

The Good Life

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What is the best life a human being can live? There can obviously be many different answers to this question with many different reasons. However, I would like to take an Aristotelian approach to this question. In order to do so, I will look specifically into Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, along with several secondary sources to clarify the central idea behind Aristotle's work. The problem is that there is controversy as to what exactly Aristotle's good life entails. I intend to describe in more detail this important issue and the arguments and objections that surround it. I also want to look at the relevance Aristotle's argument has for our lives today, and apply his ancient thought to our modern world, but with some modern changes and with a more modern understanding. In the first section I describe Aristotle's notion of eudaimonia, or human flourishing, and the three possible lives he considers as contenders for the best human life. I dismiss the life of pleasure, as Aristotle does not view it as a serious contender, and focus on the arguments for the political and the contemplative lives, and also consider the possibility of a mixture of both. In the second section I inquire whether Aristotelian eudaimonia is relevant to our contemporary lives, and discuss the reasons both to think not and to think so. I conclude that an Aristotelian conception of the good is relevant to our modern day with some slight modifications. In the final section I make specific recommendations for these modifications in order to provide a more progressive Aristotelian conception of the good as applicable to a society today.

Eudaimonia

According to Aristotle, eudaimonia is the highest good and the end purpose of human life; he therefore sets out to describe the life most consistent with the achievement

of the highest level of eudaimonia. As he holds the virtue of intellect to be the highest virtue, it also seems he holds a life most consistent with the use of this virtue to be the best life for achieving eudaimonia in the highest degree. However, there are arguments for and against this interpretation, showing the conflicting nature of Aristotle's thought. I begin this section by describing what Aristotle says about eudaimonia, and the three lives he holds as possible candidates for the best life. I also describe in detail arguments for both the contemplative life and the political life. I end this section with a possible interpretation that includes aspects from both lives into a single life, and hold this life to be the best life and the most consistent with eudaimonia.

It is helpful to begin by looking at exactly what Aristotle says in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Aristotle claims that the highest good is eudaimonia (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1095a). Eudaimonia can be translated as happiness, living well, or flourishing; it is something complete, as it is always worth pursuing for its own sake and never for the sake of something else (*NE* 1097a). All virtues such as honor, pleasure, or intellect we choose for themselves, but also for the sake of eudaimonia (*NE* 1097b). Aristotle claims that eudaimonia is self-sufficient, as he thinks the most complete good is also self-sufficient (*NE* 1097b). Aristotle makes clear that the term self-sufficient does not mean a person who is on his own, living a solitary life; instead a self-sufficient person lives along with his parents, children, spouse, friends, and fellow citizens, as man is by nature a social being (*NE* 1097b). Eudaimonia then is complete, self-sufficient and not secluded; it is the best, the noblest, and the pleasantest thing (*NE* 1099a). However, Aristotle does say that eudaimonia needs the presence of external goods as well, since it is impossible, or at least not easy, to perform noble actions without resources to do so (*NE* 1099a). Eudaimonia then requires complete

virtue and a complete life (*NE* 1100a). Aristotle claims that the eudaimon person will spend all or most of his time engaged in action and contemplation in accordance with virtue and he will bear changes in his fortune in a noble way, whether for the better or worse (*NE* 1100b). For the sake of argument, I do not want to disagree with Aristotle that eudaimonia, or human flourishing, may be the highest good, or that in all we do we aim for eudaimonia, as it seems plausible that each person wants to flourish and do so as best as possible. It is also not my objective to make this argument, but rather, I would like to focus on what exactly eudaimonia consists in.

Aristotle sets out three possible ways of life and investigates which of these three is most consistent with eudaimonia: the life of enjoyment or pleasant amusement, the life of politics or virtuous public service, or the life of philosophy or contemplation (*NE* 1095b). Aristotle states that the life of pleasant amusement is shared by slaves and animals, and he therefore considers it childish to exert oneself for the sole purpose of amusement or pleasure (*NE* 1095b). Instead, amusement and pleasure are to be regarded as relaxation, enabling one to better pursue the best life. Aristotle therefore does not even consider the life of pleasure to be a worthy contender for the best possible life.

The political life, or life of virtuous public service, is a suitable life for men according to Aristotle (*NE* 1095b). He states that man is by nature a political animal, and therefore naturally desires to live in a political community. However, to live the political life in pursuit of honor is wrong as Aristotle thinks it is too shallow (*NE* 1095b). This would be comparable to pursuing a virtuous life for the wrong reason, i.e. fame. Aristotle worries that even virtue is lacking something, because a person can be considered virtuous even

while he or she is inactive (*NE* 1095b). Aristotle does not want to allow for a person to be able to sit at home all day and be considered virtuous merely because he or she is not being vicious. He therefore says the virtuous life is only acceptable if one is virtuous and serves the public in an active way, such as being a virtuous statesman (*NE* 1095b). The virtuous life is also not self-sufficient because it needs other people to engage in the virtues with, as well as external resources to better perform these virtues. A person cannot be charitable without the proper goods to give to away and without another person to whom to act charitably. The political life then requires an active use of the virtues, in such a way that benefits the community as a whole.

C.C.W. Taylor makes a strong argument for the necessity of a political life in the quest for eudaimonia by looking into Aristotle's *Politics*. Taylor makes note that Aristotle's *Politics* is not an inquiry "into the nature of the state, or into the foundations of political authority, but to moral theory itself" (Taylor 233). According to Taylor, the *Politics* is represented by Aristotle as a necessary continuation of his *Nicomachean Ethics*, designed to complete his work on the subject matter. Because human beings cannot achieve eudaimonia except in a political society, political theory is neither a distinct subject nor an application of a moral theory to that political society. Instead, Taylor views political theory as "a discipline ancillary to moral theory" (Taylor 233). Aristotle's fundamental concept is based on the human good, and the role the state plays in enabling that good, as that human good is not achievable except in the context of the political society. Taylor's main argument is that, contrary to modern theorists who question why the individual should accept the authority of the state, Aristotle instead has to "make good the claim that individual good is unattainable except to an active participant in a political community" (Taylor 234).

