



The Enlightenment



A Mini-Journal of the Humanist Association of London and Area
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Volume 15

Number 5

May 2019

Aristotle's Way: How Ancient Wisdom Can Change Your Life

By Edith Hall

A Book Review - By Don Hatch

In the 100th issue of the *Enlightenment* published in February 2018, it was mentioned that thirty-eight philosophers and people of note ranging from Confucius to Carl Sagan had been featured on the front pages of various Enlightenments, over a period of thirteen years. It was also mentioned that Aristotle was not one of them; the reason being that I was not fully aware of the many implications of Aristotle's greatness. Having read *Aristotle's Way* by Edith Hall, this has now changed, and I will attempt to distill the essence of this book into a few pages.

The book consists of an introduction and ten chapters. The subjects of the chapters are: Happiness, Potential, Decisions, Communications, Self-Knowledge, Intentions, Love, Community, Leisure, and Mortality. Edith Hall capably elucidates how Aristotle's wisdom on each of these topics can be useful in helping us to live a more flourishing and virtuous life in our modern era.



Aristotle

Aristotle was born in Stageira in northern Greece in 384 BCE, fifteen years after the death of Socrates. His father was Nicomachus, a physician. In 367 BCE he went to Athens to study in Plato's Academy. In 343, Aristotle moved to Macedon to tutor King Phillip II's son Alexander, later to become known as Alexander the Great. In 336, Aristotle founded his Lyceum in Athens. In 322 he was prosecuted for impiety at Athens and immediately thereafter moved to Chalcis on the island of Euboea in the Aegean Sea, where he died in that same year. Aristotle had two biological children, a daughter Pythias by his wife Pythias, who died in 336, and a son Nicomachus by his concubine Herpyllis. He also adopted a nephew, Nicanor. All these family members received a substantial inheritance from Aristotle's estate. His will also stated that his slaves were not to be sold, but instead were to be freed and given generous legacies.

Edith Hall is the daughter of an Anglican priest. At thirteen she lost her religion. She says, "I just couldn't get in touch with the invisible friend I had previously called God any more." But she did not know what to put in His place. She tried experimenting briefly with astrology, Buddhism, transcendental meditation, and even psychotropic drugs as well as spiritualism. While an undergraduate, she discovered Aristotle and he supplied the answer. "He explains the material world through science, and the moral world by human standards, rather than those imposed by an external deity." Near the end of the introduction she quotes the words of philosopher Robert J. Anderson who wrote in 1986: "There is no ancient thinker who can speak more directly to the concerns and anxieties of modern life than can Aristotle. Nor is it clear that any modern thinker offers as much for persons living in this time of uncertainty." Edith Hall's last sentence in the introduction is: "Aristotle's practical approach to philosophy can change your life for the better." In today's world it is not likely that many people will be inclined to look toward Aristotle to help them lead happier and more contented lives, but perhaps it is time more people did! Edith Hall is a professor at Kings College, London.

Happiness – Aristotle believed the ultimate goal of human life is simply happiness, which means finding a purpose in order to realize your own potential and also working on your behavior to become the best version of yourself. The Greek word for happiness is *eudaimonia* which implies well-being or prosperity as well as contentment. But it is far more active than contentment. You "do" *eudaimonia*: it requires positive input and planning on the part of each individual. It is essential to plan your life in order to obtain the education needed to enjoy a satisfying career and provide for the essentials of life including food, clothing and shelter. In this regard, Aristotle preceded Maslow by 2300 years. Aristotle places a lot of emphasis on virtue. A virtuous person will be much happier than a dishonest or scheming person. Helping others can bring happiness, as can learning about how the world works. Selecting a compatible mate is also important. And appreciating and enjoying the arts including music, drama and literature can bring enjoyment.

Aristotle points out that the pursuit of pleasure for its own sake is not conducive to happiness. For example, bodily pleasures are short-lived, whereas true happiness is the pursuit of long-term contentment. Desiring and achieving fame and fortune also does not guarantee long-term happiness according to Aristotle.

