

Contemplating Pleasures and Pains in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*

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We live in a world dominated by the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain. Although we are told this mindset will lead to happiness, we commonly choose things we think will bring us happiness that, in fact, do not. Why do we consistently fail to reach our goal of happiness? And what distinguishes the happiest men from others? In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle sets out to find answers to these predicaments. The word *ethics* derives from the Greek word *ethos*, which means character. Aristotle is concerned with developing the best character — the most virtuous man. Alongside virtue, Aristotle uses pleasure and pain — the two most prominent forces in human experience — to unify his ethics. Aristotle’s thesis is that we must delight in the right pleasures and endure the right pains. In doing so, our function as man will be fulfilled, we will become virtuous men, and we will live a life of true happiness.

Aristotle begins the *Ethics* by defining the good to be “that at which all things aim”<sup>1</sup>. For example: health is the good that medicine seeks; victory is the good that strategy seeks (1094A: 8-9). Therefore, the good is attractive and desirable. Furthermore, some goods are for the sake of another good. For example, I exercise (a good) to stay healthy (a greater good). In the hierarchy of all goods, there is one good which we desire for its own sake: “happiness...[which] we choose always for itself and never for the sake of something else” (1097B: 1). Just as an archer needs a target, we also need a target for all our actions (1094A: 22-24). And happiness is the target — the real bullseye! (1094A: 21-22). But, there is a major difference between the ancient and modern meanings of happiness. In Modern English, the term ‘happiness’ is derived from the Old English word *hap*, meaning luck or fortune (a subjective satisfaction or pleasure). But happiness in ancient Greek, *eudaimonia*, is derived from a radically different meaning. The prefix *eu* means

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<sup>1</sup> Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*. The Complete Works of Aristotle. Ed. Jonathan Barnes. Princeton University Press, 1995. 1729-1867. 1094A: 3.

good (or morally good). Second, *daimon* means spirit, thus implying that happiness is a spiritual, rather than physical or external, activity. Third, *ia* means lasting state, something unchangeable. Therefore, *eudaimonia* in its fullest sense means real blessedness!<sup>2</sup> When happiness is defined by our current standard, happiness is a personal matter (“Hey man, if that makes you happy, good for you!”) and it is considered a platitude when calling happiness the ultimate good in life (1095A: 19-28, 1097B: 23-25). Aristotle’s goal is to bring people from subjective happiness to objective *eudaimonia*. To achieve this task, the function of man must be determined (1097B: 23-25).

Since the good and the ‘well’ is thought to reside in the function, the function of man is crucial in understanding the chief good in life (1097B: 28-29). Just as “the function of a lyre-player is to play the lyre, and that of a good lyre-player is to do so well,” the function of man must be the “activity of the soul implying a rational principle” “in accordance with virtue, and if there are more than one virtue, in accordance with the best and most complete” (1098A: 11-12, 1098A: 13, 1098A: 17-19). Unlike animals, man has a rational principle that leads him to constantly seek for his desired end (1098A: 1-3). This activity must be well performed and excellent in accordance with virtue (1098A: 14-15). To fully understand the function of man, we must understand virtue.

Virtue, *aretê*, is defined as excellence at a particular function. In order to understand Aristotle’s complete definition of virtue, let us unpack the following statement:

“virtue is a *state of character* concerned with *choice*, lying in a mean, i.e. the *mean relative to us*, this being determined by a *rational principle*, and by that principle by which the man of *practical wisdom* would determine it” (1107A: 1-4) (italics added).

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<sup>2</sup> Kreeft, Peter. *Happiness: Ancient and Modern Concepts of Happiness*. CERC, n.d. Web.

First, virtue is a state of character. Unlike the other two things found in the soul: passions, or feelings toward pleasure and pain (anger), and faculties, or powers behind the passion (becoming angry), the genus of virtue must be a state of character — how we stand toward our passions (bad or good response to anger) (1105B: 21-28). Passions and faculties are involuntary; whereas a state of character is voluntary (1106A: 3-11). Since we are only praised and blamed for voluntary actions, virtue must be a state of character (1106A: 1-2, 10-11). Furthermore, virtue is a state of character that implies an inner stability that “makes a man good and which makes him do his own work well” (1106A: 22-23). As “states of character arise out of like activities,” moral virtue is made perfect by habit (1103B: 21-22, 1103A: 25). For example, we become just by doing just acts (1103b: 1). By repeated practice, we gain a certain disposition that will help us perform the act consistently. Let us take another example: by abstaining from pleasures we become temperate, and it is when we have become temperate that we are most able to abstain from physical pleasure (1104A: 33-35). For Aristotle, our habits become second nature (1103A: 23-25). Good habits are crucial in the progression of a virtuous life. And to perfect moral virtue through habit, the right choices must be made (1107A: 1).