Taylor claims that the *Politics* presumes the description of the human good as described in the *Ethics*: the human good is activity of the soul in accordance with the excellent functions of practical and theoretical rationality. However, the arguments Aristotle lays out in the *Ethics* seem only to show that eudaimonia requires a communal life, not necessarily an active political life. Aristotle insists that eudaimonia requires certain types of relationships with others, such as friendships and master/slave relationships, but he does not maintain that eudaimonia requires that the individual be involved in any of the political workings of the polis. Taylor argues that Aristotle's claim is specific enough to include that one must live and participate in the life of the polis in order to flourish, and that we must look into Aristotle's account of the polis to clarify this claim.

Taylor argues that Aristotle's account of the polis is characterized by his philosophy of nature, as expressed by the two theses that "the polis exists by nature" and that "a human being is a being of a kind naturally adapted to live in a polis" (Taylor 235). Taylor then proceeds to summarize Aristotle's account to show the connection between these two theses. According to Aristotle, the continuation of the human species depends on the relationship between man and woman for reproduction purposes and also on the relationship between master and slave for survival. From these relationships necessarily follows the household, and further still the village. These associations form, as a response to natural human needs. Taylor makes note however that the term "natural" is slightly problematic, as basic human reproduction and survival can take place in organizations other than a polis, such as nomadic tribes (Taylor 236). Therefore, Taylor thinks that even at the beginning stages of the polis, Aristotle has "built into his account of what is natural a considerable element of description of the fundamentals of ancient Greek society" (Taylor

236). However, Aristotle does show the development of the polis to be purposive; because individual human beings are not self-sufficient, they join together in increasing intricacy to form the fully self-sufficient polis. Therefore if the primitive relationships between man and woman and master and slave are natural, then the more advanced relationship of the polis will also be natural and complete. Here Taylor clarifies that the polis is not necessary for the primitive form of life of mere survival, but that it is necessary for the life of virtue and therefore for the sake of the good life. Even if we grant this claim, Taylor still questions why this specific community is entitled to be "*the* goal toward which the process of evolution tends?" (Taylor 237).

There are two more claims that Taylor concedes to be based on the same grounds Aristotle claims for why the polis exists by nature. For one, Aristotle says that "man is by nature a political animal" (Taylor 238). Taylor states that Aristotle is intending to assert in this same way that human beings are by nature adapted to live in the polis. Aristotle also claims that "nature does nothing in vain" (Taylor 238). Only human beings possess speech, enabling us to make judgments and articulate them accordingly. Taylor explains that this capacity to articulate judgments is only properly exercised in the polis, and therefore in order for humans to fully exercise that capacity they must naturally live in the polis.

Taylor moves on to another claim made by Aristotle that the polis is prior to the individual in the same way that the whole is prior to the part in that of priority of essence. Taken to the extreme view, Taylor shows this could mean that an individual incapable of membership of a polis is sub-human while one who is self-sufficient without the polis is super-human. This analogy would commit "Aristotle to holding that what makes any of us

human is our capacity for polis membership" (Taylor 239). Taylor thinks that this would also lead to an extreme form of totalitarianism such that the individual's good is identified with his contribution to the state. However, Taylor makes it clear that this idea is the complete opposite of Aristotle's view of the relationship between an individual and the state. Political rule is exercised over those "who are "free and equal" and therefore a political society's end must be the promotion of the good of its citizens who freely accept that political rule (Taylor 240). Taylor claims that "the good of the state is defined via that of the individual, in that the state is well organized when it is so organized as to fulfill its aim," which is to promote the good life for its citizens (Taylor 240). This good life also cannot be forced onto the individual, as the individual must direct his life by his autonomous practical reasoning, or phronêsis. However, Taylor argues that the best exercise of phronêsis, according to the social requirements of Aristotle's human nature, is the promotion of the good life for the whole social community, not just an isolated individual.

The need for the specific political society of the polis over other types of society is seen through this idea of phronêsis. As earlier, Taylor argues that the best exercise of phronêsis is when it is used toward the common good of a community, and in general the good life of an individual is directed by phronêsis. Taylor therefore claims that the good life requires participation in a self-governing community, the polis. According to Aristotle, phronêsis is the act of deliberating "well about what is good and advantageous for oneself, not in particular areas, such as what promotes health or strength, but with a view to living well overall" (Taylor 242). To live under a tyrant or to willingly take no active part in political life is to abandon this task of phronêsis. Here Taylor describes the counter-

argument made in reference to the life of contemplation mentioned in the *Ethics*, in which the individual completely removes himself from political activity and is solely committed to theoretical activity. Taylor infers from Aristotle that such a life is only possible if the political community were to completely support these philosophers in all areas including subsistence and protection. However, Taylor still insists that to live a good life, one must perfect one's phronêsis through the participation in the political community on which the philosopher depends. Taylor claims that this does not deny the fact that theoretical activity is the highest and most valuable human activity, but that it does in fact deny that "the best possible human life is one devoted exclusively to theoretical activity" (Taylor 242). Taylor says that according to Aristotle, "the good human being must be phronimos, and the ideal phronimos is the politicos" (Taylor 242). Therefore, Taylor's overall thought can be concluded in saying that the proponents of the contemplative life are right in claiming that intellect is our most pure and highest capacity, but wrong in thinking that the best life is one of withdrawal from political community in order to continuously contemplate; their opponents are right to claim that the good life requires activity in the political community through phronêsis, but wrong in thinking that political activity is the best thing in the good life.

Aristotle argues that the best possible way of life expresses what is considered to be divine in man - our reason (*NE* 1177a). This life is devoted to the contemplation of truths and appreciation of the highest objects of knowledge (*NE* 1177a). Aristotle considers the life of contemplation to be the most self-sufficient of all virtuous lives. He says that once all the required necessities of life are provided, the just person, who leads the political life, still needs other people as objects of his just actions, and the same is true of a person with any

of the other virtues; but a wise person can contemplate even when he is alone (*NE* 1177a). However, Aristotle has already shown that people need to live with other people, and he says that even contemplation is better when done with virtuous friends. Contemplation is good in itself and a leisurely activity, and Aristotle asserts that eudaimonia depends on leisure (*NE* 1177b). Aristotle claims that among those actions, which are performed in accordance with virtue, those in politics are distinguished by their nobility, but they involve exertion, aim at an end, and are not worthy of choice for their own sake; the activity of intellect is the opposite (*NE* 1177b).

