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Item Type	Article
Authors	Verhaegh, Marcus
Publisher	Universitade Federal de Santa Catarina
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Download date	2026-11-05 13:00:17
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/171018

CONTEMPLATION AND POLITICS
IN THE LIFE OF THE ARISTOTELIAN PHILOSOPHER

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Any interpretation of Aristotle's account of contemplation must deal with one central issue. Namely, it must deal with the question of whether happiness is singular, consisting of activity in accordance with the contemplative faculty, or whether happiness is rather inclusive, consisting of activity in accordance with the ethical virtues in addition to consisting of contemplation.

The key passages concerning this issue are: **A**) ***NE*** 1098a15, "[The] human good turns out to be activity of the soul in accordance with excellence, and if there are more than one excellence, in conformity with the best and most complete."[1] **B**) ***NE*** 1177a10-18, "If happiness is activity in accordance with excellence, it is reasonable that is should be in accordance with the highest excellence; and this will be that of the best thing in us…. [T]he activity of this in accordance with its proper excellence will be complete happiness. That this activity is contemplative we have already said." **C**) ***NE*** 1178b28, "Happiness extends, then, just so far as contemplation does, and those to whom contemplation more fully belongs are more truly happy…." [**eph' hoson dê diateinei hê theôria, kai hê eudaimonia, kai hois mallon huparchei to theôrein, kai eudaimonein**, ou kata sumbebêkos alla kata tên theôrian: hautê gar kath' hautên timia.]

At a first glance, these passages would seem to support the singularist reading. Indeed, Richard Kraut has argued that they support such a reading on a second and third glance as well.[2] However, it is possible to interpret these passages otherwise, so as have them fall under the inclusivist reading. John Cooper, for instance, makes just such a move. The singularist would argue that in passages such as **A** + **B**, happiness is defined with

[1]The translation I am using is ***The Complete Works of Aristotle***, Revised Oxford Translation, Ed. Barnes, J., Princeton University Press 1995. Note that Aristotle makes this claim about the human good with the provisio that it is true if the function of man is an activity of soul "in accordance with, or not without, rational principle…."

[2] Kraut, Richard***, Aristotle and the Human Good***, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1989.

reference to activity in accordance with the highest excellence, *instead* of with reference to activity in accordance with all the human excellences. Cooper, however, takes Aristotle to simply to be ranking forms of happiness alongside forms of excellence. I.e., on Cooper's reading, Aristotle is saying in **A** + **B** that the fullest happiness does not consists simply in activity in conformity with any given excellence, but especially requires contemplative activity.[3]

Now while Aristotle surely does believe this, it does not seem very credible to read **A** + **B** as expressing this belief. If we are told that happiness is activity in accordance with excellence, we are going to assume that it is activity with all forms of human excellence until told otherwise. So Aristotle has no reason to point out that if there is more than one form of excellence, the activity in accordance with highest one will count as happiness; of course it would count. But if Aristotle is making the additional point that the fullest happiness would require the highest excellence, why would he not simply say this? I.e., why do we not find Aristotle saying that if there is more than one form of excellence, the highest or most "complete" happiness consists of activity in accordance with the highest excellence?

Instead, we find him twice, in the passages quoted, simply identifying happiness with contemplative activity. True, we do find one mention of complete happiness as contemplation, but this does not change the fact that happiness *simpliciter* is two times mentioned with the same identification.

This is not to say moral excellence might not be required in humans in order to contemplate—as Aristotle does more-or-less say this.[4] The point is simply that happiness itself consists of contemplation, not in the particular supports for contemplation needed by the kind of being one is. That the supports—i.e., the ethical virtues—might by themselves also allow for a secondary, derivative form of happiness is a complication of the picture, admittedly.[5] But to claim that activity in accordance with the ethical virtues constitutes a

[3]See Cooper, John, ***Reason and Emotion: Essays on Ancient Moral Psychology and Ethical Theory***, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1999, p. 225, where Cooper argues that Aristotle is saying the following: "[H]appiness is virtuous human activity, and if there are more than one human virtue happiness is activity of all of them, including most particularly activity of the best among the virtues."
[4]See ***NE*** 1178b32-1179a12.
[5] See ***NE*** 1178a8-22.

secondary form of happiness is certainly not to claim that such activity is necessary for happiness proper; if this were the case, one would have no standard to begin with by which to judge that the happiness of moral life is derivative.

