

# **On Proper Action and Virtue: An Essay on Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics***

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## **Abstract**

This paper will discuss and analyze specific arguments concerning moral virtue and action that are found within the ten books of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. *Eudaimonia*, i.e. well-being, or happiness, is the highest good for people, and in order to achieve this, a virtuous character is necessary. A virtuous character is cultivated, and the life of a virtuous human is a life that is lived well, and is lived according to moral virtues which are developed through proper habits. It is through this development and practice of moral virtues by which one achieves *eudaimonia*, for this well-being is achieved by partaking in actions that are virtuous. The study of ethics for Aristotle is a practical science. Although through the study of ethics one may acquire theoretical knowledge, it is practical knowledge, or practical wisdom, that is most important for Aristotle when engaged in a search to define and cultivate a life that is well-lived. The topics and arguments contained within this paper will be of interest and relevance to both those who are interested in ancient Greek philosophy and to those that are concerned with ethics in the modern world. For this paper will also present situations from the modern world that are either examples of virtuous activity or its opposite. Such a study into Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* will offer insightful perspectives on proper action and virtue that is rooted in ancient Greek philosophy and remains relevant in our modern world.

## Introduction

The *Nicomachean Ethics* is perhaps one of the most important philosophical treatises within the Western philosophical tradition. Part of the reason this is so is because it is the first treatise on ethical theory ever written. Another reason is that in the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle describes with great subtlety and insight, the components and actions required for living a well-lived life. Within the ten books located in this text, which is named after his son Nicomachus, Aristotle discusses *eudaimonia*, i.e. happiness or flourishing, *arête*, i.e. virtue, justice, *akrasia*, i.e. weakness of the will, self-restraint, friendship, and pleasure. In order to understand Aristotle's approach to ethical theory we should be cognizant of his three-fold division of the sciences into the theoretical, the practical, and the productive. The theoretical sciences are composed of the subjects such as *prote philosophia*, i.e. metaphysics, and in addition to that physics, and natural philosophy. The theoretical sciences for Aristotle mainly involve investigations dedicated to hypostasizing the conceptualization of the nature of the universe. Those engaged in research of the theoretical sciences do so in order to seek knowledge for its own sake. The practical sciences are concerned with the study of proper action and proper behavior. Ethics and politics are subjects that are found within the sphere of the practical sciences. The practical sciences are contrasted with the theoretical sciences in the sense that the former is concerned with gaining knowledge and doing something specific with it, while the latter is concerned with knowledge for its own sake. The productive sciences are concerned mainly with craftsmanship and the creation of products or artefacts, such as houses, or tables. Carpentry, medicine, agriculture and rhetoric are all found within the sphere of the productive sciences. Their aim is to create something is useful and productive to humans. Within the three-fold division of the sciences varying degrees of precision are necessary with regards to the various sciences, and Aristotle raises this point at the beginning of the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

Our discussion will be adequate if it has as much clearness as the subject-matter admits of; for precision is not to be sought for alike in all discussions, any more than in all the products of the crafts. Now fine and just actions, which political science investigates, exhibit much variety and fluctuation, so that they may be thought to exist only by convention, and not by nature. And goods also exhibit a similar fluctuation because they bring harm to many people; for before now men have been undone by reason of their wealth, and others by reason of their courage. We must be content, then, in speaking of such subjects and with such premises to indicate the truth roughly and in outline, and in speaking about things which are only for the most part true and with premises of the same kind to reach conclusions that are no better. In the same spirit, therefore, should each of our statements be *received*; for it is the mark of an educated man to look for precision in each class of things just so far as the nature of the subject admits: it is evidently equally foolish to accept probable reasoning from a mathematician and to demand from a rhetorician demonstrative proofs. (*Nicomachean Ethics*, Book I, 1094<sup>b</sup>12-27.)