Potential – It is desirable for every person to determine what they like doing and have an aptitude for, and then stick with it, in order to realize their full potential. This is because the creation of happiness means, above all, spending our lives doing what we are best at and enjoy. All parents have a duty to help their children identify their potentialities and actualize them. To help realize this aim, legislators must insure the provision of accessible public education facilities, staffed by qualified and dedicated teachers.

Decisions – Most people have no training in basic decision-making at all. Aristotle outlined nine rules for deliberation before making a decision. They are:

1. Don't deliberate in haste. Impulsiveness has no place in deliberation.
2. Verify all information. A correct decision can never result from incorrect knowledge.
3. Consult and listen to expert disinterested advisors.
4. Consider all parties who might be affected – not just yourself.
5. Examine all known precedents, both personal and historical.
6. Calibrate the likelihood of different outcomes. Then prepare for all.
7. Think about the not inconsiderable factor of luck.
8. Don't drink and deliberate.
9. Do not waste time worrying about things you cannot control.

Communication – An important distinction between humans and other animals is that humans are endowed with the ability to communicate using speech and the written word for imparting information or for engaging in the art of persuasion. Aristotle revolutionized the use of verbal persuasion in his *Rhetoric* because of its emphasis on what makes speech or writing work and achieve the desired end. Edith Hall uses the example of job applications and interviews to elucidate how Aristotle's advice can be utilized. Aristotle offers three ABCs of effective communication; audience, brevity, and clarity. Carefully research your audience, be as brief as possible, and speak or write with absolute clarity. Avoid long sentences.

The same rules apply when speaking to an audience. Sometimes analogies or comparisons are helpful and if you resort to humour, it should not be deprecating.

Self-Knowledge – The chapter on self-knowledge is really about self-improvement. It involves not only examining your vices and virtues in order to make people around you happier, but also to increase your own happiness. Virtues are of extreme importance because individuals deficient in basic virtues can never attain true happiness.

Every now and again in this long chapter, Aristotle brings up the issue of moderation or the search for the middle road or the mean (*Meson*) by taking a vow of self-control when facing decisions and challenges. For example, since humans are animals, they have sexual appetites. This is a good thing in proportion, but both too much or too little sexual appetite can cause unhappiness. Being magnanimous or generous can lead to happiness, but again in the right amount. It is unwise to give excessively to your own detriment.

Aristotle advocates that we should strive to remedy unfairness of any kind in society, bringing to mind the inequality that exists today with the huge gap between the rich and the poor. He regrets that more humans are by nature avaricious rather than generous and that greed seems to take on a variety of forms. If he were alive today, Aristotle would be the first to rebuke loan sharks and credit card companies who encourage people to spend more than their income and amass debt, which they are then required to pay back at crucifying rates of interest. He says it is desirable to avoid criticizing others and opines that people who constantly criticize others have a problem with respecting themselves.

This chapter ends by getting back to achieving the mean by stressing “nothing in excess,” as well as avoiding vice and maximizing virtue. Aristotle uses sex to make his point. “Adulterous sex for example, is likely to be much more pleasurable than avoiding sex altogether, both of which would be going to the extreme. The *meson* is to stick to monogamous sex, which may give you less pleasure than adulterous sex, but make you happier in the long run.”

Intentions – Is it ethical under certain conditions to do bad things to achieve good things in the end? Aristotle says yes. For example, a person would be justified in doing whatever is required to act in self defence, or equally so if someone was threatening one of your loved ones with persecution or death. The means may normally be considered extreme, but under the aforementioned conditions, would be justified and the intentions acceptable. And there also may be conditions under which telling a lie is preferable to telling the truth if the end justifies the means. In this respect, Aristotle preceded Machiavelli by 1850 years.

A substantial part of this chapter is devoted to weighing the choices of commission or omission. Sometimes failing to carry out or omit an action can produce dire consequences, when on the other hand, carrying out or committing the action would prevent undesirable results. Obviously, procrastinating would be the wrong

thing to do. In another situation a person may be faced with the moral decision of intervening or not acting at all. If you discover one of your colleagues is embezzling company money, do you report it or say nothing for fear of being called a snitch. You have a moral decision to make.

