

"What is the meaning of life?" One of philosophy's main purposes, using human reason only, is to answer this often-asked question. Just like today, the ancient Greeks also asked this question (in various ways) and got many various answers in return, from both philosophy and religion. Aristotle, one of the ancient Greek philosophers, had his answers to this fundamental question. He said that the supreme end in life is gaining knowledge, with "using reason (being) the fullest activity of living" since this gaining of knowledge and use of reason are the highest functions of a human being.

Aristotle argued that the supreme purpose of a human life had to involve something good in itself, ^{this} ~~and that it wasn't~~ ^{only} something useful or good for some other purpose. The supreme purpose of a human life involved something wanted just for itself, because if everything was wanted as something useful for another purpose, then one would make all desires useless since they would involve always choosing something always in turn wanted for some other purpose. There would be no overall purpose or goal for all your choosing since your choosing was always for another reason every time you chose. If one would always choose things useful for another purpose only, then one would choose one thing that was only chosen to do another thing, that was only chosen to do yet another thing, and so on, ad infinitum. Clearly, this infinite regress is ridiculous, and thus there has to be an ultimate end for all human actions. (compare p. 2 of NE, 1094a20).

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But what is the end of all human actions? Aristotle argued that happiness was the end of all (good) human actions since the various things we desire are only desired so that we can be happy, ultimately. For instance, a man may desire money so he can buy a house so he can fulfill a need for shelter, which will help make him happy. Further, since human actions should be in accordance with reason (NE, p. 35, 1104a33) and since theoretical wisdom (and practical intelligence) are the highest parts of man, exercising reason through our acts is the highest possible activity of human life. Since having knowledge, but not acting

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on it is clearly useless (NE, p. 40, 1105b15), so we must express our reason in action, not just in talk. The virtue of a human being is that state that makes him good and ^{by} in which he performs his function well (NE, p. 42, 1106a23). Of course, one obviously needs to use reason to have virtue, then, so you know how to function well. And having virtue makes it possible to be happy, since Aristotle believes that human activity in accordance with virtue (excellence) ^{is} produces happiness. Thus, a human must exercise reason (and gain knowledge) if he wishes to function well (have virtue) and become happy, which is the ultimate end of all our actions.

A hedonist would reply that Aristotle is wrong here in his emphasis on reason and virtue producing happiness. What matters most of all is the amount of pleasure we have in each moment of our lives. Happiness* is merely the sum total of all the pleasures of our lives, minus all the pains. Pleasure, since it makes our lives most pleasant, matters most of all, regardless of its source (in and of itself), since it has the same effect on our brain (and our resulting feelings). No matter how different each individual pleasure is, it really comes down to being the same thing since it has the same effect on our minds. Thus, says the hedonist, we should act just to maximize pleasure (since it is pleasant) and minimize pain (since it is unpleasant), if we want to be happy.

Aristotle would reply that such a life of seeking pleasure only is pursuing life like that of animals (NE, p. 7, 1095b20) or a child (NE, p. 272, 1174a3), since man's highest capacities of theoretical wisdom and practical intelligence, which employ reason, aren't being exercised. No virtue is developed in such a life, and such a life remains on a lower level of life capacities (perception). The life that aims at pleasure only may not accomplish or achieve ^{what?} (like scientific discoveries) since reason (which produces knowledge) may not be used in such a life except to find pleasures. Also a life of pleasure seeking might involve hurting others or, eventually the self, if harmful pleasures are engaged in and pleasures are made the only thing that matters in life (while ignoring the needs of others). And, even if it was possible to have continuous pleasure in life

(say by being hooked up to some machine that would stimulate the pleasure center of *or unhappiness, if the total amount of pain exceeds the total amount of pleasure.

the brain), would we want such a life? A life caught up in pursuing pleasures would accomplish nothing for the person doing so besides a pleasant feeling, necessarily, and not necessarily much of anything for the world or posterity. Such a life would not necessarily build moral character, perform achievements in the discovery of knowledge or of material creations (machines, products, etc.), help other people, or fulfill God's purpose for one's life. The pleasure of pride an engineer feels in his ~~mind~~ after solving some difficult technical problem isn't the same as the pleasure a drug addict feels during a high after shooting heroin into his veins.

Thus, although pleasure has its place in life and isn't necessarily harmful in itself, Aristotle's view that happiness comes from exercising and developing reason and virtue is more correct than the view life should just maximize pleasure (and minimize pain). A life following Aristotle's views would be more fulfilling, at least mentally, than the alternate view above. Thus, even a philosopher who died over 2000 years ago had relevant things to say about people's lives today. Thus, Aristotle's views on ethics help show why philosophy in general is relevant to our lives and its importance to them.

1. This leaves out the intellectualist component of A's view, which we'll go into further this week.

A doesn't argue for thought only on the basis that it can help you act so as to get good things -- rather, the life of thought ('study', in your translation) is best all by itself.

A counts thinking as activity -- indeed, that's when we're most active (in our highest capacity of soul, and most like god.