Our habits give us the ability to make the right choices with greater ease and regularity (1104B: 1-3). Aristotle claims that “since moral virtue is a state of character concerned with choice, and choice is deliberated desire, therefore both reasoning must be true and the desire right, if the choice is to be good” (1139A: 21-25). To break down this statement, let's take a look at Aristotle's definition of choice: choice is deliberated desire. *Choice* is the origin of action: the means (1139a: 32-33). To *deliberate* involves taking the right amount of time to decide (1139B:

5-9). The right *desire* must pursue what the reasoning asserts, known as right reason (1139A: 19-25). For the man who does not desire virtuous acts cannot even be considered virtuous: “the man who does not rejoice in noble actions is not even good; since no one would call a man just who did not enjoy acting justly” (1099A: 17-18). For the virtuous man, choice implies a freedom from within to actively pursue a path to happiness — to choose the means for the desired end. But is there a gauge to determine whether the choice is virtuous?

Aristotle explains virtue by contrasting each virtue to its extremes (1104A: 19-20). For “it is the nature of such things to be destroyed by defect and excess... while that which is proportionate (the mean) both produces and increases and preserves it” (1104A: 11-12, 18-19). Aristotle’s teaching on the mean is no mathematical formula, as the arithmetic mean between one and five is three for example. Rather, to choose the virtuous mean requires knowledge of the context of the situation and knowledge of self — the mean is relative to us (1104A: 8-9, 1105A: 27-34, 1106B: 6-8). For example, let’s take health. If Arnold Schwarzenegger and Mother Teresa were to sit down for a meal together, the excess, the defect, and the mean for the right amount of food each person should eat would be radically different. Aristotle explains the nature of the virtuous mean: “...to feel [pleasure and pain] at the right times, with reference to the right objects, towards the right people, with the right motive, and in the right way, is what is both intermediate and best, and this is the characteristic of virtue” (1106B: 20-23). In other words, we must see the mean as a virtuous person would see it (1107A: 2-3). At first, this might sound like the same odds as winning the lottery, but fear not! Aristotle will help us to find this golden mean.

The acquisition of the golden mean in decision making would be impossible without man’s rational principle in his soul (1107A: 1-3). The rational principle allows him to control his

desires from running wild and orients them towards the chief good and chooses the mean (1102B: 13-17). Through proper development and experiences during childhood, man is able to use his rational principle to exercise the intellectual virtue of practical wisdom (1142A: 12-16). For Aristotle, practical wisdom is the “reasoned and true state of capacity to act with regards to human goods” (1140B: 20-21). Practical wisdom becomes ingrained in our character as the guiding principle behind our choices; “for virtue makes us aim at the right mark,” and practical wisdom allows us to see the situation realistically, deliberate for the right amount of time, and freely choose the right means (1144A: 8-9, 1140B: 29-30, 1144A: 8-9). Therefore, practical wisdom unifies all moral virtues: “for with the presence of the one quality, practical wisdom, will be given all the virtues” (1144B: 15-21, 1145A: 2-3).

Now that virtue has been explained to a sufficient extent, it is important to transition into the other unifying factor of Aristotle’s *Ethics* — pleasures and pains. As the most dominant forces in human decision making, pleasures and pains are the key indicators that reveal whether a man is virtuous: “We must take as a sign of states of character the pleasure or pain that ensues on acts... for moral excellence is concerned with pleasures and pains; it is on account of the pleasure that we do bad things, and on account of the pain that we abstain from noble ones” (1104B: 4-5, 9-11). To explore this profound statement on pleasures and pains, Aristotle uses the examples of courage and temperance.

