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ARISTOTLE'S LIFE AND WAY OF THINKING

I THINK ACTUALLY THE MOST FUNDAMENTAL CHANGE OCCURRED WHEN I DEALT WITH THE PROSTATE CANCER [AT AGE 55]. THAT WAS THE FIRST TIME THAT REQUIRED ME TO SAY, "I AM GOING TO DIE. NOT NECESSARILY OF CANCER, BUT I AM GONNA DIE." SO YOU REALIZE YOU'D BETTER DO SOMETHING WITH YOUR LIFE THAT MAKES YOU HAPPY WITH YOURSELF. I DECIDED POLITICS WAS NOT MY ENTIRE LIFE.

—*RUDOLPH GIULIANI*

SOME PEOPLE BELIEVE THAT NATURE MAKES PEOPLE GOOD, OTHERS SAY THAT IT IS HABIT, AND STILL OTHERS SAY THAT IT IS TEACHING. EXPERIENCE SHOWS THAT LOGICAL ARGUMENTS AND TEACHING ARE NOT EFFECTIVE IN MOST CASES. THE SOUL OF THE STUDENT MUST FIRST HAVE BEEN CONDITIONED BY GOOD HABITS JUST AS LAND MUST BE CULTIVATED TO NURTURE SEED. FOR A PERSON WHOSE LIFE IS GUIDED BY EMOTION WILL NOT LISTEN TO A RATIONAL ARGUMENT, NOR WILL HE UNDERSTAND IT.

—*ARISTOTLE*

Aristotle says that mature men and women, if they search diligently, may find the opportunity of a lifetime awaiting them. Sometime around their fifties, thoughtful people may discover the perspective needed to make sense of their accumulated experience and the wisdom needed to identify what will bring them true happiness in their remaining years. And if they are more fortunate than Rudolph Giuliani, they will make this discovery without the trauma of a life-threatening disease, the disintegration of a marriage, or the tragic destruction of a great city.

4 Yet, in truth, embarking on a new life course requires hard work. Since the time of Aristotle, experience demonstrates that the only way mature people can become truly happy is to abandon their youthful fantasies and pursue more appropriate ends. This process of finally growing up is ultimately rewarding, but it is no easy task, as shown in the classic writings of great philosophers, poets, and playwrights, and buttressed by the modern writings of psychologists and social scientists. More viscerally, we can feel the pain of men and women we know personally when, at midlife, they realize they must finally start doing something to make themselves happy or risk failing to fulfill the promise of the one life they have.

Yet most of us equivocate, resist, and backtrack when it comes to actually changing the way we lead our lives. Giuliani, after overcoming a spate of self-defeating personal behavior in his early fifties to become our generation's leadership poster boy, continued to demonstrate recidivist adolescent tendencies. He may have declared, "Politics was not my entire life," but soon after his post-September 11 adrenaline rush wore off, he attempted to subvert the constitution of the state of New York by proposing to run for a third mayoral term. After all, what other high could fill the void of lost power and the lime-light of worldwide publicity?

In more private and less flamboyant ways than Giuliani, most men and women in their fifties struggle with the question of what to do with the rest of their lives in order to find the fulfillment that has eluded them. I reluctantly

joined their ranks when I was forced to recognize what should have been obvious to me for years: The Good Fairy was never going to grant my most fervent youthful wish.

Toward the end of the year 2000, I reluctantly admitted I wasn't finding happiness on the life path I had been following for three decades. I had begun the year, my fifty-fifth, filled with millennially grand expectations. A book I had written had just been published, and I was convinced that this one, my twelfth, would bring the recognition I desired, the acknowledgment that I felt my work had long deserved but, for this twist of fate and that stroke of bad timing, the earlier works had been denied. And it was definitely respect I was after. Sure, I wanted more money; but in my gut, I hungered for America's most sought-after prize: fame, renown, a name. I felt certain my new book was the vehicle aboard which I was bound for glory. In my considered opinion, it had all the requisites for success in the ultracompetitive business book market: I could visualize reviews praising the volume's "originality, wit, and practicality." Soon I would reap the long-desired ego boost associated with bestsellerdom, the miracle cure that would appease my pathetic craving for respect and approval.

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Alas, as the year dwindled, I eventually had to accept that my precious volume had vanished into the black hole of obscurity that had devoured my previous literary efforts. In light of this, I needed to decide whether to continue my conventional pursuit of the goddess of success and, in the process, risk never finding happiness, or seek contentment chasing a different muse, one whose favor I was more likely to obtain. For the first time in my life, I found myself entertaining a troubling question: *Even if I were to obtain the one thing I wanted more than anything else, would I find happiness in its embrace?*

Turning to Aristotle's *Ethics* for guidance, I was encouraged by his belief that almost everyone can find happiness *if* they are willing to ask themselves tough questions, create a new life plan, and then have the discipline to carry it through. In particular, he believes that mature men and women find happiness when they abandon youthful fantasies about money, power, and fame and devote their time to realizing their untapped capacities to learn new things.