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I will not pursue the singularist vs. inclusivist debate further in this essay. Having laid out the gist of this debate, I wish to examine the singularist interpretation put forth by Richard Kraut.

My main thesis is that while Kraut gets many things right, he nevertheless goes wrong in at least one crucial way. Kraut ascribes what I will term the maximalist view to Aristotle: that the more time one spends contemplating, the happier one will be. Key to his reading is passage **C**, which he takes to be stating the maximalist view flat out. When Aristotle writes of "those to whom contemplation more fully belongs," Kraut takes him to mean "those who spend more time contemplating." I reject this maximalist reading, and argue that we can take passage **C** to refer to variances in happiness and contemplative activity which are more qualitative in nature than can be captured in the idea of "the more you contemplate, the happier you are."

If one rejects the maximalist view, an entirely different picture emerges of the philosophical life. There is one particular change in this picture I want to look at closely: that of the contrast between the philosophical life and the political one. My contention is that if we reject the maximalist view, we also lose the view of the philosophical life as a life that aims at philosophy rather than politics. On my view, the philosophical life is one that aims to secure the good of contemplation. But this does not mean that the philosophical life is a failure if, the good of contemplation secured (or expected to be secured), one also aims to secure the good of statesmanship. It is not a case of having to aim at the contemplative to the exclusion of the political. On the other hand, I take the political life to involve just such an exclusion: the political life is one that aims to secure the good of statesmanship, and *not* the good of contemplation. The statesman aims lower than the philosopher.[6]

[6]See ***NE*** 1095b17-1096a5. It might be thought that the ***Politics*** contradicts this view in claiming equality for the philosophical and political life. But the ***Politics*** does not in fact claim such equality. (See Taylor, C. C. W., "Politics," ***The Cambridge Companion to Aristotle***, Ed. Barnes, J., Cambridge University Press 1995, pp. 251-2). 1324a23-1325a34 leaves us with the idea not that the philosophical and political life are equal, but

It should be apparent that I am incorporate certain elements of the inclusivist reading into my non-maximalist brand of the singularist view. Like the inclusivist, I argue that the happiness of the philosopher can properly consist in activity in accordance with the ethical virtues as well as in contemplation. (This is to be distinguished from the maximalist, singularist view, which sees any detraction from time spent contemplating to be a mar on the happiness of the philosopher.[7]) Unlike the inclusivist, however, I do not argue that the philosopher's happiness necessarily consists in activity in accordance with the ethical virtues as well as in contemplation. It is true that the philosopher will need the ethical virtues insofar as he needs to live—or in fact does live—with others.[8] But the philosopher needs the ethical virtues in this case as supports for contemplation, not as a necessary component of his happiness. The happiness of contemplation is sufficient for him, as it would be for any being who attained it.

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I turn now to Kraut's ground for endorsing the maximalist reading. Passage **C** if of course important in this regard, as it suggests that being more contemplative equates with being happier. But why should we read this passage as saying that spending more time contemplating equates with being happier? Kraut cites two additional passages: **D**) ***NE*** 1177n24-6, "[I]t follows that this [contemplation] will be the complete happiness of man, if it be allowed a complete term of life (for none of the attributes of happiness is incomplete).[9] ***E***) ***NE*** 1098a18-20, "[To the idea that happiness consists in activity in accordance with (the highest) virtue], we must add 'in a complete life.' For one swallow does not make a summer, nor does one day; and so too one day, or a short time, does not make a man blessed and happy."[10]

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that both sides of the debate have some good points (as well as some bad ones). Nonetheless, nothing said contradicts the idea that the theoretical life, properly understood (e.g., as active), is the best life.

[7] See Kraut, p. 31-5, 71-3. Kraut does not speak of a "mar," putting things in more positive terms: in general, the more contemplation, the better. From which I conclude: in general, the less contemplation, the worse.

[8] See ***NE*** 1178b32-1179a12.

[9] Kraut cites this passage on p. 67 of his book. Note that in all cases I am quoting the Oxford translation rather than from Kraut's own translation.

