

On Aristotle's Defense of Philosophy in *Ethics* X.7-X.8

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In what follows, I intend to work through Aristotle's presentation of the philosophic life in *Nicomachean Ethics*, X.7 and X.8. The fundamental interpretive rift among scholars centers on this: is the praise of *theoria* at the end of the *Ethics* in contradiction with Aristotle's previous, extensive discussion of and praise for moral virtue? Does Aristotle argue for the union of moral and intellectual virtue, or does he hold that *theoria* is in some sense separable from moral virtue?

Before turning to our analysis of Aristotle's text, it is worth briefly laying out some of the fundamental alternatives. Among mainstream scholars, Martha Nussbaum finds the view that Aristotle elevates "a Platonic quasi-divine intellect centered life" to be "at odds with the general anthropocentrism of Aristotle's method."¹ Against this, Nussbaum argues for "a view of the *human* good ... in which intellectual activity is one of many intrinsic goods."² Similarly, J. L. Ackrill has argued that Aristotle "does not tell us how to combine or relate" the claims about the superiority of *theoria* and the discussion of moral virtue in the earlier books of the *Ethics*, and that that the tension present in the closing chapters of the *Ethics* reflects a failure to completely clarify how Aristotle understands human nature.³

Others find a complete and consistent account in the *Ethics*, whereby there is no conflict between the closing claims about the superiority of the theoretical life and the earlier, more extensive discussions of the virtue of character. W.F.R. Hardie simply notes that the two are reconcilable: "that *eudaimonia* embraces non-theoretic activities is made clear ... in VI and X."⁴ On this account, the philosophic life *includes* the goods of the moral life (i.e., friends, family, and citizenship); as Hardie archly notes, he does not "find in X an 'intellectualist' doctrine in the sense of a fanatical self-dedication to metaphysics, a dedication which can do

¹ Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 373.

² Nussbaum, *Fragility*, 374.

³ J. L. Ackrill, "Aristotle on *Eudaimonia*," in *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*, ed. Amelie Rorty (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 15.

⁴ W.F.R. Hardie, "Aristotle on the Best Life for a Man," in *Philosophy* 54, no. 207 (January 1979): 42.

without the virtues and satisfactions of the family man and citizen.”⁵ Similarly, Richard Kraut rejects the view that there is a conflict in the *Ethics* as well: the conflict between the life of moral virtue as second best and the life of theory as best is more apparent than real, and the moral virtues are conducive to the philosophic life.⁶ For Kraut’s Aristotle “the philosophical life is the life of a good person, that is, someone who has and exercises the ethical virtues.”⁷ We should, he writes, “take the life in accordance with understanding and the life in accordance with practical virtue as two aspects of the one life that Aristotle is urging us to lead.”⁸ Perhaps, but the difficulty remains: Aristotle, as will be seen, does not simply say that the contemplative man is virtuous. He says that he *chooses* to do the things that have to do with moral virtue, which is not the same thing.⁹

There’s another possibility, one which I find comes closer to what Aristotle seems to be saying, but nonetheless misses out on an important qualifier. Andrea Wilson Nightingale writes on the non-utilitarian aspect of *theoria* in the *Ethics*:

if *theoria* has no bearing on virtuous *praxis*, then the theoretical philosopher does not have to be an exceptionally good person (and, correlatively, he need not practice *theoria* in order to engage in virtuous action). In fact, even if the theoretical philosopher does practice some virtues to live well overall, he will organize his life around the pursuit of a noetic activity that is neither practical nor political. As a private *theoros*, Aristotle’s philosopher is not obliged to report back to people on his findings or to justify his activity in practical terms. In fact, *qua* theorist, he does not interact in the social or political world. Theoretical wisdom, in short, is essentially amoral.¹⁰

Nightingale’s view, as presented here, seems too radical. Ronna Burger notes in *Aristotle’s Dialogue with Socrates* that “an individual living the contemplative life, to whatever extent he does associate with others, will choose, we assume, to act in accordance with virtue—which is not the same as acting out of a virtuous disposition; thus, he too will need external goods to live as a human being.”¹¹ This is not to say that *theoria* is amoral in any simple sense; rather,

⁵ Hardie, “Best Life,” 43–44. Such a view is arguably confirmed by the example of Aristotle himself (the great counter-example, perhaps, would be Socrates, whose trial exemplifies the tension between *praxis* and *theoria*).

⁶ Richard Kraut, *Aristotle on the Human Good* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 15–24.

