
Living and Living Well

The younger we are, the more things we do aimlessly. If not aimlessly, then at least playfully. There is a difference between acting aimlessly and acting playfully. We act aimlessly when we have no end in view, no purpose. But when we behave playfully, we do have an aim—pleasure, the fun we get out of the game or whatever it is we are playing. The pleasure we get from the activity itself is our goal. We have no ulterior purpose; that is purpose enough.

Serious activity, as contrasted with playful activity, always has some ulterior purpose. We engage in the activity to achieve some goal, for which doing this or that is a means. Having and not having an ulterior purpose is one distinction between work and play, about which I will have more to say later. We all recognize that work is a serious activity and that it is seldom as pleasant as play.

The younger we are, the less likely it is that we will have a

well-worked-out plan for living. When we are young, our goals are likely to be immediate ones—things to do, things to get, things to be enjoyed today, tomorrow, or next week at the most. Having such goals is hardly a plan for living one's life as a whole. One's life as a whole is a very difficult thing to think about when one is young.

As we get older, we become more and more purposeful. We also become more serious and less playful. That is generally true, but not true of everyone. There are exceptions. Some older persons live only for pleasure and enjoyment, and when we say that about them, we are not complimenting them. On the contrary, we are criticizing them for devoting too much of their time and energies to playing and not enough to serious activities. We are saying that the grown-up person who lives this way is not really grown-up but childish. It is all right for children to play a large part of the time, but not for mature men and women.

As we grow older and more purposeful, less playful and more serious, we try to fit all our various purposes together into a coherent scheme for living. If we don't, we should, Aristotle tells us. We should try to develop a plan for living in order to live as well as possible.

Socrates, who was Plato's teacher as Plato was Aristotle's, said that an unexamined life is not worth living. Aristotle went further and said that an unplanned life is not worth examining, for an unplanned life is one in which we do not know what we are trying to do or why, and one in which we do not know where we are trying to get or how to get there. It is a jumble, a mess. It is certainly not worth examining closely.

In addition to not being worth examining, an unplanned life is not worth living because it cannot be lived well. To plan one's life is to be thoughtful about it, and that means thinking

about ends to be pursued and the means for achieving them. Living thoughtlessly is like acting aimlessly. It gets you nowhere.

But Aristotle does not think it is enough to persuade you that you must have a plan for living in order to live well. He also wishes to persuade you that you must have the right plan. One plan is not as good as another. There are lots of wrong plans, but only one right plan. If you adopt one of the wrong plans, you will end up, Aristotle thinks, not having had a good life. To end up having had a good life, you must have lived it according to the right plan.

The right plan? It may be easy for Aristotle to persuade us that we ought to have a plan for living in order to live thoughtfully and purposefully. That's just common sense. But for Aristotle to persuade us that there is only one right plan that we ought to adopt is not so easy. If he can succeed in doing that, it will be another indication of his uncommon common sense.

What can possibly make one plan for living right and all others wrong? To that question, Aristotle thinks there can be only one answer. The right plan is the one that aims at the right ultimate end—the end that all of us ought to aim at. That may be the answer to the question, but it leaves a further question unanswered. What is the right ultimate end—the end that all of us ought to aim at? You can see at once that if there were a right ultimate end, we ought to aim at it. Just as we find it impossible to think that part of a whole is greater than the whole of which it is a part, so we find it impossible to think that a wrong end is one we ought to aim at. If a goal is wrong, we ought not try to achieve it. Only if it is right, ought we to try.

Granted, you may say, but that still leaves the important

question unanswered. What is the right ultimate end? What is the one goal that all of us ought to seek?

You may think that that is a hard question to answer, but Aristotle doesn't. Perhaps I should say that one of his answers to that question is very easy for him to give. But it is not the complete answer. The complete answer is much harder to state and to grasp. Let's start with the easier, though incomplete, answer.

The right end that all of us ought to pursue is a good life. Aristotle's reasoning on this point is simple and, I think, convincing. Let me summarize it.

