

**KAREN FOLEY:** In this session of the Opening Up Classical Studies Event, we're going to be interviewing Edith Hall. And by "we," I mean we, our studio audience here. I've got some questions, and we've had some questions in advance already. But if there's something that you would like to ask Edith Hall, who is professor of classics at King's College London and has published 25 books on ancient Greek and Roman culture and therefore knows much about it, then do put those in the chat box. Or you can email us. StudentHub@open.ac.uk.

So Edith, you're here to talk about your new, well, your latest book, *Aristotle's Way-*

**EDITH HALL:** I am.

**KAREN FOLEY:** *-How Ancient Wisdom Can Change Your Life.* So tell us about the book.

**EDITH HALL:** This is a book that has taken me actually 30 years to write, actually, if not to write, but to think about. So I was looking very hard. I was a very miserable teenager in lots of ways. I couldn't really figure out, because I wasn't religious, basic rules of how I should behave and everything. And it was just after the '60s. It was in the '70s, and there was an awful lot of moral chaos out there and women's lib and all the rest of it.

And it was when I went to university that I discovered that the ancient Greek philosophers had devoted a very great amount of time to thinking about, how can we best live a good life that will make us happy? And they actually saw happiness as a sort of skill, that you could actually develop techniques for getting happy. Now, I wanted to be happy, of course. And I actually found Aristotle far more appealing.

There are several other kinds of ethical, moral systems and the stoics, the Epicureans, Platonism. They had discussions about which was the best way. The one that appealed to me was Aristotle. I tried it, and 40 years later, I think I am as happy as I ever could have been given what I was born with and the good and bad luck that I've had. I think I have maximised my potential for happiness.

**KAREN FOLEY:** So what is it in particular, amongst the range that you had to choose from, that Aristotle offers you that the others didn't?

**EDITH HALL:** Aristotle's the one who actually emphasises free will most. Some of the other systems are more fatalistic, like things happen that are terrible and you've just got to learn to put up with it.

That's basically stoicism. Aristotle says, no, you've got a huge amount of choice and a huge amount of control. You are the pilot at the dashboard, and you can really figure out how to make really the best possible version of yourself.

He says, there is a strange correlation between trying to be a good person, fair to others, and happiness. And he thinks that's actually not just because if you're nice to someone else, they're going to be nice back and you'll have a virtuous circle of goodwill. But it actually kicks off inside you. It's a very internal, private state, a peace of mind which allows you to basically go to bed every night, look in the mirror knowing you haven't done anything really horrible to anybody.

And in fact, you might have done some things that you're really quite proud of in terms of helping other people. You will sleep better, and you can build on this every day. And it allows you, it means that you minimise guilt, remorse, crying over spilt milk, regret, because you can always tell yourself, at least I tried to do the right thing, even if you're not successful.

So basically, he's very deathbed focused, actually. He wants you to imagine your whole life forward and that you can really die on your deathbed, just like going to bed every night and looking in the mirror, saying, well, I did everything I could to live the best possible life I could under the circumstances. And I am at peace with myself because of that. I have no real regrets. It's funny. My mother loved Edith Piaf, who sang "Je Ne Regrette Rien." And I think that's partly why she called me Edith.

[LAUGHTER]

I wouldn't go around recommending it if I didn't genuinely believe that it can help us be much happier, not only as individuals, but Aristotle himself said, if everybody did this together, we would also make a much, much better society. If we treated everybody that we meet as if they were a member of our family we really loved, the same kind of reciprocal respect and trust, then you would build, from the bottom up, the perfect society.

That's his political theory. You don't start from the top and say, let's design the state from the top, which is what Plato had done, we're going to have this government and that government and this priest and that head of state and this army. No. You start from, how good is your relationship with the person that you live with, your child, with your husband or your partner? How much have you put into that relationship? If we multiply that up, we will have the most, the

happiest possible society we could have.

**KAREN FOLEY:** So I have to ask, after our mini Dionysia here, would this have helped Medea?

**EDITH HALL:** Yes, it would, because what Medea, in that actually very speech that we had- it fits in beautifully. What she's doing is actually called deliberating. She is making a decision. And Aristotle devoted a large part of his most famous book, which is called the *Nicomachean Ethics*- sounds off-putting. Actually, his son was called Nicomachus and he dedicated it to him. It just means "the ethics I've written for my son."