In our fifties, we are ready to take up the challenge of fulfilling our natural potential *if* we can accept that happiness means something other than being a movie star, president of the United States, founder of a successful software company, bestselling author, or whatever one's youthful fantasy still may be. Then we might actually realize the opportunity of a lifetime, the capacity to lead "the good life." If Aristotle is correct, the decades-long process of narrowing aspirations and trimming expectations is reversible. We probably won't achieve the Hollywood version of bliss that seemed so enticing in our youth; instead, we may find mature satisfaction in becoming a complete human being; we might achieve "excellence" in Aristotle's terms.

6 In light of the marketplace failure of my book, I began to understand the simple, practical, and personal significance of his philosophic message: I was unhappy because I was chasing the wrong ends and doing the wrong things. In particular, I was emulating the wrong role models: famous management gurus. In an Aristotelian view, those folks probably weren't any happier than I was, and even if they were, copying their behavior wouldn't work for me.

On gaining this insight, I was at first full of resolve to change my goals, role models, and how I spent the time of my life. But, damn it, over the next months, the process of taking Aristotle's message to heart and trying to put it into action did nothing so much as reveal my frailty, weakness, and vanity. I soon realized I wasn't ready to change course. I found I was comfortable with the conditions I had created for myself, even if they were less than satisfying. At my age, who wants to do the hard work involved in learning new behavior? Worse, I was afraid to change because the alternatives all seemed risky.

And on second thought, weren't those famous gurus the very people the world called successful? How the hell was I going to find happiness if I ended up being a nobody . . . and an impoverished one at that? Ergo, I concluded that Aristotle must have been wrong. And everything I read in magazines and watched on television argued against Aristotle's conclusions. According to conventional wisdom, happiness is found, variously, by way of

- ✿ a new job
- ✿ a new house
- ✿ a new city
- ✿ a new mate
- ✿ an adventure in faraway climes

The most attractive of these alternatives to me was the Geographic Solution. When a close friend limned his fantasy about circumnavigating Africa in a sailboat, visiting the exotic islands that float in the warm seas surrounding the continent, I could feel the ocean spray on my face and taste the promised spices (and vices) on my lips. (According to David Denby, the female version of this fantasy is Tuscany, “a primal paradise of sunshine, sex, love, terra-cotta tiles, and huge salads with real tomatoes.”) In contrast, Aristotle said I needed to grow up and to use my time in more productive ways. He said it was virtue that would make me happy, and virtue started with disciplining myself to do things that contributed to my long-term development. Clearly, Aristotle must have been wrong! So I resisted. As Ogden Nash said, “You are only young once, but you can stay immature indefinitely.”

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I had prided myself on being flexible and open-minded, but in my fifties, I discovered I actually was a master of rigidity and resistant to unfamiliar ideas. When I looked at myself honestly, I saw a man capable of creating imaginative rationales for continuing his self-defeating behavior. My first line of defense was skepticism. I devised sound reasons to resist going where Aristotle’s teaching ineluctably led. I concluded that his ideas were:

- ✿ badly dated
- ✿ elitist and politically incorrect
- ✿ prescriptive, naïve, and impractical
- ✿ hard to understand and translate into action

Who needs better reasons than those to reject the ideas of a defunct philosopher? Indeed, if you are as skeptical as I am, you, too, will want to examine Aristotle’s credentials and check his character references before committing to a full course of study of his ideas. Before delving into his

philosophy, it seems sensible to inquire about him personally, about the kinds of followers he attracted, and about his track record. Here's a brief summary of Aristotle's life, the foundations of his thought, and why his thinking has generated critics over the centuries. When I did this background check, it never occurred to me I was stalling!

THE SAGE'S C.V.

8 Although Aristotle lived two and a half millennia ago, I was able to discover a good deal about his career: In addition to his own writings, observations about him by contemporaries survive, and, miraculously, a copy of his will has come down through the ages. Nonetheless, I also found enormous gaps in knowledge about his personal life and motivations. After all, he lived in an era in which autobiography was self-indulgent. But from what we know as fact and what we can reasonably surmise, it would appear Aristotle was more like people today than one might expect, considering the enormous gulf in time separating antiquity from the 21st century. Of course, he wasn't exactly like us; he never heard of a PC, a BMW, a VCR, or an IRA, and he was definitely not P.C. But he was surprisingly like us in terms of his interpersonal relationships and the life and career challenges he faced. He wrote about the concerns of practical men and women as opposed to the more esoteric issues that preoccupy academics, and his political and ethical teachings were intended for the leadership class of his society. "The Ancient," as I think of him, was a teacher of bright, educated generalists in government and commerce as opposed to scholars and specialists.