⁷ Kraut, *Aristotle on the Human Good*, 6.

⁸ Kraut, *Aristotle on the Human Good*, 24.

⁹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1178b5–6. All citations, unless otherwise noted, are from Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Joe Sachs (Newburyport, MA: Focus Philosophical Library, Pullins Press, 2002).

¹⁰ Andrea Wilson Nightingale, *Spectacles of Truth in Classical Greek Philosophy: Theoria in its Cultural Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 222.

¹¹ Ronna Burger, *Aristotle’s Dialogue with Socrates* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 393–94.

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it is to say that the one who lives a life devoted to contemplation nonetheless, still, lives a *human* life. One does not live “*qua* theorist,” one lives as a human being.¹² It is precisely this embodiment of the contemplative soul as a rational and political animal that seems to be neglected in Nightingale's account.

At the root of these disagreements, Aristide Tessitore finds that there is “a deliberate and ultimately consistent tension in Aristotle's ethical teaching” and, further, that much of the debate about this comes from the assumption that the *Ethics* is “best understood as a philosophic exposition in the very specific sense that it is intended to present philosophers with a systematic account of the best way of life, one that can and should be analyzed in light of the current philosophic discussions on this subject.”¹³ Tessitore suggests that

the *Ethics* takes its bearings from and is addressed to morally serious persons. Moreover, it is simultaneously addressed to two distinct types of morally serious persons: those who are not and never will be philosophers *and* those who are potential philosophers.... Aristotle's study is directed not only to those who are attracted to moral goodness, but also and perhaps especially to those legislators, or at least potential legislators, with some experience of politics.¹⁴

I am sympathetic to this view. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle is really taking up the question of the best way to live, and the two strongest candidates for this way of life are the political and the philosophical, action and *theoria*. The point of the *Ethics* is that *both* of these ways of life have dignity, but that one is nonetheless superior to the other. In the following, we will work through the difficulties in the text, always with recourse to Aristotle's

¹² Robert Bartlett and Susan Collins, “Interpretive Essay,” in *Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Bartlett and Collins (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2011) note that Aristotle, in X.8, demotes “the life and the happiness connected with moral virtue on the grounds that these are “characteristically human.” They are surely right in this, but I cannot follow them in their suggestion that “*human* here” is used as something close to “a term of disparagement” (298). Aristotle can recognize and praise the activity of the *epistemonikon* without rejecting hylomorphism. We might recall *Physics* 193b1–5, in which Aristotle suggests matter and form are distinct only in the *logos*, and similarly *On the Soul* 412b5–9, where Aristotle says the question of whether body or soul are one is unnecessary.

¹³ Aristide Tessitore, *Reading Aristotle's Ethics: Virtue, Rhetoric and Political Philosophy* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996), 12. Though a lengthy discussion of the question of the audience of the *Ethics* is impossible here, the view that it is written in the same manner as a contemporary philosophical treatise seems preposterous, and there is much evidence to the contrary. The interested reader is referred to Tessitore, *Reading Aristotle's Ethics*, Burger, *Aristotle's Dialogue with Socrates*, and Carnes Lord, “Introduction,” in *Essays on the Foundations of Aristotelian Political Science*, eds. Carnes Lord and David O'Connor (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991). Lord's *Education and Culture in the Political Thought of Aristotle* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982), 30, and Richard Bodéüs, *The Political Dimension of Aristotle's Ethics*, trans. Jan Garrett (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993), chap. 4, note that Aristotle's inquiry is neither *strictly* a political one nor a philosophic one.

¹⁴ Tessitore, *Reading Aristotle's Ethics*, 19.

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own writings, to demonstrate that he is unequivocally praising the philosophic life as best, while nevertheless granting the political its proper dignity and due.

The seventh and eight chapters of *Nicomachean Ethics X* are extremely important for understanding Aristotle's intention. It is in these chapters that Aristotle begins to make explicit some of the more radical claims that were implicit earlier in the *Ethics*. Both of these chapters are worth considering at length, as they are ultimately concerned with the final presentations of *eudaimonia* and *theoria* in the *Ethics*. Opening the chapter, Aristotle writes that if *eudaimonia*:

is being at work in accord with virtue, it is reasonable that it would be in accord with the most powerful virtue. And, this ... would belong to the best part. Now, whether this is intellect or some other part that by nature seems to rule and lead and have a conception about things that are beautiful and divine and to be either divine itself or the most divine of the things in us, the being at work of this part in accord with its own proper virtue would be complete *eudaimonia* (1177a10-17).