Aristotle argues that the life in accordance with the intellect is divine as compared to human life (*NE* 1177b). A life in accordance with other virtues is happy only in a secondary way because the activities associated with those virtues are human, not divine (like the gods) (*NE* 1178a). Aristotle claims that the contemplative person is also best because he is dearest to the gods, and the gods are fond of what is closest to them (*NE* 1179a). The secondary life of virtuous public service also requires more external necessities for the activities of these virtues; for example, the generous person needs more money in order to do more generous actions (*NE* 1178a). A life of contemplation does not need these things, and Aristotle says they might even be a hindrance to contemplation (*NE* 1178b). However, Aristotle does say that in so far as a person is a human being and lives together with other human beings, he chooses to act in accordance with virtue and he will therefore need such things for living a human life (*NE* 1178b). Aristotle claims that the more contemplation there is in one's life, the happier one will be (*NE* 1178b). However, he does say that because the happy person is human, there is also need for external prosperity, because the human body is not self-sufficient enough for pure contemplation, as

it must be taken care of (*NE* 1179a). We can act from virtue with merely modest means and do not need an excess of external goods (*NE* 1179a). Therefore it seems the best life is one in which a person has sufficient goods to lead a leisurely and self-sufficient life, but not too many goods so as to get distracted from the greatest activity of contemplation. Aristotle's contemplative life seems to be a life of modest means – but by modest one was supposed to have slaves and sufficient wealth so as not to have to work for a living – and a life where leisurely contemplation is the sole pursuit.

Thomas Nagel strongly argues for the contemplative life as Aristotle's idea of the best life. He looks at the problem of Aristotle's two accounts of eudaimonia as consisting in a "comprehensive" account and an "intellectualist" account (Nagel 7). Nagel defines the intellectualist account as one in which "eudaimonia is realized in the activity of the most divine part of man," namely his reason, "functioning in accordance with its proper excellence," which is theoretical contemplation (Nagel 7). In turn, he defines the comprehensive account as that in which "eudaimonia essentially involves not just the activity of the theoretical intellect but the full range of human life and action, in accordance with the broader excellences of moral virtue and practical wisdom" (Nagel 7). Nagel believes the comprehensive view to be secondary to the intellectualist view. The intellectualist view is more "divine" as the activity of contemplation is the highest function man can achieve, while the comprehensive view involves more ordinary human features such as emotion, perception, and action, along with reason, in a material body.

Nagel begins his argument by looking past what he calls the "truism" that the supreme human good is eudaimonia, and investigating the *ergon* of man, or what it is that

man does that makes him what he is (Nagel 8). He also claims that man's good is specified by and is a function of his ergon, and his ergon is what makes him a man rather than anything else. Human excellence is therefore measured by the proper function of a man's ergon. It can be inferred from this that those functions which humans share with animals or plants, or which animals and plants perform better than humans, should not be included in defining the ergon of man, for those things are not specifically what it is to be human. Nagel however criticizes this inference, as he claims that if the special feature of humans could exist without those other features we share with plants and animals, then that would no longer qualify as a human being. He questions why we should take a special function or highest good to be our ultimate end, instead of also including the practical side of our rationality along with the contemplative. Nagel further pushes this question to include more specific practical functions, such as health, into the definition of ergon for a human being.

Nagel assumes that the objection to the inclusion of practical functions will be that these specific functions, like health, "fail to meet an essential condition for inclusion: the condition of autonomy" (Nagel 9). The condition of autonomy essentially states that the human good cannot be based merely on luck. Therefore when something bad simply happens to a man, that is not a result of his actual malfunctioning and therefore does not directly count in evaluating him as eudaimon or not. However, Nagel remarks that this bad thing is a malfunction in itself, and the bad effects may cause the man to do unpleasant things that are out of his control. In this case he uses the example of a sickness that causes sweating or vomiting. He claims that this issue leads into the question of whether the ergon of a human should include the bodily functions that we share with plants and animals, even

though these bodily functions, such as digestion, do not require any effort on our part. Nagel observes that Aristotle does not consider the nutritive functioning in determining eudaimonia, but Aristotle also does not exclude it from the human soul. Nagel claims that if we can understand why nutrition is so insignificant to Aristotle, then that will solve the problem of why Aristotle decides to “pare away everything except the intellect, till the only thing that intrinsically bears on eudaimonia is the quality of contemplative activity” (Nagel 9).

Here Nagel uses a very simplistic analogy of a combination corkscrew and bottle-opener to describe the possibility of a conjunctive ergon in humans. Nagel explains that although the combination corkscrew and bottle-opener can both remove corks and open bottles, neither of these functions can be the special ergon of the device. This is because it shares both of those functions with common corkscrews and bottle-opener. However, the device must have an ergon, so Nagel presumes it must have a “simple conjunctive ergon, and its excellence is a function of both conjuncts” (Nagel 10). He then projects this same reasoning onto the functions of humans. Digestion, procreation, sensation, and desire are all common functions we share with plants and animals, and reason is also common to the gods, therefore leaving man with no special ergon of his own. As a result, man must have a conjunctive ergon, similar to that of the combination corkscrew and bottle-opener. This conjunctive ergon would include reasoning as well as all nonintellectual activity and lower functions. Nagel thinks this account of the ergon of humans is absurd.

To challenge this absurdity, Nagel focuses on Aristotle’s design of a “hierarchy of capacities” (Nagel 10). Nagel uses an example of a giraffe to show how its certain functions,

such as those of nutrition, perception, and locomotion, are not separate activities, but are organized in a particular hierarchical manner so as to interact proficiently. He says that the proper excellence of a giraffe "is not just the conjunction of the special excellences of its component functions but the optimal functioning of the total system in the giraffe's life" (Nagel 10). Nagel shows human beings to be different than giraffes, in that we have reason and because our organic functions serve both rational and non-rational activity. We also have a hierarchical account of our functions, such that all lower functions support our highest function of reason. Nagel says that reason helps to control and direct our other functions, but reason is never subservient to the lower functions. Therefore the "dominant characterization of a human being must refer to his reason" (Nagel 11). Nagel claims this to be why Aristotle endorses intellectualism, since "the supreme good for man must be measured in terms of that around which all other human functions are organized" (Nagel 11).