Aristotle was born in 384 B.C. in a Greek colony in Macedonia. His father, Nicomachus, was court physician to the king of Macedonia, Alexander the Great's grandfather. Nicomachus died when Aristotle was 17, and he was then sent to the Athenian Academy, where he studied under Plato until he was 37. (He was either a slow learner or a precursor of the modern graduate

student.) Like everyone, Aristotle had his shortcomings, weaknesses, and even vices. He was a bit of a dandy in his youth, sporting the latest designer fashions in cloaks and sandals, and was said to have worn ostentatious rings. He engaged in conspicuous consumption: He had the finest collection of books in Athens; his teacher, Plato, was said to be envious. As a student, he occasionally was arrogant: He would sit in Plato's class at the Academy and point out errors in his teacher's logic. Plato was not necessarily paying him a compliment in dubbing him "the mind." There is reason to believe he was smugly ambitious in midlife. When Plato died, Aristotle assumed he was the obvious candidate to succeed as head of the Academy. But it was not to be. Apparently, Aristotle's arrogance had alienated so many members of the faculty that he was passed over in favor of his best friend. He left Athens hurt, if not in a huff.

On the rebound from the disappointments of his academic career, Aristotle moved back to Macedonia, where he became tutor to Alexander from the time the prince was 13 until he was 16 years old. Significantly, Aristotle did not attempt to turn Alexander into an intellectual: "It is not merely unnecessary for a king to become a philosopher, it even may be a disadvantage," Aristotle wrote. "Instead, a king should take the advice of true philosophers. Then he would fill his reign with good deeds, not good words." Alas, it must have seemed to Aristotle that Alexander suffered from attention deficit disorder during his tutorials, because there is little evidence that the teacher had any more than a slight influence on his student's behavior then or later.

Nonetheless, we have reason to believe that Aristotle's home life in Macedonia was richer and emotionally more rewarding than his work life was with Alexander. After the career setback in Athens, Aristotle married an 18-year-old noblewoman, Pythias. They soon had a daughter, whom they also named Pythias. Based on what he wrote, Aristotle was deeply in love with his bride: "As for adultery, let it be held disgraceful for any man or woman to be found in any way unfaithful once they are married and call each other husband and wife." Sadly, the young wife died before the prime of her life. Aristotle never

remarried but spent the rest of his days with a mistress, Herpyllis, who bore him a son, Nicomachus.

During the 13 years he was away from Athens, we may surmise that Aristotle gained wisdom and, perhaps, humility. Clearly, he sought to become self-aware. He worked to discover the unconscious appetites that had derailed his career. Abandoning those inappropriate desires, he disciplined himself to aim, instead, for “goods” that would make him truly virtuous and happy. To develop his potential, he read everything he could get his hands on and seriously studied all subjects imaginable. He made friends among others similarly inclined, and together they spent days and months discussing scientific and philosophical questions, challenging each other when one of them offered a facile answer to a complex question. In addition, Aristotle applied his growing store of learning, wisdom, and understanding to the practical problems that beset his community.

10 After years of such effort and around the beginning of that all-important sixth decade of life, he felt he understood, finally, what it meant to be happy. He concluded that true happiness results not from winning the admiration of others or from being appointed to a position of power (like deanship of the Academy); instead, happiness derives from dedication to the goal of living a good life, and that such a life entails a never-ending quest for knowledge and wisdom.

He returned to Athens at age 50, perhaps wishing to make amends and to convince his former colleagues to reform the Academy’s idealistic and metaphysical curriculum by adopting a more realistic and scientific approach to learning and research. Again he was rebuffed (long memories among faculty sorts are as ingrained as their unwillingness to forgive). Unable to change the existing academic system, he acted like an entrepreneur today who finds himself frustrated inside established institutions: He started his own business, the Lyceum. Specializing in biological research and historical studies, the Lyceum ultimately became the model for formal higher education in the West. (The French still call their high schools *lycées*.) He led the institution for a dozen

years, until anti-Macedonian agitation erupted in Athens and he was forced to retreat from the city.

Aristotle died in exile at about age 62 in 322 B.C. His friends remembered him for his loyalty, kindness, and generosity. What is striking about his life is that he appears to have practiced what he preached. He spent his last quarter century unswervingly dedicated to the pursuit of wisdom in exactly the way he recommended to others.

HIS PRIMARY CHARACTER REFERENCE

Aristotle is remembered today as a polymath and organizer of knowledge. A primary influence on medieval philosophy, he introduced a structure of logical thought that laid the groundwork for empirical science in the centuries to come. Although most of his scientific research had become embarrassingly dated by the time of the Renaissance, Aristotle's writings nonetheless gave scholars, inventors, and artists of that era license to explore previously off-limits secular and scientific worlds. Galileo himself noted that Aristotle would not have advanced his earth-centered model of the universe had the Ancient possessed a telescope. Be that as it may, his scientific works are seldom read today, but his books dealing with political and moral philosophy have stood the test of time.