Previously, it seemed as though being “merely” moral would be sufficient to achieve *eudaimonia*. Now, however, Aristotle says *eudaimonia* in the complete and most authoritative sense is grounded on an activity of the part of the soul he named the *epistemonikon* (1139a5-15). Recalling book VI in this regard, *phronesis* was the excellence of the *logistikos*; here, Aristotle implicitly downgrades it, just he had in VI.7 (1141a20-b1). Much of what Aristotle has written prior about happiness and pleasure in book X has aimed at identifying the relationship between the two, and providing us with a principled way of distinguishing among pleasures.¹⁵ He continues to do so here in X.7, offering a justification for the view that philosophical pleasures are superior, linking *eudaimonia* to the highest activity of the most authoritative part of the rational part of the soul. *The* distinctively human activity proves to be contemplation, i.e., philosophy. If *eudaimonia* is activity in accordance with the virtue of the *best* part of us, on this account it would be an activity of the intellect. The philosophic life would be the happiest life. This line of argument was intimated in IX.8, when he noted that one who is truly a lover of the self “takes for himself the things that are most beautiful and good, and gratifies what is most authoritative in himself, and obeys it in

¹⁵ Aristotle on this point represents *the* serious alternative to a thinker like John Stuart Mill. Mill, in *Utilitarianism*, prefers intellectual pleasure over bodily pleasure, but he can't really offer a principled justification for his claim that pleasures of the mind are superior to pleasures of the body.

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all things" (1168b29–31). Here Aristotle makes it explicit and presses the claim more forcefully. Similarly, in I.5, Aristotle had raised the possibility that the life devoted to contemplation could stake a claim as the life of *eudaimonia*. At that point, he did something peculiar: he said that he would drop consideration of the contemplative life, and instead he replaced it with the life of moneymaking. The happiness of the non-philosophic, but still moral, person, now proves to be *eudaimonia* in a secondary sense. The highest and most complete *eudaimonia* is the that of the philosopher, because the philosopher puts into act that which is the most divine thing in the human being, the intellect.

According to Aristotle, "this way of being at work is the most powerful," because

the intellect is the most powerful of the things in us. And, the things with which the intellect is concerned are the most powerful of the things that can be known. It is also the most continuous, for we are more able to contemplate continuously than to act in any way whatever. And, we believe that pleasure must be mixed with *eudaimonia*. And, by general agreement, the most pleasant of the ways of being at work in accord with virtue is that which goes along with wisdom. At any rate, philosophy seems to have pleasures that are wonderful in their purity and stability. And, it is reasonable that the way of life of those who have knowledge is more pleasant than those who are seeking it (1177a20–25).

Aristotle's discussion here (from 1177a26–b7) is concerned with the self-sufficiency of philosophy. Philosophic pleasures have a wonderful purity and stability, so the conclusion that those who pursue philosophic rather than bodily pleasures are happier is a reasonable one. Similarly, notes Aristotle those who attain such pleasures live happier lives than those who merely pursue them. *Sophia*, or the pursuit of *sophia*, philosophy, proves to be superior to the other virtues because of the self-sufficiency characteristic of both the pursuit and the possible acquisition. The wise, he says, can contemplate even when alone, although they can contemplate better with others. Contemplation proves to be the activity that is most akin to *eudaimonia* in that it's loved for its own sake and nothing comes from it; as Aristotle demonstrated in book VI, the *epistemonikon* engages in neither production nor action. Moreover, contemplation does not require much in the way of equipment. The wise person is capable of contemplating even when alone, though it is easier to perceive the highest in others—thus the contemplative life is improved by friends, but it is a good life even in the absence of friends.