At this point Nagel reminds us that a large amount of our practical use of reason goes to managing the lower functions, such as organizing our time and money or helping society as a whole. He questions whether this is the proper excellence of our reason, or if there is a higher function of our reason rather than merely managing our lives. Nagel claims that reason does in fact have a higher function than serving our worldly concerns, as Aristotle believes human life is not important enough for reasoning capabilities. According to this view, "a person should seek to transcend not only his individual practical concerns but also those of society or humanity as a whole" (Nagel 12). The highest and best use of our reason is therefore detached from our daily lives, and exceeds all worldly capabilities. Nagel quotes Aristotle as saying that political science, or thoughts pertaining to daily life, is

not the highest kind of knowledge, because “man is not the highest thing in the universe” (Nagel 12). Theoretical ideas are the highest kind of knowledge, and man is the only creature capable of partaking in something higher than himself through his contemplation of these theoretical ideas. However, man is flawed in that he uses his high level of reasoning to concentrate on lowlier matters such as his worldly life, which should be a simple management job for reason. If less time was spent managing daily life, more time could be spent contemplating theoretical ideas, allowing humans to partake in something divine.

Nagel points out the worry that a life focused solely on highest knowledge would be a life that was higher than human life, and this would therefore make it uncertain whether this ergon of man could still be described as a strictly human good. However, Nagel insists that, according to Aristotle, this divine reason “is the highest aspect of our souls, and we are not justified in forgoing its activities to concentrate on lowlier matters – namely, our own lives – unless the demands in the latter area threaten to make contemplation impossible” (Nagel 12). He claims that the comprehensive human good should not be the main end of man, and that man must not identify himself with the whole, but instead with the highest aspect of himself, namely divine reason. The lower functions are there to provide support for this highest use of reason, but these lower functions are not primary components of our proper excellence as human beings or our achievement of eudaimonia. Therefore, according to this view, intellectualism or the contemplative life is the only possible way to achieve eudaimonia.

The next step is to consider what exactly Aristotle is arguing and what he means by the contemplative life and the political life. David Bostock holds that the “most natural

way” to look at Aristotle’s position is to see that he is comparing and contrasting two lives, one of contemplation, and the other of political activity (Bostock 200). Bostock explains that these lives are two different examples of how to organize and structure one’s life, distinguishable by the “dominant activity in each” (Bostock 200). However, Bostock asserts that there will be other activities in these two lives as well, including things such as eating or drinking, and even relaxation. Bostock even includes activities such as going to see a play, or playing with one’s children, though these activities will not contribute to one’s contemplation (Bostock 200). Bostock states that for the life of contemplation, contemplation is the major and overriding goal in one’s life, and nothing should be done that seriously detracts from that goal (Bostock 200). The same goes for the political life.

The contemplative life, therefore, is one in which contemplation is the most important aspect of that life. One will need the basic necessities of life, such as food, drink, friends, and family, a certain amount of wealth to allow for the leisure time of contemplation, and all of the practical virtues. However, any of these “necessities” will not be as important or meaningful as contemplation. Bostock makes the point that a “life devoted to [contemplation] would appeal to no human being at all. For what people who engage in the academic life do value about it is the opportunity to research, and (in many cases) to teach” (Bostock 199). Bostock contends that the contemplative life should be able to cover all aspects of academic research, in order for it to be an actual contender against the political life, and that the term “contemplation in particular gives altogether too narrow an account of what is actually attractive about that life” (Bostock 199). However, it does not seem that the life of academia as we know it today would qualify for Aristotle’s definition, since professors are paid and must spend time teaching, not just contemplating, as in the

form of research. I take Aristotle's contemplator to be one who truly spends the vast majority of time contemplating, and is allowed to do this because of sufficient means of wealth and leisure.

Bostock describes the political life as one which is "in accordance with the rest of virtue," or the practical virtues, which excludes theoretical wisdom; these practical virtues include justice, courage, and temperance just to name a few (Bostock 201). Bostock claims that it would be unfair to construe the political life as one devoted to the service of the community (Bostock 201). The political life will also need the necessities of life, including the virtues. He includes our modern day politicians as those who lead the political life, but he also generalizes the term more to include the professional soldier and Mother Teresa, as he considers them to also be exercising the practical virtues (Bostock 201). However, once again I believe Bostock interprets Aristotle in too much of a modern sense, as I take Aristotle's political life to be the life of a statesman, whose time is spent conducting policies that are to contribute to the community's overall eudaimonia. This statesman must also be fully virtuous and have meaningful relationships with his fellow men. Therefore the political life is focused much more on the virtues than anything else, and the relationship one has with others in the community.

There are two contending interpretations of Aristotle's argument, an "inclusive" interpretation and a "dominant" interpretation. Bostock defines these terms such that:

an 'inclusive' interpretation allows that one's ultimate end may include a number of different things, each pursued for its own sake, and it should also include a long-term plan which ranks them in relative importance and attempts to secure the harmonious realization of all of them at once, so far as

this is possible. By contrast, a 'dominant' interpretation picks one goal in particular as the main goal, and it downgrades or indeed rejects other aspirations, except in so far as they are seen as contributing to the main goal (Bostock 21).

Bostock claims that there is inconsistency within Aristotle's argument, because the beginning of the Ethics seems inclusive, while the latter seems dominant (Bostock 202). If we took Aristotle's argument to be inclusive, then aspects of both the contemplative life and the political life would be needed for eudaimonia. However, for Aristotle, contemplation would still be placed in a higher rank than the practical virtues; but the inclusive interpretation would still allow the practical virtues to have intrinsic worth and therefore be just as necessary to the best life. According to an inclusive interpretation, one's time would not be solely focused on contemplation, but rather on all the virtues, while still recognizing intellect as the highest virtue. In contrast, if we took Aristotle's argument to be dominant, then contemplation would be the main goal of life, and the practical virtues would only be useful in so far as to contribute to the aid of contemplation. In this light the practical virtues would have no intrinsic worth, and their main purposive worth would be seen merely as the means to the ultimate end of contemplation.

