



Ethics

Aristotle

Aristotle was a Greek philosopher who lived in the third century BC. He wrote the 'Nicomachean Ethics' (Nicomachus being his son) which examines the concepts of virtue, happiness, and what it is to be a good and successful person.

He identifies practical wisdom as an intellectual virtue within the domain of ethics, differentiated from other intellectual virtues such as theoretical wisdom (e.g. mathematics). Practical wisdom requires deliberation due to the ambiguous nature of morality; one must learn general truths and be able to apply them to situations where the correct response or judgement is subjective.

'This is why some say that all the virtues are forms of practical wisdom, and why Socrates in one respect was on the right track while in another he went astray; in thinking that all the virtues were forms of practical wisdom he was wrong, but in saying they implied practical wisdom, he was right.'

Aristotle discusses free will, and the virtues of one who knows what the right thing is and does it despite temptations and adversity, and one who knows what the right thing is and chooses to do wrong. He believes that moral virtues are learned and must be practised to become habitual.

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Idea

Aristotle believes the 'Chief Good' in life is something final, towards which all other acts are in service, or trying to achieve. He argues that happiness is this end.

Quote

*Now of the Chief Good (i.e. of Happiness) men seem to form their notions from the different modes of life, as we might naturally expect: the many and most low conceive it to be pleasure, and hence they are content with the life of sensual enjoyment. For there are three lines of life which stand out prominently to view: that just mentioned, and the life in society, and, thirdly, the life of contemplation. Now the many are plainly quite slavish, choosing a life like that of brute animals: yet they obtain some consideration, because many of the great share the tastes of Sardanapalus. The refined and active again conceive it to be honour: for this may be said to be the end of the life in society: yet it is plainly too superficial for the object of our search, because it is thought to rest with those who pay rather than with him who receives it, whereas the Chief Good we feel instinctively must be something which is our own, and not easily to be taken from us. And besides, men seem to pursue honour, that they may *[Sidenote: 1096a] believe themselves to be good: for instance, they seek to be honoured by the wise, and by those among whom they are known, and for virtue: clearly then, in the opinion at least of these men, virtue is higher than honour. In truth, one would be much*

more inclined to think this to be the end of the life in society; yet this itself is plainly not sufficiently final: for it is conceived possible, that a man possessed of virtue might sleep or be inactive all through his life, or, as a third case, suffer the greatest evils and misfortunes: and the man who should live thus no one would call happy, except for mere disputation's sake...As for the life of money-making, it is one of constraint, and wealth manifestly is not the good we are seeking, because it is for use, that is, for the sake of something further: and hence one would rather conceive the forementioned ends to be the right ones, for men rest content with them for their own sakes. Yet, clearly, they are not the objects of our search either, though many words have been wasted on them. So much then for these.

Now since the ends are plainly many, and of these we choose some with a view to others (wealth, for instance, musical instruments, and, in general, all instruments), it is clear that all are not final: but the Chief Good is manifestly something final; and so, if there is some one only which is final, this must be the object of our search: but if several, then the most final of them will be it. Now that which is an object of pursuit in itself we call more final than that which is so with a view to something else; that again which is never an object of choice with a view to something else than those which are so both in themselves and with a view to this ulterior object: and so by the term "absolutely final," we denote that which is an object of choice always in itself, and never with a view to any other.

And of this nature Happiness is mostly thought to be, for this we choose always for its own sake, and never with a view to anything further: whereas honour, pleasure, intellect, in fact every excellence we choose for their own sakes, it is true (because we would choose each of these even if no result were to follow), but we choose them also with a view to happiness, conceiving that through their instrumentality we shall be happy: but no man chooses happiness with a view to them, nor in fact with a view to any other thing whatsoever.

So then Happiness is manifestly something final and self-sufficient, being the end of all things which are and may be done.

Questions

- Is happiness the ultimate good in life? How do you define happiness?
- Does thinking of happiness as the ultimate end in life help us make decisions about how to achieve it? What guidance would you give others in what activities of lifestyles to pursue to achieve a form of happiness?

Idea

Happiness is influenced by practical and material considerations. Happiness consists in a 'complete life', lasting when we are young to old age. While we should aim for happiness, we must consider what is achievable in our circumstances and provide for the possibility of misfortune.

Quote

Still it is quite plain that it does require the addition of external goods, as we have said: because without appliances it is impossible, or at all events not easy, to do noble actions: for friends, money, and political influence are in a manner instruments whereby many things are done: some things there are again a deficiency in which mars blessedness; good birth, for instance, or fine offspring, or even personal beauty: for he is not at all capable of Happiness who is very ugly, or is ill-born, or solitary and childless; and still less perhaps supposing him to have very bad children or friends, or to have lost good ones by death. As we have said already, the addition of prosperity of this kind does seem necessary to complete the idea of Happiness; hence some rank good fortune, and others virtue, with Happiness.

For to constitute Happiness, there must be, as we have said, complete virtue and a complete life: for many changes and chances of all kinds arise during a life, and he who is most prosperous may become involved in great misfortunes in his old age, as in the heroic poems the tale is told of Priam: but the man who has experienced such fortune and died in wretchedness, no man calls happy.

Questions

- What does this tell us about the importance of being prudent with our life choices? How do we become resilient and protect ourselves from unpredictable and difficult life events, but not become too risk-averse?
- Can we still be happy if we are ugly, ill-born, or solitary and childless?

Friedrick Nietzsche

Friedrick Nietzsche's views on morality as expressed in Beyond Good and Evil might well be characterised by many today as 'immoral'. In the text, Nietzsche described himself as an 'immoralist' and contends that many ideas of modern morality are constructs that are in opposition to the nature and spirit of man.

Many of Nietzsche ideas promote independence, individuality, and a separation from that which is popular and mainstream. Many interesting questions are raised by the text and by addressing them we may learn about ourselves.

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Idea

An independent life requires unusual strength of character, will, and resilience.

Quote

It is the business of the very few to be independent; it is a privilege of the strong. And whoever attempts it, even with the best right, but without being OBLIGED to do so, proves that he is probably not only strong, but also daring beyond measure. He enters into a labyrinth, he multiplies a thousandfold the dangers which life in itself already brings with it; not the least of which is that no one can see how and where he loses his way, becomes isolated, and is torn piecemeal by some minotaur of conscience. Supposing such a one comes to grief, it is so far from the comprehension of men that they neither feel it, nor sympathize with it. And he cannot any longer go back! He cannot even go back again to the sympathy of men!

Questions

How independent can, or should, a man be? Are some men more independent than others by nature, and what are the risks and benefits of going it alone?

Would you choose to be independent, such as starting a business, or would you rather have a stable job? What are risks and benefits of both?

Idea

Nietzsche argues that what is good and bad in modern times is determined more by the person who performed an act and their intention rather its consequences.

Quote

In the last ten thousand years, on the other hand, on certain large portions of the earth, one has gradually got so far, that one no longer lets the consequences of

an action, but its origin, decide with regard to its worth... "origin," the mark of a period which may be designated in the narrower sense as the MORAL one: the first attempt at self-knowledge is thereby made. Instead of the consequences, the origin—what an inversion of perspective!...the origin of an action was interpreted in the most definite sense possible, as origin out of an INTENTION; people were agreed in the belief that the value of an action lay in the value of its intention.

Questions

Should our actions be judged by their consequences, or by our intention in committing them? Which is more important?

Can you think of an example where judging intent over consequence leads to a better outcome (e.g. in the justice system or in punishment)?