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Aristotle on Adversity

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Aristotle had powerful ideas about dealing with adversity that can help us today, 2,000 years after he lived and wrote.

This brief essay will, I hope, speak to those of you who know very little about Aristotle, and also to people with some knowledge of his writings and views.

Then we will explore his substantive ideas on how to deal with adversity and more. Most of these ideas may be found in his most extensive work on ethics, *The Nicomachean Ethics*.

- I admire Aristotle's work, but I do fault him for part of his ethics. By this I mean, not his personal ethics towards friends and associates, nor even his writings on the subject. I fault him for being a toady to two monarchs, and for being an advocate of slavery, and having

beliefs we would categorize as anti-democratic, male chauvinistic, and more.

Then why study Aristotle? Because there is so much that is good and useful in understanding ourselves and the world in his works.

Background

Aristotle was a Greek philosopher who lived from 384 – 322 B.C. He may have been (in my opinion) the most profound thinker who ever lived. I say this because of his insightful views on how to live a fulfilled life, his pioneering work in science, and to some extent his views on ethics. On the other hand, he was a sexist, imperialist and monarchist with great disdain for democracy.

Aristotle was third in a line of world-famous Greek philosophers, a group that included Socrates and Plato. He wrote authoritatively on ethics, logic, physics, biology and more. He is considered to be the founder of zoology. And he served as tutor for Alexander the Great, who conquered (and oppressed) much of the known world.

Aristotle wrote extensively, covering such subjects as logic, physics, ethics, music, poetry and much more.

Adversity or Misfortune

Aristotle's key beliefs can help us deal with adversity of all kinds. He had clear views on misfortune, which we may take as the equivalent of adversity. Adversity as defined here can include the relatively minor incidents of life, such as breaking a bone, to the major, such as disease and death, or losing a loved one. In our age of pandemic, this would include dealing with the current pandemic or at least mentally framing it.

It is important to note that Aristotle's views on misfortune are framed in contradistinction to living the Eudaemonic life – a fulfilled one of

meaningful happiness. Unlike many Stoic philosophers, who focuses extensively on misery and how to overcome it or diminish its impact, Aristotle offers a change of focus. He advocates focusing on what makes life beautiful. He recommends the essential nobility of our souls, if we let that quality shine through.

He wrote:

Now many events happen by chance, and events differing in importance; small pieces of good fortune or of its opposite clearly do not weigh down the scales of life one way or the other, but a multitude of great events if they turn out well will make life happier (for not only are they themselves such as to add beauty to life, but the way a man deals with them may be noble and good), while if they turn out ill they crush and maim happiness; for they both bring pain with them and hinder many activities. Yet even in these nobility shines through, when a man bears with resignation many great misfortunes, not through insensibility to pain but through nobility and greatness of soul.¹

Eudaemonia

Key to understanding Aristotle's views of the most important thing in life us understanding eudaemonia. It is sometimes interpreted as Happiness, but is broader than that. Probably the best definition is human flourishing.

It is a "final good," one that admits of no other step beyond, except perhaps to blessedness.

Seeking and achieving Eudaemonia is the best way to overcome some of the ills of misfortune. It is no panacea, however. Aristotle says that external

¹¹ <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/nicomachaen.1.i.html>

circumstances must not be calamitous. In fact, he believes that one needs a certain amount of external goods to be happy.

Eudaemonia is not to be confused with a state such as Nirvana in Buddhism.

Eudaemonia is a state of being -- an activity involving the attainment of one's human potential.

Friendship is powerful.

Aristotle believes strongly in the values of friendship and spends much time and papyrus in distinguishing the various kinds of it.

Friendship

Friendship is a great boon for us in times of adversity.

“it is fitting to go unasked and readily to the aid of those in adversity (for it is characteristic of a friend to render services, and especially to those who are in need and have not demanded them; such action is nobler and pleasanter for both persons); “ <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/nicomachaen.9.ix.html>ⁱ

Moderation

Aristotle is famous for his belief that Moderation is needed to steer between excessive qualities. He seeks the Golden Mean and advises us to do so as well.

Virtue ethics

To be virtuous is to excel in moral virtue and intellectual virtue. These virtues are critical to understand, because they constitute an active defense against adversity.

Note that as shown in the quote above, Aristotle does not believe that the “right attitude” can overcome major disasters in one's personal life.

The key virtues are:

Intellectual Virtues – (nous) these are related to teaching and knowledge; we are taught to be virtuous.

Moral or Practical Virtues – (phronesis) these come about by habit, and they cannot reason themselves but can follow reason

To put flesh on these concepts, let us conceive that a young person learns that generosity and honesty are virtues. This is the nous, or knowledge of the essences of two virtues. In practice, or phronesis, she may discover that it is difficult to be generous in all situations, such as when one is starving. And honesty may not be the best approach if it causes suffering.

These distinctions do not automatically guide us to the best choices, but they can inform our choices.

Determined Recollection - an important technique

One device that Aristotle used and recommends in the *determined recollection of ideas* -- and images particularly -- that bring one to a happier state of mind. For example, he commissioned a statue of his mother to be made. That gave him happiness. And he sometimes used mind-only recollection, such as recalling a particular favored student. That is a technique we use, say on Facebook or Instagram today, or perhaps in a photo album or in paintings and photos we display in our homes.

Physical devices such as images are not a crutch. They are part of the flow of activity that is a virtuous life.

Self-Love

Aristotle makes a good case that love of self is the key to being able to extend oneself positively towards others via friendship. This may sound contradictory because we tend to associate the notion of self-love with self-

involvement and even narcissism. But he meant it as a positive starting point from which one can reach out.

As he says in Book VIII, section 8:

The question is also debated, whether a man should love himself most, or some one else. People criticize those who love themselves most, and call them self-lovers, using this as an epithet of disgrace, and a bad man seems to do everything for his own sake, and the more so the more wicked he is-and so men reproach him, for instance, with doing nothing of his own accord-while the good man acts for honour's sake, and the more so the better he is, and acts for his friend's sake, and sacrifices his own interest.

But the facts clash with these arguments, and this is not surprising. For men say that one ought to love best one's best friend, and man's best friend is one who wishes well to the object of his wish for his sake, even if no one is to know of it; and these attributes are found most of all in a man's attitude towards himself, and so are all the other attributes by which a friend is defined; ⁱⁱ

The Happiest Life

Aristotle believes the greatest existence is one of philosophic contemplation. The use of reason in this circumstance is god-like.

I agree that such a life can be wonderful, although it is not the only state that can be super-happy. Lovers in love offer another option. But it can also seem inert (if imagined as non-interactive) regarding of say, the ineffable beauty of a sunset. It can be sensible if we add with dynamic interaction or creativity. The joy of artistic creation can be supremely rewarding and indeed, an altered state that is as great as philosophic contemplation.

In any case, Aristotle causes us to ponder what the ideal life is. And why each avenue may or may not be the most rewarding.

For two thousand years, he has held our attention in these matters. And despite his many faults and shortcomings, he has informed our choices.

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ii <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/nicomachaen.9.ix.html>