In the above passage Aristotle advises us to be aware of the variations in precision related to the various sciences. On the one hand, sciences such as mathematics and physics demand exact answers, and demonstrative proofs to show precise solutions. Such a high degree of precision seems to be reserved for subjects located within the sphere of the theoretical sciences, due to the fact that the truths we are searching for in those studies are not subject to change, they are fundamental and eternal truths concerning the nature and abstract reality of the universe. Another area that demands great precision is logic, a subject matter not located within the three-fold division of the sciences due to its special nature of investigating the correct principles of

argumentation. These logical principles do not belong to one particular science because they can be applied to and used within all the sciences as the appropriate tool to discern between correct and fallacious reasoning. Aristotle's treatises on logic are found within an organised group of works under the title of *Organon*. On the other hand, in the practical and productive sciences, such a high degree of precision is not required due to the limitless permutations that exist within the productions, actions and behaviors found in human nature. In the cases of things involved with human nature, we can only be as precise as the subject matter itself. Ethics is one of these studies that does not demand exact precision, for the study of virtue and human nature can be expressed through generalizations formed through reasoned arguments based on perceptions observed in our world. Therefore it is with reasoned argumentation and an appropriate degree of precision with which we approach the study of ethics.

### **Teleology in the Ethics**

Throughout his writings, Aristotle identifies and argues for the existence of a final cause in nature. To say that something has a final cause is to state that its existence has a goal or purpose. A teleological account, then, maintains that something exists for a specific purpose. Teleological explanation can be found throughout Aristotle's *corpus*, from his biological works, to his metaphysical works, and his ethical works. His arguments for a final cause are found in his exposition of the doctrine of the four causes, such as is found in *Physics*, Book II, chapter three, where he states:

Again, in the sense of end or that for the sake of which a thing is done, e.g. health is the cause of walking about. ('Why is he walking about?' We say: 'To be healthy', and, having said that, we think we have assigned the cause.) The same is true also of all the intermediate steps which are brought about through the action of something else as a mean towards the end, e.g. reduction of flesh, purging, drugs, or surgical instruments are means towards health. All these things are for the sake of the end, though they differ from one another in that some are activities, others instruments. (*Physics*, Book II, 194<sup>b</sup>33-195<sup>a</sup>2.)

When we do something for the sake of which something is done, we do it with a goal that aims at the end. In the above passage Aristotle identifies actions or activities, processes and instruments or things that are goal directed, or teleological in nature. In all of the above examples that Aristotle mentions, all of them aim for or were made for the creation of health. When we do things, such as walking, it is important to consider what the purpose of that action is so that we may determine our overall reasons for existence. If we walk in order to be healthy, then a part of our purpose in life is to exist with health.

In his treatise the *Generation of Animals* Aristotle discusses certain organs and natural bodily functions of various animals which are also teleological in nature. In his discussion of living organisms in general he states the following.

Everything then exists for a final cause, and all those things which are included in the definition of each animal, or which either are for the sake of some end or are ends in themselves, come into being both through this cause and the rest. (*Generation of Animals*, Book V, 778<sup>b</sup> 11-13.)

Since all living organisms and their parts exist with a specific purpose, it is up to the natural philosopher to investigate what that purpose is. The functions of certain organs or parts of the

body may be dismissed as existing through necessity, however Aristotle criticises such a dismissal.

Democritus, however, neglecting the final cause, reduces to necessity all the operations of nature. Now they are necessary, it is true, but yet they are for a final cause and for the sake of what is best in each case. Thus nothing prevents the teeth from being formed and being shed in this way; but it is not on account of these causes but on account of the end; these are causes in the sense of being the moving and efficient instruments and the material. (*Generation of Animals*, Book V, 789<sup>b</sup>3-8.)

As we see from the *Generation of Animals*, teleological explanation plays a central role in the description of the functions of certain biological processes and organs. Although it may be true that our organs and parts are necessary for our proper functioning, they do not exist *because* of necessity. These processes and organs function with a natural aim, i.e. in the case of the general subject of the *Generation of Animals*, the organs and functions related to embryology, it is that of reproduction. Humans, then, partake in conscious and unconscious actions that contain specific ends in sight. We walk in order to be healthy, and our livers and kidneys perform their natural functions for the same reason. Furthermore, we create drugs and artefacts such as surgical instruments with the final goal of health in mind. With teleological explanation playing such a central role in Aristotle's thought, perhaps it would be insightful to the understanding of human nature to explore the role it plays in his *Nicomachean Ethics*. This paper will explore teleological explanation in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and will identify which proper actions lead to the best type of life worth living.

At the beginning of the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle proposes that there indeed exists something in human nature that is sought after for its own sake, and nothing else. Furthermore, thinks Aristotle, all other things in the world are sought after for the sake of this one thing. This one thing Aristotle calls the good, or the highest good. In the following passage from the beginning of the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle states that this highest good is the end we are seeking.

