

Eudaimonia - Ancient Wisdom for Modern Flourishing

Introduction and Welcome

Hello, everyone. Welcome to Peaceful Life Radio. I'm David Lowry, and today, I am with Don Drew.

I'm excited to be here, David. I think we're gonna have some fun today.

It's going to be a great program because we're discussing the values of a very ancient Greek philosopher. Before we move on, Don, I want to remind our listeners to,

Absolutely! We want to remind all our listeners to download, share, and spread the word about our podcast. Please invite everyone to tune in. We're featuring some fantastic guests and exploring a lot of wonderful topics, and we would love to hear from you.

Introducing Aristotle

As we start to embrace conscious aging, it's fitting that we consult someone truly wise: Aristotle.

Aristotle. Tell us who Aristotle was. Now, maybe not all our listeners really know. I'm sure they've all heard of him. But who was he?

Well, he lived in 350 BCE, before the common era. Aristotle probably has no unpublished thought. He's written about science, oratory, speech, how to persuade people.

Understanding Eudaimonia

The guy was brilliant—a philosopher—and one of his favorite areas was human flourishing. Here's the word we want you to know: eudaimonia.

Eudaimonia. I believe that, if I recall correctly, Aristotle was a student of Socrates, and that most of what we know about Socrates comes through Aristotle.

Absolutely. There's a lesson for us today that reinforces an old idea: no matter when you travel back in time, people will always be people, and the things that mattered back then remain important to us now and will continue to be essential in the future. One of those concepts relates to human flourishing or eudaimonia.

And this was also related to a man's search or human search for the highest good.

Yes, and that's the thing. Don, I remember when I was asked to imagine the most noble thought I could think of. And you know what? I found it difficult to do. What is the most noble thing you can conceive? What is the highest good you can envision? Is it world peace or eradicating hunger? It's a worthy question to ponder. When we discuss living a peaceful life and attaining the kind of life we desire, we want to ensure that we're filling it with things that help us flourish, make us happy, and ultimately benefit the people we know and love.

So, Aristotle was on to something. What was it?

Happiness and Flourishing

He came up with this word that is sometimes called happiness in English, but it's almost a mistranslation. Eudaimonia is more of a term that talks about the flourishing we get. Happiness is almost like a state, but flourishing is continual renewal, living your best self. It's when you're at your best. It's like the tree in bloom, those sorts of things.

This sounds a lot like our American psychologist, Abraham Maslow, who had a term he called self-actualization, which is the human reaching the fullness of themselves.

And that's what Aristotle introduced all those years ago. There's a psychologist named Carol Reif who talks about eudaimonia and self-acceptance, being OK with yourself or positive relations with others, and autonomy. We all like to do things in our own way and feel like, *hey, I know what I'm doing, and I can do this in my own way*. Environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth. Those are some of the things she borrowed from Aristotle as she created this scale to help her psychology practice understand what it means to be a flourishing human being.

These are things that give us purpose in life. As my wife, Cary, says, *it makes you want to put your feet down on the floor in the morning. It's a reason to get out of bed*.

David, what is eudaimonia's highest or ultimate good?

If you were talking to Aristotle, he would say that the ultimate human good is happiness. When I first heard this, I thought, hmm, I'm not sure.

It sounds like it could be selfish if you're not careful.

Or is it hedonism, like having any sensual pleasure that you want and being absolutely unrepentant about doing things for yourself at the expense of other people? But he's not really talking about that.

He's not saying that you should avoid all pain. But he might point out that sometimes we experience a bit of pain because we believe it will benefit us later on. For instance, an athlete might endure those tough workouts so that when they compete, they have a chance at winning something significant, like the Super Bowl.

For years now, we've faced significant challenges in both cultural and psychological

aspects when it comes to defining what constitutes happiness in a person's life. Sometimes, our expectations of happiness are culturally determined. For example, in the United States, high levels of materialism and consumerism heavily influence our culture. Consequently, the belief that happiness comes from possessing and acquiring things is quite prevalent.

