

contemplation in nicomachean ethics

contemplation in nicomachean ethics, particularly the concept of theoria, represents the pinnacle of human flourishing, the highest form of eudaimonia. Aristotle, in his seminal work, meticulously outlines a path to the good life, and at its apex lies the activity of the intellect. This article will delve deeply into Aristotle's understanding of contemplation, exploring its nature, its divine character, its relationship to other virtues, and its ultimate role in achieving true happiness. We will dissect the unique position of the contemplative life within the Nicomachean Ethics, examining why it is considered superior to even the most virtuous practical lives. Furthermore, we'll explore the implications of this philosophical pursuit for our own understanding of a well-lived existence.

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The Supreme Good: Eudaimonia and the Role of Contemplation

Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics is fundamentally an inquiry into the nature of the good life, or eudaimonia. He argues that this ultimate human good is not mere pleasure or honor, but an activity of the soul in accordance with virtue. Among the various virtues, Aristotle identifies one that stands head and shoulders above the rest, the one that brings us closest to the divine and offers the most enduring form of happiness. This highest good, he posits, is none other than contemplation.

The pursuit of eudaimonia is not a passive state but an active engagement with the world and with oneself. It is a life lived well, a life characterized by excellence in all our faculties. However, Aristotle is keen to differentiate between various levels of human excellence. While practical virtues like justice, courage, and temperance are essential for a good and functioning society, they are, in his view, subordinate to a more profound and intellectually fulfilling activity. The contemplation of eternal truths offers a distinct and superior path to fulfillment.

The Nature of Contemplation (Theoria)

What exactly does Aristotle mean by contemplation, or theoria? It's crucial to understand that this is not mere idle daydreaming or passive observation. Theoria is an active and intense engagement of the intellect with the most noble and unchanging objects of knowledge. Think of it as the highest form of intellectual activity, where the mind is fully absorbed in understanding universal truths, the first principles of reality, and the nature of the divine. It is the exercise of the rational part of the soul at its absolute peak.

The objects of contemplation are inherently divine and unchanging. This includes abstract concepts, mathematical truths, and the ultimate causes of things. It's the pursuit of wisdom for its own sake, not as a means to an end, but as an end in itself. Unlike practical activities that are directed towards producing some external good or outcome, contemplation is intrinsically valuable. The pleasure derived from it is pure and self-sufficient, unlike the fleeting pleasures of the senses or the conditional satisfaction of achieving practical goals.

The Intrinsic Value of Contemplation

The allure of contemplation lies in its inherent value. We don't engage in philosophical inquiry to become a better carpenter or a more eloquent speaker, although these might be secondary benefits. We pursue knowledge and understanding because the act of knowing itself is deeply satisfying. It's like the joy of solving a complex puzzle or appreciating a masterpiece of art; the reward is in the experience of understanding and appreciating the intricate beauty of the subject matter.

This self-sufficiency is a key characteristic of the good life. A life that relies on external factors for its happiness is vulnerable to the whims of fortune. A life centered on contemplation, however, draws its sustenance from within, from the activity of the mind itself. This makes it remarkably resilient and enduring. The pursuit of truth is a personal journey, one that can be undertaken even in the face of adversity, offering a profound sense of inner peace and fulfillment.

Contemplation as the Highest Virtue

While Aristotle champions all virtues as essential components of a good life, theoria is presented as the supreme virtue, the activity that most fully realizes our human potential. This isn't to diminish the importance of moral virtues, which are indispensable for social living. However, the

contemplative life is considered more divine, more self-sufficient, and more continuously enjoyable than any practical pursuit.

The reasoning behind this hierarchy is multifaceted. The objects of contemplation are the highest and most divine things that exist. To engage with them is to engage with the noblest aspects of reality. Furthermore, the activity of the intellect, particularly when focused on eternal truths, is the most purely human aspect of our being. It is what sets us apart from other animals and connects us, in a sense, to the divine realm. This elevated status of contemplation makes it the ultimate goal of human existence.

The Uniqueness of Intellectual Virtue

Intellectual virtues, such as wisdom and understanding, differ significantly from moral virtues. Moral virtues are cultivated through habit and practice, shaping our character and guiding our actions in the realm of human affairs. Intellectual virtues, on the other hand, are developed through teaching and learning, honing our capacity for rational thought and understanding. Aristotle argues that the latter, when directed towards the highest truths, leads to a more profound and enduring form of happiness.

Consider the difference between being courageous in battle and understanding the principles of geometry. Both are valuable, but the latter offers a different kind of satisfaction, a clarity and certainty that is less susceptible to the unpredictable nature of human interaction. The intellectual grasp of unchanging truths provides a stable foundation for happiness that is less prone to erosion by external circumstances.