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But there is still a need to consider the political. The claim that Aristotle rejected about politics and honor in I.5 nevertheless had *some* kind of plausibility. This passage, in book X, stretching from 1177b7-27, returns to political life or political action. Virtuous *praxis* is found most pre-eminently in politics and war. These actions are un leisured; they are not pursued only for the sake of what they bring. This points us to a permanent political problem. In general, human beings want the co-occurrence of political power and wisdom or *sophia*. But those who pursue, and ultimately acquire power are un leisured, while contemplation and *sophia* require leisure. The ironic solution in the *Republic* is the suggestion that you have to force the philosophers to become kings, or force kings to philosophize. Aristotle has a simpler solution, at odds with the superficial teaching of the *Republic* (but perhaps not so at odds with the actual teaching of the *Republic*).¹⁶ Aristotle's solution is the recognition that the wise have to educate the ruling class. Philosophers won't hold power. They need leisure in order to philosophize. But if the philosophers educate those who hold power, though the result will never be a perfect coincidence of political power and wisdom, one can come closer: the philosopher can improve the regime incrementally.¹⁷ The philosopher's education of the gentlemen is of crucial importance, for both the *polis* and philosophy itself. If politics and war concern action, and virtue in regard to these things involves political and military *actions* that are preeminent in "beauty and magnitude" (1177b18), but such actions are both un leisured and for the sake of something else, then the life devoted to such actions cannot be the life of *eudaimonia*.¹⁸ If the ones who engage in these actions are un leisured, and the actions they perform are instrumental to some other end rather than ends-in-themselves, this points toward some other way of life, i.e., the contemplative or philosophic life, as the highest or best or happiest life for the human being. The happiest life, then, is dependent on the perfect activity of the *epistemonikon*. Aristotle's analysis of our moral and political lives,

¹⁶ The section on tyranny in the *Politics* helps us see the difference between Plato and Aristotle, and therewith the vast difference between the political and the philosophic. The *Republic's* best regime is *still* the cave, and the philosophic life is qualitatively higher to the point of there being almost no connection whatsoever. Aristotle, starting in book IV of the *Politics*, is trying to introduce philosophy to statesmanship in order to reform regimes—even the worst. Aristotle is attempting to save the dignity of the political, which he says (cf. *Politics* II) Plato does not do. Aristotle intends to show us the possibility of philosophy aiding justice.

¹⁷ This is seen most clearly in *Nicomachean Ethics* IV.3's analysis of *megalopsychia*, which dialectically leads the self-proclaimed great-souled men to realize what it *really* means to be great-souled, i.e., not wealth, power, and what we today call "privilege," but rather the possession of *all* the virtues, for which *megalopsychia* is an ornament.

¹⁸ Cicero, *On Duties* II.1-6, turns to philosophy only after being driven out of politics.

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while treating them with the utmost seriousness and dignity, nonetheless points toward a way of life that goes beyond and is superior to such lives.

But, as Aristotle immediately notes, there's an obvious objection here:

such a life would be greater than what accords to a human being for it is not insofar as one is a human being that he will live in this way, but insofar as something divine is present in him. And, to the extent that this surpasses the compound being to that extent also the being at work of it surpasses that which results from the rest of virtue. So, if the intellect is something divine as compared with the human being, the life that is in accord with the intellect is divine as compared with the human life (1177b25-30).

The philosophic life seems too high for a human being and is possible only insofar as the divine is present in a person. If the intellect is divine, Aristotle says, in comparison to the human things, then the life in accordance with the intellect is the most divine life. And, if this is so, he says, we should contemplate the eternal things and live our lives in accordance with intellect. The wise man is now distinct from the moral man: the moral virtues, concerned with action, are therefore political virtues, but the truly happy life is the life according to participation in the divine, i.e., the life lived according to *nous*.¹⁹ Even if intellectual pleasure is lesser in terms of quantity, it is greater in terms of quality and is appropriate to what he calls the "governing and better part," i.e., the part human beings think of as most being themselves (1178a3).²⁰ Aristotle aptly notes at the end of the chapter that "what is appropriate by nature to each being is best and most pleasant for each. And so, for a human being, this is the life in accord with the intellect if that most of all is a human being. Therefore, this life is also the happiest" (1178a5-8).

Now, at the end of chapter seven, Aristotle can state the superiority of the philosophic life and philosophic activity more directly, because his audience of gentlemen (or self-proclaimed great-souled men) have, hopefully, been transformed by his argument. They are not in the same condition they were at the start of the argument. They are receptive to the argument Aristotle is giving in favor of the theoretical life as being the highest kind of life. There's one last point to consider in this chapter. Aristotle writes that:

¹⁹ Recall the discussion of the satisfaction of the best part of the human being in book *Ethics* VII.

²⁰ See Aristotle, *On the Soul* 414a10-15, 414b15-20.

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If the intellect is something divine as compared with a human being, the life that is in accord with the intellect is divine as compared with the human life. But one should not follow those who advise us to think human thoughts since we are human and mortal thoughts since we are mortal. But as far as possible, one ought to be immortal and to do all things with a view toward living in accord with the most powerful thing in one self. For even if it small in bulk, it rises much more above everything else in power and worth (1177b30–1178a1).

