

## Why is contemplation so highly regarded by Aristotle?

by Gerhard Schuhmacher

In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, the Greek philosopher Aristotle (384–322 BC) provides an ethical model as to how humans should live and, in particular, he asserts that humans ought to aspire to leading a contemplative life. This essay will examine the question why contemplation is highly regarded by Aristotle by firstly having a brief look at Aristotle's definition of contemplation as well as interpretations by some other writers and then describing and discussing the prerequisites for a contemplative life, aspects of the contemplative life which contribute to Aristotle's high regard for contemplation and the relevance of his ethical system and in particular contemplation, to the Greek *polis* and our world. This will lead to the thesis that Aristotle's claim that it is not possible to provide precise rules for ethical action appears valid in that his ethical model, besides providing ethical absolutes, accounts for different societal conventions, civil laws and cultures. Further, it will lead to the thesis that Aristotle's contemplation should not be understood as a supreme end or good above the ends which are constituents of happiness, in that Aristotle distinguishes between practical activities or actions of the human being in accordance with moral virtues which are directed towards his/her fellow human beings aimed at the orderly functioning of society while contributing to the individual's 'secondary happiness' and intellectual activities such as contemplation which, in a sense, is directed towards pleasing the gods, and unlike moral virtues has no vices in that it has no deficiency and leads to complete happiness the more humans engage in it.

The classical Greek philosopher Aristotle (384–322 BC) in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, provides "an ethical model or a framework within which [human beings are able] to deliberate" (Charlesworth 1991, p.74) and choose their actions in accordance with moral virtues and are thus able to lead a morally good life which entails pleasures which lead to happiness. Aristotle's *Ethics* is in response to the Sophists, "a group of teachers [who] emerged to teach the arts of [public] debate and persuasion" (Charlesworth 1991, p.8) vital for the political life in the quasi-democracies (because women, foreigners and slaves were precluded from participating in public life (de Ste Croix 1981)) of Greek city states such as Athens, who proposed that ethical judgements cannot be universal but are subjective in that, for instance, what is considered right or just and what is considered wrong or unjust depends on an individual's perception which is linked to what is convenient for the individual (Guthrie 1967). It further builds on the ideas of Aristotle's mentors, Socrates and Plato, who had already opposed the Sophists by suggesting that human happiness is a function of morally good living. Aristotle (1976) asserts that morally good living is also a prerequisite for engaging in contemplation.

In Book X of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle (1976) refers to contemplation or *theoria* as being "both the highest [and most continuous] form of activity ... since the intellect [or *nous*] is the highest thing in us, and the objects that it apprehends are the highest things that can be known" (p.328). The answer to the question why Aristotle considers the intellect to be the highest thing and contemplation to be the highest form of activity of human beings flows from ideas by Socrates and Plato who suggest "that everything has ... [an excellence (*arete*) or] function (*ergon*) proper to it ... [which fundamentally distinguishes it from other things and in the case of human beings this unique excellence or function which distinguishes humans from other living things such as plants and animals] is to engage in rational activity" (Charlesworth 1991, p.15). Aristotle's notion of contemplation is somewhat ambiguous and has been interpreted by a number of philosophers.

Charlesworth (1991), for instance, interprets Aristotle's contemplation as being 'pure thought'. Barnes (1976) provides a more comprehensive definition by interpreting Aristotle's contemplation as being "something like a review or survey of existing knowledge ... [in that] the contemplator is engaged in the orderly inspection of truth which he already possesses; his task consists in bringing them forward from the recesses of his mind, and arranging them fittingly in the full light of consciousness" (p.38). In this context, Barnes (1976) provides the parallel of the art lover who first acquires a work of art and then immerses himself in admiration and enjoyment of his collection. As for the art lover, Barnes' (1976) interpretation of Aristotle's contemplation presumes that "a moderate supply of 'external goods' [such as

wealth, good ancestry, beauty, family and friends are] a precondition of ‘happy’ intellectual activity” (pp.37–8). However, Aristotle’s contemplation is an intellectual activity of humans who are similar to the ‘ideal ethical agent’ or *phronimos*, who is himself (in Aristotle’s view, clearly masculine) a kind of work of art. Having external goods at his disposal, the *phronimos* is a kind of, as Barnes (1976) calls it, ‘enlightened egoist’ who looks inwardly at his knowledge. The *phronimos* engages in intellectual activities while at the same time leading a morally good life based on engaging in practical activities in accordance with acquired excellences of character (moral virtues) which moderate his desires and emotions. The *phronimos* is the ideal to which humans ought to aspire.

