general outlook and philosophical method, it seems reasonable to assume that he would have agreed that happiness can be widely shared. Given that most people are not fully virtuous that would appear to imply that people can be happy without having internalized all the virtues completely.

2.14 Conclusion

In addition to Aristotle's account of how to lead the happy life there are other reasons for adopting a more pragmatic outlook: an ethical theory which sets the bar so high that it become impossible for a mere mortal does not have much practical relevance. Indeed, it is often thought to undermine the whole concept—what is the point of ethics if it cannot be applied one might ask. While it might be unrealistic to expect people both to know and to do the right thing at every turn, we can all strive to become better versions of ourselves. As shown in this chapter a more pragmatic take on virtue ethics seems to imply that many can lead good and happy lives though they might not be excellent in every respect. Life is sometimes hard and we are frequently tempted to do things which might have negative consequences both for ourselves and for others. Sometimes we give in, fail to anticipate, turn a blind eye, feel too tired, find an excuse and so on and so forth but a lot of the time we can also get it right. As we go through life we can learn and we can change—the good life is an ongoing project and a life-long commitment. But the positive news is that it is available for most people: it is alright to be good enough.

So was the poet W. H. Auden right then when he wrote that to philosophize was a luxury which only those fortunate enough not to have to worry about worldly stuff could afford? ³² On one level it is undeniably true that man cannot live unless

³¹ Because the *exercise of the virtues* is both means and ends in themselves. The virtues themselves, on the other hand, are arguably to be understood as pure means to the noble act.

³² Original quote: "it is nonsense to speak of higher and lower pleasures. To a hungry man it is, rightly, more important to eat than that he philosophize", *W. H. Auden*.

a set of basic needs are satisfied and that it is only then that he has the energy and time to reflect on other aspects of life. As has been shown in this chapter, however, once above a certain persistence threshold we tend to care a lot about the quality of life. Perhaps we spend too much time thinking about it rather than actually living. However, that might be living is clearly about much more than mere survival. Living well is about both the practical and the theoretical and it is clear that many are willing to forfeit certain bodily pleasures if they believe that increases the chances overall happiness. So in that sense we are not slaves to our biology. Popular wisdom has it that if we only work hard enough we appear to be able to ‘overcome’, or at least transform, ourselves into a better version. On a more down-beat note, however, recent work in the natural sciences has shown that one major obstacle that stands firm between us and the good life is our biology. Let us now turn to take a closer look at some of these findings.



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