

How to Pursue Happiness

When Thomas Jefferson drafted the Declaration of Independence, did he understand Aristotle's view of happiness and how to pursue it?

The Declaration says that all human beings, being equal by nature, have an equal right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Living, we have seen, is itself a means to living well. So is freedom.

Unless we can exercise a free choice about the things we want or need, and unless we can freely carry out the choices we make—without coercion or impediment—we cannot pursue happiness. If everything is determined for us, if the pattern of our life is imposed upon us, there would be no sense in talking about planning our lives or about adopting a plan for living well.

We need to stay alive in order to live well. We need liberty in order to make an effort—a planned effort—to live well. Because

we need these things in order to pursue happiness, we have a right to them. But do we need to pursue happiness? Do we need to live well? If not, what is the basis for saying, as Jefferson did, that all human beings have a right—a right inherent in their human nature—to pursue happiness?

The answer to that question lies in a number of points that were covered in the preceding chapters. Living well, or happiness, we saw, is the ultimate or final end of all our doing in this life—that which we seek for its own sake and for the sake of no further good beyond it. We also saw that we do in fact desire certain things and when we do, they appear good to us. There are other things we ought to desire because they are really good for us, whether or not they appear to be so at the time.

Now if a good life as a whole is one that involves having all the things that are really good for us, then we ought to desire to live well—to achieve happiness or a good life. Since anything that is really good for us is something we ought to desire, the sum total of real goods is certainly something we ought to desire.

The word “ought” expresses the notion of a duty or an obligation. We have a duty or an obligation to do what we ought to do. To say that we ought to pursue happiness as the ultimate goal of our life is to say that we have a duty or obligation to try to live well or to make a good life for ourselves.

To fulfill that duty or obligation, we need whatever is indispensable to making a good life for ourselves—we need the real goods that, taken all together, constitute or make up happiness or a good life. That is why we have a right to them. If we did not have the obligation to try to live well and if we did not need certain things in order to do so, we would not have the right to them that Thomas Jefferson asserted all of us have.

Thomas Jefferson thought that all human beings, having the

same human nature, had the same natural rights. That amounts to saying that they all have the same natural needs—that what is really good for any one human being is really good for all human beings. To this extent, Thomas Jefferson appears to have adopted Aristotle's view that the pursuit of happiness involves all human beings in seeking and trying to obtain the same set of real goods for themselves.

Before I attempt to enumerate the real goods that Aristotle thought all of us should seek, I would like to spend a moment on the difference between the question "What should I do in order to pursue happiness?" and the question "What steps should I take in order to make a chair, a picture, or a piece of music?" The difference between these two questions throws light on the difference between doing and making, and between the kind of thinking that is involved in acting in order to live well and the kind of thinking that is involved in producing something that is well made.

If you undertake to make a chair, a picture, or a piece of music, you must have a productive idea of the thing to be made and you must have the know-how or the skill required to produce a well-made chair, picture, or piece of music. The productive idea and the know-how are the means to that end. But you are under no obligation to seek that end. Only *if* you are determined to make that particular chair, picture, or piece of music must you employ the means required to produce it.

Pursuing happiness is different from producing a chair, picture, or piece of music because you do not begin by saying, "If I wish to pursue happiness, I must do this or that." There is no *if* about it, as there is in the case of the chair, the picture, or the piece of music. You may not wish to produce a particular chair, nor need you, but you ought to pursue happiness. That is why there is no *if* about it.

You ought to pursue happiness, but how ought you go about doing so? This is the question that remains to be answered.

Aristotle offers us two related answers to that question. The first answer consists in his enumeration of the real goods that all of us need—the goods that, taken together, constitute happiness or a good life as a whole. The second answer consists in his prescription for obtaining all the real goods we need in the course of a lifetime. The first answer is easier than the second, so let us start with it.

We are, by nature, questioning, thinking, and knowing animals. As animals, we have bodies that need to be cared for in certain ways. As human animals, we have minds that need to be exercised in certain ways. Some of the real goods we need Aristotle calls bodily goods, such as health, vitality, and vigor. And since our senses give us the experience of bodily pleasures and pains, Aristotle also includes such pleasures among the real goods. Few of us, I think, would challenge his common-sense observation that we ought to seek bodily pleasure and ought to avoid, if we can, bodily pain.

These bodily goods are goods we share with other animals. They are goods for us because we are animals. It is only in the way that we seek them that we differ from other animals. For example, other animals instinctively try to avoid bodily pain and always instinctively try to enjoy bodily pleasure. By watching a pet cat or dog, you will see that this is so. But human beings sometimes give up bodily pleasure or endure bodily pain for the sake of some other good that they think is more desirable. And we may even think it advisable for us to limit our enjoyment of bodily pleasures in order to make room in our lives for other, more important goods.

The bodily goods that have been mentioned are means to the ultimate end of happiness or a good life. But they are also them-

selves ends for which other goods serve as means. For the sake of our bodily health, vitality, and pleasure, we need food, drink, shelter, clothing, and sleep.

Aristotle lumps all these things together under one heading which he calls external goods or wealth. Wealth, according to Aristotle, is a real good because it is a necessary means to bodily health, vitality, and pleasure. Without a certain amount of wealth, we cannot enjoy health, vitality, or pleasure, and without these things we cannot live well.

