

Samuel S. Franklin

The Psychology of Happiness: A Good Human Life.

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It is an odd fact that people in the West, the vast majority of whom are incredibly wealthy by historical standards, are not getting happier. In fact, the trend line for happiness has been relatively static for at least 50 years (Easterbrook, *The Progress Paradox*, 2003). This fact becomes even odder when we consider that we have spent considerable time and effort thinking about how we can become happy, and have certainly devoted an unbelievable amount of money to becoming so, most prominently through therapy and pharmaceuticals. In Canada, for example, there was a 52% increase in therapists from 1982-1997, and Americans spent approximately \$76 billion on antidepressants such as Prozac in 2006 (McLaren, *Globe and Mail*, May 27, 2000; and O'Connor, *Happy at Last*, 2008).

The positive psychology movement, which has argued that psychology has paid far too much attention to neuroses and mental illness at the expense of an examination of positive human functioning, has taken these facts as support for their claim that we have become terribly misguided about what happiness is, and hence have no idea how to achieve it. The conceptual mistake is to think that happiness is some subjective (and often transitory) state like pleasure or preference satisfaction and that it can be achieved through material things like money and possessions. They call for a return to the Ancient Greeks and in particular to Aristotle's notion of happiness as *eudemonia*. Franklin is squarely within this positive psychology tradition and this book is devoted first to explaining Aristotle's position and then to showing the ways in which Aristotle's conception of happiness matches current thinking in positive psychology, which, Franklin argues, has been gaining increasing empirical support.

The key insight of Aristotle, according to Franklin, is his notion that happiness is actualizing our potential. This entails that there is something we are supposed to be that Aristotle described as our *telos* or purpose or final end, and which is determined by differentiating us from other 'species' in our 'genus'. The distinguishing feature of humans is our reasoning ability: hence, to be a fulfilled and happy person, we must engage our reasoning faculties. Aristotle's virtue ethics is built upon this teleological framework with practical reason being used to find the best means to good ends. Virtue or *arête* literally means to do this excellently, and in the case of living our lives well, this means dealing correctly with our emotions by avoiding too much or too little and choosing 'the mean in action'. To sum up briefly:

... happiness comes with fulfillment and that fulfillment requires virtue. Virtue enables us to acquire the goods we need to become all that we might. (86)

While Franklin writes about Aristotle in a clear and concise manner, what he says about him is familiar territory. The real value of this book resides rather in Franklin's relating Aristotle's theory to contemporary psychological accounts of happiness. He begins this process by expanding on Aristotle's idea of virtue as emotion moderated by reason and the way this has been unpacked in some modern psychology where emotion is conceived as involving thought, desire, and action, in addition to feeling. Becoming virtuous for Aristotle required training eventuating in a habit or *hexis* for correct, reasoned action. Franklin relates this to cognitive psychology, from the ABC model developed by Arthur Ellis in the 1960s through to contemporary thinkers such as Seymour Epstein's theory of 'constructive thinking'. As Franklin says:

Aristotle's concept of virtue is very much alive and well in contemporary psychology. Virtue can be thought of as the moderation of emotion by reason. It is a premise of the new cognitive psychology that external events are not really the cause of emotions or actions. It is rather the mental interpretation of the event that is causal. We no longer believe that we are passive recipients of emotion and at its mercy. Aristotle painted a much more complicated, but more reasonable picture of emotion and we have finally caught up with him. (113-14)

In fact, according to Franklin, Aristotelian virtue is quite similar to what the contemporary cognitive psychologists call 'emotional intelligence', which involves the abilities to perceive emotions correctly, understand the meaning of those emotions, manage them, and make good decisions on the basis of them (122-4). There is in fact some empirical evidence that people with high emotional intelligence achieve high levels of self-actualization (125). From this evidence, Franklin discusses the need to develop virtue in our children by ensuring that they become emotionally intelligent and hence are able to become all that they can be, i.e., are able to self-actualize.

Positive psychology has always intrigued me. As Martin Seligman, one of the movement's originators, once asked: 'Why should psychology devote itself entirely to getting people from -5 to 0 instead of trying to move them from 0 to +5?' As a primer to the movement, Franklin's book is excellent. However, his work lacks Aristotle's critical edge. Whereas Aristotle reshaped prior thought by rejecting some of it and using other parts in new ways, Franklin has a tendency to treat widely divergent theories as if they somehow form a unified and coherent whole. Thus, Freud, James, and Seligman are treated as if they had compatible positions. Moreover, Franklin also tends to avoid hard questions about his position and to treat Aristotle's theory as if it were completely unproblematic. So, for example, in his chapter on developing virtue (Chapter 14), Franklin suggests that through the exercise work of practical wisdom and repeated iterations of a virtuous behavior,

eventually we are good at knowing which action goes with which circumstance. We know when to be honest and when not to be. We know when to tell our host that the party was enjoyable even if we had a terrible time. That is, we learn to discriminate among different situations and to select the appropriate response for each. (132)

But how do we *know* this? On what basis do we make our discrimination? In an ethics of justice, like utilitarianism or Kantian deontology, we can know an action is good or right if it maximizes utility or it adheres to the categorical imperative. But Aristotelian virtue ethics eschews such overarching principles and is notoriously vague as a result.

In Aristotelian ethics, then, what a person chooses as an appropriate action must be the product of the chooser's culture and upbringing. However, Franklin basically assumes a kind of moral universalism (see, e.g., p. 146) that appears inconsistent with the subjectivist dimension of virtue ethics. Finally, I think that Franklin doesn't deal adequately with Aristotle's teleology, which doesn't mean simply that humans act intentionally and hence purposively, as Franklin sometimes appears to imply early in the book. Rather, for Aristotle the entire universe is teleological and so everything has a purpose. But this picture of the universe is wildly out of sync with contemporary scientific views and more clearly part of a religious world-view. Franklin deals with this issue only at the very end of his book, and in the context of his discussion of the attainment of a type of happiness through a life of contemplation (rather than virtuous action). Indeed, the last line of Franklin's book is: 'Religion and spirituality have been with us from the very beginning, and perhaps when they are grasped in their deepest, most meaningful, and profound form, they provide the ultimate form of happiness' (168). This may be so, but Franklin does little in his book to substantiate this claim.

In the final analysis, then, Franklin's book offers insight into some of the main tenets of positive psychology and particularly its relation to Aristotle, but it fails to deal with any of the hard issues such a position entails.

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