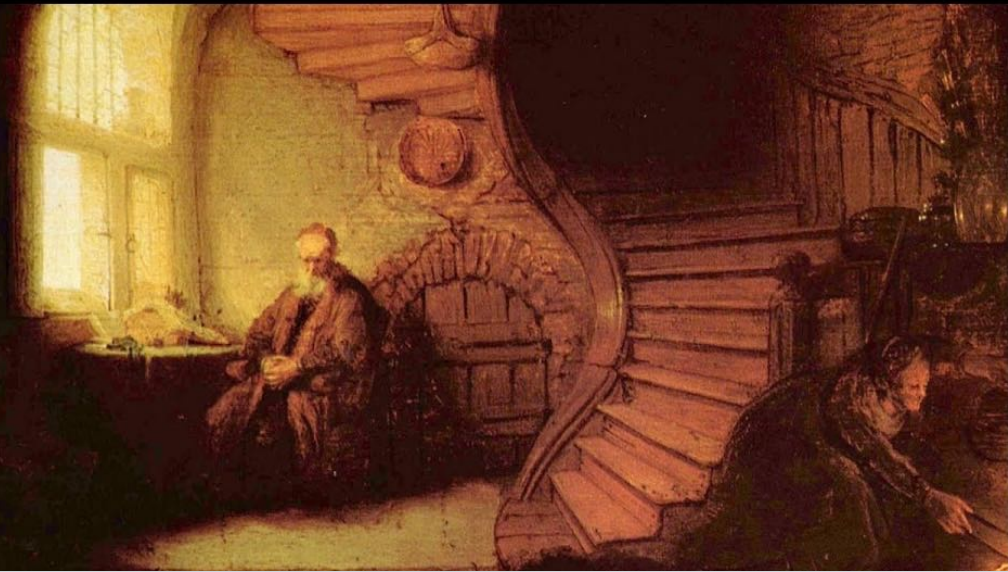


Aristotle on the Best Form of Life



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Brief Review

- main goal of the *Nicomachean Ethics*: to discover what human happiness consists in, what is a good life.
- virtues seem to be part of it (function argument)
- recall the *Protrepticus*: the best life is the philosopher's

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Brief Review

Outline of the Nicomachean Ethics

- suggestions for good life: life of pleasure; politics; philosophy
- general definition of happiness in I.7 as rational activity in accordance with virtue
- spelling out 'virtue' in general (Bk 2) and in particular (Bks 3–5)
- the cognitive component of virtue (Bk 6)
- pleasure and happiness (Bk 7 & 10)
- what we owe to others (friendship, Bks 8–9)
- the happy life (Bk 10)

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EN X.6, 1176a30–32

“Now that we have spoken of the excellences [virtues], the forms of friendship, and the varieties of pleasure, what remains is to discuss in outline the nature of happiness, since this is what we state the end of human nature to be.”

Recall that happiness is self-sufficient (we do everything *for it* but we don't aim for *it* for anything else).

Happiness vs Amusement

Many people think that amusements (bodily pleasure, etc.) are what makes for a happy life.

But this cannot be:

- Amusement is an end-in-itself only for those who are childish
- Amusement is only valued as a form of relaxation
- Serious activity is better, therefore serious activity must be happier (!)
- Slaves can be amused, but they certainly are not happy

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EN X.7, 1177a12–17

“If happiness is activity in accordance with excellence [virtue], it is reasonable that it should be in accordance with the highest excellence; and this will be that of the best thing in us. Whether it be intellect or something else that is this element which is thought to be our natural ruler and guide and to take thought of things noble and divine, whether it be itself also divine or only the most divine element in us, the activity of this in accordance with its proper excellence will be complete happiness.”

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Why Contemplation Is the Best

Happiness = the highest virtue / excellence = the best element in us.