Let me ask you a question, Don. If you're a poor person, but you're in a state of happiness and flourishing, how is that different from a wealthy person who's experiencing the same thing, feeling like *I'm happy and flourishing*? Is the richer person happier? And is there a degree where that person has more than the other person as far as the emotion and feeling of well-being is concerned? And the answer is not really. When you are in that state where you're happy, it doesn't matter whether you're rich or poor; you're experiencing the same emotion. So when we get to that happy place, it's the same for all of us.

It's really something that's internal. I think one of the traps we fall into is we think that if the conditions, or the money, or the other person, the way they're acting, or name any number of different conditions, if that's right, or when that's right, then I'll be happy. And we find that never happened. So we've got to start inwardly. And I think that's a big part of what Aristotle was trying to tell us.

Happiness is a thing that comes within. And sometimes, when we get everything we want, we discover, *but I'm still not happy. I'm still not flourishing*. We want more and more and more. And we think maybe I just need to try something else. We get into this spinning cycle of trying to chase after things, and it's not doing what we need to do.

But hold on a second, because not only did Aristotle say that happiness is the key, but he also explains how to achieve it. And that's what's fun to discuss today.

Goal-Directed Happiness

One of the things I believe he mentioned is that human behavior is goal-directed. What did he mean by that? What defines goal-directed happiness?

Even when we're not consciously aware of it, most of us instinctively seek out activities that bring us joy and avoid those that lead to pain. In other words, nearly everyone I know desires a happy life rather than a painful one.

As I reflect on this, I consider how a person might engage in dysfunctional behaviors in an attempt to fulfill certain needs. This seems to align with a definition of some psychological difficulty or problem one may experience. Often, we pursue what works for us, right? While these actions might be misdirected and not lead to happiness, they somehow help us obtain other desired outcomes.

The Concept of Ends and Means

And we get our internal wires crossed. The goals you're discussing from philosophy are intentionally directed toward things that are good and beneficial for the individual.

Yes, he'll refer to them as ends and means. Some people might say they want money. But it's not the money they truly desire; it's what the money can provide for them. Money represents a means of achieving something else they believe will bring them happiness. Perhaps it's owning a piece of land or having a nice home. We need to start asking ourselves: is that really what I want, or is there something else I'm after? Maybe there's a way to attain that without needing the other thing.

It reminds me of this story about a fisherman who's had a boat. Have you heard that story?

Yes, he goes out fishing every day, catches fish, brings them back, and grills them on the beach. One day, a wealthy man passes by, tries the fish, and says, "Man, this is the best fish I've ever had! You know what? I can help you get another boat or two, and you can build a fleet. You'll catch two or three times the fish you're catching now and make more money. Then you can buy even more boats and hire more people. You'll have wealth, build a house on the beach, live this wonderful life, and so on. And when you're old enough, like me, you can retire and just sit back, relax, and fish." The fisherman looks at him and replies, "I think I'll just stay where I'm at. I've already got it."

I've got this figured out. I go home whenever I want, I fish whenever I feel like it, and I eat fish whenever I choose. Sometimes, we don't need money to enjoy the things we truly desire. I've met people in the mountains where I love to go, and while they may not have the biggest places, they are living in the mountains they cherish. And they'll say, I wouldn't trade it for anything.

Some of our goals to get happiness are more noble and valuable than others, but all of them can move us towards the flourishing that we want. The journey is part of it, right? So the end and means that Aristotle talks about isn't *when I get all of this, then I will have happiness*. You're getting happiness all along the way if you pay attention to the journey.

Sometimes, it's the acquiring of things along the way. It's the learning of a new skill, the reading of a new book that opens your mind, and suddenly, you're ready for the next big thought.

One of the challenges that comes from this ends-means discussion is that a lot of folks have excused awful means in order to achieve what they perceive to be a good end. Aristotle has a counter to that. He gives us some general characteristics of happiness and the kinds of things we should be doing in order to be on the right path toward happiness and flourishing.

He says that we shouldn't want it just because we want stuff. If that's the end of it, it'll probably be fairly disappointing when the stuff breaks or we don't have it anymore. But happiness is something you have forever.

