

The life of
contemplation is the
best one philosophy
essay



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Though there are objections in justifying Aristotle's life of contemplation, I feel that his arguments regarding life of contemplation are sound and support it. While Aristotle argues that man cannot be happy without being virtuous, it is equally proper to say that true virtue cannot be attained without a certain degree of contemplation. This further highlights the point that in today's turbulent times, a particular amount of contemplation in life is necessary to achieve virtue and happiness in life.

Thus, I support Aristotle's argument that to be truly happy, one needs to exercise virtue and this can be achieved through a fair degree of contemplation.

Life of contemplation is regarded the best by Aristotle because leading a contemplative life can be considered Aristotle's answer to the question of what life humans ought to live. The Greek Philosopher Aristotle, as a practical philosopher, bases his ethics on the practical entity: human actions. Aristotle identifies the most moral life as a happy life and also asserts that morally good life is a prerequisite for engaging in contemplation. He appears to view human being as a kind of hybrid between animal and God, with reason and moral virtues serving to control humans' animal nature.

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, *Nicomachean Ethics*, (ed. G. Schuhmacher) p. 75) which together

enable humans to resist their emotions and desires and to act in accordance with moral virtues.

According to Aristotle, a happy man is a man who lives a good life and does good - a virtuous man. It is man's purpose to be happy and to be a happy man, he must be virtuous. The life of nous is considered the most perfect virtue by Aristotle. Obviously, what is virtuous is to be found in the correct mean between two extremes of excess and deficiency. An excess of virtue leads to foolhardiness, a deficiency leads to cowardice. The virtuous man can take the correct and balanced decision when confronted by a difficult choice. He does not take inappropriate risks, nor does he stop taking action when a justified amount of risk is involved.

Aristotle goes on to say that "if happiness consists in activity in accordance with virtue, it is reasonable that it should be activity in accordance with the highest virtue; and this will be the virtue of the best part of us"

(Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (trans. H. Rackham, Ed.), Book 1, Sec 7, 1177a). This means that while ethical virtue is action in accord with reason, intellectual virtue is superior because it employs reason the highest part of man, in contemplation of the best objects which man has the ability to know. Since it is the most continuous activity, the most pleasant virtuous activity, the most self-sufficient activity, and the only activity which is loved for its own sake, contemplation constitutes the most complete form of human happiness. Aristotle thereby provides his definition as such: "Happiness is a bringing of the soul to the act according to the habit of the best and most perfect virtue, that is, the virtue of the speculative intellect, borne out by easy surroundings and enduring to the length of days."

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(Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (trans. Joseph Rickaby, S. J.), Book 1, Sec 7, 15, 16) The more one engages in contemplation, the more complete one's happiness will be and the more one will be dearer to the gods.

Man, however, lives in a world with so much suffering where he cannot spend his entire life in continuous contemplation. Understanding this problem, Aristotle concedes, “ But such a life would be too high for man; for it is not in so far as he is man that he will live so, but in so far as something divine is present in him.” (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (trans. William David Ross), Book 10, Sec 7)

In addition, Aristotle posits that, in order to be happy, it necessary to have sufficient external prosperity, such as health, good birth, satisfactory children, food, shelter, and freedom from suffering, although even in the most dire circumstances the virtuous man can maintain some semblance of happiness by bearing his trials nobly and with fortitude. Aristotle himself argues that without being virtuous, supreme happiness through contemplation cannot be achieved. It is also true that for a person to realise that there is so much suffering in the world, he needs contemplation.

So, I believe, to justify Aristotle, there needs to be some sort of balance between contemplation and virtuous action. Another objection is that contemplation is not possible without a structured society in which many cannot live a contemplative life, since they have to be producers, enabling society to function. The third problematic area is that in Aristotle's view, people are born to a specific function or form of life, meaning that some, many, or even most people cannot possibly live the best possible life.

It is my opinion that a virtuous life in modern times needs be taken as a life in which not only the individual in question, but also all other people, can come to their right as a person. I believe that the lessons from the past need to be taken into consideration to reflect on what it means to be a person in complex modern times. By rejecting off-hand every theory, which dares mention God, the person making the rejection is cutting himself off from a vast amount of very important material, philosophical but also cultural.

Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, a contemplative life, by which I mean a life in which contemplation is an important factor, should not be underestimated. Since Aristotle argues that happiness is the first principle from which our inquiry will advance, it supports the base argument that happiness can be achieved through virtue, which in turn, could be achieved through contemplation. This then becomes a stepping stone to leading a virtuous and happy life. While, this may not be the exact intent of Aristotle's contemplative life, it is the best we can achieve in today's times.