

# BEGINNING AT THE END

## TOWARDS 'THE GOOD LIFE'



### 1. In My Life...

Imagine this. It is some 70 or 80 years from now. You look back over your life. Unlike many you knew and travelled with, you have been blessed with a particularly long life. You are thinking through what you felt, what you did and why you did the things you did. You look at what you enjoyed, and what pained you. You look at what you gained and what you lost. You look at what you achieved and where you failed. You see where you were strong, and where you were weak. You think through what you came to know, and what you may have missed. You think through whom you loved and the quality of love that you showed them.

#### Task 1

- \* Imagine the scenario above.
- \* Discuss your thoughts on what will have counted as a 'good life', as a life well lived for you. What do you hope to be able to say?
- \* Write a short imaginative piece, or act out a role play that explores the issues raised above – from a perspective that fits you.
- \* As a class, discuss your different responses.
- \* How do your current actions further or undermine the 'good life' that you hope to have led, at the end of the next 70 or 80 years, or so...?

Humans have grappled with this very question since time immemorial. Responses have differed immensely. Aristotle had some clear and strong views on this subject. He set them out in his classic book of ethics, entitled *The Nicomachean Ethics*.

Here are some of the 'candidate lives' he recognised that people would come up with in response to the questions above:

- \* A life that has been shaped predominantly around the **pursuit of pleasure**, of feelings and sensations that 'feel good'.
- \* A life that has been shaped predominantly around the **pursuit of wealth** and the acquisition of things.
- \* A life that has been predominantly shaped around the **quest for status**, respect, fame, influence.
- \* A life that has been shaped around the **thirst for power** – or having your way, bringing others round to it, either by force, or by reasoned persuasion.

- \* A life that has been predominantly shaped around the **search for knowledge**.
- \* A life that has been shaped around **ethical living**, around how to live out morally virtuous activities – a life that has been marked by feeling, thinking and acting well.

Clearly, most lives will be made up of different components and elements of these, but one ingredient will dominate, and animate all that you do.

#### Task 2

Which of the above 'candidate lives' for 'the good life' corresponds best to the one you imagined in your short piece of writing? Discuss this in pairs, then as a group. Have you thought of a kind of life that is not covered by the above? If so, what is it?

Aristotle has his own views on this very question. Here are his thoughts on some of the various kinds of life on offer:

- \* To the life organised around the pursuit of pleasure, Aristotle queries:  
**But does this sort of life really give full exercise to all of our distinctively human capacities? What about the role of reason, or thinking?**
- \* To the life organised around the pursuit of wealth and accumulation of things, Aristotle queries:  
**But for what purpose? Surely the purpose that you want money for, is what you really want? Do you want it for security, for power, or to buy the things that give you pleasure? Or anything else?**



- \* To the life shaped around the quest for status and respect, Aristotle queries:

**But by whom do you want to be respected, and why is their view so important to you?**

**And what will become of your life, when the very people who now give you applause, go on to condemn you – people, after all, are fickle, are they not...?**

**And what will you do to persuade others to give you this applause, or honour – you must rely upon them giving it, and those that give it, can just as easily take it away...**

**What are the sorts of things you wish to be respected for? Are they the sorts of things that are really worthwhile?**

### Task 3

- \* In pairs discuss what you think about what Aristotle thinks about these various kinds of life. Aristotle raises some queries about the different kinds of life. How would YOU answer his queries? You can agree or disagree with him!

Aristotle then goes on to commend a life to us. The trouble is, quite what he commends is disputed by those who read and think about what he has to say. That said, there is enough agreement amongst all those who disagree on how to interpret his writings. Aristotle commends to us a life that is shaped around:

- \* Living and acting thoughtfully.
- \* Reflecting on the ordinary challenges and complexities of existence, as well as the extraordinary.
- \* Acting out the ordinary, moral matters of living, in an extraordinarily fine way.<sup>1</sup>

Sounds interesting, doesn't it? But what has he got in mind, as a good way of living, as 'a life that is good for human beings'?

<sup>1</sup> Curzer, H.J (2012) Aristotle and the Virtues (OUP)

Aristotle has in mind, as a minimum, a life that is marked by:

- \* **Courage**, rather than rashness or cowardice;
- \* **Self-control**, rather than self-indulgence, or insensibility;
- \* **Generosity**, rather than niggardliness, or wastefulness;
- \* **Friendliness and civility**, rather than rudeness, or flattery;
- \* **Tact and discretion**, rather than boorishness, or buffoonery;
- \* **Truthfulness**, and integrity, rather than false modesty, or bragging;
- \* **Good temperedness**, rather than prickliness, or indifference to the concerns of others;
- \* **Fairness**, rather than unfairness.