And he says that making a decision is the most important skill anybody can develop, But it's quite complicated. There's actually an eight-point programme he offers for making any decision. And actually, the very first thing you do is take your time. You never, ever act precipitately. Precipitately means like falling off a cliff very fast, headfirst. You buy the maximum amount of time.

So Medea gives herself a speech of exactly five minutes to make her mind up, and because her husband has just left her, is not in a fit state. And he absolutely says that you have to get to a state of reasonable calm. You need someone else to deliberate with. You've got to do a very democratic way. It's very difficult to do it all on your own. You need to test out your opinions. You need to verify all information.

Famously, in Britain, the- I'm not going to say what my opinion on Brexit is. I may be somewhere in the middle. But we did not deliberate properly. We took that decision without verifying information about what would happen, calibrating likelihoods, testing out the responses of different sectors of the community, all the things that Aristotle says that you have to do. So deliberation is a word we don't use enough because we don't do it enough. And I do find one of the most popular talks I give when I'm going to schools to 16 to 18-year-olds is how to make a decision, because nobody's ever really sat them done and done it.

So there are all these things. And actually, the verifying information is so important. So the basic thing you have to do, shall I leave my boyfriend? My girlfriend has told me that she saw him kissing someone else at a party. Do you believe her? Or do you go and verify that information? Do you actually ask him? Of course you do. But actually, most of us just blindly on impulse if we're given a little bit of gossip.

So that has helped me more than anything, because in fact, one of my own faults, and he asks

you to look at yourself very candidly, Aristotle. He actually gives you a questionnaire to find out what your worst faults are. And impulsiveness was very definitely one of mine. Very definitely. I'm a hugely emotional, impulsive person, and I have learned, the number of emails when I say, I'm afraid I can't take that decision quickly, can I get back to you in a week? And you usually can.

**KAREN FOLEY:** So would you say that the main thing that's changed for you in terms of your own behaviour is that decision making process, that you've got these measures in place that's enabled you to act slightly differently?

**EDITH HALL:** Yes. I spend a lot more time, I don't do mindfulness, sort of Buddhist hippie stuff. I spend an awful lot of time thinking about how I'm going to act and why, thinking through even quite small decisions. In my job, I'm responsible, I am a parent of young adults, but I'm also responsible as a university teacher for a very large number in loco parentis. I am in a parental role.

So how I deal with them and what I say to them can have huge consequences in terms of their morale, in terms of their futures. So it is my responsibility to do that. I don't watch much TV. I don't even like having music on. I spend every available minute I can not looking at computers and email but actually thinking about my relationships, believe it or not, and my job.

But the most useful thing to me was actually that questionnaire, because Aristotle, I discovered when I'd really stared at myself in the face, and it was very hard. You will not get happy if you're not honest, if you're in denial. If you actually like nasty gossip and don't say, yes, I like nasty gossip, but I'm going to try not to do it, then you won't get happy. So I have to be very honest.

And I discovered that impulsiveness was one. The other one I really score very highly on is vindictiveness. I love revenge. And I have to be really honest with myself. I was spending far too much of my time nursing wounds and figuring out how to get-

**KAREN FOLEY:** Sounds like quite a Greek trait, though.

**EDITH HALL:** -back at people. It is. It's one of the reasons I love the Greek. But I had to let it go. It does not make you happy. In fact, Aristotle's motto is learn to live well. That doesn't mean to eat a lot of good food. It means to live the best life that you can. Just make the best version of yourself with what you've given. And I was not doing that by spending all of this time getting back at people who had usually attacked me.

I then know, if I'm doing my best every day, if they're attacking me, it's out of bad motives. They don't have good motives if I'm doing my best. They have envious motives or vindictive ones themselves, so they don't matter. And the freedom that comes from doing what Aristotle says, which is, living well is the best revenge. People who damaged me 30 years ago, actually, what bizarrely will hurt the most, if they still feel like that, is that I am happy.