The chapter ends with: "There are few easy choices to make in life, but adding equity to our intentions when it comes to both justice and equality can help us immeasurably to do our best as we struggle to find a walkable path through the ethical jungle of everyday human life."

Love – At a relatively young age we experience the first excitement of discovering sexuality and romance and the first "love" relationships. So how are we to maximize our chances of finding happiness through our close relationships with others?

Aristotle regarded love as essential to human life, and although all relationships with people we love require effort, the rewards are inestimable. For him love involved not only love in family relationships, but also various kinds of friendships. He describes the marital unit as the most natural, but extremely intense form of partnership. He envisages a heterosexual husband and wife brought together for mutual support with complementary spheres of competence and interests. They also need one another if the human race is to reproduce itself. As mentioned earlier, monogamy should be the norm; adultery is unacceptable. While heterosexuality is the predominate form of partnership, Aristotle recognized the reality of gay and lesbian relationships.

Strong bonds occur between close kin, with bonds between parent and child the strongest. Losing a child is the most devastating thing that can befall a parent. Losing a close friend can also result in a great deal of grief.

Toward the end of this chapter Aristotle talks about three kinds of friendship: utility friendships, pleasure friendships, and permanent friendships. Utility friends are those you can call on in times of a practical need, and of course you should be willing to be available when your friend requires help. Pleasure friendships are those where friends share similar interests such as playing golf together. Permanent friendships are long-term, whereas the first two categories tend to be shorter.

Aristotle considers friends to be one of the greatest of all good things, and friendlessness and solitude very terrible things, because the whole of life and voluntary interactions are with loved ones.

Community – We are all members of communities which extend beyond our families and close friends. Our happiness depends partly on whether we are at ease with our fellow citizens in our nations and the citizens in other nations across the planet.

But when Aristotle was thinking of community, he was of course referring to the Greek city-state and the style of government best suited to a community of 150-200,000 people. For him it was the duty of statesmen to provide the best possible well-being and happiness for all citizens in a morally conscientious way. This requires a foundation of friendship between citizens who share things equally. Everyone should share in the community's welfare. Citizens who take advantages at the expense of others are not to be tolerated. Above all, corruption is to be avoided at all costs. Aristotle believed that communities should not become overpopulated because overpopulation can lead to poverty.

Aristotle refers to four kinds of government: democracy, tyranny, aristocracy, and kingship. Democracy is the best, and the worst is tyranny. Edith Hall points out humanity's lack of progress in this regard, in that although democracy is generally considered to be the best system of government, today less than 40% of the world's population lives in countries which respect basic human rights and the rule of law. (What a sad comment on humanity. No doubt theocracies and the greed of dictators are part of the problem).

Aristotle admits that democracies are not perfect. Regulation of property ownership can cause problems and excessive inequality can creep in. This exorbitant inequality is plainly evident today in that some executives are earning 5000 times as much as a warehouse worker.

Aristotle did not neglect the homeless and the disadvantaged in a community, and stated it is the most ethically minded person that will want to help the disadvantaged and physically handicapped. Those who are well off should aspire to assume a responsibility in this regard.

Leisure – Surprisingly, Aristotle insisted that leisure is more important than working or earning a living when it comes to enjoying a flourishing and happy life. But to make the best use of leisure time, it is important to develop constructive pastimes in order to fill in the time because boredom is the enemy, not only of peace but also of happiness. Therefore, leisure is wasted if we do not use it properly. Aristotle went so far as to argue that good use of leisure time in an ideal society would be the main goal and objective of education.

Aristotle was an enthusiastic walker who valued bodily health and pleasure highly. He encouraged pastimes which involved exercise and creative pursuits including literature, drama, music, and the enjoyment of fine food and drink. He was the first philosopher to argue that the arts could be wonderfully educative. Aristotle advocated that some leisure time should involve community activities such as volunteering and engaging in political activity.

The important point to take away is that leisure is not a secondary matter. Making full use of it requires even more thought and effort than our working lives. For it is at leisure that we will find our true selves and our greatest happiness.

Surely this wisdom is telling us today that not using all our allotted vacation time is not a good practice, and that being a workaholic may not necessarily lead to optimum happiness.