Every art and every inquiry, and similarly every action and choice, is thought to aim at some good; and for this reason the good has rightly been declared to be that at which all things aim. But a certain difference is found among ends; some are activities, others are products apart from the activities that produce them. Where there are ends apart from the actions, it is the nature of the products to be better than the activities. (*Nicomachean Ethics*, Book I, 1094<sup>a</sup>1-6.)

In this first passage at the outset of the *Nicomachean Ethics* we can clearly see Aristotle's teleological approach to the study of ethics and its relation to human nature. As natural processes or biological processes have goal-oriented functions, so too do the actions and choices found in human nature. Teleological explanation applies to not only some actions and choices, but to all actions and choices. Furthermore, the goal of every action and choice is the same thing: the attainment of the good. Therefore it could be said that perhaps the function of all human behavior, i.e. all human actions and choices, is to attain the good. The attainment of this good, the goal of all actions and choices, is, for Aristotle, superior to the activities leading to its acquisition because it is the reason why humans partake in those activities. This good is sought after and acquired for its own sake, as is stated in the following passage.

If, then, there is some end of the things we do, which we desire for its own sake (everything else being desired for the sake of this), and if we do not choose everything for the sake of something else (for at that rate the process would go on to infinity, so that our desire would be empty and vain), clearly this must be the good and the chief good. Will not knowledge of it, then, have a great influence on life? Shall we not, like archers who have a mark to aim at, be more likely to hit upon what we should? (*Nicomachean Ethics*, Book I, 1094<sup>a</sup>18-25.)

Actions and choices are done deliberately, and with consideration. This consideration concerns the end at which the action or choice aimed at, and as with all actions and choices in human nature this end is the highest good. Aristotle further states that all things desiderative to human nature are so because of this goal we are seeking. The study of ethics, then, for Aristotle, is teleological in nature because the acquisition of understanding what the goal is in our actions and choices will assist us in determining the proper course of action in order to attain that goal.

### ***Eudaimonia***

In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book I, chapter seven, Aristotle argues that the greatest good that humans can attain is also the most complete and final end. It is to this end that all things are done, even if some other things are considered mistakenly by some to be ends in themselves. For this is a complete end, for attaining it is attaining the highest good.

Since there are evidently more than one end, and we choose some of these (e.g. wealth, flutes, and in general instruments) for the sake of something else, clearly not all ends are final ends; but the chief good is evidently something final. Therefore, if there is only one final end, this will be what we are seeking, and if there are more than one, the most final of these will be what we are seeking. Now we call that which is in itself worthy of pursuit more final than that which is worthy of pursuit for the sake of something else, and that which is never desirable for the sake of something else more final than the things that are desirable both in themselves and for the sake of that other thing, and therefore we call final without qualification that which is always desirable in itself and never for the sake of something else. (*Nicomachean Ethics*, Book I, 1097<sup>a</sup>25-35.)

In our actions and choices certain things such as wealth or instruments are chosen as ends. However, wealth or instruments or possessions are clearly acquired for the sake of something else, and not for the sake of themselves. For clearly the acquisition of wealth is not only to possess it, but to use it in order to attain something else. Aristotle thinks that this something else is more worthy of pursuit than other ends because it is the most final, i.e. it is the ultimate goal that humans strive for. This greatest good is happiness, or *eudaimonia*.

Now such a thing happiness, above all else, is held to be; for this we choose always for itself and never for the sake of something else, but honour, pleasure, reason, and every virtue we choose indeed for themselves (for if nothing resulted from them we should still choose each of them), but we choose them also for the sake of happiness, judging that through them we shall be happy. Happiness, on the other hand, no one chooses for the sake of these, nor, in general, for anything other than itself. (*Nicomachean Ethics*, Book I, 1097b1-7.)