There are certain things we do in order just to live—such things as nourishing and caring for our bodies and keeping them healthy, for the sake of which most of us have to work to earn the money we need to buy food, clothing, and shelter.

There are other things we do in order to live well. We make the effort to get an education because we think that knowing more than is necessary just to keep alive enriches our life. We do not need certain pleasures in order to keep alive, but having them certainly makes life richer and better.

Both living and living well are ends for which we have to find the means. But living, or keeping alive, is itself a means to living well. It is impossible to live well without staying alive—as long as possible or, at least, as long as it seems desirable to do so.

Living, I have just said, is a means to living well. But what is living well a means to? There can be no answer to that question, Aristotle tells us, because living well is an end in itself, an end we seek for its own sake and not for the sake of anything else or for any ulterior purpose.

Anything else that we can think of, anything else that we call good or desirable, is a means either to living or to living well.

We can think of living as a means to living well, but we cannot think of living well as a means to anything else.

Aristotle thinks that that should be obvious to all of us. He also thinks that our common experience shows that all of us do, in fact, agree about it.

The word he uses for living well (or for a good life) has usually been translated into English by the word "happiness." Happiness, Aristotle says, is that which everyone seeks. No one, if asked whether he wants happiness, would say, "No, I want misery instead."

In addition, no one, if asked why he wants happiness, can give a reason for wanting it. The only reason for wanting it would have to be some more ultimate end, for the achievement of which happiness is a means. But no more ultimate end exists. There is nothing beyond happiness, or a good life, for which happiness can serve as a means.

I have used the word "happiness" as interchangeable with "living well" or "a good life." What has been said about happiness is not as plain and obvious if the word is used with any other meaning. I can avoid using the word "happiness" with any other meaning, but I cannot avoid using the word "happy" with many different meanings, meanings that are related to happiness in different ways.

We ask one another "Did you have a happy childhood?" We ask one another "Do you feel happy now?" We say to one another "Have a happy vacation" or "Have a happy New Year." When we use the word "happy" in these ways, we are talking about the pleasure or satisfaction that we experience when we get what we desire.

People who feel contented because they have what they want feel happy. A happy time is one filled with pleasures rather than

pains, with satisfactions rather than dissatisfactions. That being so, we can be happy today and unhappy tomorrow. We can have a happy time on one occasion and an unhappy time on another.

Different human beings want different things for themselves. Their desires are not alike. What one person desires, another may wish to avoid. That amounts to saying that what some persons regard as good for themselves, others may regard as bad.

We differ in our desires and, therefore, we differ in what we regard as good for us. What makes one person feel happy may do just the opposite for another.

Since different persons feel happy as the result of doing different things or as the result of getting the different things they desire, how can it be said that happiness—living well or a good life—is the one right goal or ultimate end that all human beings ought to pursue?

Aristotle may be able to persuade us that all of us want happiness. He may be able to persuade us that we all want happiness for its own sake and not for the sake of anything else. But how can he persuade us that all of us, wanting happiness for its own sake, want exactly the same thing?

Human beings, in seeking happiness, certainly appear to be seeking different things. That is a matter of common experience, which Aristotle acknowledged without hesitation. He knew from common experience, as we do, that some individuals think that achieving happiness consists in accumulating great wealth; others, that it consists in having great power or becoming famous or having lots of fun.

If happiness, like feeling happy, results from getting what you want, and if different persons want different things for themselves, then the happiness to be achieved must be different for different persons.

If that is so, then how can there be one right plan for living well? How can there be one ultimate end that everyone ought to pursue? Happiness or living well may be the ultimate end that all of us seek, but it is not the same end for all of us.

Please remember something I said earlier in this chapter. I said that there was an easy, but incomplete, answer to the question, What is the one right ultimate end that all of us should seek? The easy but incomplete answer is: happiness, living well, or a good life as a whole. To get at the complete answer, we must see if Aristotle can show us why living well, a good life, or happiness is the same for all of us.