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It may seem as if Aristotle's ideas have been an integral part of the Western tradition uninterruptedly since the Classical age; in fact, from shortly after his death until the dawn of the Renaissance, his writings were little known in Christendom, and their very survival was in doubt. Scrolls containing Aristotle's writings disappeared in Europe during the Roman and early Christian eras. His thoughts were preserved thanks mainly to Syrian scholars who kept them in currency until they were propagated widely by the two greatest Islamic minds, Avicenna and Averroes.

The Ancient did not find a secure place in the literature of the West until the medieval scholar St. Thomas Aquinas became his advocate. While

studying at the University of Paris in the mid-13th century, Aquinas chanced upon third-hand Latin translations of Aristotle's works based on Averroes' Arabic texts. Reading Aristotle even in such corrupted form, Aquinas was persuaded that the Ancient's philosophy was unusually timeless, logical, practical, moral, and, particularly important to a Benedictine monk, consistent with the teachings of Christ. Aquinas thus became the Christian Champion of the Pagan Aristotle. Now, how many résumés include a bona fide, Rome-certified saint as a reference?

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Emerging from the cloistered, afterlife-obsessed Middle Ages, when learning had been focused on holy scriptures, Renaissance intellectuals rediscovered the great minds of antiquity and, in Aristotle, found a philosopher refreshingly practical and of this world. Unlike early Christian scholars, Aristotle had not cast his arguments in terms of either/or: sin or grace, angels or devils, heaven or hell. Instead, he argued that virtue lay in the middle ground between having too much and having too little of a good thing, whether money, fame, or power. So the goal in life was moderation, and the trick was knowing where to draw the line. This notion of a "golden mean" was quite alien to medieval Christian scholars, who typically had cast moral issues in all-or-nothing terms. They had accepted as gospel St. Paul's dictum "the love of money is the root of all evil," and then taken vows of poverty. But to Aristotle, wealth was intrinsically neither good nor bad; instead, he said the moral issue each person had to resolve was when he or she had enough. As capitalism evolved during the Renaissance, Aristotle's pagan take on wealth began to be viewed as more sensible than St. Paul's Christian construct.

Aquinas followed Aristotle's texts faithfully on the issue of moderation, teaching that virtue lay in "the just mean" and "sin lies in exceeding this mean." This formulation was adopted by the Church, and it became morally acceptable for Renaissance men to be rich even if, at the same time, it was sinful for them to pursue wealth as the sole object of life. The moral challenge was for each of them to answer the Aristotelian question, How much is enough?

Skeptics of the time found such moral questioning naïve, much as some

today condemn as impractical the Aristotelian conclusion that a person totally absorbed in wealth creation is not leading a good life. After all, how can one say it is not virtuous for business people to devote their lives to wealth creation when society obviously benefits from their efforts? The issue is not easy to resolve, particularly if we believe it is imperative to act in a manner consistent with our beliefs. If Aristotle's concept of moderation is morally right, it calls into question the behavior of many of us, and it becomes incumbent on us to pursue different ends. But if he is wrong, and it is morally acceptable to maximize wealth at the expense of other activities and concerns, that conclusion, too, will influence the course of our life planning. But how do we decide what is right for us?

For most of us, of course, the issue isn't how excessive wealth accumulation gets in the way of our pursuit of happiness; we each have smaller and different fish to fry. Nonetheless, applying Aristotle's way of thinking is useful whatever our particular issue may be—pride, envy, anger—and however large or small it is. As I eventually learned in my efforts to overcome my own counterproductive desires for approval, the long-term payoff from Aristotle can be enormous. But I also learned we can't benefit from Aristotle's wisdom until we understand the analytical process he uses, then learn to apply it imaginatively to our own issues. The challenge is to overcome the decades of sloppy moral reasoning that inhibits our ability to do so.

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THE FOUNDATIONS OF ARISTOTLE'S THOUGHT

Aristotle begins his own philosophical inquiries by taking the world as it is and humans as they are: in both cases, *imperfect*. He asks how these imperfect people can make their social and political institutions better and how they can individually lead better lives. He observes a rather nasty world in which men struggle for wealth and power, but he has no illusions that human na-

ture can be changed or that it is desirable for government to try to enforce virtuous behavior. Aristotle is no utopian.

In this he differs greatly from his own esteemed teacher. In perhaps the most influential secular book ever written, *The Republic*, Plato imagines a brave new world led by a few virtuous “guardians” who create conditions under which the less-than-virtuous masses of humankind are made as happy as pigs in slop. Plato premises his utopia on the assumption that almost all humans are material boys and girls content only when their purses are filled with gold, their stomachs are stuffed with fattening goodies, and their possessions include the equivalent of a mortgage-free second house on Maui. To make such materialistic folk happy, Plato invents a class of paternalistic guardians who rule a well-ordered economic and political system. Because the guardians manage society so effectively, their followers are able to concentrate fully on trying to satiate their insatiable desires for wealth and sensual pleasure. In Plato’s utopia, the masses are happy because they are not burdened by political, moral, and philosophical concerns that get in the way of enjoying gluttony, avarice, lust, and other sources of pleasure.

