

- ESSAY -

Prosperity: An Aristotelian Legacy

[The Culture of Prosperity Series](#)

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From the late nineteenth century onwards—and within the English-speaking world—the term ‘prosperity’ started to recur with increasing frequency in the literature dealing with political change, social development and intellectual progress. Its usefulness, and widespread adoption, was a reflection of the fact that this was the word regarded by most commentators as the least inadequate rendering of *eudaimonia*: a term central to the philosophy of Aristotle. English translations of the Aristotelian texts were being published in great numbers during the Victorian era and the philosopher’s attention to ‘becoming’—a process which discloses identity and meaning cumulatively and progressively—spoke to the distinctively nineteenth century preoccupation with evolutionary development. Aristotle’s conception of *eudaimonia* is similarly rich in meaning and amounted to a fundamental transformation in human understanding both of the self and the surrounding world. The word had a pre-existent history when its usage denoted a pretty straightforward kind of ‘happiness’ or ‘contentment’ but, within the Aristotelian context, *eudaimonia* gained additional connotations and the English language has struggled to find an appropriate translation.

‘Flourishing’ evokes individual development and attainment of self-expression. Aristotelian *eudaimonia*, a term that became a concept, certainly sought to describe these features of the human condition. Nonetheless, ‘flourishing’ seems a bit banal, redolent as it is of florist shops and the self-congratulatory songs hymned at English public schools (*Floreat Rugbeia!*). ‘Wellbeing’ has attracted some support as a rendering of *eudaimonia*, vitiated though it be by the English phrase’s association with a left-of-centre concentration on explanatory, and expiatory, ‘social factors’. ‘Prosperity’ limps less than most alternatives. It remains important to establish what Aristotle meant by *eudaimonia* since his usage of the term explains

the relevance of 'prosperity'. This philosophical legacy from classical antiquity is almost 2,400 years old and its observation of the human condition, together with an account of the principles we should follow when investigating that capacious subject, remains definitive.

Different things make different people happy. Obvious truths, such as this one, are sometimes neglected. We assume all too often that something which is obviously true does not need to be pointed out. But when the obvious is no longer stated it may well be forgotten and an act of recovery is then needed. Aristotle's philosophical investigations were inspired by the need to recover a great truth. Variety and difference are evident human characteristics but contemporary thinkers had, in Aristotle's view, ceased to notice these obvious facts. The immense prestige of Plato had led to the establishment of a consensus which followed the Platonic line: unity. This was the principle of inter-connecting order, visible in the natural world and the basis of human thought, and it was deemed far more important than variety because it was so much more fundamental. Aristotle was no less interested in this question of unity. Why did the world hang together rather than fall apart, and what was the basis of the human mind's ability to think in a fashion both coherent and relevant about the world in which it found itself? But questions about unity, as he pointed out, can only be answered if more, not less, attention is paid to variety, difference, and individual circumstances. Observation of these tangible, empirical, details had produced the big question about unity: how might all the world's features be related to each other? Suspension of observation was an unlikely way of producing an answer. And so Aristotle, and all the Aristotelians after him, directed their thoughts and researches towards particulars and specifics, varieties and differences. It was, we might say, the obvious thing to do and no less transformative for being so. Aristotle is the great philosopher of everyday experience and the world which stirred his curiosity was the one that he shared with his fellow fourth century Greeks. It is not a rarefied place. And that is the point. Aristotle did not need to create a Utopia in order to portray prosperity at work. This distinguishing feature of the human condition can be discovered, if we know how to look, in everyday activity: a way of life which turns out to be remarkable.

What is true of individuals is also true of certain periods in human history, social classes and their codes of behaviour, institutions and social organisations, tribal rituals, intellectual traditions and their schools of thought, inhabitants of democratically organised cities, subjects of kings, citizens of republics, as well as, perhaps by extension, nations and states, though as a Greek of the fourth century BC Aristotle would have had no experience of the two latter. These modes of existence are, for Aristotle, irreducibly different and their motivations are correspondingly varied. We can compare these ways of living and of thinking because

they are all part of a common story: humankind's energetic relationship with the world. But a study in comparisons is not the same thing as a rush to judgement about good and bad, right and wrong. Human beings, the kinds of societies in which they live, and the traditions or patterns of thought predominant at certain times and places: all have to be understood on their own terms and not by the application of criteria which are alien to the experiences of those being judged. It would be pointless, therefore, to begin a study of Sparta with a complaint. Why can't the Spartans behave more like Athenians and take up Athenian-like activities, such as writing plays and engaging in philosophical debate? But Spartans are not examples of inadequate Athenians. They do Spartanish things—such as going to war at the drop of a hat and enforcing a daily military drill for most adult males—because that's the whole point of Sparta. Remove that *raison d'être*, and Sparta would cease to be Spartan. Reformers need not lose heart. Change can happen. People and institutions can be persuaded to change tack. But a wise reformer will start—not by preaching and expostulation—but rather by getting under the skin of those who need to be persuaded.