Aristotle (1976) views the human being as a kind of hybrid between an animal and a god. On one hand humans have an animal nature with their actions, if uncontrolled, being driven by emotions and desires; on the other hand they also have a “rational part [(soul or *psyche*)]. ... This has two aspects: one amenable to reason, the other possessing it and initiating thought” (Aristotle 1976, p.75) which together enable humans to resist their emotions and desires and to act in accordance with moral virtues. Each human action in accordance with moral virtues entails an intrinsic pleasure and leading a morally good life therefore equals leading a happy life. “Fine [moral] acts ... [can be performed] even from a modest competence” (Aristotle 1976, p.334). However, Aristotle (1976) asserts that a morally good life by itself results in a kind of secondary, somewhat incomplete, happiness. It is contemplation or, as Charlesworth (1991) calls it, ‘pure thought’ which results in complete happiness (*eudaimonia*). At this level of engagement humans omit their actions and become, in a sense, god-like. The contemplative life can be seen as Aristotle’s answer to the question of what is the best life for a human being to lead. “A life of unbroken contemplation is something divine: no man can hope to live it for more than a portion of his time, and many men cannot aspire to it at all” (Barnes 1976, p.39), thereby having to content themselves with what Aristotle (1976) calls ‘secondary happiness’ derived from a morally good life. Leading a morally good life is a prerequisite for Aristotle’s contemplator who is presumed to have acquired moral virtues through training.

Aristotle (1976) lists a number of moral virtues or excellences of character (*aretai*) such as courage, temperance, liberality, truthfulness, friendliness, modesty, etcetera and provides a framework within which human beings are able to deliberate and choose actions which are in accordance with moral virtues. Aristotle (1976) asserts that each moral virtue or human disposition, which is acquired through training, has two opposites or vices, one being an excess, the other a deficiency of the activity in question. For instance, opposites of the moral virtue of courage are rashness (excess) and cowardice (deficiency). Aristotle (1976) proposes a doctrine of the mean in order to determine what constitutes the right amount of moral virtue in a particular circumstance, with the mean not being a mathematical mean between excess and deficiency (Charlesworth 1991) but a mean determined by the moral agent’s perception (which is likely to be influenced by the conventions of the particular society of which the moral agent is a member) as to how to “feel and act towards the right person to the right extent at the right time for the right reason in the right way” (Charlesworth 1991, p.43). Moral virtues are also, in a sense, connected (Charlesworth 1991) in that a person who has acquired the moral virtue of courage, according to Aristotle (1976), is also likely to possess other moral virtues such as temperance and truthfulness etcetera and thus flourishes as a human being by wanting to act in accordance with the moral virtues adopted (Charlesworth 1991). Such a person uses practical wisdom or *phronesis* (common sense), an intellectual virtue, to deliberate and choose his/her actions according to his/her moral virtues and therefore leads a morally good life. However, the desire for bodily pleasures, driven by humans’ animal nature, may lead human reasoning astray and result in non-virtuous activity. The question arises why humans would want to act in accordance with moral virtues?

Aristotle (1976) proposes that humans’ justification for their actions is that their actions are either ends or good in themselves and performed for their own sake or means to ends or goods such as health, knowledge, etcetera. Aristotle (1976) asserts that intrinsic pleasure accompanies each virtuous activity with ends as health, knowledge being constituents of happiness or *eudaimonia*. A morally good life therefore contributes to the happiness of a human being, although by itself, as mentioned before, such a life remains incomplete. Later philosophers such as Kant have criticised Aristotle’s ethics of happiness by suggesting that we act out of duty with possible resultant happiness being a mere by-product (Charlesworth 1991). Further, Aristotle’s ethical model has been criticised for not providing precise rules for ethical action and listing moral virtues which appear to reflect values of upper class Athenian society, which may have been by no means representative of the democracy practised in the majority of Greek city states (de Ste. Croix 1981).

Aristotle's claim (1976) that it is not possible to provide precise rules for ethical action appears to be valid. Aristotle's moral virtues are likely to be those which were not only valued in Athens but across the Greek city states and are likely to be recognised by all societies. As such, Charlesworth (1991) suggests that Aristotle's moral virtues can be considered *ethical absolutes* as they are derived from "facts about human nature" (p.75) which "are recognised as immutable, invariant and universal and not dependent upon man-made convention" (p.55). Aristotle's doctrine of the mean, on the other hand, makes allowances for societal conventions with the societal conventions of a particular society being reflected in its civil law. Charlesworth (1991) points out that, for instance, adultery is punished by different means in different societies. It follows that precise rules for ethical action cannot be drawn up as such rules would preclude different societal conventions, civil laws and cultures. Contemplation, being an intellectual activity, can be distinguished from practical activities in a number of aspects which explain Aristotle's high regard for contemplation.

For instance, in contrast to humans' practical activities which cease once the end or good has been achieved, humans are capable of continuous conscious intellectual activity with contemplation being "pursued as an end in itself" (Adkins 1960, p.344) although as mentioned earlier, "no man can hope to live it for more than a portion of his time, and many men cannot aspire to it at all" (Barnes 1976, p.39).