Now, what does it mean to say that one *ought* to be immortal? For Aristotle, human beings are complexes of body and soul, and bodies die. How is it that the mortal compound can be immortal? Elsewhere, he speaks of a drive toward immortality that manifests in the reproductive act, but he goes further and claims it ultimately manifests in *all* activities undertaken by living things.²¹ Here, his scope is narrower. What Aristotle means is that you can be “immortal while you are alive.”²² The mortal intellect, which is the most divine thing in the human being, can contemplate the immortal or unchanging things. One participates in immortality through the contemplation of the whole. Further, Aristotle notes, “each person would even seem to be this part,” i.e., the *epistemonikon*, “if it is the governing and better part. It would be strange then if someone were to choose not his own life but that of something else” (1178a1–3). *The* distinctively human life proves to be the life of the philosopher—it is the life of the activity of the *epistemonikon*. Other ways of life are in a sense just as subhuman as the life of sensual pleasure proved to be in I.5. Aristotle’s claim is similar to the famous Socratic claim about the unexamined life.²³ The distinct, and most completely human way of life is this philosophical life. “What is appropriate by nature to each being is best and most pleasant for each. And, so for a human being, this is the life in accordance with the intellect, if that most of all is a human being” (1178a7–10).

While X.7 focused on the superiority of the activity of the *epistemonikon*, X.8 focuses on the relation between *theoria* and the other virtues. It’s here that Aristotle reiterates, in a surprisingly open way, the superiority of the contemplative. The *eudaimonia* achieved in accord with virtue of character is “happy in a secondary way” (1178a9–10). The most

²¹ Aristotle, *On the Soul* 415a30–b1, writes: “That is the goal towards which all things strive, that for the sake of which they do whatsoever their nature renders possible.” On this account, the choice for death and glory on the part of an Achilles or Socrates is just as much driven by the orientation toward participation in immortality as is the procreative drive. Here, in the *Ethics*, Aristotle will suggest that philosophic activity, too, is ultimately aimed at some kind of immortality.

²² Quotation from one of my own teachers, Leo Paul de Alvarez.

²³ See Plato, *The Apology*, 38a.

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complete *eudaimonia* is found via the life of intellectual virtue (and, ultimately, the most complete virtue of the highest part of the rational part of the soul: the virtues of the *epistemonikon*, which come together to establish *sophia*). Here, *phronesis* once again emerges as occupying a lower position, as it did in book VI, wherein Aristotle noted that *phronesis* and politics are only the highest thing *if* the human being is the highest thing; shortly thereafter he notes that the human being is not the highest or best being in the *kosmos* (1141a21-1141b1).²⁴ Further, the right thing in matters relating to virtue of character will always be dependent upon *phronesis* and these things are related to matters that have to do with the status of the human being as a kind of complex of soul and body. The virtues or excellences of the compound (i.e., of the rational animal), are going to be of a human sort. *Phronesis* is linked to virtue of character: the sources of *phronesis* are dependent upon virtue of character while the right thing belonging to virtue of character is dependent upon *phronesis* (1178a15). These may also be entangled with the passions that are coequal with the compound being, but the virtues of the compound are of a human sort. Thus, the life and the *eudaimonia* that are in accord with these are human as well. But, he says, the happiness that belongs to the intellect is separate from this other human, all too human happiness that grounds itself in the other virtues. The *eudaimonia* characteristic of the intellect seems to be separate and distinct from this secondary *eudaimonia*. Aristotle writes that this most complete *eudaimonia*:

would seem to have little need of external props or less than virtue of character has. For both, there is a need for necessary things and let it be equal, even if someone involved in politics goes to more trouble about his body and things of that sort since it would differ to a small extent, but for their activities, there will be a great difference. For the generous person will need money for performing generous acts. And so will a just person for paying back what is due. And, a courageous person will need strength if he is to accomplish any of the things that go with his virtue. And, a temperate person will need opportunity, for how else will he or any of the others be manifest. It is also a matter of dispute, whether the choice or the actions are more determining of virtue since it is present in both. It is clear that the completeness of it would consist in both together, but for the actions, many things are needed and more of them to the extent that the actions are a greater magnitude and more beautiful. But for someone who contemplates, there is no need of such things for his being at work, rather one might

²⁴ One can note in this regard that in regimes that deny anything higher than themselves, science itself is often subject to political pressure, not merely in terms of the research agenda, but in terms of the conclusions reached. Consider Lysenkoism and Soviet biology, or the Nazi promotion of *Deutsche Physik* (or *Arische Physik*) over and against the work of Einstein and other physicists, whose work was labeled as *Jüdische Physik*.