Contemplation fits this:

- It is the best activity with the best objects
- It is continuous and admits of the most continuity
- It is the most pleasant of virtuous activity
- It is self-sufficient
- It is an end-in-itself
- It is a leisured activity (contrasted to the hurried life of a politician)
- Thus, contemplation is perfect happiness.

“this activity will be complete/perfect happiness of a human being [b25] when it takes a complete span of life, for nothing incomplete is characteristic of things belonging to happiness.” (b24-26)

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Contemplation Is the Best

Contemplation is better than the virtues of character:

- other virtues are human (arising from our composite nature), and thus they are happy secondarily; contemplation is divine.
- it needs less external support than the other virtues / excellences
- God or the gods have no reason to engage in anything but contemplation; hence, it is perfect happiness
- Animals are not happy for we humans are happy only in so far as we contemplate
- The happy man has only moderate external needs.

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Consider these claims:

- 1 happiness is monistic (there is something on top of a single hierarchy of activities)
- 2 the activity of practical virtue is happiness
- 3 theoretical activity and morally virtuous activity are two distinct activities (EN VI)
- 4 theoretical activity is complete happiness

But these seem to be incompatible!

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- Why is the whole of the NE concerned with practical virtue – but then on the finishing line there is something even better?
- Or: is happiness an activity in accordance with the *single virtue of contemplation*, or in accordance with *all* the virtues?

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Or: What Is the Best Life?

- ① life of pleasure – Aristotle rules this out
- ② life of the politician (practical wisdom)?
- ③ life of the philosopher (theoretical wisdom)?

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- ① relativism: human and divine happiness are different
- ② pluralism/inclusivism: happiness consists of multiple activities
- ③ monism (“dominant end” model): contemplation is really the only activity that makes us happy; it needs to find some space for practical agency.

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Maybe: the best human activity is by means of practical virtue; but the best activity *overall* is contemplation, which is unachievable for humans.

- Aristotle often calls contemplation 'divine', so maybe we should just take him literally.
- maybe contemplation is the final end, but we cannot possibly achieve it, and so must do with the second best, the practical life.

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- there is some textual evidence that Aristotle thinks that human beings can and should engage in contemplation (both in NE and in the *Protrepticus*).
- it follows from the function argument! The most human thing to do is to engage in contemplation!

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- perhaps there is a plurality of equally valuable ends – contemplation is an end in itself, but then so is the political life.
- or, perhaps, the end can be composed of many sub-ends
- it seems plausible that a life that's entirely self-sufficient would include multiple activities and hence inclusive ends; maybe neither the purely contemplative nor the purely political life would be entirely self-sufficient on its own.

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Against Inclusive Ends

- it would make the overall argument of book 10 very strange
- the whole mission of the *Nicomachean Ethics* seems to be to identify *the* form of life that's the happiest.
- it seems that for Aristotle, happiness can't be a mere aggregate of things
- Pluralism can lead to practical dilemmas (which life to choose?).

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- is the final end in the function argument theoretical or practical reasoning? Some argue that it must be theoretical (cf. the operation of the *nous* in the *De anima!*).
- Aristotle says explicitly, many times, that contemplation is the highest good: it is on the top of the hierarchy of ends, i.e., we do everything for its sake but we don't do it for anything else's sake.
- When talking about the highest good, Aristotle does not mention *practical* reasoning.

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Solution?

- Perhaps: practical wisdom is good because it imitates theoretical contemplation.
- so, the best life is the philosopher's, but the politician's life is also pretty good.
- Or, cf. the difference between extrinsic and constitutive means: the moral virtues would be constitutive means of intellectual virtue. In this case, the human good is both intellectual and encompassing.

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- natural philosophy: what do we need in a proper explanation? How is natural change possible? How does science work / what is the structure of scientific knowledge?
- metaphysics: the ontology of the *Categories*; individuals as primary. Form and matter and substance.
- “applied metaphysics”: living things and human beings
- human beings continued: virtues and the good life for humans.

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