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**ARISTOTLE’S WAY**
**How Ancient Wisdom Can Change Your Life**
By Edith Hall
254 pp. Penguin Press. $27.

Three years ago, New Year’s came and I promised to eat only organic. I lasted two weeks. A year ago, I resolved to run before dawn and take a cold shower every morning. That lasted two days. This year, I don’t have a resolution. Instead I read Edith Hall’s “Aristotle’s Way: How Ancient Wisdom Can Change Your Life,” and concluded I probably didn’t have to undergo some painful — and therefore temporary — transformation to remake my life. I just had to put some sustained effort into being properly happy.

There is a pernicious, but widely held, belief that turning over a new leaf always involves turning our worlds upside down, that living a happy, well-adjusted life entails acts of monkish discipline or heroic strength. The genre of self-help lives and dies on this fanaticism: We should eat like cave men, scale distant mountains, ingest live charcoal, walk across scalding stones, lift oversize tires, do yoga in a hothouse, run a marathon, run another. In our culture, virtuous moderation and prudence rarely sell but, taking her cues from Aristotle, Hall offers a set of reasons to explain why they should.

Hall’s new book clears a rare middle way for her reader to pursue happiness, what the ancient Greeks called *eudaimonia*, usually translated as well-being or prosperity. This prosperity has nothing to do with the modern obsession with material success but rather “finding a purpose in order to realize your potential and working on your behavior to become the best version of yourself.” It sounds platitudinous enough, but it isn’t, thanks to Hall’s tight yet modest prose. “Aristotle’s Way” carefully charts the arc of a virtuous life that springs from youthful talent, grows by way of responsible decisions and self-reflection, finds expression in mature relationships, and comes to rest in joyful retirement and a quietly reverent death. Easier said than done, but Aristotle, Hall explains, is there to help.

Hall, a professor of classics at King’s College London and the author of “Introducing the Ancient Greeks,” is not the first contemporary theorist to claim that philosophy — particularly ancient Greek philosophy — can change, and even save, a life. Twenty-five years ago the French classicist Pierre Hadot argued that the Greeks never intended the love of wisdom to end up as the most arcane of intellectual disciplines. Instead, according to Hadot, “philosophy appears as a remedy for human worries, anguish and misery.”

In the last decade, the ancient Stoicism articulated by the Roman ruler Marcus Aurelius in the second century has re-emerged as self-help for the smart set — a way of regulating our passions, doing our duties and resigning ourselves to the things we cannot change. The Stoics are wildly popular among readers (predominantly men) who want to train their stiff upper lips. Silicon Valley moguls, N.F.L. stars and Olympians flock to “Stoicon,” an annual conference of modern-day Stoics who spend a week attempting to “think like a Roman emperor.” There are probably worse ways to spend one’s time, but according to Hall’s Aristotle there are also far better ways to approach life.

In the end, according to Hall, Stoicism “is a rather pessimistic and grim affair. … It recommends the resigned acceptance of misfortune rather than active, practical engagement with the fascinating fine-grained business of everyday living and problem solving.” In short, an Aristotelian life is not solely about bearing the inevitable, but about identifying the particular talents or natural proclivities that each of us has, and then pursuing a path, consistently and deliberately, over the course of a life. This will make one deeply happy. In Hall’s assessment, “Stoicism does not encourage the same *joie de vivre* as Aristotle’s ethics.”

As one who is perhaps not overly predisposed to dwell on the joys of life, I was skeptical. Cold showers have their virtues: They prepare an adult for the unavoidable tortures and small indignities of the day. But Hall’s treatment of Aristotle’s “Nicomachean Ethics” reveals that true virtue, the inner core of human happiness, is a matter of living in accord with “the ancient Greek proverb inscribed on the Delphic Temple, ‘nothing in excess.’” According to Aristotle, the first Western theorist to develop a moral system tethered to this principle, “character traits and emotions are almost all acceptable — indeed necessary to a healthy psyche — provided that they are present in the right amounts. He calls the right amount the ‘middle’ or ‘mean’ amount, the *meson*.”

Hall suggests that her adult reader aim for this Golden Mean by first asking a number of diagnostic questions: What sort of moral being am I right now? Am I prone to envy or revenge, rage or lust, overblown confidence or secretive cowardice? Do I find acute pleasure in precisely the things that stand in the way of my long-term happiness? If you are unable or unwilling to answer these thorny questions, Hall writes, “you might as well stop reading here.” Hall excels when she is at her most frank. For Aristotle, there is latitude when it comes to which endeavors merit our pursuit, but authenticity and self-knowledge are nonnegotiable.

Self-reflection may be a private affair, but being virtuous never is. “Project Happiness,” as Hall puts it, cannot be accomplished by oneself, but depends on the kind of relationships we foster or neglect. Togetherness is the testing ground of Aristotelian virtue. In “Love” and “Community,” two of the strongest chapters of the book, Hall explains how we can fail each other and, in turn, fail ourselves. In Aristotle’s day, and our own, friendship is often reduced to its pleasure or utility, and there is nothing particularly wrong with friendships of this kind save that, in Hall’s words, “they are vulnerable to early closure.” These relationships, Aristotle writes, “are easily broken off. … When the motive of friendship has passed away, the friendship itself is dissolved.” Ideally, in contrast, he maintained that lasting connections — intimate, civil and political — are based on a mutual respect for the virtues each participant holds dear. True friends, true lovers, true citizens want the best for one another. What is “best”? Happiness, of course, defined by the pursuit of excellence (*arête*) or living up to one’s fullest potential.

I finished Hall’s book largely convinced but equally worried: Was this the sort of message that could reach the readership that needed it most? Could a virtuous happiness trump greed and cynicism? Maybe. Aristotle was the first to observe that philosophy, and particularly ethics, has a deep public relations problem. Those most in need of ethical training are probably the least likely to spend $27 on a moral guidebook. There is, however, hope. “Aristotle’s Way” is blazed by a counterfactual that Hall and Aristotle routinely employ: Is a life of vice a truly happy one? The answer is firm yet compassionate: “No.” As Hall explains, Aristotle, who lived “at close quarters with the tyrannical Macedonian royal family, the ruthless Phillip II and his scheming wives, concubines and lieutenants, all jockeying for position at court, seems to have meticulously observed the misery of immoral people. … These miserable reprobates, who can’t stand to be alone with themselves, can’t fully experience their own joys and sorrows, as there is a civil war in their souls.” Perhaps this is precisely the moment to consider the impossibility of happiness without virtue.

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