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say they get in the way of his contemplating. But insofar as he is a human being and lives in company with a number of people, he chooses to do the things that have to do with virtue and will have need of such things in order to live a human life (1178a25-b8).

Thus, the *eudaimonia* of the philosopher has little need of external props or equipment. That doesn't mean it has no need of them, however - the philosopher is after all a human being. Obviously, the activities of the other virtues require external goods or "equipment" to be enacted (cf. 1099a30-b5). Contemplation-as-such doesn't require such things. In fact, beyond a certain bare minimum, they might even get in the way of the proper activity of the *epistemonikon*. Aristotle concedes that there is a difficulty in regards to the question of whether choices or actions are more determinant of virtue, since "it is present in both" (1178b1), but notes that for *praxis* "many things are needed, and more of them to the extent that the actions are of greater magnitude and more beautiful" (1178b2-3). None of this should come as any surprise to us, as Aristotle had introduced us to and worked through these difficulties earlier in the book. But immediately thereafter he says something shocking: "for someone who contemplates there is no need of such things for his being-at-work; rather, one might say they get in the way of his contemplating. But insofar as he is a human being and lives in company with a number of people, he chooses to do the things that have to do with virtue, and thus will have need of such things in order to live a human life" (1178b4-8). In other words, the contemplative or philosophic type engages in the actions of moral virtue out of choice, and out of human nature, and out of a need to live with other human beings (after all, the philosophic man is still a man, and thus a political animal). What Aristotle has *not* said is that the contemplative or philosophic soul is characterized by the unity of reason and desire that characterized the virtuous as opposed to the merely continent or self-restrained. Aristotle's emphasis here is on choice and the need to live in community, and thus on the need to do "the things that have to do with virtue." But doing the things that have to do with virtue is *not* the same as being virtuous. Thus we are forced to ask ourselves whether or not the contemplative is, or can be, truly virtuous - or does the contemplative merely do the things of moral virtue because such actions are practically necessary for the contemplative? The suggestion seems to be the second.

Nietzsche's account of the philosopher in *Genealogy of Morals* proves to be helpful here, though we need not follow him all the way. There, Nietzsche writes that "*la bête*

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philosophe... instinctively strives for an optimum of favorable conditions... Thus the philosopher abhors marriage, together with that which might persuade to it—marriage being a hindrance and calamity on his path to the optimum.”²⁵ The philosopher *appears* externally to be an ascetic, according to Nietzsche, not because the philosopher rejects pleasure as bad or low, but because the philosopher pursues something higher, the pursuit of which would be hindered by pursuing other, lower pleasures.²⁶ For Nietzsche, the philosopher benefits from a

voluntary obscurity, perhaps; an avoidance of oneself; a dislike of noise, honor, newspapers, influence; a modest job, an everyday job, something that conceals rather than exposes one; and occasional association with harmless, cheerful beasts and birds whose sight is refreshing; mountains for company, but not dead ones, mountains with eyes (that is, with lakes)... we philosophers need to be spared one thing above all: everything to do with ‘today.’ We reverence what is still, cold, noble, distant, past, and in general everything in the face of which the soul does not have to defend itself and wrap itself up.²⁷

From the outside, the philosopher looks like the virtuous man, the ascetic or the temperate, but in actuality, there is just one desire that outstrips all other possible desires. In *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche brings up a story that is told by Cicero in the *Tusculan Disputations* in which the Persian physiognomist Zopyrus comes to Athens and encounters Socrates. Zopyrus claimed to be able to identify the character of the soul by examining the appearance of the face. Upon encountering the famously ugly Socrates, Zopyrus pronounced him “a pit of all bad appetites.”²⁸ Everyone present laughed at Zopyrus: they’d never seen Socrates indulge in *any* vice. Socrates, too, just laughed and said, “you know me, sir.” In other words, Socrates confesses to being a pit of all bad appetites. It’s not that Socrates isn’t moved by these bad appetites; rather, there is another appetite or passion that outstrips them all: the Socratic desire for knowledge allows him to dominate these other bad appetites. While

²⁵ “On the Genealogy of Morals,” in *The Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), III, §7. We need not follow Nietzsche in this, for, while we have the example of Socrates’s difficult marriage (cf. Xenophon, *Symposium*, II.9-10), we also have the example of Aristotle’s own marriage.