Courage involves confidence in the face of fear and involves facing the painful: “for it is harder to face what is painful than to abstain from what is pleasant” (1117A: 33-34). G.K. Chesterton quips: “Courage is almost a contradiction in terms. It means a strong desire to live

taking the form of a readiness to die.”<sup>3</sup> This readiness to die is a sign of true bravery for Aristotle, since “he is knowingly losing the greatest goods, and this is painful” (1117B: 11-12). On one extreme is the coward who lacks confidence and flees at the sight of any fear, and on the other extreme is the rash man, who is thought to be boastful and only a pretender of courage (1115B: 29-30, 1115B: 34 - 1116A: 1-3). In contrast, the courageous man uses his rational principle to understand the situation, the appropriate response to a potential pain, and acts from a firm and unchangeable character in choosing the golden mean for its own sake. Notice how the courageous man fulfills the three conditions for an act to be good (1105A: 29-34). Although courage is a good example, pleasure is often to cause of error “for it appears a good when it is not” (1113B:1). Therefore, let us use the example of temperance that deals with the bodily pleasures of touch and taste (1117B: 24-25, 1150A:10). In regards to the extremes of temperance, Aristotle states that on one end of the spectrum is the man deficient in pleasure — he is rare and called insensible (so rare, it’s not worth discussing) (1107B: 5-8, 1118B: 15-16). On the other end of the spectrum is the self-indulgent man who “craves for all pleasant things... and is led by his appetite to choose these at the cost of everything else; hence he is pained both when he fails to get them and when he is merely craving for them” (1119A: 1-5). Furthermore, the self-indulgent man doesn’t even know this behaviour is wrong (1150B: 29). Unlike the extremes is the temperate man, who “craves for the things he ought, as he ought, and when he ought” (1119B: 17-18). The temperate man, guided by right reason, will dislike what the self-indulgent man enjoys and take pleasure in choosing the moderate and healthy mean (1104B: 4-6, 1119A: 10-20).

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<sup>3</sup> Chesterton, G.K. *Orthodoxy*. London: William Clowes and Sons, Ltd. Pg. 85.

As shown with temperance, “pleasure is the most to be guarded against; for we do not judge it impartially” (1109B: 7-8). Why? Because we all desire pleasure, and if our desires are attached to the wrong objects, we will likely choose the wrong action. Since we all desire pleasure and happiness, Aristotle admits how often people consider pleasure and happiness to be the same thing (1175B: 30-34), “bound up together... since without activity pleasure does not arise, and every activity is completed by the attendant pleasure” (1175A: 19-22). And again, people “weave pleasure into their ideal of happiness... for no activity is perfect when it is impeded, and happiness is perfect thing” (1153B: 15-18). Aristotle considers activities void of pleasure to be incomplete and to understand why, we must understand what Aristotle means by *activity* (1175A: 19-22).

Pleasure is a direct result from the perfection of an activity. Pleasure is not a process but an unimpeded activity of the natural state (1153A: 14-16). To impede an activity would indicate an insufficient supply of external goods (1153B: 17-19). Activity is synonymous with ‘actualization’ or ‘completion.’ Aristotle explains: “in the case of each sense the best activity is that of the best-conditioned organ in relation to the finest of its objects. And this activity will be the most complete and pleasant” (1174B: 16-19). For example, when my hearing is functioning well (no impediment to the organ) and I listen to Gregorian chant at Westminster Abbey (a fine object for hearing), I experience great pleasure because there is no obstacle to the perfection of the fine activity. Therefore, the perfection of different activities will produce different levels of pleasure. If I eat a bag of popcorn while listening to Gregorian chant, this alien pleasure (popcorn) will detract from the proper pleasure of listening to Gregorian chant (1175B: 2-23). Since the more pleasant activity drives out the lesser, the proper pleasure of Gregorian chant

would eventually cause me to stop eating popcorn while I listened to Gregorian chant (1175A: 35 - 1175B: 9). Thus, some pleasures are not worth choosing when they interfere with far better activities: “the pleasure proper to a worthy activity is good and that proper to an unworthy activity is bad; just as the appetites for noble objects are laudable, those for base objects culpable” (1175B: 27-30). Therefore, pleasure is only good when the activity pleasure accompanies is good. This begs the question: what is the best pleasure?