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Were Plato alive today, it is clear what advice he would give us as we struggle with how to live a good life: “Kick back and relax,” he would console us, “because only a few extremely smart and virtuous people can understand what the good life really entails. So have a glass of chardonnay, and leave philosophizing to your moral and intellectual betters.” Over the millennia, Platonism has been extremely popular with people who measure their lives by the goods they possess and, even more, with those in power who believe the masses are incapable of governing their own animal impulses and, by logical extension, incapable of participating in government.

From his many frustrating and futile debates with Plato, Aristotle came to understand that how one thinks about happiness depends on the assumptions one makes about human nature. The more he thought about Plato’s assumptions, the more he questioned whether it was true that people care only about satisfying their animal instincts. Further, he wondered if benevolent

dictators can, in fact, create utopia by satisfying their subjects' desires for bread and circuses. Ultimately, Aristotle came to reject both his mentor's premise and his conclusion. He then set out to refute Plato's views about human nature, the structure of a good society, and the wellsprings of individual happiness in his *Politics* and *Nicomachean Ethics*. Rejecting utopianism, he turned to empirical observation as his starting point.

HIERARCHIES AND MORE HIERARCHIES

Aristotle begins with the basics: Observing the human species in all its physical, intellectual, and moral variety, he concludes that its most salient characteristic is its diversity, the manifest and multifold differences found among its members. For example, there are tall people, short people, and lots of people in between. If all adults in the world stand in rank order according to height, the tallest at one end and the shortest at the other, the entire spectrum will be covered, ranging from some 8 feet to less than 4 feet, with the largest concentration around the middle. Most striking, there will be a *hierarchy* from shortest at the bottom to tallest at the top, covering in rank order humanity's incredible range of heights. Hence, Aristotle chooses hierarchy as his master organizing principle, except he doesn't use height to exemplify the main idea he is trying to convey. What he has to say is more controversial and more relevant to the issue of happiness.

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To Aristotle, height matters only for giraffes. He believes that everything in nature has a purpose, and nothing is created in vain. The single purpose of any animal species is the thing that most distinguishes it from all other species, the thing it does "best." For example, more than any other mammal, the neck of a giraffe allows it to reach soft, nutritious shoots at the tops of tall trees. Ergo, giraffes are built for height. Although all giraffes are tall relative to other animals, there are marked differences among the heights of individual giraffes. So it is better to be a taller giraffe than a shorter one because

the taller ones get the best shoots. As Darwin noted in *The Origin of Species*, Aristotle anticipated the theory of natural selection.

To the Ancient, the tallest giraffe is atop the hierarchy of giraffes because it has the salient characteristic of “giraffeness”—height—more fully developed than in any other giraffe. Similarly, he concludes that horses are created for speed because they run faster than other animals (Aristotle had never heard of cheetahs). Hence, the fastest horse is atop the hierarchy of horses because it has the most developed “horseness.” Because oxen are the strongest bovines Aristotle knows about, he says strength is the salient characteristic of an ox; thus, the strongest ox is the “best” ox because it has the most fully developed “oxness.”

Perhaps you have anticipated where Aristotle is headed: To him, the distinguishing characteristic of the human species is not height, speed, or strength. What most clearly distinguishes humans from other species, what we do best, is reasoning. Aristotle’s precision of observation is strikingly scientific. He doesn’t say that some humans aren’t tall, fast, or strong, or that other animals can’t think or don’t have feelings. Instead, he says what truly distinguishes humans from other animals is the species’ unique ability to engage in abstract thought and to put words to those thoughts. In sum, humanness is reasoning.

Yet, though all humans can reason, not all humans have the same capacity for reasoning. As there is a hierarchy among animal species and all things in nature, Aristotle argues that there is a natural hierarchy among humans, at the top of which are people with the greatest and most fully developed capacity to reason, that is, to engage in abstract thought. He believes that newborn humans are like empty vessels of various sizes, each with a different potential for reasoning. If we liken that capacity to empty milk cartons, some are born with a half-pint capacity and a few with half-gallon potential, but most are clustered around the quart mark. Moreover, the nature of individual capacities differs as well: John may have a large capacity for learning music but a small capacity for physics; Mary may have a large capacity for mathe-

matics but a small capacity for the law. Nonetheless, all healthy humans possess at least some capacity for learning, reasoning, and speculative and moral thought.

Aristotle asks us to consider why we possess this higher-level human capacity. He concludes that there can be no other purpose in having it than to use it; therefore, we each fulfill our humanness by developing our naturally given potential. To him, it is a sign of wisdom to seek out the natural flow of things and then to go in that direction, as it is a sign of foolishness to fight Mother Nature. Hence, he says those who pursue “the good life” aim at fulfilling their highest-order human capabilities. The alternative, to choose to act like an animal, is absurd, irrational, and unhuman.

