

An Examination of the Contemplative Life and Social Relationships in Nicomachean Ethics

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Aristotle has contributed tremendously to the realm of moral ethics by theorizing the happy and fulfilling life. In his representative work, Nicomachean Ethics, he explains the role virtue plays in consolidating that kind of life. While scholars have conducted countless kinds of literature in understanding how significant having an excellent character is towards achieving well-being, there seems to be a lack of interest in interpreting Book X of NE, which specifically talks about a contemplative life built on self-sufficiency and meaningful social relationships. Although the two concepts appear contradictory on the surface, in this essay, I argue that they are neatly coherent and compatible with each other. I aim to clarify this subtle relationship to further emphasize how practical and well-thought-out Aristotle's philosophy is, and consequently, why it deserves to be read and examined by us to this very day.

In *Nicomachean Ethics* Book X, Aristotle writes that the most satisfying and fulfilling life is a life of study, one based on continuous and reflective contemplation. He does, however, acknowledge that for humans to thrive in communities as social and political beings, they must maintain relationships with other people in order to gain insights from the external world. Are these two points contradictory, since social interactions might interfere with one's focus on

introspection? Or are they compatible with one another if we recognize the nuanced connection between them? In this essay, I want to discuss how social relations, especially friendships that are complete, noble, and mutually beneficial, are essential for a self-sufficient life of study for ordinary people.

The initial step to solving the above-mentioned puzzle is to have a clearer picture of what Aristotle means when he refers to a contemplative life. I offer two perspectives for understanding the contemplative life. The first is to recognize the pleasant and self-sufficient nature of this kind of life. Book X describes pleasure as being highly context-related. Pleasure is not freestanding but is rather an epiphenomenon that comes along with distinct activities. Besides that, Aristotle also points out that certain pleasures are derived from the replenishment of preexisting emptiness, such as the joviality we feel when we consume food to drive out the pain of hunger.¹ In contrast, a contemplative life is not a stuffing process, “since no emptiness of anything has come to be, there is nothing whose refilling might come to be.”² It contains a pure and firm pleasure that engages with a person’s higher-order faculties. Furthermore, a contemplative life follows the formal criteria that Aristotle has been developing throughout the whole book. A contemplative life’s value is not “derivative upon certain external ends.”³ Engaging oneself in this life is pleasurable and whole simultaneously. One continuously finds joy since contemplation is serious yet enjoyable. At the same time, this life which is “superior in

¹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2019), 185.

² Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 185.

³ Nancy Sherman, *The Fabric of Character: Aristotle’s Theory of Virtue* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 98.

excellence” has all its value fully reserved within itself rather than on anything further or external to it.⁴

After understanding the structural features of the contemplative life, one might wonder about its substantial content. What exactly does a contemplative life refer to? The life devoted to *theoria* ought to be lived by “someone who has a full understanding of the basic causal principles that govern the operation of the universe, and who has the resources needed for living a life devoted to the exercise of that understanding.”⁵ That is to say, the contemplative life Aristotle refers to ought to be carried out toward certain overarching schemas that are built upon—yet surpass—a simple discernment of mundane reality. Hence, contemplation as a method to get closer access to the unchanging nature of the world is not tantamount to deliberation. Contemplation enables one to be conscious of one’s thinking patterns from a more holistic standpoint instead of focusing solely on the subject of thinking. Aiming toward the eternal truths of the universe and the sanctity of life, contemplation is rumination toward the “fine and divine.”⁶

Nevertheless, can normal human beings adapt to this way of living that transcends mediocrity? Is this life a bliss that ordinary people could even have a chance to experience? Aristotle addresses this inquiry later in Chapter 7 of Book X. He first admits that the

⁴ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 194.

⁵ Richard Kraut, “Aristotle’s Ethics,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, The Metaphysics Research Lab at Stanford University, updated Fall 2022, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2022/entries/aristotle-ethics/>.

⁶ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 193.

contemplative life he mentions “would be superior to the human level.”⁷ Insofar as one remains a human being, there will be innate obstacles stopping one from fully reaching that kind of life since one does not possess all the necessary divine elements. However, Aristotle also states that “rather, as far as we can, we ought to be pro-immortal, and go to all lengths to live in accord with / our supreme element; for however much this element may lack in bulk, by much more it surpassed everything in power and value.”⁸ In short, there are hindrances in human nature that make the perfect life of contemplation unapproachable. But we should treat that life with respect and yearning since it deserves to be treated as such. In other words, the most ideal paradigm of the contemplative life seems unreachable, yet this fact doesn’t render Aristotle’s philosophical discussion void. Instead of debating whether it is ever possible for ordinary human beings to gain access to an unworldly life orientated toward understanding, we should rather discuss the way to reach a contemplative life “not as a god would, but as a human would, with the boundaries defined by our social and moral lives.”⁹

Following that, the remaining task in the rest of the essay is to figure out how humans can live a life of contemplation within their own stretch of capability “*as far as is possible*.”¹⁰ It is not an either yes or no question about whether humans should pursue a standpoint that is “unconditioned by historical circumstances.”¹¹ What should really be taken into consideration is

⁷ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 195.

⁸ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 195.

⁹ Sherman, *The Fabric of Character*, 101.

¹⁰ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 194.

¹¹ Sherman, *The Fabric of Character*, 101.

the extent to which humans could navigate toward the life that “allows for a most perfect form of happiness and self-perfection.”¹² If it is intrinsically implausible for human beings to reach the life of the philosophy king upon the hill, then how should they shape a way of living that has lofty connotations in a more transcendental dimension while remaining suitable for themselves? Aristotle’s perspective on the external resources contributing toward *Eudaimonia* will be particularly helpful in response to these theoretical conundrums.