Don, I know your kids and my kids are all raised. But the moments we had all that fun together, you never lose that, right? I don't know where all the clothes went, where the bicycles went that I bought for them. I don't know where that trampoline is that I had for them at one time, but I do know where the happiness is. It's in our hearts and in our relationship with each other. You will never forget that.

I had lunch with my son. He's 38 years old, I had lunch with him earlier today. We actually talked about some of his favorite things from childhood and so forth. Not once did he mention something that he got.

You can plan for your happiness. Aristotle says you're going to have to use your brain. It's a rational exercise. He says one of the greatest things that you have is your ability to reason. And reasoning is what will lead you to happiness. In other words, there are several things that we do to plan for happiness.

Happiness results from a rational life focused on the pursuit of excellence.

Aristotle calls it Arete. A R E T E. He says that's excellence. Excellence at what you do. So, if you're a guitar player, you play with excellence. If you're a teacher, you do the job with great flourish, right?

You're reminding me right now of, what was it? Bill and Ted's excellent adventure. I think I came out in the 1990s, and they were always saying *be excellent*, right?

External and Internal Prosperity

Be excellent. Don and I just pointed out that some of our happy moments come from our memories of our children and the fun times we had together. In a sense, that's prosperity. If you think about it. There are things that make you prosperous because of their beauty and the wonderful memories you have.

And then there are some things that make you prosperous because they create a situation where you control your environment and give yourself the time to do what you need to do or enjoy life for comfort and security. Let's talk about external prosperity.

So, what does prosperity mean to me? Let me start by saying that as I grow older, what matters most to me is maintaining relationships with my friends and family. This feels good both mentally and physically. It makes me happy and brings me immense joy. I've been very fortunate financially, and while I may not have much status or power, those things have served me well. However, that might not be true for all our listeners.

You do need what we call circumstantial security. It's beneficial to have some money. Now, how much money do you need? Well, enough to live as comfortably as possible and pay the bills so you won't worry about whether something will be taken from you. You need a roof over your head. And it's nice to have something to get you from place to place, a good car, decent clothes, and things like that.

My wife and I once had a fairly large home, and we downsized because, frankly, we wanted a place that was small enough for the two of us to manage without feeling like we were constantly working on the house. Just a nice, comfortable space to live, right? It varies from person to person.

Yeah, I get that. Well, what about internal goods?

I loved what you said earlier about family and friends; we all need peace of mind. If I were to give advice I didn't receive when I was younger, I would say don't do things that

will rob you of your peace of mind. There may be temptations that come your way, and you should ask yourself, can I really live with doing this? Is this going to haunt me or take away my peace of mind? Don't sacrifice your integrity, ruin your relationships, or burn your friendships. Focus on the things that bring happiness and peace of mind, and ensure you're doing those.

Moral and Intellectual Excellence

David, a few minutes ago, you mentioned the Greek word Arete, which Aristotle uses to denote excellence. There are two different types of excellence. The first type is called intellectual excellence, focusing on two primary qualities. The first is rationality, which pertains to the quality of your reasoning and thinking. The second aspect is non-rational excellence, such as attending to bodily health, physical conditioning, and similar factors. What's the second one?

The second concept is moral excellence, which involves aligning with your principles. What are your core values? For instance, if respect is a primary value for you, it is essential to ensure that you demonstrate that respect in your daily interactions. It could be something as simple as walking down the street and encountering someone that others might ignore because they are asking for money. Instead, you can greet them with a "good morning" and treat them just like anyone else since respect is important for you. It's one of your core values, one of your virtues, you might say. That exemplifies your moral excellence.

My family believes it's important to help people have food to eat. So, several years ago, Don and I built a blessing box that we installed near a church to share with those who face food insecurities. When we go to the store and buy groceries, we also spend a little extra money on items to place in that box. What we are doing is following up on the moral reasoning and excellence that emphasizes the importance of helping those in need, especially those who are hungry.