THE EQUALITY (AND INEQUALITY) OF THE SPECIES

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Because Aristotle sees members of the human species as inherently unequal in their ability to engage in abstract reasoning, modern critics have been inclined to throw out his philosophy on the grounds of political incorrectness. Clearly, the major error in Aristotle’s observations is his conclusion that observed differences among individuals are linked to the social class, caste, or gender to which they belong. Living in an age when slavery was rampant, Aristotle observed that slaves in Athens never engaged in higher-order intellectual activities; there were no slave politicians or philosophers. Instead, slaves behaved slavishly, engaging solely in repetitive toil, doing only what their masters bade them. Based on this observation, Aristotle concluded that there are “natural slaves” incapable of higher-order reasoning. His notion stood for some 2,000 years, until French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau identified the logical error in the Ancient’s thinking. “Aristotle was doubtless right” in terms of his observation, Rousseau wrote in 1740, that slaves do behave in a servile way. But they do so because they are beaten by their

masters when they try to do otherwise. Hence, Rousseau explained, “Aristotle mistook the cause for the effect.”

Because Aristotle’s mistaken belief that caste differences are “natural” has been so thoroughly refuted, we may assume that Aristotle himself would have been convinced by Rousseau’s logic and would have come to agree that his own philosophy is made more just, robust, and universal when applied equally to all humans. In fact, Aristotle’s ideas are more logical if the observed differences among people are viewed as reflecting the variety of abilities and aptitudes found among individuals instead of as group traits. In the next chapter, we see how Harriet Taylor Mill “improved” Aristotle by expanding his conclusions to include women.

18

So it is safe for us to interpret Aristotle’s notion of differences in a way to make it self-evidently true: People are as manifestly unequal in terms of their natural abilities as they are in terms of their height, but there is no reason to conclude that those differences demand differences in treatment. Quite the opposite, because on the issue mattering most to Aristotle, he himself recognizes that everyone is capable of learning and capable of development. While he believes individual potential is fixed at birth, he does not see this as an excuse for those with the smallest capacities not to try to develop their minds to the full. He argues that no one, regardless of the size of his or her potential, ever succeeds in fulfilling it. Therefore, the good life comes about from the process of *filling*, that is, learning, and not from the impossible end of a *filled* container, an idea as absurd as the Gary Larson cartoon depicting a grade school student with hand raised, asking: “Teacher, may I go home? My brain is full.”

Proof we never fulfill our potential is found in the fact that all healthy people can continue to learn, even in extreme old age. Indeed, Aristotle says that developing our minds is the one activity everyone can engage in equally in old age. Because today’s men and women in their fifties can expect to live at least another three decades, his insight is even more important now than in his time, when few people survived through their sixties.

Nonetheless, Aristotle is not saying Grandpa Bill ever will be as adept at

learning French as Grandma Sue is or, conversely, that she can end up playing pinochle as well as he, no matter how hard he tries or how long she lives. One person simply has a greater capacity than another for learning one thing or another. In this way, Aristotle claims that people are different *and* unequal. He is fair and logical, but not relativistic, as we now shall see.

WHY POLITICS AND PHILOSOPHY TOP THE HIERARCHY OF HUMAN ENDEAVORS

He is particularly nonrelativistic when it comes to evaluating different types of activities. He would say the ability to ride a bike is not equal to the ability to perform heart surgery. Instead, there is a natural hierarchy of human activities (to Aristotle, there is a hierarchy of everything), and the measure of an activity is the degree to which it requires the highest-order, most abstract, mental capabilities. It is simply harder to learn calculus than arithmetic. Yet, as a believer in human development, he argues that a great many people who quit studying math after arithmetic would be surprised to learn that they are, in fact, capable of learning much more, up to and including calculus. He adds that if they make the effort to do so, they are likely to have the sense of fulfillment he calls happiness. (Of course, calculus wasn't invented until nearly 2,000 years after Aristotle's death. Here and throughout the book, I freely use anachronistic examples to illustrate Aristotle's timeless ideas.)

19

Aristotle concludes that the highest-order, most-human activities are “politics and philosophy” because these require the greatest deployment of abstract reasoning. This assertion is easily misinterpreted. Aristotle is not assuming that only people engaged in his kind of philosophy are using their full range of abilities. He is not so proscriptive. In the category of philosophy, he includes all of what we call the sciences, arts, and learned professions. Thus, engineers, lawyers, and doctors are “philosophers,” as are journalists, teachers, playwrights, and so on through the professions. In the category of

philosophers, he includes people who are merely studying those subjects, not just those who make their living practicing them. Likewise, he includes more than those serving in elected office when he talks about politics. To Aristotle, that category includes what we call community service, unpaid as well as paid. Later we see why he would include leadership of business organizations in his catchall category of politics.