²⁶ Cf. Nietzsche, “On the Genealogy of Morals,” III, §8.

²⁷ Nietzsche, “On the Genealogy of Morals,” III, §8.

²⁸ “Twilight of the Idols,” in *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols and Other Writings*, trans. Judith Norman, ed. Judith Norman and Aaron Ridley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), *The Problem of Socrates*, §3. See also Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*, trans. J. E. King, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press/Loeb Classical Library, 1927), 4.37.

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Nietzsche and Aristotle do not have identical teachings, they have both discerned that the philosophic life involves a certain kind of detachment. The philosopher cannot be indifferent to the community, since the philosopher is dependent upon the community. But the philosopher is also incapable of the simple commitment to virtue that characterizes the many. The philosopher sees not just the beauty or nobility of moral virtue, but the complex ground upon which it sits; more importantly, the philosopher recognizes the superiority of contemplation over *praxis* and thus over both *phronesis* and politics. We may laugh at Thales for falling into a hole while contemplating the heavens, but in truth, when he *chose* to be concerned with the practical things, he succeeded: his contemplative activity gave him the knowledge necessary to profit off a bumper crop of olives.²⁹

Returning to Aristotle's argument, we can continue to discern the distinction between the second-order happiness of the merely moral, and the higher-order happiness of the philosopher. Aristotle had previously referred to the intellect and the activity thereof as being divine. Here, in X.8, he clarifies what he had meant by this in his discussion of the gods (1178b10-23), which serves to further support the claim that "complete happiness is a contemplative activity" (1178b8). It seems to be "ridiculous," he suggests, to say that the gods perform acts of justice or courage or generosity or temperance. In other words, the gods do not engage in *praxis*, and therefore do not engage in the things of moral virtue. The things involved in *praxis* are "small and unworthy of the gods, but surely everyone supposes that they are alive at any rate and are therefore at work, for they are surely not asleep like Endymion." But when someone who is living is "deprived of acting and still more of making" (1178b20), nothing remains save contemplation or *theoria*. The being-at-work of a god, which is "surpassing in blessedness," can only be a contemplative activity, "and therefore among human activities, the one most akin to it would be the most happy" (1178b3-25). So, the only activity left for the gods (if there are gods) is contemplative; therefore, the philosophic or contemplative life is the most divine life and the happiest life.

As a consequence, we have to reconsider a claim Aristotle had made much earlier in the book. It seemed, on the basis of the psychology that emerged over the course of the first three books, that animals (and children) could not participate in *eudaimonia* because the psychological process described in III.1-4 was inaccessible to them. Now we are seeing that

²⁹ Cf. *Nicomachean Ethics* VI.7, but also *Politics* I.11.

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the inaccessibility of *eudaimonia* has less to do with practical reason or the *logistikon* and more to do with theoretical reason.³⁰ Non-rational animals (whether by nature or by incomplete development) cannot engage in this sort of activity due to the difference in terms of the powers of the soul. “For the gods,” he writes, “the whole of life is blessed” because the only activity they can engage in is contemplative, “and for human beings it is so to the extent that there is in it some likeness to such a way of being-at-work” (1178b24–26). So *eudaimonia* “extends as far as contemplation does,” and insofar as a being is capable of contemplation, that being is capable of *eudaimonia*—Aristotle is now explicit on this point. *Eudaimonia* is some sort of contemplation, but he also recognizes that this requires some degree of external prosperity, “since nature is not self-sufficient for contemplating” (1178b33). One needs health, food, and “other attentions to be present” (1179a1); admittedly, one needs them less than one would for other ways of life. One does not “need many things or grand ones” to achieve *eudaimonia* if *eudaimonia* is a consequence of contemplation moreso than anything else (1179a1–5).