[10] Kraut cites this passage on p. 67 as well.

Kraut rightly interprets **D + E** as saying that "contemplation must extend over a certain length of time for a person to be considered happy."[11] Kraut goes on to contrast the life of one who is a philosopher for ten years versus one who is a politician for thirty, concluding that the philosopher would be considered happier by Aristotle. Kraut further concludes that there is some threshold of time spent contemplating that needs to be passed before one can be said to be happy, and if one cannot meet this threshold, one should aim instead to achieve the secondary form of happiness available to the politician.[12] This view seems to me to be correct. However, this view in no way entails the further one Kraut endorses: "[Aristotle's point in passage **C**] is that once this period of time [i.e., that needed for a person to be considered happy] is long enough, then increases in contemplation constitute increases in happiness." Kraut provides no justification for this maximalist reading of passage **C**. This is unsurprising, as the maximalist reading goes against the whole grain of Aristotle's thinking. Aristotle's intent in passages such as **D + E** is to establish certain minimum thresholds for "completeness." His point is that not just any amount of time contemplating (or practicing moral virtue for that matter) will do; his target are those who would hold that only an instant is necessary to secure the good of contemplation. Aristotle is as such simply attempting to differentiate himself from a highly radical view. We have no reason to read him as also saying that "and the longer one lives, the more happiness one can have" or anything of the sort. Happiness requires a certain length of time; but the happiness of one's life is not increased by additional time.

How then should we interpret passage **C**? The passage occurs in the context of a comparison among animals, men, and gods with respect to the question of contemplation. So the simplest and best interpretation of what Aristotle means in saying that, "Happiness extends… just so far as contemplation does, and those to whom contemplation more fully belongs are more truly happy…," is that gods are the happiest, men are less happy because our lives bear only a "likeness" of the contemplative activity that belongs to them, and animals are not happy at all because they have no ability to contemplate. There is no need to import into this passage the idea of a calculus of temporal units during which one is happy, with the happiness being increased as more units of the best kind are accrued.

[11] Kraut, p. 69.

It might be objected that the only way we can distinguish between the contemplation of gods and men is on the basis of time. This would seem an unfounded objection for a couple of reasons. First of all, divine contemplation is likely envisioned by Aristotle to differ from human contemplation in kind as well as in duration, and there is no reason to suppose this difference in kind is due solely to duration. Second of all, even if difference in duration is key, it is not obvious why the difference in amount of time spent contemplating between two human lives would be significant when compared with the eternity of divine contemplation. (Does a slightly longer line bear a better "likeness" to an infinite line that does the slightly shorter one?)

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Kraut, then, is correct in ascribing a "threshold view" to happiness, but incorrect in his maximalist reading. I.e., Kraut rightly claims that a certain amount of time spent contemplating is necessary for happiness, and if this can't be achieved, one should aim lower, at the political life; but Kraut wrongly claims that, once achieved, the happiness of one's life is increased by more time spent contemplating.

Reaching the "threshold" is equivalent to what I earlier termed "securing" the good of contemplation. Having secured the good of contemplation, one's life would be judged happy should one then die, at least so long as one does not die in an ignoble manner.

Given that this is the case, one's life would also be judged happy if, in addition to securing the good of contemplation, one also engaged in political activity. Kraut also allows for this: he even claims that if two lives contained an equal amount of contemplative activity, the happier one would be the one with the greater amount of morally virtuous activity.[13] But in comparing two lives with differing amount of contemplative activities, Kraut would say that, for Aristotle, the life with the greater amount of contemplative activity would be the happier one, regardless of the differences in morally virtuous activity.

Having rejected the maximalist view, I see no support for such a claim. Furthermore, it seems to me there are problems with the whole practice of comparing differing amounts of happiness. It is seems correct to claim that for Aristotle, some are only

[12] Ibid., p. 71.

partially happy, and that virtuous activity gives only a secondary kind of happiness in comparison to that found in contemplation. One might even wish to further distinguish between partial secondary happiness and partial complete happiness, although I think there is something suspect about that last class of happiness.[14] Regardless, I see no reasons to differentiate further than these three or four classes of human happiness. In particular, I know of no direct textual evidence supporting the idea that there are gradation in happiness to be marked among humans who have secured the good of contemplation (putting aside those passages I have already rejected as irrelevant to the issue).