Individuals who are starving, who are freezing or sweltering, individuals who are deprived of sleep or whose bodies are consumed by the effort to keep alive from moment to moment, individuals who lack the externals that give them the simple comforts of life, cannot live well. They are as badly off as individuals who are forced to work as slaves, who are in chains, or who are confined by prison walls. The lack of a certain amount of wealth is as much an obstacle to living well and achieving happiness as the deprivation of a certain amount of freedom.

In both cases I have said, as Aristotle would say, "a certain amount." He does not say that unlimited freedom is needed to live well, nor does he say that unlimited wealth is needed. The reason for the limitation is not the same, but both are limited, not unlimited, goods, just as bodily pleasure is also a limited good, of which we can want too much for our own ultimate good.

To the two kinds of goods that have already been mentioned—bodily goods and external goods, or wealth—Aristotle adds a third. These goods he calls goods of the soul. We might refer to them as psychological goods, as we would probably refer to the goods of the body as physical goods.

The most obvious of these psychological goods are goods of the mind, such as knowledge of all sorts, including know-how and skill. Among the skills all of us need is certainly the skill of thinking. We need it not only in order to produce well-made things, but also in order to act well and live well.

Less obvious, perhaps, are the psychological goods that we need because we are social animals as well as thinking animals. We cannot live well in complete solitude. A solitary life is not a good life, any more than the life of a slave or of a man in chains is a good life.

Just as we naturally desire to acquire knowledge, so we naturally desire to love other human beings and to be loved by them. A totally loveless life—a life without friends of any sort—is a life deprived of a much-needed good.

Even though other human beings are as external to ourselves as the various forms of wealth are, Aristotle does not place friendship among the external goods. He treats it rather as a psychological good—a good of the soul. Because it fulfills a psychological need on our part, friendship is like knowledge and skill rather than like the things that satisfy our bodily needs.

There are pleasures of the mind as well as pleasures of the body. Among them, for example, is the pleasure we get from making things and from our enjoyment of works of art—things that are well made by others. There is also the satisfaction we feel in acquiring knowledge, in having skills of one sort or another, and in loving and being loved.

Human beings desire to be loved. They also wish to be respected for the traits they think admirable or lovable. Recognizing this, Aristotle includes, among the goods that contribute to a good life, self-esteem and honor. But, in his view, being honored is not a real good unless it is for the right reason—unless we really deserve the honor we receive. Some individuals

seek fame instead of honor. They are satisfied with having a good reputation even if they do not deserve it.

I have now almost completely enumerated the real goods that Aristotle thinks go to make a good life as a whole. They are the component parts of that whole, and as such they are the means we must use to achieve that whole for ourselves. This is Aristotle's first answer to the question about how to succeed in achieving happiness. To the extent that we manage to obtain and possess all these real goods, we succeed in our effort to live well and make a good life for ourselves.

Aristotle's second answer to the same question involves a different kind of prescription for us to follow. It directs us to act in such a way that we develop a good moral character. Over and above all the real goods that have so far been mentioned, there is one more class of goods that we need—good habits; more specifically, good habits of choice.

Persons who have developed the skill of playing tennis well possess a good habit, one that enables them regularly to play well. Persons who have acquired the skill of solving problems in geometry or algebra have a good habit. So, too, have those who regularly and without difficulty restrain themselves from eating or drinking more than is good for them, or from indulging too much in the pleasures of sleep or play.

These are all good habits, but the good habits mentioned last are different from the others. Skill in playing tennis is a good bodily habit, and skill in solving mathematical problems with ease is a good habit of the mind. Good habits of this kind enable us to perform certain actions with excellence, not only regularly but also without effort. Contrasted with these habits of action are habits that enable us to make certain choices regularly, with ease, and without having to go through the process of

making up our minds and deciding how to choose each time that we do so.

The person who has acquired the firm and settled disposition to avoid eating or drinking too much has a habit of this sort. It is a *good* habit because the decision to restrain oneself when tempted to overindulge in food and drink is the *right* decision.

Food and drink are real goods, but only in moderate amounts. There can be too much of many real goods, pleasures of all sorts. We often want more of them than is good for us, more than we need. That is why Aristotle tells us that we need good habits of choice or decision—in order to seek real goods in the right amount and also in order to seek them in the right order and in the right relation to one another.

The name that Aristotle gives to all good habits is a Greek word that can best be translated by the English word “excellence.” However, that Greek word more frequently comes down to us in English by way of its Latin translation, and so the more usual English word for good habits is the word “virtue.”

Good habits of the kind exemplified by skills of one sort or another are virtues of the mind, or intellectual virtues. Good habits of the kind exemplified by a settled disposition to choose or decide correctly constitute a person’s character, and so Aristotle calls them moral virtues.

Both kinds of virtue are real goods that we need for a good life. But moral virtue plays a very special role in our pursuit of happiness, so special that Aristotle tells us that a good life is one that has been lived by making morally virtuous choices or decisions.

Why Aristotle thinks that statement sums it up I will try to explain in the next chapter.