Of course, there is a danger of misinterpretation here. Upon recognizing that the highest human activity is contemplative, one might easily conclude that the philosopher has no concern with the political. The greatest recent statement of such a view comes from Nietzsche, whereby when Aristotle comments that the only things outside the city are either beasts or gods, “he left out the third case: you can be both—a *philosopher*.”³¹ The temptation for the philosopher, whose *activity* transcends *praxis* and the political (as Aristotle has so ably shown), is to think that oneself *also* transcends politics. This was, at least in part, the charge in Aristophanes’s *Clouds*: Socrates doesn’t recognize the degree to which his own contemplative activity depends upon the political community. We should also recall the discussion of *phronesis* in VI.8 of the *Ethics*; there, Aristotle noted the temptation to think that *phronesis*, as something involved with one’s own good, involved pursuing that good without concern for the wider community of which one is a part. But to do that is forget one’s own nature a political animal. The *phronimos* cannot be indifferent to the *polis*. The

³⁰ But recall the comment in VI.7 about how some animals are said to be prudent (1141a25–30). Aristotle had already laid the groundwork for the depreciation of *phronesis* in book VI. Only the inattentive reader is surprised by the explicit depreciation of it now.

³¹ “Twilight,” *Arrows and Epigrams*, §3; cf. *Beyond Good and Evil*, §150, and, of course, Aristotle, *The Politics*, translated by Carnes Lord (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 1253a1–5 and 1253a25–30.

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philosopher (who at this point seems to be differentiated from the *phronimos*),³² too, has to have an interest in the *polis* if for no other reason than that philosophy needs a minimal degree of external prosperity to be able to engage in its own characteristic activity.³³ The philosopher has an interest in the political precisely because the philosopher wants to philosophize, and therefore to maintain the conditions under which such activity is possible. We saw just prior that complete *eudaimonia* doesn't require the possession of many goods, or even particularly grand ones. "Self-sufficiency," writes Aristotle, "does not consist in excess any more than *praxis* does" (1179a4). One need not be a ruler to do the noble or the beautiful in action. One can act virtuously on the basis of moderate means as well.³⁴ Thus Aristotle suggests that Solon has "beautifully" said that the happy "are those who have been supplied with external things *in measure*, who have performed the most beautiful deeds ... and have lived temperately, for someone with moderate possessions is capable of living as one ought" (1179a10-18). Anaxagoras, too, suggests that the many will simply not be able to recognize such *eudaimonia* "since they judge by externals, perceiving these alone" (1179a18). So, Aristotle appeals to the authority of these earlier thinkers to bolster his own view, but then, immediately undercuts it by noting (as he did in the consideration of Eudoxus earlier) that while the harmonization of various arguments "have some trustworthiness," nevertheless "the truth in matters of action is discerned from deeds and from life" (1179a20). Consequently, such *logoi* must be examined for harmonization with deeds, and must be rejected despite their evident beauty and flattery of philosophy, if they do not harmonize with action. But instead of turning to an examination of the philosophic life *as such*, Aristotle instead notes that the person active with and concerned for the intellect, and who "is disposed in the best way toward it" (see his earlier discussion of gratifying the highest part of oneself) would also be most dear to the gods (1179a27). He qualifies this—as he must, given his earlier

³² There is a difficulty with this claim, however. The philosopher must be prudent in order to continue to philosophize. Is the philosopher prudent in a different way from the *phronimos*? Or is Thales, for example, *simply* prudent?

³³ Of course, this is not to say it is the *only* reason the philosopher might be concerned with the *polis*. After all, the philosopher is still human. Nonetheless, one is reminded of Hobbes, who suggested that his interest in politics stemmed from his desire to not have to bother with politics and return to his investigations in physics and optics. Consider, for example, *Leviathan* XLVI.6: "*Leisure* is the mother of *philosophy*; and *Commonwealth* the mother of *peace* and *leisure*."

³⁴ There's a difficulty here, though. Do we now have *three* senses of *eudaimonia*? In other words, do we now have to distinguish between a) the complete *eudaimonia* of the philosopher, and b) the higher but nonetheless secondary *eudaimonia* of the *megalopsychos* and c) the yet even lower *eudaimonia* of the merely moral person? Against this suggestion, Aristotle notes that "private people seem to perform decent actions not less than powerful people but even more" (1179a7-9).

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comments about the gods—noting that *if* the gods have some care for mortals, then it is “reasonable” that they “delight in what is best and most akin to them,” which would necessarily be the intellect (1179a28). Additionally, and still “reasonably,” they would “do good in return to those who love and honor this most,” i.e., those who place the intellect at the highest position and gratify it most of all. Such a one would be wise, and “most dear to the gods,” and therefore the wise person is the happiest (1179a30-33). The one active in the intellect is the one whose activity is most like that of the gods, and therefore most loved by the gods, and therefore most happy. The philosopher, then, is the only who can possess complete *eudaimonia*.