The important thing to Aristotle is not a person's job, profession, or career; rather, it is the extent to which an individual is using his or her higher-order mental capabilities. Thus, his concepts of philosophy and politics should be thought of as inclusive: A factory worker who participates in decision making and problem solving is using those higher-level capabilities every bit as much as is the company's CEO.

20 Still, there is no denying that Aristotle is judgmental and elitist in a way that's unfashionable today. He not only believes there is a hierarchy of humans, he is willing to state who is at the top! Using the same principle of organization he applies to animals, he says individuals atop the human hierarchy are those who have both the greatest natural capacity for and, more important, the most fully developed potential in politics and philosophy. Granted, this is not the way we speak in an era in which the equality of our species is a given. Nonetheless, for good or ill, it is the way economists think and the way in which the hierarchical structure of organizations is justified, even if unconsciously.

ARISTOTELIAN MICROECONOMICS

Aristotle is an astute economist who understands markets and monopolies and whose writings about the division of labor anticipated the work of Adam Smith by over 2,000 years. In describing a proper and just division of labor, he links his observations about the hierarchy of human abilities to the broader social structure of society, arguing that people atop the natural hierarchy should be engaged in tasks where they can make the maximum contribution.

For example, it would do the people of Athens no good if those who possessed the greatest aptitude to design and build large structures, like the Parthenon, weren't doing so because they were denied the opportunity to develop their engineering capabilities. Justice would be lacking in a society where a person (say the brilliant mathematician Pythagoras) who had great technical potential ended up stuck for life in a cobbler's shop retreading soles on sandals. Indeed, Aristotle argues that the reason Athens is such a highly developed society in 400 B.C., and why most other places in the world are mired in the stage of subsistence agriculture, is exactly because the Athenians freed their most-talented individuals from the tyranny of toil and gave them the leisure to develop science, medicine, engineering, and the arts. Aristotle believes if Pythagoras had been born "barbarian" (non-Greek), he probably would have spent his life pushing a plow. No wonder barbarians didn't create acropolises: *They treated everyone as equals.*

To an Aristotelian, the great mathematician Euclid, another student of Plato, is not equal either to a person whose maximum capacity to contribute to society is pushing a plow, or to a high-capacity person who is satisfied with mere plow pushing. To deny one with Euclid's potential the opportunity to develop his skills in the name of equality is, in Aristotle's view, unjust. Worse, how can justice be served if those with limited capabilities are made leaders of society, or the bosses of enterprises, while those who have the greatest natural capacities are held down at the bottom carrying out orders?

Aristotle observes such injustice in the monarchies of his era, where princes impose their wills on people who are smarter, more productive, and more virtuous than they are. He thinks such systems are as unjust as ones in which less-capable people rule in the name of equality. Such was the case in Mao's China, where uneducated Communist cadres could veto managerial decisions made by engineers and other professionals. Equality may be served in such societies, but the collective good of the community is compromised. The Ancient concludes that meritocracy is the most just form of governance because everyone benefits from the rule of the most competent.

Paradoxically, for a philosopher concerned with personal happiness, Aristotle's ultimate point of reference is the overall good of the community and not the welfare of the individual. Although it may seem odd today, Aristotle believes that the natural hierarchy of humans should not serve as an excuse to reward those at the top for having been born with good genes, or to make the burden of life easier for those so privileged. He believes the opposite: *People at the top of a social or organizational hierarchy are responsible for making it possible for those lower down to lead good lives.* When they do, everyone benefits from inequalities based on real capabilities and economic contribution. Using a modern example, the reason Bill Gates and Steve Ballmer should make executive decisions at Microsoft is not because authority is their right, their due, their reward, or what satisfies their egos; instead, having the most qualified minds at the top of the company is in the best interest of all members of the organization, including those lower down. Who would want to work at Microsoft if equality were its main goal and the company's executive team had an average IQ of 100, while Gates, Ballmer, and the rest of the brain trust were assigned work as security guards?

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To Aristotle, individuals capable of making greater contributions should be treated differently than those capable of only smaller ones. But differently in some respects only. In particular, those with the greatest capabilities should be freed from lower-level work so they can concentrate on activities making maximum use of their potential and social contribution. The question then becomes, *How large a share of the bounty produced by an organization are those at the top entitled to reap?* In a later chapter, we examine several Aristotelian tests of fairness of the distribution of rewards, but it is sufficient here to say corporate leaders like Gates and Ballmer are rewarded justly for their contributions if they have worked hard, if they have increased the wealth of society, and if they have made it possible for everyone in their organization to develop their full potential. It will require a greater understanding of Aristotle before we can see how to reckon who deserves how much.