Aristotle's concentration on difference has to be judged in the context of his relationship to Plato, the master whom he continued to revere despite reacting against his influence, a common feature of the relationship between formative teachers and their indebted pupils. Plato had no doubt that certain forms of knowledge—the more abstract the better—were superior guides to conduct and that the relationship between higher and lower could be expressed in pyramidal form with an apex consisting of the few who, being fully enlightened, were qualified to rule, while the broad mass of the population were at the base where, dealing exclusively in opinions rather than truth, they were congregated in order to be governed.

It is Aristotle's countervailing emphasis on difference, uniqueness, and variability which explains his concept of prosperity: *eudaimonia* describes the condition attained by individuals and societies when expressing, and developing, the capacities that are uniquely theirs and which constitute their identity. Descriptions of such capacities and identities become relevant, accurate and nurturing when attuned to individual circumstances. "Some accountants may be comedians", as the counsel for the defence said in a celebrated trial, "but comedians are hardly ever accountants". The operating principles in each *métier* are different and those who achieve success in a particular area do so because their abilities lead them in that direction. Appreciation of diversity informs the judgement of those who wish to understand these patterns of success. A biologist, when admiring the design of a bridge and wishing to make an informed judgement about its excellence, needs some understanding of how engineers and architects set about their work. Imposition of the ways of thought that typify a biological investigation would not get her or him very far.

Bodies of thought and intellectual disciplines are built up on the basis of sustained observation of the prosperities described by Aristotle. Drawing the evidence together in an ordered fashion is often a sensible thing to do. This enables us to map out the terrain as it were. Having ascertained the extent of our present knowledge, while also assessing its evidential basis, we can begin to think about the next line of inquiry. What we know guides us towards areas where our knowledge is sadly lacking but where there is a chance of discovering answers. Many historians of England, for example, think that the relationship between patterns of land ownership and the distribution of power has been of particular importance at certain times in the kingdom's past. Freedom, in England, has a specific association with property rights. Why should this be? An answer might help us to understand, in these challenging times, the extent to which the English kingdom might be an intrinsically different kind of political entity compared to its continental neighbours. Domesday Book will give us excellent information about the extent to which the regime change instigated by Duke William of Normandy was relied on for its effectiveness on an appropriation of lands previously held by the indigenous aristocracy. Distributed among King William's followers, these landholdings were the basis of the Norman order in England and a guarantor of its governmental effectiveness. The present Duke of Westminster is a direct descendant of one of Duke William's followers and his landholding in London, known as "the Grosvenor estate", illustrates the longevity of the English relationship between land and power. Leasehold, it might be argued, is the survival of feudalism by other means. At this stage we might wish to leap the centuries and investigate another application of this motif. Henry VIII's 'reform' of *Ecclesia Anglicana* led to the biggest land grab in England since the Conquest. To what extent, therefore, was the English Reformation—its extent and durability—the result of a repeat performance by the Crown? And finally, ambitiously but not without plausibility, this historical journey would end in the Salisbury of Cecil Rhodes and Robert Mugabe's Harare. Today's Zimbabwe is the result of an application of the English land grabbing experience and its regime is comparable to the order imposed on England by the Norman aristocracy.

