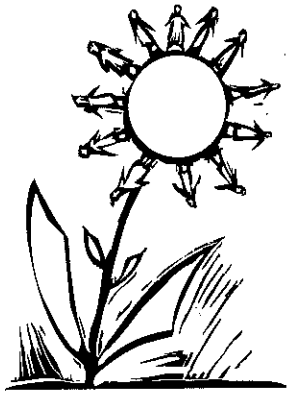
CHAPTER 2



True Happiness

Aristotle

'One swallow doesn't make a summer.' You might think this phrase comes from William Shakespeare or another great poet. It sounds as if it should. In fact it's from Aristotle's book *The Nicomachean Ethics*, so called because he dedicated it to his son Nicomachus. The point he was making was that just as it takes more than the arrival of one swallow to prove that summer has come, and more than a single warm day, so a few moments of pleasure don't add up to true happiness. Happiness for Aristotle wasn't a matter of short-term joy. Surprisingly, he thought that children couldn't be happy. This sounds absurd. If children can't be happy, who can? But it reveals how different his view of happiness was from ours. Children are just beginning their lives, and so haven't had a full life in any sense. True happiness, he argued, required a longer life.

Aristotle was Plato's student, and Plato had been Socrates'. So these three great thinkers form a chain: Socrates–Plato–Aristotle.

This is often the way. Geniuses don't usually emerge from nowhere. Most of them have had an inspirational teacher. But the ideas of these three are very different from each other. They didn't simply parrot what they had been taught. Each had an original approach. Put simply, Socrates was a great talker, Plato was a superb writer, and Aristotle was interested in everything. Socrates and Plato thought of the world we see as a pale reflection of true reality that could only be reached by abstract philosophical thought; Aristotle, in contrast, was fascinated by the details of everything around him.

Unfortunately, almost all the writing by Aristotle that survives is in the form of lecture notes. But these records of his thinking have still made a huge impact on Western philosophy, even if the writing style is often dry. But he wasn't just a philosopher: he was also fascinated by zoology, astronomy, history, politics and drama.

Born in Macedonia in 384 BC, after studying with Plato, travelling, and working as a tutor to Alexander the Great, Aristotle set up his own school in Athens called the Lyceum. This was one of the most famous centres of learning of the Ancient World, a bit like a modern university. From there he sent out researchers who returned with new information about everything from political society to biology. He also started an important library. In a famous Renaissance painting by Raphael, *The School of Athens*, Plato points upwards to the world of the Forms; in contrast, Aristotle is reaching out towards the world in front of him.

Plato would have been content to philosophize from an armchair; but Aristotle wanted to explore the reality we experience through the senses. He rejected his teacher's Theory of Forms, believing instead that the way to understand any general category was to examine particular examples of it. So to

understand what a cat is he thought you needed to look at real cats, not think abstractly about the Form of cat.

One question that Aristotle mulled over was 'How should we live?' Socrates and Plato had both asked it before him. The need to answer it is part of what draws people to philosophy in the first place. Aristotle had his own answer. The simple version of it is this: seek happiness.

But what does that phrase 'seek happiness' mean? Today most people told to seek happiness would think of ways they could enjoy themselves. Perhaps happiness for you would involve exotic holidays, going to music festivals or parties, or spending time with friends. It might also mean curling up with your favourite book, or going to an art gallery. But although these might be ingredients in a good life for Aristotle, he certainly didn't believe that the best way to live was to go out and seek pleasure in these ways. That on its own wouldn't be a good life, in his view. The Greek word Aristotle used was *eudaimonia* (pronounced 'you-die-moania', but meaning the opposite). This is sometimes translated as 'flourishing' or 'success' rather than 'happiness'. It is more than the sort of pleasant sensations you can get from eating mango-flavoured ice cream or watching your favourite sports team win. *Eudaimonia* isn't about fleeting moments of bliss or how you feel. It's more objective than that. This is quite hard to grasp as we are so used to thinking that happiness *is* about how we feel and nothing more.

Think of a flower. If you water it, give it enough light, maybe feed it a little, then it will grow and bloom. If you neglect it, keep it in the dark, let insects nibble its leaves, allow it to dry out, it will wilt and die, or at best end up as a very unattractive plant. Human beings can flourish like plants too, though unlike plants we make choices for ourselves: we decide what we want to do and be.