**KAREN FOLEY:** Absolutely.

**EDITH HALL:** It is the best revenge.

**KAREN FOLEY:** Yeah. No, absolutely. Sylvia recommends the book.

**HJ:** Yes. She said it's highly recommended. And Susan as well says that she needs the book. It seems like a book for life. So a lot of good advice as well. But I know we've got in a lot of questions through, so if you have questions in the chat as well, just put them- I know Edith would love to hear them. And do we want some questions from some students through here?

**KAREN FOLEY:** We certainly do. But may I take one first from our studio audience here, because Rebecca would like to ask a question.

**REBECCA:** What other Greek writers have influenced the way you live your life?

**EDITH HALL:** Oh, certainly Aristophanes, who we were talking about. He and Aristotle are actually my two big heroes. It's just accident they both begin with "Aristo," which means "best," actually, so it's sort of appropriate. But the humorous angle on things, by studying quite closely how Aristophanes does that, because he's actually trying to community and consensus build the theatre. He gets the laughs when everybody responds in the same way, but to very, very difficult problems often.

And I always had a penchant for humour. I'm told that I was a child who liked to make people laugh. But I've learned that it's actually incredible instrument of political consensus. So if I'm in committee meetings where there's a lot of huge disagreement, bitter opposition maybe from the other side, if you can get them to laugh, it's a really powerful way of building consensus.

If you've got a very difficult emotional situation with someone you love very much, managing to make each other laugh can defuse it because it reminds you how much you've got in common because you're laughing at the same thing. So of course, not every joke I do is for political or emotional reasons, but I've learned more from Aristophanes than from any other figure about

that.

And also, his laughter is not just a community, it's a democratic community. It's about building, often, the laughter of the underclasses or the less rich against top politicians and so on. So it's building this sort of Democratic, middle of the road- how do we all feel? What can we all take in terms of humour? And just sheer joy. So that's him plus Aristotle. Aristotle loves humour as well, but he says that too many people use it destructively, to laugh at people who are vulnerable or in bullying situations, to gang up on people.

Point is, laughter can be used for good or bad. But if you use it for good, I would go so far, as an atheist, to say it's a God-given gift. As far as we know, other animals, we're just an advanced animal. As far as we know, other animals, well, some people think that some apes have a sense of the absurd, but the ability to tell a story that will get the entire chimpanzee community feeling at ease with each other appears not to be available to them.

**KAREN FOLEY:** Let's take some questions from people at home.

**EDITH HALL:** Good question. Very good question, Rebecca.

**HJ:** We've had a fantastic question through the chat. Kim Mason says, "We love Seneca and think we don't like Aristotle. Can you change our students' minds. They're studying OCR.

**EDITH HALL:** I don't know if that could change your students' minds. I find the- Seneca is a stoic, and that stoicism is the most popular of these secular moral systems in ancient Rome. The system, basically, is a dualistic one. It says that you're full of passions and emotions and sex drives and anger. These must be quelled. You must control them. They are not nice.

Aristotle has a triple system- he's only one he does- where he says, let's take anger, that there is bad anger, which is having far too much of it with the wrong people at the wrong time. That means you hit your child because your boss is at you or you're angry with everybody every day. Having no anger, which is what the stoic wants, is, if you're an Aristotelian, equally culpable because it means you will not get into the headmaster's study if your child is being bullied.

You will not take someone to court for legal redress if they have smashed into your car drunk and broken your leg. No anger, he says, you cannot be an effective moral agent if you never get angry. Martin Luther King wouldn't have done what he did, even then, he did it peaceably,

if he wasn't deeply angry. So you can use it for good. And I, as a very emotional person, finding the right thing, he calls it the mean.

Aristotle calls it the mean, on anything, whatever it is. He says sex is great. It's absolutely great in the right amount with the right person in the right context for the right reasons. If you have no sex drive, you are not going to be able to have a fully happy life, he says, because you can't make the right kind of relationship. You have too much sex drive, you certainly can't make one because you'll be a sexaholic and upset people.

For me, this triple system with the healthy mean is much more appealing than just sit on biological drives and emotions. It's certainly worked for me.