Information gleaned from reliable historical sources can deepen and widen our understanding of contemporary issues. The choices to be made when we seek to resolve these issues through decisions and actions remain ours to make, revelatory as they are of individual character and powers of judgement. That which is true of historical information and investigation applies more generally to all research activity. Attention to the evidence does not involve choosing information that might serve the interests of a pre-determined theory. Human beings have a natural propensity to notice behaviour and information which seem to confirm what they already believe to be true. And the urge to reject, or fail to notice, evidence

which challenges what we think we know is very powerful. These features of the human mind are disabling and we need to be aware of our defects. Research—when honest and rigorous—is self-critical. I might have a very strong gut feeling that a hypothesis has a lot going for it but it needs to be tested against as much evidence as possible if it is to achieve credibility. Researched investigations do end in some kind of a conclusion but a pre-determined end, one which dictates the relevance or otherwise of the evidence adduced, is just a dogma. If we already know what we know, why bother with the ‘research’ except as a bit of window dressing? Marxist historiography was one of the best twentieth century, examples of a dogmatic system: a mechanism which was self-referential and whose pre-determined goal dictated the choice of evidence. We all know what happened in the Paris of 1789 but a Marxist historian would also have wished to demonstrate the revolution’s inevitability in general, as well as its fore-ordained, ‘bourgeois’ nature. An account of Paris of 1788, conducted along these lines, would concentrate on events which could be interpreted as anticipating or even ‘causing’ the national breakdown that started on 14 July 1789. Such events were very few in number and a Marxist account of that year’s significance was, therefore, a reassertion of dogma rather than a really historical interpretation.

Traditions of thought are shaped by their origins and the philosophy of *eudaimonia* reflects some of the assumptions prevalent in the culture of Greek antiquity. Athenian ways of living and behaving are of particular importance in this regard. Success mattered: first was first and second was nowhere. *Ostracism* was a particularly effective, Athenian way of showing who had the upper hand. *Agon* (contest) recurs as a cultural motif. The Greeks competed against each other for prizes awarded in athletic competitions and also in literary contests. Debate, whether political or philosophical, could be spectacular means of point-scoring with no holds barred. Aristotle on *eudaimonia* reflects this individualism. But he also refines it. Emphasis on variety means that *eudaimonia*/prosperity does not reflect the more insanely competitive aspects of Greek life. It is, nonetheless, faithful to the Greeks’ emphasis on the things of this world. They told stories about their gods and the religious festivals were a good way of coming together and partying. The humbler, more local, festivals were, apart from the occasional Dionysian entertainment, akin to English village fetes. At these festivals the gods were, as always in Greek life, a shadowy, off-stage presence rather than an object of sustained speculation. Notions of an after-life (*Hades*) were extremely vague. The Christian idea of a judgement in the life hereafter would have made no sense at all to Aristotle’s Greeks. His way of thinking survived the arrival of Christianity and Aristotelianism, being flexible and highly adaptive, was incorporated within an evolving pattern of theology. But there was one profound difference. The knowledge and love of God was the *summum bonum* for all Christians: the purpose of living and the best thing to be

doing. *Eudaimonia* and 'worldly' matters were now regarded, and accommodated, as 'secular' preoccupations. 'Blessed are the Prosperous' does not feature among the Beatitudes. Christian instructions about how to live and think were based on the fact that this world had become a gateway to the next. This was a transformation even greater than the one effected by Aristotle.

In this note I have sought to show how and why Aristotelian *eudaimonia* came to exercise so powerful an influence and also why its continuing relevance supplies the context of the Legatum Institute's work on the nature of 'prosperity'. The term means something specific: a way of thinking which has stood the test of time for close to 2,400 years. Prosperity/*eudaimonia* is adjectival in its operation since it describes how individuals and their institutions feel and think and behave when allowed to express in an untrammelled fashion the specific qualities that endow them with individuality, meaning and purpose. The fact that the literature on this subject employs a noun, 'prosperity', as a translation has created difficulties. Usage of a noun denotes a particular, time-specific, state of being and a literalist understanding of this term would encourage the very un-Aristotelian view that there is just the one valid form of 'prosperity'. 'Prosperous existence' would get us further since *eudaimonia* is developmental, not static, and is forever a work in progress. The categories of thought used in order to understand this state of being need to reflect its organic and evolutionary nature. It is a very good idea to have a map when exploring an area that is new to you but its reliability as a guide to the terrain needs to be checked on a continuous basis. History's literature contains shelf after shelf of mapped out areas of knowledge, carefully delineated and proudly possessed, but which had to be abandoned after experience showed them to be, at best, partial and, at worst, delusional. There will always be a need for a better map. Most of Aristotle's works were put together posthumously by admiring pupils and they consist by and large of lecture notes, jottings, improvisations, and asides, a series of 'notes to self' about what might, or might not, work as an interpretation. These writings are the expression of a mind which is possessed of a certain method, a way of thinking. That method helped him to explain how and why 'success happens', work which now continues in the Culture of Prosperity programme.