

Aristotles claim that
contemplative life is
the greatest
philosophy essay



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In the writings of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Book X*, he discusses the idea of contemplative life and how happiness can be established through virtue. In this paper, I will argue the reasons Aristotle has provided in establishing his theory that a contemplative life is the greatest life to live, and provide reasons as to why I believe his arguments are compelling enough to be considered valid.

To establish an understanding of Aristotle's ideas about contemplative life, we must first recognize the relations he makes between pleasure and virtue. Aristotle describes the idea of virtue in relation to the soul, separating it into three, the desiring soul, the nutritive soul, and the reasoning soul. To Aristotle, the reason soul is of the greatest importance since that is what separates humans from other living creatures, and it is what is unique and sets us apart, and therefore is the function of life. He illustrates this by saying that "...happiness must be placed among those desirable in themselves, not among those desirable for the sake of something else since happiness does not lack anything, but is self-sufficient" (Aristotle, p. 46).

Aristotle furthers his argument by defining the idea of pleasure. He acknowledges that there are two types of pleasures, good pleasure and bad pleasure, but they do not necessarily exist in a balance, for there are lives we would reject because no matter how much happiness they bring, it will always be bad. As well, Aristotle believes that pleasure is achieved through continuous activity, and since it is not possible to be continuously active, then we are incapable of experiencing sustained pleasure; "no one is continuously pleased... human beings are incapable of continuous activity" (Aristotle, p. 45).

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Based on the conclusions realized above about virtue, pleasure, and the function of man, we can now combine all his ideas into one basic understanding. Since pleasure is proportional to activity and virtue, therefore, the highest virtue must produce the greatest pleasure. Furthermore, Aristotle stated that the greatest virtue of man is reasoning, and the greatest pleasure is to fulfill the function of man. Therefore, since the greatest virtue of humans is reasoning, then a life of contemplation would be the best life. As stated by Aristotle, “ firstly, this activity is the best (since not only is reason the best thing in us, but the object of reason are the best of knowable objects); and secondly, it is the most continuous, since we can contemplate truth more continuously than we can do anything. And we think happiness has pleasure mingled with it, but the activity of philosophic wisdom is admittedly the pleasantest of virtuous activities” (Aristotle, p. 47). To Aristotle, contemplation is not the highest virtue, but instead it is the one that is the most stable and reliable since it is self-sufficient; “ And the self-sufficiency that is spoken of must belong most to the contemplative activity. For while a philosopher. As well as a just man or one possessing any other virtue, needs the necessities of life, when they are sufficiently equipped with things of that sort the just man needs people towards whom and with whom he shall act justly, and the temperate man, the brave man and each of the others is in the same case, but the philosopher, even when by himself, can contemplate truth, and the better the wiser he is; he can perhaps do so better if has fellow-workers, but still he is the most self-sufficient. And this activity alone would seem to be loved for its own sake; for nothing arises from it apart from the contemplating, while from practical activities we gain more or less apart from the action” (Aristotle, p. 47). As stated by Aristotle, it <https://assignbuster.com/aristotles-claim-that-contemplative-life-is-the-greatest-philosophy-essay/>

is clear that this is the greatest kind of life because it does not rely completely on intrinsic values that other types of life depend on, but rather is self-sufficient.

Aristotle develops his argument further by incorporating the life of the Gods' in relation to his theory. He is careful in making sure that the gods are seen as beings that have reached fulfillment of life and "above all other beings blessed and happy" (Aristotle, p. 48). According to Aristotle, since continuous activity is what provides continuous pleasure and fulfillment of life, he believes that the gods do not sleep, therefore allowing them to be in a constant state of contemplation. Furthermore, Aristotle states that gods do not have the concerns and troubles that plague human thought, these things are "trivial and unworthy of the gods" (Aristotle, p. 48). The question which then arises is if the gods do not sleep, and do not occupy their minds with the concerns of humans, then how do they remain active. To this, Aristotle replies by saying that they must simply live in a state of contemplation; "...if you take away from a living being action, and still more production, what is left but contemplation?" (Aristotle, p. 48). Furthermore, Aristotle argues that since gods are the happiest of us all and they live a fulfilling life of contemplation, then the life of contemplation will be the happiest for us humans as well; "Therefore the activity of God, which surpasses all others in blessedness, must be contemplative; and of human activities, therefore, that which is most akin to this must be most of the nature of happiness" (Aristotle, p. 48).

To conclude, when linking all the ideas together, it is evident that Aristotle had a clear and very realistic view of how contemplation is the best life to <https://assignbuster.com/aristotles-claim-that-contemplative-life-is-the-greatest-philosophy-essay/>

live. He argues each point clearly and brings it together as demonstrated when he linked pleasure to the fulfillment of the function of humans and to reasoning, in a way that suggests that it is a very plausible idea. His view that the most fundamental function of humans is reason, seems to be a viable theory since it is clearly what has made us dominant in our world and separates us from animals. Since we are able to reason, and pleasure is derived from virtues, then Aristotle's connection between the function of humans and the highest virtue therefore leads to a contemplative life. Furthermore, Aristotle incorporates gods into his theory and through simple deduction finds that since gods live in a contemplative life, we should as well. His reasoning being that since gods do not take part in the pointless concerns that surround our minds, and since they are wise and powerful, the most logical and obvious deduction would be that they are continuously contemplating. His involvement of god into his argument is very clever since we as humans strive to imitate and please god(s), it is ideal that by using god(s) as an example of a being living a contemplative life, then as followers of god(s), we too should strive to live an ideal life, a life of contemplation. For this reason, a contemplative self-sustaining life seems the most practical and logical, because if the gods live a life of contemplation and we are created in the image of god, then a life of contemplation must surely be the ideal life to live. Therefore, the reasons outlined above provide a sound and stable argument to Aristotle's claim that a life of contemplation is the most ideal life to live, he has not only provided sufficient evidence to render his theory valid but has done so by bringing all his ideas together in a clear and comprehensive manner.