*Eudaimonia*, then, is the greatest good because all of the virtues are ultimately chosen because of it. Likewise, happiness, or human flourishing, is never chosen for any other end, for it is an end unto itself. It is important to state here that for Aristotle *eudaimonia* is not an emotion, nor is it a state. *Eudaimonia* for Aristotle is a function, or activity, of man. Just as musicians and artists have a function, namely, to create beautiful things, so too do the human organs have functions, such as the eye, which is used for perception. Other species of animals also have eyes and so forth, therefore it would not be correct to say that it is the sole function of humans to perceive, or to merely persist throughout life, such as the plants. There must be a goal in life that is particular to humans, a goal that is bound up with the possession of a special faculty that separates us from other living things found in our world. Aristotle continues this line of argument in the following passage.

There remains, then, an active life of the element that has reason; of this, one part has it in the sense of being obedient to reason, the other in the sense of possessing reason and exercising thought. And, as 'life of the rational element' has two meanings, we must state that life in the sense of activity is what we mean; for this seems to be the more proper sense of the term. Now if the function of man is an activity of soul which follows or implies reason, and if we say 'a so-and-so' and 'a good so-and-so' have a function which is the same in kind, e.g. a lyre-player and a good lyre-player, and so without qualification in all cases, eminence of goodness being added to the name of the function (for the function of a lyre player is to play the lyre and that of a good lyre-player is to do so well): if this is the case [and we state the function of man to be a certain kind of life, and this to be an activity or actions of the soul implying a rational principle, and the function of a good man to be the good and noble performance of these, and if any action is well performed when it is performed in accordance with the appropriate virtue: if this is the case], human good turns out to be activity of soul exhibiting virtue, and if there are more than one virtue, in accordance with the best and most complete.

But we must add 'in a complete life'. For one swallow does not make a summer, nor does one day; and so too one day, or a short time, does not make a man blessed and happy. (*Nicomachean Ethics*, Book I, 1098<sup>a</sup>1-19.)

Aristotle posits that our rational element in conjunction with action is what we are searching for rather than the mere passive possession of reason when attempting to discern the function of man. Just as a lyre-player and good lyre-player are differentiated according to the ability of their functions, so too is goodness added to the appropriately functioning man that carries out actions well. What just is a properly functioning man? We see in the above passage for Aristotle that it is a man that commits good deeds and virtuous actions that are based on reason. Such virtuous actions must be practiced over a lifetime, though, for Aristotle stresses that *eudaimonia* is a much deeper idea than mere temporary happiness. In order to attain *eudaimonia* it will now be necessary to analyze Aristotle's arguments concerning virtue and action.

## **Virtue and Action**

We are not born virtuous. Depending of the type of virtue, we acquire it either through habit or instruction. Aristotle identifies two different types of virtues; moral virtue and intellectual virtue. Moral virtues such as temperance or courage are acquired through habit, while intellectual virtues such as practical wisdom or philosophical wisdom are acquired through

instruction. Habits are types of activities, and they can be done well or poorly. Good habits done well are actions that develop moral virtues. In order to become good at something, one must practice at it devoutly, and the same is true for the moral virtues, we become good by practicing good actions and deeds. Therefore it can be said that the state of our characters depends upon the practicing of good actions that in turn actually make us good. What in actuality comprises a good action? Aristotle is quite aware of the negative results that excess and deficiency create in respect to different aspects of life and his awareness of this extends to his ethical theory as well. In the following passage Aristotle posits that deficiency and excess are to be avoided not only in relation to habits that affect the body but also habits that contribute to the development of virtues.

First, then, let us consider this, that it is the nature of such things to be destroyed by defect and excess, as we see in the case of strength and of health (for to gain light on things imperceptible we must use the evidence of sensible things); exercise either excessive or defective destroys the strength, and similarly drink or food which is above or below a certain amount destroys the health, while that which is proportionate both produces and increases and preserves it. So too is it, then, in the case of temperance and courage and the other virtues. For the man who flies from and fears everything and does not stand his ground against anything becomes a coward, and the man who fears nothing at all but goes to meet every danger becomes rash; and similarly the man who indulges in every pleasure and abstains from none becomes self-indulgent, while the man who shuns every pleasure, as boors do, becomes in a way insensible, temperance and courage, then, are destroyed by excess and defect, and preserved by the mean. (*Nicomachean Ethics*, Book II, 1104<sup>a</sup>11-26.)