I have a strong objection to the dominant view, as I see the practical virtues as having intrinsic worth, and more worth than merely supporting contemplation. For example, the virtue of generosity, as well as all the practical virtues, is good in and of itself, and it also contributes to a person's overall eudaimonia. Aristotle can also be read in this light as he says that virtues are pursued for their own sake, as well as for the sake of eudaimonia (*NE* 1097b). Although some would argue contemplation and eudaimonia are

ultimately the same, if we take them to be two separate things, then the practical virtues and the virtue of the intellect can both be seen to have intrinsic value, while both furthering the end of eudaimonia.

Bostock describes a possible inclusive interpretation of Aristotle which claims that the two lives thus described “should rather be considered as but two aspects of a single life, so that what Aristotle is saying is that the eudaimon life has both of these aspects (one of them providing a ‘primary’ kind of eudaimonia, and the other a ‘secondary’ kind, but both contributing to overall eudaimonia)” (Bostock 206). Since Aristotle holds intellect to be the highest virtue and the best thing in man, he sees it as contributing to a more significant part of eudaimonia. The practical virtues also contribute to eudaimonia in their own way, not merely through enabling contemplation, but they contribute in a slightly lesser way. Bostock discusses how if we pursue the idea that everyone should pursue both lives at once, then we are assuming that the practical virtues have intrinsic value, and are not used for the sole purpose of promoting contemplation as described earlier by the dominant view. Bostock hypothesizes that we might hold certain claims if this is true:

(a) that theoretical virtue always overrides, so that practical activities are to be pursued (for their own sakes) only when purely intellectual activities make no demands; or (b) that the two are commensurable, and so may be ‘traded off’ against one another (for example, one might properly forgo some small amount of intellectual activity in order to perform a practical deed of real importance – say, saving one’s neighbor from a burning house); or (c) that the practical virtues override, in the sense that theoretical pursuits occupy one’s attention only when all practical demands are satisfied (Bostock 207).

Aristotle would disagree with the third claim, as he holds that theoretical pursuits should be the main goal of one's life, and should only be compromised by fulfilling the necessities of life. These necessities might include moments of practical demands such as saving a neighbor from a burning house as in claim (b) - as not saving a burning neighbor would be vicious - but they will not include active community service such as volunteering at a local organization, or even political participation such as voting. The necessities of life require one to be virtuous, but not in the modern sense of volunteering as we think of it today. Claim (c) is more in line with the life of practical virtues, since it requires that the demands of the practical virtues be met first, placing intellectual activity as second. Aristotle says the life of practical virtues is less worthy than the life of contemplation, and therefore would reject claim (c).

Aristotle would also reject claim (a), as it seems to imply an impossible demand if saving a neighbor from a burning house can only be considered after intellectual activity has been satisfied. The life of contemplation requires that the person also be virtuous, and knowingly neglecting to save a neighbor (in circumstances permitting the neighbor can be saved) for the sake of pursuing intellectual activity is a vicious act. This claim also seems implausible because intellectual activities will never fully be satisfied for a human, as humans are incapable of being all-knowing. Therefore, according to claim (a), a person would never be able to perform any sort of practical demands aside from the bare necessities to stay alive, because he or she will always be trying to fulfill intellectual demands.

Aristotle's position seems to lie within claim (b), with the specification that the intellectual activity is most important, only to be traded for a practical demand in specific, and maybe even urgent instances. A contemplator should pursue theoretical activity as much as possible, only taking time for necessities such as eating or drinking, and certain instances that demand practical virtuous excellence, as would be the case with saving the neighbor from the burning house. Therefore one who pursues the contemplative life should be virtuous and pursue excellence in all the practical virtues, but only in a secondary and necessary way; the vast majority of one's life should be spent in pursuit of truths and appreciation of the highest objects of knowledge (NE 1177a).

In conclusion, I take this last interpretation of Aristotle to be the most consistent with a high level of eudaimonia and therefore the best possible life. This interpretation is in line with Aristotle's own thought, as it holds the virtue of intellect to be the highest, but also allows room for the agent to be virtuous in an active way so that he or she cannot be seen to be virtuous merely by sitting in contemplation and not being vicious. This interpretation therefore incorporates the intellectual activity of the contemplative life with the active virtues displayed in the political life, allowing aspects of both lives to be included in a single best life. However, even this interpretation of Aristotle is still incompatible with our modern day, for reasons discussed in the next section, and therefore needs to be modified in a way that it nonetheless consistent with Aristotle's conception of the good.

Relevance to Contemporary Life

At this point I would like to consider some objections to Aristotle's argument, followed by some reasons to conclude that Aristotelian eudaimonia is in fact applicable to our modern day. For one, critics might argue that Aristotle's use of the gods as a standard of excellence for humans is not acceptable. Aristotle considers intellectual activity to be the best because it is "divine" (*NE* 1177a). He references the gods, saying that the contemplative person is best because he is dearest to the gods, and the gods are fond of what is closest to them (*NE* 1179a). He sees contemplation as an activity in which humans partake in something divine and therefore share a connection with the gods. Aristotle seems to be trying to make the best human life the same as the best life for the gods. However, there should be a difference. Not only would it be an impossible standard for humans to achieve, but also the gods' lives are fundamentally different from humans and require completely different necessities. Furthermore, his reasoning is flawed because the gods and their divinity are not universally accepted. We need not accept that contemplation is divine in order to judge it the most worthy activity in human life, as Aristotle's claim does not hinge on our understanding of divinity. There are other credible and less controversial premises for why contemplation is the most worthy activity, such as because it is good in and of itself, or because it improves the life of humans. I do not see this as a critical objection, as Aristotle's entire reasoning does not depend on this premise. This reason can be negated and viewed as a condition of Aristotle's society. Aristotle still holds contemplation to be the most self-sufficient and worthy of choice for its own sake and for the achievement of eudaimonia (*NE* 1177a-b).