The Divine Element in Contemplation

Aristotle's assertion that contemplation is the highest human activity stems, in part, from its connection to the divine. He argues that the activity of the intellect is the most god-like part of us, and therefore, the activity that brings us closest to the gods is the activity of contemplating divine things. This isn't to suggest that we can become gods, but rather that by engaging our rational faculty to its fullest potential, we partake in something akin to divine activity.

The gods, as Aristotle understands them, are pure intellect, eternally engaged in contemplation of the most perfect and unchanging truths. By striving for *theoria*, humans can emulate this divine activity, achieving a state of blessedness that transcends the ordinary limitations of human existence. It's a profound aspiration, suggesting that our ultimate fulfillment lies in mirroring the very nature of the divine, as far as our mortal limitations allow.

The Unsurpassable Pleasure of Knowing

The pleasure derived from contemplation is of a unique kind. It is not the fleeting, sensory pleasure of eating a good meal or the emotional satisfaction of a successful social interaction. Instead, it is the deep, enduring joy that comes from understanding, from grasping the intricate workings of the universe or the logical necessity of a mathematical proof. This intellectual pleasure is considered superior because it is more pure, more lasting, and more intimately connected to our rational nature.

Imagine the satisfaction of a scientist who finally unravels a complex natural phenomenon or a mathematician who discovers a new theorem. This joy is not contingent on external praise or material reward; it is the intrinsic reward of intellectual discovery. This is the essence of the pleasure Aristotle attributes to contemplation, a profound and self-sustaining source of happiness.

The Practical Virtues vs. The Contemplative Life

It's essential to clarify that Aristotle does not dismiss the importance of practical virtues like justice, courage, temperance, and generosity. These virtues are fundamental for a well-ordered society and a good human life. We cannot live in isolation, and our interactions with others require a robust ethical framework. However, when considering the absolute highest good, the contemplative life emerges as superior.

Practical virtues are directed towards achieving certain outcomes in the human realm. For instance, justice aims at fairness in our dealings with others, and courage aims at overcoming fear in the face of danger. These are crucial, but they are contingent on the circumstances and the actions of others. The contemplative life, on the other hand, is self-contained and independent of external factors, making it a more stable and ultimate source of fulfillment.

The Limitations of Practical Existence

While the practice of moral virtues is noble, it can also be subject to the vagaries of fortune and the complexities of human relationships. A just person might still suffer injustice, and a courageous person might face overwhelming odds. The happiness derived from these virtues, while significant, is often mixed with the challenges and imperfections of the human condition. The contemplative life offers a refuge from these uncertainties.

Think of it this way: building a magnificent city requires great effort and skill, and its success is dependent on many factors, including the cooperation of its citizens and the favor of the gods. However, understanding the abstract principles of architecture or the laws of physics is a more direct and less precarious form of achievement. The intellectual realm offers a certainty and permanence that the practical realm often lacks.

Obstacles to Contemplation

Despite its exalted status, achieving a life dedicated to contemplation is not without its challenges. Aristotle acknowledges that the demands of human existence, including the need for physical well-being, social interaction, and the pursuit of practical necessities, can often interfere with the pure pursuit of knowledge. We are embodied creatures, and our physical needs and social obligations cannot be entirely ignored if we are to live a complete human life.

Furthermore, the nature of contemplation itself requires a certain disposition and a degree of leisure. It is not a pursuit that can be easily undertaken by those burdened by constant hardship or distraction. The pursuit of wisdom demands mental clarity, sustained focus, and an environment conducive to deep thought, all of which can be difficult to attain in the midst of life's daily struggles.

The Necessity of External Goods

While contemplation is the highest good, Aristotle is not a radical ascetic. He recognizes that certain external goods are necessary for the full exercise of our faculties, including the intellectual ones. A certain level of health, freedom from extreme poverty or suffering, and adequate leisure time are all prerequisites for dedicating oneself to philosophical inquiry. It is difficult to contemplate the nature of the universe when one is preoccupied with finding one's next meal.

Therefore, a balanced life that includes the pursuit of practical virtues and the acquisition of necessary external goods provides the foundation upon which a contemplative life can be built. It is not a matter of abandoning the world, but rather of cultivating the conditions that allow for the highest forms of human activity to flourish. The ideal life, for Aristotle, involves a harmonious integration of both the practical and the contemplative.