Mortality – When I was young, I considered death to be a morbid subject and did not want to talk about it. But now as I approach my 90th year, the subject can hardly be avoided because it is necessary to get my estate in order so that making the required arrangements will be as easy as possible for my family to carry out when I am no longer here.

In my early years I was exposed to the Christian belief that I possessed a soul that would survive death and, providing I lived a virtuous life, this soul would live on eternally in some kind of idyllic heaven. In other words, I was immortal. This belief was supposed to give comfort as the years progressed and peace of mind as the time of death approached. Later in life I began to doubt and question Christian tenets and eventually came to the conclusion that these beliefs made little sense and that this life on earth is all there is. The logical conclusion from this realization is that one should strive to live life to the fullest in the here and now so that when the end time comes, it will be possible to look back and conclude that it has been a “good” life.

It would then follow that it would be advantageous to be born into a loving secular home without any religious baggage and belief in the supernatural. Instead of being sent to Sunday school, a child should gradually be made aware of how the world works and the need to acquire an education in order to be able to live a satisfying secular life in future years. Sound guidance from parents and teachers will be essential. Then when the end is near, there should be few regrets. (In reality there will be regrets, but hopefully few).

Aristotle would agree with all of this. Unlike Plato, he did not believe in a soul that survives death. He believed when life on earth is over, it is truly over. He did not rule out the existence of some vestige of higher power in the universe, but if it did exist it did not influence events on earth.

Aristotle placed emphasis on leading a morally good life here on our planet, rather than speculate about an afterlife somewhere else. Therefore, acknowledging our mortality can be a good thing because it can help us to live well and to die well, realizing that while we are alive, we have the potential for great happiness acquired through living in the right way and in loving relationships. We can hope to live in pleasant homes, work toward goals, experience constructive work and recreation, enjoy pleasurable sensations, wonder at the variety and beauty of the natural world, and think for the larger portion of our lives about things other than death. Nietzsche, like Aristotle, saw that confronting our mortality and rejecting hopes of an afterlife made it necessary for us to assume full adult responsibility for the state of our reality, which in turn requires us to live better and with great vigour.

Although the last chapter of the book may be slightly on the gloomy side, the general tone of all the other chapters is positive in tone in that Aristotle is advocating a philosophy of how to live a happy virtuous life in a democratic society. His was not a philosophy for ivory tower academics, but for the masses. But it is most regrettable, thanks to the Roman Catholic Church, that this advantageous style of living remained dormant for more than a thousand years, until the coming of the Renaissance, the Enlightenment and the Protestant Reformation. Since then, democracy and individual freedom have slowly crept into Western societies as they became more secular and less religious. There is still a distance to go, particularly in the United States, before religions fade away and before secularism becomes the norm. Insuring that this advancement continues is the challenge facing the West today. This is the premises of my recent book *The Road Not Travelled*.

Aristotle Versus Plato - Is Plato Responsible for the Founding of Christianity?

Aristotle believed the philosopher's job was to explain how the world works and how as human beings we can find our proper place in it. He was the true father of modern science, logic, and technology. Plato, by contrast, is the spokesman for the theologian, the mystic, the poet and the artist. He shaped the contours of Christianity, while Aristotle shaped the ideas of the Enlightenment.

Jesus of Nazareth did not found Christianity. He was a fully human Jewish rebel (not the supernatural son of God) opposing the establishment in the Temple. For this they crucified him. The true founder of Christianity was the apostle Paul and his associates. Paul was a Jew, but a Roman citizen fluent in Greek. It is known that he visited Athens and as a scholar would almost certainly have read the Greek classics including Plato. Paul would have picked up on Plato's concept of a human soul and some form of afterlife. This could well have influenced him in the establishment of his teachings in his Epistles. These teachings, in addition to an emphasis on faith in a supernatural Jesus, include a redemption of the soul and an afterlife.

Is it too much of a stretch to claim that without Plato there would be no Christian religion? Maybe not! It would seem almost certain that Plato had a significant influence on Paul. And it is known that St. Augustine, bishop of Hippo (354-430 CE) and a man of great influence in the formation of the early Christian Church, was himself significantly influenced by Plato. To quote Nietzsche, “Christianity is Plato for the masses.”