**KAREN FOLEY:** Wonderful. And we've had some questions as well from people at Runshaw College.

**EDITH HALL:** Oh, I love Runshaw.

**HJ:** And they've actually sent some photos with their questions as well. So this is Runshaw College, year two students at Mycenae. And they're asking, "Which three characters from Greek mythology, particularly the Trojan War, would you have dinner with and why?"

**EDITH HALL:** From the Trojan War? That is a very good question because they're all pretty serious, take themselves seriously, don't they?

**KAREN FOLEY:** So for a dinner party-

**EDITH HALL:** I know, for a dinner party.

**KAREN FOLEY:** -you need to be careful.

[LAUGHTER]

**EDITH HALL:** Who's the funniest? Well actually, Odysseus, of the big Greek heroes, is by far the funniest, without a doubt. He has got a sense of humour. I'm not sure that you could say that Achilles did. I certainly wouldn't be having Agamemnon. I think Eurycleia, the old nurse of Odysseus, I suspect she had a few stories to tell. She could remember his babyhood. We always want to have a senior lady attending symposiums.

So that's two from the Odyssey. I really do need one from the Iliad. Well, I wouldn't want Nestor because he told those incredibly long and boring stories about when he was a

horseman in his youth and goes on for books and books and books. But I like Patroclus. Patroclus is the one that Achilles goes berserk about when he's killed- Achilles is his best friend.

And he's one of the only heroes in all of Homer that we're told he was kind. There is a specific word. Everybody loved Patroclus, not because he was a mighty warrior, but because he was kind. So I'm going to have my kind, dishy Patroclus, my witty, rye, weather-beaten old sea captain of an Odysseus, and his old nurse to take the wind out of all the young men's sails as my other woman.

**KAREN FOLEY:** Kim and her students love the point about Martin Luther King and about being positive and harnessing that positivity. And Sylvia says that you get a lot of angry tweets from stoics, but aren't they meant to be stoic? So final question that we're going to have from somebody in our studio is Lizzie.

**LIZZIE:** Hello. Why is it you prefer the Greeks over the Romans?

**KAREN FOLEY:** Oh. Briefly, Edith.

[LAUGHS]

**EDITH HALL:** They're much more joyful. That's partly because they're not so stoic, actually. Stoicism is the dominant ideology of the Roman Empire. They're much more joyful. But they also invented almost every aspect of the inside of your mind. The Romans were very good at roads, very good aqueducts, very good at running armies. The Greeks gave you philosophy, psychology, history writing, theatre, democracy, geography, astronomy, every form of biography and autobiography.

Almost all the great myths were Greek before they were ever Roman. And they gave you every important philosophical school. And they gave us all the ideas about theatre and performance that we've got. And their visual culture. To me, those amazing vases, of which we've got thousands and thousands, that invite us so directly into their lives. They had a thing about beauty that I don't think the Romans had. So they were more fun, they were more beautiful, and they were cleverer.

**KAREN FOLEY:** Well, let's see what you all have to say. Which is best, Greek or Rome? Greece or Rome?

**EDITH HALL:** Yes. We win. We win. We win.

[LAUGHTER]

**KAREN FOLEY:** Edith, that's been absolutely wonderful. We've got so many more questions that we just don't have time-

**EDITH HALL:** That's a shame.

**KAREN FOLEY:** -to cover today. It is such a shame.

**EDITH HALL:** Tell them to tweet them to me.

**KAREN FOLEY:** In a nice way.

**EDITH HALL:** @EdithMayHall. My middle name is May. Just @EdithMayHall. Tweet me the question. I will answer it.

**KAREN FOLEY:** Brilliant. But not angry if you're a stoic.

[LAUGHS]

That's wonderful. Thank you so much for coming along. Your enthusiasm is just so infectious.

**EDITH HALL:** Thank you.

**KAREN FOLEY:** And I think it's wonderful that you've got this project, and you're going to inspire so many people.

**EDITH HALL:** Good. Thank you.

**KAREN FOLEY:** So thank you. And Edith's also got some great videos on YouTube if you'd like to hear more as well. So we're going to watch a quick video now. We're going to hear from one of the OU's professors, Phil Perkins. And then we're going to have a short clip of an animated version of Lysistrata, which we were talking about a little bit earlier. And then we're going to come back and talk about the Votives Project. I'll see you soon.

[MUSIC PLAYING]