The Contemplative Life in Action: A Deeper Understanding

The idea of a purely contemplative life might seem abstract, but Aristotle offers insights into how it might manifest. It is a life characterized by the constant exercise of the intellect, an unceasing quest for understanding. This doesn't mean being detached from the world; rather, it involves a profound engagement with its underlying principles. Think of the great philosophers, scientists, and mathematicians throughout history who have dedicated their lives to unraveling the mysteries of existence.

Their work, driven by an insatiable curiosity and a love for truth, embodies the spirit of *theoria*. Even when engaged in practical tasks, individuals who possess a contemplative disposition will approach them with a heightened sense of inquiry and understanding. They will seek to grasp the underlying reasons, the broader implications, and the fundamental principles at play, thereby enriching their experience and elevating their actions.

Living Wisely in the Everyday

Even for those who cannot dedicate their lives exclusively to philosophical study, the principles of contemplation can inform our daily lives. It means cultivating a habit of reflection, questioning assumptions, and seeking deeper understanding in all our endeavors. When faced with a decision, a contemplative approach would involve not just considering the immediate consequences but also the underlying ethical principles and the broader impact of our choices.

This engagement with the world through the lens of reason and wisdom allows us to live more intentionally and more meaningfully. It transforms mundane activities into opportunities for intellectual growth and a deeper appreciation of the world around us. It is about bringing the disciplined and insightful nature of the contemplative mind into every aspect of our existence.

The Enduring Relevance of Contemplation

Aristotle's exploration of contemplation in the *Nicomachean Ethics* offers a timeless perspective on human happiness and fulfillment. In an age often characterized by relentless busyness and superficial distractions, his emphasis on the profound value of intellectual engagement and the pursuit of wisdom resonates more powerfully than ever. The concept of *theoria* challenges us to look beyond immediate gratification and to cultivate the inner life that leads to lasting contentment.

By prioritizing the development of our rational faculties and engaging with the most profound truths, we not only achieve a higher form of happiness but also connect with something larger than ourselves. The contemplation of eternal truths reminds us of our place in the grand scheme of existence and offers a path to a life of purpose, meaning, and enduring well-being. The quest for wisdom, as Aristotle so eloquently argued, is indeed the noblest and most fulfilling human endeavor.

Q: What is the primary meaning of "contemplation" in Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics?

A: In the Nicomachean Ethics, "contemplation," or *theoria*, refers to the highest form of human activity, which involves the intellectual engagement with eternal, unchanging truths and the first principles of reality. It is the activity of the rational part of the soul at its most excellent, pursued for its own sake.

Q: Why does Aristotle consider contemplation to be the highest good?

A: Aristotle considers contemplation the highest good because it is the most divine, self-sufficient, and continuously enjoyable activity. It engages the noblest part of our being (the intellect) with the noblest objects (eternal truths), leading to a form of happiness that is less susceptible to external circumstances than happiness derived from practical virtues.

Q: How does contemplation relate to eudaimonia?

A: Contemplation is presented by Aristotle as the pinnacle of *eudaimonia*, or human flourishing. It is the activity that most fully realizes our potential as rational beings, leading to the most complete and enduring form of happiness and a well-lived life.

Q: Are practical virtues irrelevant if contemplation is the highest good?

A: No, practical virtues are not irrelevant. Aristotle acknowledges their essential role in living a good and just life within society. However, he argues that contemplation represents a higher, more divine form of activity and fulfillment, even while practical virtues are necessary for a complete human existence.

Q: What are some examples of things contemplated in Aristotle's philosophy?

A: In Aristotle's philosophy, contemplation focuses on objects such as mathematical truths, the principles of metaphysics, the nature of the divine, and the fundamental causes of things. These are unchanging, universal truths that are grasped by the intellect.

Q: Can a person achieve a contemplative life while

also engaging in practical affairs?

A: Aristotle suggests that while a life solely dedicated to contemplation is the ideal, individuals can integrate contemplative principles into their practical lives by cultivating a habit of reflection, seeking deeper understanding in their actions, and striving for wisdom in their daily endeavors.

Q: What is the role of pleasure in the contemplative life?

A: The pleasure derived from contemplation is considered superior to other forms of pleasure because it is intrinsically linked to the activity of the intellect and the grasp of truth. It is a pure, enduring, and self-sufficient pleasure that arises from the activity itself.

Q: What are the external requirements for a contemplative life according to Aristotle?

A: While contemplation is an internal activity, Aristotle acknowledges that certain external goods are necessary for its full exercise. These include basic necessities like health, sufficient leisure time, and freedom from extreme hardship, which allow the individual to dedicate their mental faculties to philosophical pursuits.

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