Another reason why Aristotle (1976) regards contemplation highly is that he views humans who are engaged in contemplative activity as being those who are most self-sufficient with this most self-sufficient of human activities entailing complete happiness "provided that it is allowed a full span of life" (Aristotle 1976, p.330). Such human beings "live in conformity with the highest that is in" (Aristotle 1976, p.331) them, namely their true selves and thus lead their own lives. Humans who cannot lead a contemplative life and have to content themselves with secondary happiness, based on leading a morally good life, require others to be able to perform morally good acts towards them. Aristotle (1976) provides various examples of this by citing that a just person requires others in order to perform just acts, a brave person requires others in order to perform brave acts and so on although, as mentioned earlier, a person who possesses the moral virtue of justice is likely to possess other moral virtues such as courage, thus generally being a morally good person whose character is likely to be reflected by behaviour which is just, brave and so on.

Philosophers have pointed out that although "Aristotle's analyses of the 'moral' virtues are, by and large, clear enough ... [,] the case of the 'intellectual' virtues is less clear" (Barnes 1976, p.37). In particular, some philosophers have interpreted Aristotle's contemplation or *theoria* as being a supreme good or end (Charlesworth 1991). However, Charlesworth (1991) points out that Aristotle considers "ends which are good in themselves ... [such as health, friendship or knowledge, which are achieved through activities in accordance with moral and intellectual virtues, to be] *constituents* of the good human life, the life of 'happiness'" (p.25) and it is further hard to see how "we [could] possibly justify [, for instance, moral virtues such as] courage or justice by showing that they were means to the end of pure contemplation" (p.71). The answer may lie in the observation that Aristotle's moral virtues and intellectual virtues appear to operate at different levels. Aristotle distinguishes between practical activities in accordance with moral virtues which are directed towards fellow human beings and aimed at the orderly functioning of society (the *polis*) and intellectual activities which, in a sense, are aimed at pleasing the gods and being rewarded by them. While moral virtues have two opposites or vices, namely excess and deficiency, "the activity of contemplation ... [, according to Aristotle,] has no deficiency" (Aristotle 1976, p.251). In fact, Aristotle (1976) asserts that contemplation possesses "a pleasure peculiar to itself, which intensifies its activity" (p.330). He does not use the word 'excess' regarding contemplation, only mentioning that contemplation has no deficiency and while 'excess' should be shunned regarding practical activities, the more one engages in contemplation, the more complete one's happiness will be and the more one will be dearer to the gods (Aristotle 1976).

With some humans being able to engage in contemplation or what Charlesworth (1991) calls 'pure thought', a divine activity as it in a sense enables these humans to become god-like, citizens of the Greek city states who had toppled the divine kings of Mycenae (Vernant 1982) found justification for their *poleis* and quasi-democratic systems. While earlier the Greek city state or *polis* was thought to have a divine origin, in that, for instance, the god Apollo was said to have inspired Lycurgus to found the city state Sparta (Charlesworth 1991), with the formation of Greek colonies outside Greece in the fifth and fourth century BC, a rational foundation for the *polis* was necessary and sought by classical Greek philosophers (Charlesworth 1991). Aristotle (1976) appears to have come the full circle when he proposes that some human beings, presumably philosophers, at times are able to supplant the gods by engaging in contemplation, a divine

activity. Thus, the status of philosophers within society (the *polis*) is elevated and philosophy, the discipline concerned with pure thought, is able to “supplant the traditional forms of religious and mythical thinking” (Charlesworth 1991, p.7) and “provide a rational explanation of ... [not only for the Greek city state or *polis* but our] world and of our place in it” (Charlesworth 1991, p.5).

In summary, contemplation is highly regarded by Aristotle (1976) because leading a contemplative life can be considered Aristotle’s answer to the question of what life humans ought to live. Aristotle’s answer stems from his view that a contemplative life is a complete life which, in the first instance, presumes a morally good life. He appears to view the human being as a kind of hybrid between animal and god with reason and moral virtues serving to control humans’ animal nature. According to Aristotle (1976), no precise rules can be given for an individual’s morally good actions (*practical activities*) which are directed towards fellow human beings, contribute to the orderly functioning of society and entail pleasures which contribute to what Aristotle (1976) calls an individual’s ‘secondary happiness’. Aristotle’s claim appears valid in that any ethical system, while providing ‘ethical absolutes’, needs to leave room for societal conventions in determining what constitutes a particular morally good action. Complete happiness, according to Aristotle (1976), is a function of the contemplative life which also engages in contemplation, an *intellectual activity*. Contemplation, or what Charlesworth (1991) calls ‘pure thought’, enables humans to omit their actions which are characteristic of their animal nature, contemplate their knowledge and thus comprehend the highest things known to humans. Contemplation is characterised by being the highest and most continuous of all human activities entailing a ‘peculiar’ pleasure which reinforces its activity (Aristotle 1976). Therefore, contemplation should not be understood as a supreme end or good above ends good in themselves such as health, friendship or knowledge because unlike *practical activities* which, according to Aristotle (1976), should be characterised by an avoidance of the vices of excess and deficiency, contemplation has no deficiency. The more humans engage in contemplation, the closer they are to their gods and the more perfect will be their happiness. Thus, contemplation enables humans at times to displace their gods and Aristotle’s ethical system provides a rational explanation not only for the Greek *polis* in support of democracy and against divine kings, but also for our world.

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