Aristotle was convinced that there is such a thing as human nature, that human beings, as he put it, have a function. There is a way of living that suits us best. What sets us apart from other animals and everything else is that we can think and reason about what we ought to do. From this he concluded that the best kind of life for a human being was one that used our powers of reason.

Surprisingly, Aristotle believed that things you don't know about – and even events after your death – could contribute to your *eudaimonia*. This sounds odd. Assuming there is no afterlife, how could anything that happens when you are no longer around affect your happiness? Well, imagine that you are a parent and your happiness in part rests on the hopes for your child's future. If, sadly, that child falls seriously ill after your own death, then your *eudaimonia* will have been affected by this. In Aristotle's view your life will have got worse, even though you won't actually know about your child's sickness and you are no longer alive. This brings out well his idea that happiness is not just a matter of how you feel. Happiness in this sense is your overall achievement in life, something that can be affected by what happens to others you care about. Events outside your control and knowledge affect that. Whether you are happy or not depends partly on good luck.

The central question is: 'What can we do to increase our chance of *eudaimonia*?' Aristotle's answer was: 'Develop the right kind of character.' You need to feel the right kind of emotions at the right time and these will lead you to behave well. In part this will be a matter of how you've been brought up, since the best way to develop good habits is to practise them from an early age. So luck comes in there too. Good patterns of behaviour are virtues; bad ones are vices.

Think of the virtue of bravery in wartime. Perhaps a soldier needs to put his own life at risk in order to save some civilians

from an attacking army. A *foolhardy* person has no concern whatsoever for his own safety. He might rush into a dangerous situation too, perhaps even when he does not need to, but that's not true bravery, only reckless risk-taking. At the other extreme, a *cowardly* soldier can't overcome his fear enough to act in an appropriate way at all, and will be paralysed with terror at the very moment when he is most needed. A brave or courageous person in this situation, however, still feels fear, but is able to conquer it and take action. Aristotle thought that every virtue lies in between two extremes like this. Here bravery is halfway between foolhardiness and cowardice. This is sometimes known as Aristotle's doctrine of the Golden Mean.

Aristotle's approach to ethics isn't just of historical interest. Many modern philosophers believe that he was right about the importance of developing the virtues, and that his view of what happiness is was accurate and inspiring. Instead of looking to increase our pleasure in life, they think, we should try to become better people and do the right thing. That is what makes a life go well.

All this makes it sound as if Aristotle was just interested in individual personal development. But he wasn't. Human beings are political animals, he argued. We need to be able to live with other people and we need a system of justice to cope with the darker side of our nature. *Eudaimonia* can only be achieved in relation to life in a society. We live together, and need to find our happiness by interacting well with those around us in a well-ordered political state.

There was one unfortunate side effect of Aristotle's brilliance, though. He was so intelligent, and his research was so thorough, that many who read his work believed he was right about everything. This was bad for progress, and bad for philosophy in the tradition that Socrates had started. For hundreds of years after

his death most scholars accepted his views of the world as unquestionably true. If they could prove that Aristotle had said something, that was enough for them. This is what is sometimes called 'truth by authority' – believing something *must* be true because an important 'authority' figure has said it is.

What do you think would happen if you dropped a piece of wood and a piece of heavy metal that was the same size from a high place? Which would hit the ground first? Aristotle thought that the heavier one, the one made of metal, would fall faster. In fact, this isn't what happens. They fall at the same speed. But because Aristotle declared it to be true, throughout the medieval period just about everyone believed that it must be true. No more proof was needed. In the sixteenth century Galileo Galilei supposedly dropped a wooden ball and a cannonball from the leaning tower of Pisa to test this out. Both reached the ground at the same time. So Aristotle was wrong. But it would have been quite easy to show this much earlier.

Relying on someone else's authority was completely against the spirit of Aristotle's research. It's against the spirit of philosophy too. Authority doesn't prove anything by itself. Aristotle's own methods were investigation, research and clear reasoning. Philosophy thrives on debate, on the possibility of being wrong, on challenging views, and exploring alternatives. Fortunately, in most ages there have been philosophers ready to think critically about what other people tell them must be so. One philosopher who tried to think critically about absolutely everything was the sceptic Pyrrho.

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