Another objection to Aristotle is that he neglects the experiences of women, slaves, and lower class males. In order to be able to achieve eudaimonia, he insists that sufficient

wealth is needed so that one will not have to work for a living and so that one will have enough leisure time to spend contemplating; one also needs slaves and women to satisfy the necessities of life such as cooking food and cleaning the household (*NE* 1099a). Aristotle also only prescribes two types of life that are acceptable for man, the political life and the contemplative life. These two career paths would have only been available and acceptable for wealthy upper class Athenian males during Aristotle's time period. He did not recognize women and slaves as having the same high level of reasoning capacity as males, and thought that women and slaves needed to be ruled by their masters as they were too incompetent to rule themselves. Aristotle insinuates that eudaimonia is only attainable for the wealthy, privileged, male citizens. Aristotle did not think women, slaves, or lower class males were capable of the same level of eudaimonia as upper class males, and his specifications for the best life only allow for wealthy male citizens to even be considered. This is obviously a problem as a fulfilling life should be at least an attainable possibility for every human at the same time. It is argued that this chauvinism is due to Aristotle's time period and his audience, as his audience would have been privileged males. However this poses a problem to the translation of Aristotle into our modern day if he is to be read as recognizing only wealthy males as the sole possible recipients of eudaimonia.

As already mentioned, Aristotle does not even consider any possible life path except for a political life and a contemplative life. He therefore disregards any other career choice, such as a doctor or farmer, as he does not think these careers can lead to a high level of eudaimonia. This is most likely also due to his time period and his audience, since those he was speaking to would have only been considering the possibility of being a statesman or a theoretician, as this was the path for the wealthy privileged Athenian male. The same

however is not true for our modern day society. For one, there can only be so many statesmen and so many contemplators in one society, otherwise it would be a very unproductive society. Also, simply because of the nature of the thing, it seems that any human being should have the possibility of achieving a high level of eudaimonia, and it should therefore not be arbitrarily based on career paths. It seems implausible that a certain level of eudaimonia is only open to certain careers. Even with more options than the life of a statesman, Aristotle would nonetheless still argue that the contemplative life is the best, namely because of the high regard with which he holds the virtue of intellect.

It therefore seems that Aristotle's thought is too distant from our own modern day problems. However, Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* is seen as a decisive text for the modern virtue ethics theory. This ethical theory is seen as an alternative to the views of deontology and consequentialism. Virtue ethics differs from these in two distinct ways: the first is that it focuses on the character of the agents instead of specific acts; the second is that it moves away from the notion of obligation, as the theory focuses on virtue-centered concepts. One of the problems with applying Aristotle to modern day is that his list of virtues is not completely the same as the list of virtues we know today. Christopher Cordner, in his essay "Aristotelian Virtue and Its Limitations," looks at the implications of the difference in the lists of virtues. He concedes that nowhere in the *Nicomachean Ethics* are virtues such as kindness, compassion, forgiveness, apology, repentance, remorse, humility, faith, hope, or charity mentioned (Cordner 293). He also argues that some of the virtues that Aristotle held in higher regard, such as courage, tend to be downplayed or systematically construed by modern thinkers (Cordner 292). He explains how Aristotle regards courage on the battlefield as "pre-eminent among the virtues," but that modern theorists reject this form of

courage as a central premise, and instead regard some form of “moral courage” as a central virtue, even though Aristotle never illustrates a form of courage comparable to moral courage in his work (Cordner 293). While this difference in virtues appears to pose a problem, it can be argued that the underlying conception and framework of a virtue-centered theory is still creditable to Aristotle, even though our preference or understanding of a list of virtues has grown and expanded over time as society has changed.

In an essay entitled “Aristotle’s ‘Republic’ or, Why Aristotle’s Ethics Is Not Virtue Ethics,” Stephen Buckle argues that modern virtue ethicists have misconstrued Aristotle, and that Aristotle’s purpose was not to replace a law conception of ethics, but rather to augment it (Buckle 568). Buckle points to a passage in the beginning of the *Nicomachean Ethics* to describe Aristotle’s enquiry into the nature and conditions of the human good:

Knowledge of the good would seem to be the concern of the most authoritative science, the highest master science. And this is obviously the science of politics... Since political science employs the other sciences, and also lays down laws about what we should do and refrain from, its end will include the ends of the others, and will therefore be the human good. For even if the good is the same for an individual as for a city, that of the city is obviously a greater and more complete thing to obtain and preserve. For while the good of an individual is a desirable thing, what is good for a people or for cities is a nobler and more godlike thing. Our enquiry, then, is a kind of political science, since these are the ends it is aiming at. (*NE* 1094a-b)

This opening thought of the *Nicomachean Ethics* seems contradictory to Aristotle’s later discussion of what the best life is for an individual. This passage seems to imply that a life

of politics, and not contemplation, is best, since a political life is involved in the good of the city, which Aristotle holds to be a 'nobler' thing. However, the majority of the rest of the *Nicomachean Ethics* focuses on the good for an individual. Aristotle is often criticized for being egotistical and exemplifying a lack of concern for the common good, but the beginning of the *Nicomachean Ethics* shows another side. Christopher Cordner addresses the charge that Aristotle has an egoistic conception of virtue. He says that critics have accused Aristotle's virtuous person of being "preoccupied with the fashioning and sustaining of his own virtue," such that he exhibits "moral self-indulgence" (Cordner 308). This means that one does a virtuous act out of concern for one's self image as a virtuous person. This is in contrast to one who acts out of genuine virtuous motivation towards others, portraying a motivation that is altruistic in nature. Cordner argues that Aristotelian virtue is neither egoistic nor altruistic; Aristotle ascribes to the virtuous agent "a self-directedness in his ethical thinking, of a sort which is incompatible with altruism," but the "virtuous agent's thought is not egoistic in the modern sense of involving a concern with self that is essentially to be contrasted with a concern with others" (Cordner 309). Cordner in turn argues that Aristotle "would regard the contrast between the egoistic and the altruistic as assuming a separateness between members of a moral community which is incompatible with ethical virtue" (Cordner 310). A conception of the human good therefore must be connected with others in a 'moral community.'

