

INTRODUCTION TO ARISTOTLE'S *ETHICS*

HOW TO LEAD A GOOD LIFE

LECTURE 3

HAPPINESS

OUTLINE

0:00-5:00—Summary of Lectures 1 and 2

5:01-10:35—Common Opinions about Happiness

- Aristotle examines the common opinions about the nature of happiness. Many people consider it to be a life of pleasure, wealth, or honor.
 - Pleasure: if we live for only the common understanding of pleasure it is like “choosing a life that belongs to fatted cattle.”
 - Wealth: serves as a test; if you have a virtuous character it is a good thing, but not sufficient.
 - Honor: it has a more serious claim than pleasure and wealth if it is pursued in the right way; but, it is not enough on its own.

10:36-13:12—Good and Being

- The good and being are convertible terms.
 - According to Aristotle, to say a thing is good is the same as saying it has the being of a particular thing

13:13-23:02—The Work That Produces Happiness

- The work that produces happiness has to be essentially human.
 - It involves reason and speech, but also something in our soul that is able to be persuaded by reason.

- The good of a cup has to do with what somebody else fashioned. The good of a dog is secured chiefly through natural gifts and instincts. The good of a human being depends primarily on choice and the formation of a virtuous character—which is an expression of human freedom.

23:03–32:42—Happiness

- Aristotle defines happiness as:
 - A "certain sort of being at work of the soul in accordance with virtue."
- Virtues are active conditions of the soul. This term indicates the stable state of a virtuous person's soul in relation to feelings and desires.
- Being-at-work is when the virtues, or active conditions, are fully engaged.
- Happiness can be summarized as the activity of the soul that is excellent in all the ways that a human being acts and thinks.

TERMS

Active-condition: the constant disposition of our soul in relation to feelings and desires. For example, cowardice and courage are active-conditions developed towards fear.

Being-at-work: once an active-condition is formed, actions will spring from it, not as habit, but as the result of active thinking and desiring.

Virtue: the excellence that makes anything an outstanding specimen of its kind, especially well fitted to its purpose.

KEY PASSAGES

But perhaps to say that the highest good is happiness is obviously something undisputed, while it still begs to be said in a more clear and distinct way what happiness is. Now this might come about readily if one were to grasp the work of a human being. For just as with a flute player or sculptor or any artisan. . .the good and the doing it well seem to be in the work, so too it would seem to be in the case with a human being.

Ethics, Book I, Chapter 7, p. 10

For happiness was said to be a certain sort of being-at-work of the soul in accordance with virtue, while all other good things are either conditions that need to be present for happiness or else things that naturally assist the work and are useful as tools.

Ethics, Book I, Chapter 9, p. 15

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

What is the difference between a habit and an active-condition? Can a virtue simply be the result of habits or must the soul be actively engaged for an individual to be virtuous?

How is the way Aristotle discusses happiness different from our modern conception of happiness? According to Aristotle, can a vicious person be happy?

NOTES