ARISTOTLE'S CRITICS

There is a formidable list of critics who have supplied thoughtful arguments against Aristotle's way of thinking: Hobbes, Rousseau, the Mills (Harriet Taylor and John Stuart), and Bertrand Russell are some of the stars of philosophy who, over the centuries, offered refutations to the Ancient's ideas. Today, some modern conservatives argue he is "naïve," "impractical," and "anti-wealth creation" and, on the left, postmodernists claim he is "elitist" and "morally prescriptive." One thoughtful recent critic, David Denby, ends up rejecting the near entirety of Aristotle's philosophy because

I could not dismiss politically correct objections; nor would I want to. No matter how you look at it—and no matter what qualifying historical context you place it in—Aristotle made a disastrous mistake.

Indeed, Aristotle's "disastrous mistake" of political incorrectness has led an entire generation of scholars to question his fitness to stand as a moral guide.

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So, are Aristotle's ideas outmoded? Are they impractical, naïve, antibusiness, elitist, and politically incorrect, as his critics on the left and right claim in their briefs against him? In my reading, Aristotle turns out to be quite a modern fellow, particularly for one now 2,400 years old. Properly understood, the world according to Aristotle corresponds remarkably with contemporary thinking about human capabilities and meritocracy and about how organizations should be structured to maximize effectiveness. He was also deeply concerned with what we today call *social responsibility*. And if Aristotle wasn't exactly a capitalist, he was a protocapitalist to the extent that his ideas are consistent with modern economic concepts, particularly the linkage of rewards to contributions.

In the middle of a lecture at the Lyceum in 312 B.C. or thereabouts, we can imagine the gray-bearded Aristotle being interrupted by Simplicius, one of his students: "Tell us, Professor, why is it that philosophers are not rich if they

know so much?” Aristotle takes no offense. In his mid-fifties, he has a secure sense of who he is and what he believes. If he winces, it is in recognition of how obnoxious he must have seemed years earlier when he had challenged his own teacher, Plato, at the Academy. So Aristotle restrains himself from giving the easy answer: an accounting of his landholdings and gold stashed away for his old age. Instead, he replies: “You raise an interesting question, one best answered by telling a true story about the great Milesian philosopher, Thales, whose work you doubtless recall we discussed last semester . . .

Certain cynical people in Miletia reproached Thales for his poverty, saying it proved philosophy was of no use. So, to make a point, Thales decided to engage in a little demonstration. He was a skilled meteorologist and, from his analysis of the weather in the dead of winter, he concluded there was going to be a bumper crop of olives during the next year. So he leased all the olive presses in Miletus, which he got at a low price because no one bid against him. Then, when harvest time came and the presses were suddenly in great demand, he rented them out at exorbitant rates and made a windfall profit. Thus, he showed that philosophers can easily be rich, but their ambition is of another sort.

Aristotle pauses to decide how much he should explain to his students and how much he should leave them to discover for themselves. He then proceeds: “Doubtless you see the impoverished and ‘impractical’ Thales understood the workings of the most complicated of economic concepts: supply and demand, monopoly rents, and futures markets? So, then, would someone in the class explain the point of Thales’ demonstration?”

“I get it, Prof,” an eager pupil exclaims. “Thales is showing us that almost anyone can learn the ins and outs of finance, learn to play markets, and do economic calculations. In contrast, he wants us to see that few people are able to answer the questions occupying the minds of philosophers: *What is justice?*”

What is a good life? What is a good society? What is happiness? He wants to show it is better to spend more time trying to answer such tough, important questions than working on easier, practical ones, right?”

And to be able to answer such profound questions, Aristotle tells his class, one must learn to think like a philosopher. “Of course,” he admits, remembering his disagreements with Plato, “not all philosophers end up with the same conclusions because they start in different places and their arguments rest on different basic assumptions. That’s why we spend so much class time testing the basic concepts underlying our arguments. If our foundation is rotten, our entire intellectual edifice crumbles when challenged.”

So, as I read and thought more about Aristotle, I realized that the intellectual excuses I had used to keep him at bay were faulty. But I still wasn’t ready to face the behavioral consequences of accepting his counsel. Intellectually, I grasped the undergirding of his thinking and was ready to see how he constructs the edifice of his moral philosophy on that foundation. But still I resisted. Emotionally, I wasn’t ready to get out of the familiar rut I was in. It still didn’t “feel right” that engaging in Aristotelian politics and philosophy would lead me to happiness.

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AND YOU?

It’s time for you to take your own temperature before moving on to practical applications of Aristotle’s admittedly difficult and unusual way of thinking. Here are a few questions you might want to consider asking yourself: Where am I searching to find happiness? What are the main lines of resistance I habitually use when confronted with new ways of thinking that challenge my basic assumptions and upset my comfort level? Are those mechanisms in fact useful, or do they keep me from considering other, possibly more promising, ways of finding true happiness? Are those mechanisms the obstacles on my personal life map that prevent me from achieving the ends I desire?