Stephen Buckle claims that opening of the *Nicomachean Ethics* shows how Aristotle's enquiry into the human good is focused on the 'laws about what we should do and refrain from,' and therefore focused on the legislation for humanity (Buckle 569). One should legislate "for those conditions conducive to the development of virtues of character"

(Buckle 570). The virtues of character are central to Aristotle's thought, but, contrary to the view of modern virtue ethicists, they are part of the larger framework of laws (Buckle 569). Aristotle says that "a person who wishes to improve people, whether many or few, through his concern for them should try to develop a capacity for legislating, if it is through laws that we will become good" (*NE* 1180b). Buckle therefore argues that the best life for a human being is "to be a legislator for humanity" (Buckle 570). However, Aristotle only says that 'a person who wishes to improve people' should legislate, not that it is the best life for a human in general. Buckle argues that the moral and the political cannot be separated into different realms; they are both part of a single enquiry, because according to Aristotle, "it is evident that the state is a creation of nature, and that man is by nature a political animal" (*Politics* 1253a). Buckle holds that this statement goes beyond displaying man's affection for a communal life over a solitary life, as it shows that the "good at which human life aims is that of an organized and ordered social whole" (Buckle 572). This means that "human beings *necessarily* desire organized social existence; that they recognize, even if implicitly, that their good cannot be specified independently of relations with others, nor those relations independently of intelligent social rules" (Buckle 572). This shows that individuals need more than just a 'moral community,' they also necessarily need a political community.

The conflict arises, then, when Aristotle distinguishes between what is the best for the community and what is the best life for an individual. As we have seen, Aristotle holds that a contemplative life, not a political life of producing legislation for humanity, is the best life a person can lead. A contemplative life needs a community to flourish, but it seems for a contemplator to flourish, he or she only needs interaction within a moral community, not

necessarily within a political community. The contemplator needs others for the purpose of relationships, but he or she is not necessarily concerned with others' eudaimonia. The contemplator's main purpose is to contemplate in a virtuous way for the purpose of achieving his or her own eudaimonia. However, Aristotle says in his *Politics* that "the state is by nature clearly prior to the family and to the individual, since the whole is of necessity prior to the part... The proof that the state is a creation of nature and prior to the individual is that the individual, when isolated, is not self-sufficing; and therefore he is like a part in relation to the whole" (*Politics* 1253a). Aristotle uses the same language in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, when he describes the act of contemplation as being the most self-sufficient. Even if contemplation is the most self-sufficient act, humans themselves are not self-sufficient and must therefore involve themselves in a community. Aristotle explicitly says that the state is prior to the individual, yet he presents the best life of a person as one of minimal interaction that is mainly used to fulfill certain necessities for oneself, of the predominantly solitary activity of contemplation, and of no political requirements. Aristotle's description of the best life for an individual is just that, a description for one person individually, separate from the good of the city.

Buckle insists that we cannot address the question of how we are supposed to live by viewing persons as distinct from each other (Buckle 573). The *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Politics* are intimately connected, as the best government is one that enables its citizens to achieve eudaimonia. Buckle argues that Aristotle's enquiry "into the good for man in the *Nicomachean Ethics* is not self-sufficient, but finds its completion in the *Politics*" (Buckle 575). Buckle therefore concludes that "the good life depends on harmonious functioning, and that this harmony is achieved when reason rules in both the individual soul and in the

political order” (Buckle 591). If reason is to rule in both the individual and in the society, then the best life for an individual and the best life for a society must somehow be compatible with one another. A society cannot fully flourish if its citizens are not flourishing; it is also the case that citizens cannot fully flourish if their society is not flourishing. The society and its citizens are dependent on one another to ensure flourishing in its highest degree. However, it is not possible to have the best society in one in which individuals only pursue the contemplative life. This society would be full of individuals who did not work, and therefore were completely unproductive, and whose only concern was their own eudaimonia, regardless of the fate of their fellow citizens. This society is an impossible ideal, if it can even be considered an ideal. On the other side of the argument, Aristotle would not agree to a society in which every person was involved in virtuous public service and never engaged in contemplation, as he would argue that no person in that society ever achieved eudaimonia in its proper sense.

In conclusion, I would argue that there must be a middle way, just as there was a middle interpretation to Aristotle at the end of the first section. A citizen should therefore include aspects of both the contemplative life and the political life into his or her complete life, so that the good of the individual is not neglected, and neither is the good of the society. In this way both the individual and the society are able to achieve a high level of eudaimonia, as both are dependent on each other for the achievement of eudaimonia. A society should exist so that all its citizens, including women and men of all classes, have the possibility and the capabilities of achieving eudaimonia. This society must be different from Aristotle’s in that all citizens are equally capable of achieving a high level of eudaimonia, regardless of their trade, class, wealth, or gender, pending on the fact that it is a just society.

Also, the necessities of life that Aristotle considers need to be expanded to meet our requirements for what we consider a certain necessary quality of life today. All of this must be modified, while continuing to maintain an Aristotelian conception of the good.

Recommendations

In this section I would like to make some recommendations for ways in which I think Aristotle's argument could be modified so as to apply his conception of the good to a modern society today. For one, his justifications for the contemplative life that are based on divinity need to simply be dropped. Since these are not a substantial premise to Aristotle's argument, I do not find their absence to be inconsistent with his overall purpose. Also, we need to jettison Aristotle's chauvinism, so that his conception of the good may apply universally to all citizens, regardless of race, gender, social status, or profession. Aristotle's list of virtues needs to be adjusted as well, so as to incorporate our modern understanding of a virtue. I believe the modern Virtue Ethics Theory has sufficiently done this, as they have created a list of virtues that fits within Aristotle's virtue-centered conception of the good, while including our modern, albeit possibly Christian-based, interpretation of a virtue. We also should apply an Aristotelian conception of the good at the political level, implementing social policies that contribute to universal opportunities for eudaimonia, by ensuring basic necessities for a good life and by fostering the afore mentioned virtues. As I find Aristotle's list of the basic necessities for a good human life to be lacking, I believe Martha Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach provides a more adequate and modern list of these necessities in her book *Frontiers of Justice*.