In fact, Aristotle thinks that being able to live out these and other 'virtues' in the differing contexts of our lives, is actually what makes up for a life well lived, and indeed, worth living. Imagine it. We are in the winter of our lives, looking back over the 80 or so years that we can remember. And we say, in response to the question, '*How well did you live, and was it all worth it?*' something like this:

'I have been courageous when I had to be; I have been self-controlled, when I had to be, balancing out the differing pleasures that have come my way; I have been generous, friendly, discreet, and always truthful to others about who I really am; I have been even tempered, kind and loving towards those around me – even when tested. I have lived with integrity – when I made mistakes I admitted them and sought to restore the damage they had caused. I felt the right way about the right things, and did the right things in the right way – most of the time. I was able to live thoughtfully and with good sense and wisdom'.





### Task 4

- \* What do you think of Aristotle's answer? Is he on to something, or is he completely off the mark? Why? Why not?
- \* Which other qualities, or virtues would you add to this list and why?

### Task 5

- \* In 1965 Lennon and McCartney wrote a song called 'In My Life', performed by The Beatles. Listen to the song – how does their song answer the question 'What is the Good Life?'

- \* How did Frank Sinatra answer the question, 'What is the Good Life?' in his song, 'My Way'?
- \* Compare the content of these two songs with each other: who came closer to setting out the most attractive vision of the 'good life' on this evidence, The Beatles, or Frank Sinatra?
- \* What would Aristotle make of:
  - \* The Beatles' 'In My Life'?
  - \* Frank Sinatra's 'My Way'?

N.B. What does he think they have included, and what have they missed?

## 2. Signs of Flourishing

*Aristotle suggests that there are some signs that we can look out for to see if somebody is flourishing as a person, rather than withering or decaying, or whether a person has a good, virtuous character, or a bad, vicious character.*

### Sign 1: They are committed to searching for and leading the very best of lives.

They show this commitment by ensuring that any health, wealth, status, friends or any other external goods they have, help them to live, explore, reflect upon and sustain the 'good life'.

### Sign 2: They are fully human in their choices and actions.

They do those things that are unique to the human animal. They exercise their unique human abilities and capacities to flourish. They do things that ONLY humans can do, or do in a particularly sophisticated way. They lead morally good and ethically worthwhile lives. They have set their moral sights very high.

### Sign 3: They carry out good actions particularly well.

They carry out those things that make us uniquely human, particularly well. Aristotle takes these to be moral qualities, or virtues. Humans, he says, flourish when they act with self-control, with courage, with fairness, with integrity.

### Sign 4: They are consistent.

They consistently and reliably do those things that are unique to the human animal. For example, they can be relied upon to act courageously in situations that call for courage; they act with self-control in situations that call for self-control, and so on.

### Sign 5: They take pleasure in exercising their virtues, or moral qualities – in doing those things that are unique to humans.

They take delight in doing the right thing; and are pained at doing the morally wrong things. It gives them pleasure to be courageous, to be self-controlled, to be generous, to be even tempered, to be civil and discreet, to be truthful about who they really are. Sometimes acting like this will bring them external benefits – that's all well and good, but not their motivating force. They are motivated by a desire to do the right thing, simply because it is the right thing.



**Sign 6: They seek being good as an end in itself.**

They are not animated primarily by pleasure, recognition, money, or power, even though these may come their way. They seek simply to live a morally good life.

**Sign 7: They use any extra things that come their way wisely to live the 'good life'**

Any 'bonus goods', or external goods they receive, are immediately put in the service of the life of thinking and acting well. Extra friends, surplus money, or enhanced status all become means through which they can think through how to live and act well on a grander scale.

**Sign 8: They act well and think well; exploring how to practise the virtues that build their character!**

**Task 1**

- \* Number off, as a class, 1 –8. Get in groups with others who have the same number. Design a poster for your class that illustrates the point your sign 1 –8 above is making.
- \* Who do you know who comes closest to displaying the signs set out above? Write a short account of them, responding to each of the 8 signs – and never show them, or tell them!

Aristotle suggests that if we can live out such principles:

- \* We will not be miserable – in fact we will be very happy, and flourish.

- \* Even if circumstances outside our control move against, or constrain us, we will be happier than if we had been unethical.
- \* All other things being equal, we will be happier having lived ethical lives, as opposed to unethical ones.
- \* We'll flourish as human organisms!

Not only does Aristotle come up with some signs that he thinks go to show if a person is living the very best kind of lives for human beings. He also thinks that such a life can be learned, and taught. He thinks, for instance, that we can be trained, (or habituated) to become more courageous; and that, as we act more courageously in the differing circumstances of our lives, we will both see when courage is called for, what it will look like, and how best to practise it.

So, how will we go about this?

This Course on Character Education hopes to support you in exploring those very issues.

**Task 2**

- \* Make a presentation to the class on a Role Model for you. It's perhaps more interesting if you know the person personally, rather than the image of the person that has been mediated to you by television, etc.
- \* How do they exemplify the signs set out above?
- \* As a class, evaluate whether you agree or disagree with your friends' choice of Role Model.