This said, and having rejected the maximalist view that a greater amount of time spent contemplating would equate to a greater amount happiness, can any case be made for Kraut's claim concerning the absolute desirability of a greater amount of contemplation? One problem in rejecting the maximalist view which one might see, is that of the point of one's actions once happiness has been attained, if they are not for the sake of an increase in happiness. I will return to this question below. I would only like to remark here that in a certain sense, one's actions would have to be for more happiness—i.e., more time living where one is happy. In this sense, Kraut is correct: once one has secured the good of contemplation, further time spent contemplating would count as further time being happy, and this might be termed an "increase" in happiness.

But Kraut means more than this. First of all, on the basis of passages **C**, **D**, + **E**, he claims that one will be happier the more one contemplates during that period of time which counts as a complete life.[15] I have already laid-out my reasons for rejecting this view, which largely come down to questioning the textual basis for it. But Kraut also makes a second claim: not only does one want units of time that involve the maximum amount of contemplation possible, one wants a maximum of these units, in that this constitutes a maximum of time where one is happy. The assumption here is that the only way to "stay happy"—i.e., keep adding units of happy-time—is to keep spending a great deal of one's time contemplating. It is this assumption which I find questionable. And in rejecting it,

[13] Kraut, p. 293n.
[14] I am taking "complete happiness" to refer to the happiness of contemplation versus the secondary happiness of moral virtue. In this I follow Kraut.
[15] Ibid., p. 69

one must also reject the conclusion that Kraut draws from it, that one should desire a maximum of units of contemplative-time in one's life.

The alternate view that I am advancing is that the fully happy life could consist of a mixture of theoretical and political activity, so long as it involves a certain minimal amount of contemplation over a certain minimal amount of time.

We have seen that passages **D + E** support the idea that the contemplative activity must take place over a certain minimal amount of time. And it is reasonable to suppose that it is not the case that one must live a certain amount of time, but that one must live a certain amount of time performing a certain amount of virtuous action. And although perhaps Aristotle's thinking is not all that clear on this issue, we might suppose that one of the ideas he has in mind is that the minimum amount of time one must live is that amount of time necessary to perform a certain, "complete" amount of virtuous action. However, one might equally well suppose that Aristotle also simply doesn't think a very short life should count as a happy one. Whatever the case—and though it would be nice if we new what the ultimate justification for his temporal requirements for happiness were—it seems safe to suppose that these kinds of reasons were operating in his thinking. And so we may conclude that the happy life involves a certain minimal amount of contemplation over a certain minimal amount of time.

If we reject the idea that there are gradations of happiness in the happy life (which of course is not to deny that one may be only partially happy), then it follows that the life containing the minimum of contemplation will be just as happy as the life containing far more contemplation. And so the life containing the minimum of contemplation plus a great deal of political activity will be just as happy as the purely theoretical life. Conversely, the pure-as-humanly-possible philosophical life will be just as happy as the philosophical life which also aims at political activity to a great extent.

This is a good place to again take up the question of the point of one's actions once the good of contemplation has been secured, if they are not for the sake of an increase in happiness. As I have indicated, one's actions *are* then for the sake of an "increase" in happiness in the sense of living a life that continues to be happy. But they are not then for the sake of an increase in happiness in the sense of living a life that will be judged to be

"happier." Again, this follows from denying that are gradations of happiness in the happy life.

But if Kraut is wrong to say that increases in contemplation constitute increases in happiness, it does not follow that he would be wrong to say that the philosopher aims to contemplate as much as possible. We must ask ourselves: if all actions are for the sake of happiness, does this just mean that they are for the sake of a happy life, or does it mean that all actions also aim at being happy in any given period of time?[16] This is in interesting question, because it might seem that if "momentary happiness" is part of the human *telos*, one would in fact always aim to contemplate, because contemplation would allow one to take part in the happiest activity possible at any given moment. However, this seems to me to be a misleading way to characterize Aristotle's position. I think it is correct to say that we aim to be happy at any given moment, as well as aim to have a happy life. It is just that we *are* happy at any given moment in virtue of having a happy life.[17] While happiness can perhaps be lost, it is nonetheless something stable and lasting, not something identified simply with this or that moment of virtuous activity.[18] As such, while it is true that the philosopher aims to have the minimum amount of contemplation necessary for the happy life, it does not in fact follow that he also necessarily aims to contemplate as much as possible (i.e., every moment that he can).