Nussbaum claims her capabilities approach provides “the philosophical underpinning for an account of core human entitlements that should be respected and implemented by the governments of all nations, as a bare minimum of what respect for human dignity requires” (Nussbaum 70). As Aristotle says in the *Politics* that a community is best, and that individuals should be involved in their government, then this is something the legislators should implement. Nussbaum provides a list of central human capabilities, saying that these are “what people are actually able to do and to be, in a way informed by an intuitive idea of a life that is worthy of the dignity of the human being” (Nussbaum 70). She argues that the capabilities are “set in the context of a type of political liberalism that makes them specifically political goals and presents them in a manner free of any specific metaphysical grounding,” so that they “can become the object of an overlapping consensus among people who otherwise have very different comprehensive conceptions of the good” (Nussbaum 70). Nussbaum considers the capabilities approach to be “fully universal: the capabilities in question are held to be important for each and every citizen, in each and every nation, and each person is to be treated as an end” (Nussbaum 78). The ten capabilities Nussbaum argues should be supported by all democracies are:

1. *Life*. Being able to live to the end of a human life of normal length; not dying prematurely, or before one's life is so reduced as to be not worth living.
2. *Bodily Health*. Being able to have good health, including reproductive health; to be adequately nourished; to have adequate shelter.
3. *Bodily Integrity*. Being able to move freely from place to place; to be secure against violent assault, including sexual assault and domestic violence; having opportunities for sexual satisfaction and for choice in matters of reproduction.
4. *Senses, Imagination, and Thought*. Being able to use the senses, to imagine, think,

and reason-- and to do these things in a "truly human" way, a way informed and cultivated by an adequate education, including, but by no means limited to, literacy and basic mathematical and scientific training. Being able to use imagination and thought in connection with experiencing and producing works and events of one's own choice, religious, literary, musical, and so forth. Being able to use one's mind in ways protected by guarantees of freedom of expression with respect to both political and artistic speech, and freedom of religious exercise. Being able to have pleasurable experiences and to avoid nonbeneficial pain.

5. *Emotions*. Being able to have attachments to things and people outside ourselves; to love those who love and care for us, to grieve at their absence; in general, to love, to grieve, to experience longing, gratitude, and justified anger. Not having one's emotional development blighted by fear and anxiety.

(Supporting this capability means supporting forms of human association that can be shown to be crucial in their development.)

6. *Practical Reason*. Being able to form a conception of the good and to engage in critical reflection about the planning of one's life. (This entails protection for the liberty of conscience and religious observance.)

7. *Affiliation*.

A. Being able to live with and toward others, to recognize and show concern for other human beings, to engage in various forms of social interaction; to be able to imagine the situation of another. (Protecting this capability means protecting institutions that constitute and nourish such forms of affiliation, and also protecting the freedom of assembly and political speech.)

B. Having the social bases of self-respect and nonhumiliation; being able to be treated as a dignified being whose worth is equal to that of others. This entails provisions of nondiscrimination on the basis of race, sex, sexual orientation, ethnicity, caste, religion, national origin.

8. *Other Species*. Being able to live with concern for and in relation to animals, plants, and the world of nature.

9. *Play*. Being able to laugh, to play, to enjoy recreational activities.

10. *Control over one's Environment*.

A. *Political*. Being able to participate effectively in political choices that govern one's life; having the right of political participation, protections of free speech and association.

B. *Material*. Being able to hold property (both land and movable goods), and having property rights on an equal basis with others; having the right to seek employment on an equal basis with others; having the freedom from unwarranted search and seizure. In work, being able to work as a human being, exercising practical reason and entering into meaningful relationships of mutual recognition with other workers. (Nussbaum 76-8).

Nussbaum claims that the capabilities approach “sees rationality and animality as thoroughly unified” and therefore it “sees the rational as simply one aspect of the animal, and, at that, not the only one that is pertinent to a notion of truly human functioning” (Nussbaum 159). She reaches this conclusion by combining “Aristotle’s notion of the human being as a political animal” and “Marx’s idea that the human being is a creature ‘in need of a plurality of life-activities’” (Nussbaum 159). These capabilities therefore allow for the physical, mental, and intellectual needs of a person.

Nussbaum’s list is very basic, but it gives you what you need for a basic good life. Along with the guarantee of these capabilities by the society, I also think Aristotle’s notion of the virtues, as being a necessary requirement to a fulfilling life, is an essential prerequisite for achieving eudaimonia. Aristotelian virtues give a more specific conception of the good to achieve the best life possible. Neither the capabilities approach nor the virtues is alone sufficient to achieve eudaimonia; both are necessary as supplements to one another. Aristotelian virtues are the best way to cultivate a moral community in which eudaimonia can thrive. Also, with the modern interpretation of the virtues, they tend to

produce a more altruistic community, so that members are actually actively helping one another to achieve eudaimonia. I believe that this active virtuous public service is part of what we could today consider the political life. Along with this I believe that citizens should take an active role in their government, even if it is at least just consciously voting. This active participation will help to keep society both a moral and a political community, which will provide the most conducive environment for citizens to achieve eudaimonia. However, we cannot forget about the intellectual aspect of eudaimonia. I think Aristotle was right in claiming that we need contemplation in our lives in order to achieve eudaimonia, but I do not believe that it is necessary to lead a life completely devoted to it in order to achieve eudaimonia. Nussbaum's capabilities also allow for this ability to contemplate, though she does not specify that it needs to be thoughts about "high moral truths." Intellect can be interpreted as having knowledge in order to put it to good use. Even if knowledge is intrinsically good and the contemplation of high moral truths in good in itself, it seems wrong not to also use intellect for its practical purpose of bettering human kind, which can be done through politics. Knowledge is good for making policies that enable people to flourish. While we should contemplate for the pure value of contemplation, we should also use that to intellect to better everyone, and that cannot be achieved by leading a solitary life mostly devoted to pure contemplation of high moral truths.

In conclusion, the best life for a human being today can still be advanced from an Aristotelian approach, with some modern modifications necessitated by a more universal understanding of the human good. The best life is a mixture of the contemplative and the political lives, as seen by the interpretations in the first two sections. By approaching the best life from these inclusive interpretations, both the individual and the society are able to

flourish, as both are dependent on one another for the flourishing of the other. Also, by modifying Aristotle's argument we are able to apply his virtue-centered conception of the good in a modern society today. These modifications are consistent with Aristotle's underlying conception of the good, which includes contemplation, the virtues, and certain basic necessities, so that every citizen is capable of achieving a high level of eudaimonia, and consequently is seen as leading a good life.

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