To clarify, Aristotle never denies the necessity of external resources for flourishing as individuals. A fully prosperous life requires a set of abundant resources. Besides certain basic needs such as shelter, food, and things alike, social connections are the proper mediums for a person’s cultivated and habituated virtues to be articulated and implemented into real life. Aristotle states that even a wise person is still in need of other people “as partners and recipients of his just actions.”¹³ A person ought not to live in total solitude, as external apparatuses based on socially constructed bonding and interactions can participate in one’s life in meaningful and influential ways that one cannot generate and sustain on one’s own.

Nevertheless, the life of study proves that it is likely for a virtuous person to gain happiness with a relatively small extent of dependency on externalities since a contemplative life requires fewer extrinsic goods to a lesser degree. That does not mean a person devoted to contemplation does not need those resources to flourish. It rather refers to the idea that external

¹² Sherman, *The Fabric of Character*, 101.

¹³ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 194.

goods are necessary, but only necessary to a certain extent. One's life will be shaky if one places excessive weight on things out of his scope of control. "Needing necessary resources" and "believing that one can only be well off with those resources" are intrinsically two very different mindsets, and the uniqueness and praiseworthiness of a contemplative life is that it admits the former but rejects the latter. It accepts the irreplaceable status of external resources in one's life, but it reinforces that contemplation needs to be generated from self-sufficiency that is solid and stable on its own behalf. A successful way of living contemplatively is to be willfully ignorant toward the roles external resources play in a person's life: their importance is being recognized and appreciated without generating inordinate dependence on them. One's state of happiness should not be unduly determined by the extent of plentifulness of external resources one can attain in a lifetime, that is, "we must not think that to be happy we will need many large goods."¹⁴

Undoubtedly, contemplation is often abstract and theological. But one cannot achieve that phase if one has not immersed oneself in cultivating the corresponding virtues in particulars. What role does friendship play within this stretch between the down-to-earth and the divine? In Book VIII, Aristotle differentiates among three kinds of friendship: friendship based on utility and expediency, friendship based on easily dissolvable passion and pleasure, and complete friendship based on both parties' similarities in virtues. Later on in Book IX, Aristotle further elaborates on the desirability of the complete friendship compared to the other two. For a base

¹⁴ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 197.

person, it might be extremely difficult for him to have complete and noble friendships since he is at odds with himself. He is constantly distracted by things that are not constructive toward his personal well-being. He is filled with internal conflicts, therefore he cannot have genuine friendships since he cannot even appear loveable to himself, as “the bad man does not seem to be amicably disposed even to himself, because there is nothing in him to love.”¹⁵ In comparison, a good person must be a self-lover since he has fine and harmonious desires guided by reasons and beneficial to both him and others. Furthermore, he can also derive happiness and satisfaction from observing pleasant behaviors of his intimate ones and categorize those behaviors as conduct he is capable of performing as well. In this way, a decent person is related to his friend as he is to himself, since a friend is a lively reflection of the virtuous qualities one already possesses and the potential ones one can foster accordingly. A complete friendship is thereby characterized by similarities in virtue from both parties and a reciprocal goodwill for the other person to flourish, thus consolidating this kind of human relationship to be truly equal, noble, and pleasurable. Aristotle tactfully summarizes this contrast that “the good man should be a lover of self (for he will both himself profit by doing noble acts, and will benefit his fellows), but the wicked man should not...following as he does evil passions.”¹⁶ A complete friendship thus becomes the mirror one observes one’s own being while offering opportunities for one to build bonds that extend beyond one’s inner self and stretch into the outside world.

¹⁵ Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. David Ross (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 170.

¹⁶ Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. David Ross, 175.

I will go on to discuss in further detail the role of friendship, as mentioned in the text, “but the wise person is able, and more able the wiser he is, to study even by himself. Though, presumably, he does / it better with colleagues, even so he is more self-sufficient than any other [virtuous person].”¹⁷ The simple argument that a highly wise person will be able to study better with others’ company in life despite the fact that he is truly self-sufficient makes me ponder. Even though this person can generate ample vigor and momentum to keep supporting his intellectual pursuits, Aristotle still senses others’ value and efficacy in bettering this life of study. One possible way of understanding is that locking oneself in total solitude and isolation carries the risk of creating an information cocoon, where one doesn’t gain a lively and sincere exchange of ideas, evidence, and propositions but rather resides in a bubble of self-justification. Consequently, one might not be able to combat the impact of personal prejudice and preference, which might negatively impact one’s grasp of the fundamental truth. Others’ company could either function as resonance or logical challenges toward one’s held beliefs, thus extending the breadth and depth of one’s thinking. Therefore, self-sufficiency and external relationships do not need to be mutually exclusive concepts. A person can preserve his self-sufficiency through contemplative activities that do not posit toward any other ends, while at the same time receiving energy and reflections from other communal beings. Social relationships do not exist to deteriorate the pureness and integrity of one’s self-sufficiency if they are as complete as Aristotle says. Quite the contrary, positive social links affirm the elements that constitute a virtuous

¹⁷ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin, 194.

person. They are healthy sources of deepening one's self-sufficiency, therefore stabilizing one's self-awareness. All these steps are primarily important in constructing full-fledged practical wisdom, the concordance between theoretical reasoning (i.e., contemplation), and practical reasoning. Thus, a contemplative and self-sufficient life is never detached from relationships among different social agents, just as we as normal human beings are never distant from the outside atmosphere that encompasses us.

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