So if one's actions are not for the sake either of a life judged "happier," or, more simply, of a maximum of moments containing contemplative activity, what then are they for the sake of? They would be for the sake maintaining one's happy life: e.g., the philosopher acts to contemplate sufficiently, and to pursue further virtuous activity, including more contemplation. What would rule out the possibility of "resting on one's laurels" after one has contemplated sufficiently—e.g., one does some philosophy, and then

[16] We must keep in mind that there is some question as to what Aristotle means by "action" in this context. In "The Role of *Eudaimonia* in Aristotle's Ethics" (in ***Essays on Aristotle's Ethics***, Ed., Rorty, A.O., UC Press 1980, pp. 359-376), John Macdowell argues that only certain of what we would take to be actions actually count as action-aiming-toward-the-good—namely, those actions following from rational choice.

[17] See Broadie, S., ***Ethics with Aristotle***, New York: Oxford University Press 1991, p. 51, for some discussion of these issues.

[18] At ***NE*** 1101a1-14, we find both the claim that the happy man can never become miserable and the claim that the happy man will not recover his happiness quickly if he loses it. Aristotle perhaps only means that the blessed man will never lose his happiness; or perhaps he is saying that even if the happy man loses his happiness, he will still have partial happiness?

sleeps and drinks a lot? There are two answers possible: either one could say that the philosopher just wouldn't want to "retire" to a frivolous life, or one could say that if he did, he would lose his happiness. However, it is just not clear to me that Aristotle thought about these kinds of issues. One who had developed his theoretical virtue would contemplate unless kept from doing so; one who had developed his ethical virtues would perform morally virtuous acts unless kept from doing so; and one who had developed both kinds of virtue would contemplate and/or perform morally virtuous acts unless kept from doing so. What barriers to virtuous action, if any, could deprive someone of their happiness is an interesting question, though not one I can address here. On the other hand, the question of why the virtuous person, on Aristotle's account, would keep acting virtuously is just not an interesting question.[19]

No, the question we are left with is if how the philosopher is going to decide between contemplating and performing virtuous acts at any given point, if he does not have the decision procedure of "so far as possible, increase one's happiness by contemplating." The obvious answer is that it is a question of *phronesis*. Even though practicing *phronesis* is not the highest activity a human can perform, it is nonetheless the activity one engages in to decide when to pursue the highest activity of contemplation and when to pursue other kinds of virtuous action. It should be noted that this seems in keeping with much of Kraut's discussion of altruism in Chapter Two of his book. However, one need to not imagine that the philosophical *phronomos* will reason in the way Kraut describes—i.e., always acting "for the sake of" contemplation.

Since *phronesis* is necessary precisely because virtue cannot be codified, I will not attempt to lay-out any rules the philosopher would use in deciding how much to contemplate. Something like "as much as possible" does not seem wholly off the mark, but, on the other hand, this makes the alternative of morally virtuous activity sound too much like a burden one tries to avoid at all cost—something like having to sit in on departmental committee meetings. Morally virtuous action contributes to the moral climate of the *polis*; this is something Aristotle, a great believer in the imitative nature of human beings, is committed to. The virtuous *polis* will, in the end, allow for better

[19] In general, the question "Why be moral?" is not one Aristotle addresses. See Macdowell, ibid.

contemplation.[20] As such, Kraut's thesis that all is "for the sake of contemplation" may have something to it, so long one gives this "for the sake of" a truly wide berth, so that one might aid contemplation that occurs long after one is dead.[21] One must keep in mind, though, that this would not make performing such actions-in-aid of contemplation—i.e., morally virtuous ones—any kind of burden or necessarily second-best choice. In short, the philosopher may happily act as a statesman; how much he does so is a question of his situation.

[20] This is something emphasized by in Amelie Rorty's "The Place of Contemplation in Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics" (in Rorty, ibid.). See in particular p. 392.

[21] This is not to say that one's happiness will be effected by these very posthumous results; the fact that one performs activities tied to such results will.