One of the biggest challenges arising from this discussion of morality concerns our definition of whether something we call moral produces good or negative outcomes. We often debate this issue. For instance, I might say, "Yeah, David, we have a blessing box because we care about the people in our local community who don't have enough food; we're doing what we can to help." However, others might respond, "Well, you mean well, but you're not feeding everyone. The first person arrives and takes everything in the box, which happens occasionally, right? There's an inherent unfairness in that. How does Aristotle fit into this with his rationale?"

I don't have Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics with me right now, but I believe he would basically say that while we can't solve all the world's problems, we can focus on our moral reasoning. It's true that I can't feed the entire world with that small blessing box, but I'm still trying to live out my values.

So, what we're arriving at is that they need to be true to their own rational and moral thinking, which is how we develop what Aristotle refers to as virtues, and this is really important. How, then, are excellent virtues established? How do we acquire these virtues? In early life, if we're fortunate, we receive valuable moral training from our family or those raising us, and so on. However, it also requires practice—practicing right

thinking, practicing moral action, and so on.

You're absolutely right. It's all about practice. He refers to it as practice. You truly need to practice your morals. If you claim to value respect, you must incorporate that into your behavior as often as possible. People should say, when I think of so-and-so, I think of a respectful individual. They should always display respect for others. They ought to provide numerous examples of it because you demonstrate that virtue, if you will when people are around you.

Aristotle describes what he calls the golden mean. You're probably familiar with the idea of walking the middle path, right? Let's say you want to be respectful to others. On one side of the road is disrespect, where you disregard anyone's feelings. On the other side, you become obsequious, like a doormat. Yes, you're just being a doormat or excessively praising everyone for trivial things, which feels insincere. Therefore, we need to fine-tune each virtue to ensure we're neither overdoing nor underdoing it, and it should make sense in how we approach it.

Yeah. So, according to Aristotle, the mean, which means the middle or the average, okay, with the center path, if you will, let's just take a look at a couple of these examples. For instance, we pretty much universally see bravery as a virtue, right? And it's what we would expect from somebody. If they're deficient in their bravery, they act cowardly. We consider that a vice, right? That's a problem. That's one direction. And then if we go the other way, if somebody is so brave that they act rashly, which means without rationality, in other words, just being brave without thinking about it, okay, it's no longer bravery, it's rashness, it can be very dangerous, right?

Being truthful is another aspect of honesty. We all desire to be sincere in our statements. We aim to express things that are accurate rather than false. However, some individuals exhibit significant self-deprecation regarding the truth. They often say, "Oh, no, I couldn't do that. I'm really not that good," when, in reality, they are quite skilled in certain areas. This reflects a form of intellectual honesty that we should acknowledge. Yes, I can excel in specific tasks. Conversely, we might also become boastful and exaggerate our abilities. Thus, leaning too far in either direction can turn it into a vice, both in Aristotle's philosophy and in our lives today.

Yeah, that's really great, David.

Aristotle's Cardinal Virtues

Let's talk about Aristotle's cardinal moral virtues.

When you think about a flourishing life, it's important to wrap everything up neatly. Aristotle essentially says that if you want to be happy, you need to use your reason, reflect on what you excel at, and pursue those skills. Use that to help you gain the money and prosperity you desire, as well as the social standing you seek. Develop your friendships. He also emphasizes the need to live according to your values, suggesting four specific ones.

The four characteristics he lists are temperance, which refers to restraint and self-control; prudence, which we can translate as wisdom; justice, which entails fairness

to others; and fortitude, which embodies courage, endurance, and resilience.

He identified these four virtues as essential for everyone. While we can possess many others and each of us is unique, these four are ones we should individually seek as good citizens of society.

I'm on team Aristotle for this one because I want to be around people who are just and fair. I want to be with those who have self-control. I want to be around wise individuals. And of course, I enjoy being with people who know how to face tough times wisely. I believe that is essential for living a peaceful life as well.

Conclusion and Farewell

I want to extend my thanks to Aristotle, wherever you are. Thank you for everything you gave us. We genuinely appreciate it. Also, thanks to our listeners for joining us this week on Peaceful Life Radio. We hope you have a fantastic week, and we'll see you next week.