When Those Death Thoughts Intrude

What would the 16th Karmapa do?

By Duncan Watterworth

Some events in the last few months have got me thinking about death. My death. What should I do with that?

I did read years ago that some Buddhists believe that thinking about death is a good thing. They even recommend loitering in graveyards. Surely a bit strange.

The groundwork for my deathly thoughts must have been laid by my years of twice-weekly visits to my mother, still ongoing, at the end of that long hall in Dearness Nursing Home. And perhaps my 65th birthday had something to do with it. And that pesky heart condition that is a gold mine for my travel medical insurance company.

Whatever the reasons, the death thoughts began nibbling at my consciousness in the lead-up to my trip to India last fall. I had a twinge of apprehension about the trip. I joked that, if I died there, I fancied being cremated in the holy city of Varanasi, with my ashes released into the sacred Ganges River

Before I left, I made attempts to “put my affairs in order”. My daughter was visibly impatient when I told her, once again, where the “important papers” are kept. I had a small life insurance policy I was going to cancel, but then decided to keep. I returned alive, of course, but then Leonard Cohen died. I mourned the writer of my epitaph, chosen long ago, always on standby:

*Like a bird on a wire,
Like a drunk in a midnight choir,
I have tried, in my way, to be free.*

And then there was an interment of some of the ashes of my brother-in-law John. This led to a discussion with Barb when we were walking the dog. I told her I’d like my ashes spread in the water along the north shore of Georgian Bay. My kayaking country. It was when I was reminding her of how she and Brooke would have to walk out the trail along the Chikanishing Creek, the only access point to the shoreline, that it got too real. I started to choke up.

With all this death stuff in my head, I went to my bookshelf for another look at “The Big Questions: A Buddhist’s Response to Life’s Most Challenging Mysteries” by American-born Lama Surya Das. Specifically, chapter eight on Death.

Now if you’re expecting strange, I can offer this: Das writes that his personal guru was the 16th Karmapa of the Karma Kagyu lineage of Tibetan Buddhism. That meant nothing to me before. But when I read it this time

I was shocked. It meant that Das must have spent a lot of time at Rumtek Monastery in the Indian Himalayas, a compound that Barb and I visited last September. We even viewed the “relics” of the late 16th Karmapa, on display in the stupa at the back.

Anyhow, back to brooding about Death. For all the Big Questions, Das writes in the book’s introduction, “There are simply no definitive answers”. But he does recommend, in the Death chapter, to “take solitary, unhurried, contemplative walks in local cemeteries.” And he explains why.

“To avoid the subject ... leaves us wide open to unnecessary, often unconscious, fears and suffering.” He continues, “keeping death in the forefront of consciousness helps us to face the facts of life, such as impermanence and change ...”

“This helps us to let go a little, prioritize things ... experience reverence, gratitude and awe.” “Such awareness helps us to cherish life and value time, energy, and the inconceivable magic of aliveness itself.”

Our culture tries to ignore death. Perhaps there is a better way.

Is Death Really the End?

Because there is most likely no afterlife, it does not necessarily mean that humans do not live on in some other way. Humans who procreate live on in the lives of their children and grandchildren and so on. We also live on in the memories of loved ones and friends.

And those who contribute to the improvement of human well-being live on in name long after their death. Examples are medical scientists like Louis Pasteur and Jonas Salk. Scientists like Isaac Newton and Charles Darwin. Inventors like Thomas Edison and Alexander Graham Bell. And the list goes on. All we need to do is compare the way people live today with those who lived for hundreds of generations before the industrial revolution, in order to realize the contributions of countless outstanding creative individuals, famous and otherwise, who are no longer with us. And we must not forget the arts. Famous authors, poets, artists and musical composers also live on through their creative contributions, legacies that we all can enjoy. (DAH).

Editors note – It is noted that death is the subject of the last chapter in *Aristotle’s Way* and also of the last two articles. It may not be the most pleasant of topics, but is a reality and needs to be discussed, if only occasionally.

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