Since pleasure completes the activity, and pleasure and happiness are closely related, the activity that will give us the best, most complete pleasure is the activity of the soul in accordance with the best thing in us (1177A: 11-14). And since the best thing in man is his reason and “the objects of reason are the best of knowable objects,” the activity of contemplating the truth will result in perfect happiness (1177A: 21-22, 1177A: 17-18). Also, contemplation is the most continuous activity, is cherished for its own sake (relating to the definition of the good), and results in “marvellous pleasures for their purity and their enduringness” (1177A: 21-27, 1177B: 2). Furthermore, since reason is divine, we must strive to “make ourselves immortal, and strain every nerve to live in accordance with the best thing in us” (1177B: 33). For Aristotle, this philosophical life of contemplating the truth is the closest to sharing in the life of the gods and the best way to achieve ultimate happiness (1178B: 8-10, 22-32).

In the *Ethics*, Aristotle concludes that the philosophical life is even greater than the ethical, or political life (1177B: 5-25). Although this seems quite odd in a treatise on ethics, Aristotle is not downgrading ethics. For the philosopher to live a life of contemplation, certain prerequisites are necessary. Since our “nature is not self-sufficient for the purpose of contemplation” (1178B: 33-34), men need a certain amount of stability based upon proper

education, a good political system, family, friends, health, and wealth (1100A: 3-9, 1100B: 7 - 1101A: 24, 1170A: 1-2, 1178B: 32 - 1179A: 9, 1179B: 31-34). Furthermore, to be properly equipped to pursue the life of contemplating the truth, the philosopher needs to possess a character “already with a kinship to virtue, loving what is noble and hating what is base” (1179B: 30). Therefore, the ethical life will actually promote the contemplative life.

Regardless of the highest pleasures derived from the philosophical life, Aristotle admits that a life in accordance with ethical virtue, in a secondary degree, will still be happy (1178A: 8-9). And some men must make a sacrifice to live this second-best life of politics in order to ensure proper education and a good political system: “Surely he who wants to make men good, whether many or few, better by his care must try to become capable of legislating, if it is through laws that we can become good” (1180B: 23-25). Although it is impossible to force people to become virtuous, the role of politics can stimulate the desire to pursue the good. But perhaps its most important role is to foster good habits for young men: “For this reason their nurture and occupations should be fixed by law; for they will not be painful when they have become customary” (1179B: 35 - 1180A: 1). In doing so, men will be well-trained and habituated in virtue to properly pursue the contemplative life (1180A: 14-15). Therefore, the student of politics must understand the soul (1102A: 17).

In studying the soul, the politician needs to have a clear grasp on pleasures and pains. Since human goodness is “both rare and noble,” sometimes we must struggle for years before we can subject our pleasures and pains to proper reason (1109A: 29). In the battle to overcome our wrong passions, Aristotle gives hope to men who are in between virtue and vice — the incontinent and continent men (1145A: 15-20, 1145B: 1-2). The incontinent man, who chooses

wrong due to being overcome by his passions, is curable because he has preserved his rational principle (1151A: 20-26). He must fight to overcome his passions by dragging himself away to the contrary extreme (1109B: 5-7). In doing so, the incontinent man may eventually build up the proper habits and become the continent man, who chooses the good, but lacks the desire to do it (1111B: 14-15). Eventually, the continent man, through repeated acts of virtue, will overcome the struggle to make the right decision, desire virtuous acts for their own sake and experience true pleasure. Aristotle does not condemn the passions of the incontinent and continent men. Rather, pleasures and pains need to be brought under control and habituated under virtuous habits.

C.S. Lewis once said that human history is “the long terrible story of man trying to find something other than God which will make him happy.”<sup>4</sup> Aristotle saw this terrible story before his eyes. Rather than fall into despair, he wrote a profoundly human system of ethics that will lead men to the greatest levels of happiness. Although there is no answer key in the back of Aristotle’s *Ethics*, we can apply the fundamental truths revealed and examine our pleasures and pains to gauge our development in the virtuous life. In doing so, we may recite the following psalm verse with true pleasure:

*You will show me the path of life,  
the fullness of joy in your presence,  
at your right happiness for ever.*<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Lewis, C.S. *Mere Christianity*. The Complete C.S. Lewis Signature Classics. New York: HarperCollins. P.49

<sup>5</sup> Westminster Abbey. *English Ordinary: Responsorial Psalm*. November 29, 2014.

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