An excess or deficiency of anything in almost any situation is not what we should seek. Too much water or too little water both have destructive effects on the human body. So does too much or too little exercise. This is why nutritionists and physiologists conduct research on determining the best amounts of things for the human body. They are searching for what is best, and as delineated by Aristotle above, the best is that which lies in betwixt deficiency and excess. Aristotle identifies the mean, or the intermediate, as that towards which we should strive in our actions in the development of the virtues. The virtues are, for Aristotle, states of character, and in order to develop the best states of character one must choose their actions accordingly, and when doing so choosing that which is intermediate in the appropriate situation. Aristotle raises the moral virtue courage as an example. A deficiency of courage makes one a coward, and with too much courage one ignores imminent danger and becomes rash.

A wonderful example of courage from ancient Greece is found in Apollonius Rhodius' *Argonautica*. In this Greek epic poem Jason and the Argonauts partake in a mythic voyage by land and sea in search of the Golden Fleece. Much of what they encounter on their voyage is dangerous and life threatening, especially the circumstances they confront on Crete. While attempting to land on Crete they become engaged in a confrontation with Talos, a giant man made from bronze. He is the guardian of Crete that circled the island three times a day. Talos hurls boulders at their ship, and they are unable to moor their ship in the harbor. Spears and rocks are no match for a bronze giant, so they rightly make the decision to flee. Refusing to yield to what is more powerful and more dangerous is a sign of rashness. However, with the advice and help of Medea, Jason is made aware of a weakness in the ankle of Talos, and they suspend their escape with this new knowledge and stop their boat just far enough in the sea to be safe from the hurling boulders. During this encounter Talos scrapes his ankle against a

sharp rock and his *ichor*, or sacred fluid, flows out from his body and he is killed. Jason and the Argonauts then spend the night on Crete. Jason and the Argonauts can be said to be courageous due to this and other courageous acts. Perhaps it is due to their experience and practice of being courageous in other situations that assisted them in striving for the intermediate in the above confrontation. Fleeing is the correct action when encountering a bronze giant, and should not be called cowardice, however, if somehow a chance or weakness is found that may allow for victory in the face of defeat, then it is courageous to stay and fight. Courageous acts create the virtue, or a state of character that we call courage. Concerning virtue and the intermediate Aristotle states the following.

Virtue, then, is a state of character concerned with choice, lying in a mean, i.e. the mean relative to us, this being determined by reason, and by that reason by which the man of practical wisdom would determine it. Now it is a mean between two vices, that which depends on excess and that which depends on defect; and again it is a mean because the vices respectively fall short of or exceed what is right in both passions and actions, while virtue both finds and chooses that which is intermediate. Hence in respect of what it is, i.e. the definition which states its essence, virtue is a mean, with regard to what is best and right an extreme. (*Nicomachean Ethics*, Book II, 1106<sup>b</sup>36-1107<sup>a</sup>8.)

A choice is a type of action, and therefore virtue is a result of making the best choices in relation to the proper type of action. The intermediate is that which falls equally between excess and deficiency. The intermediate, then, is a type of equality between those two extremes. The intermediate is also not some equal found amongst objects, for it is a relative mean determined by individuals that possess practical wisdom, or *phronesis*. Those that possess *phronesis* are capable of determining that the intermediate is relative due to their reasoning. The intermediate itself, in particular circumstances, however, is apprehended through perception, not reason. Aristotle states this in the following passage.

The man, however, who deviates little from goodness is not blamed, whether he do so in the direction of the more or of the less, but only the man who deviates more widely; for he does not fail to be noticed. But up to what point and to what extent a man must deviate before he becomes blameworthy it is not easy to determine by reasoning, any more than anything else that is perceived by the senses; such things depend on particular facts, and the decision rests with perception. So much, then, is plain, that the intermediate state is in all things to be praised, but that we must incline sometimes towards the excess, sometimes towards the deficiency; for so shall we most easily hit the intermediate and what is right. (*Nicomachean Ethics*, Book II, 1109<sup>b</sup> 17-26.)

Reason determines that the mean is a relative intermediate, however perception leads to understanding what is the intermediate in various situations. Although reason tells us that an excess of food or drink of a certain amount is a type of indulgence, it is through our own perception by which we come to an understanding of the right amount of food or drink we should consume. Therefore, temperance, or self-restraint, the intermediate between the excess of indulgence, and the deficiency of boorishness or total abstinence, is determined by our choices. These choices are manifested into actions which in turn if carried out appropriately result in virtue. This is not an easy thing to do, though, as Aristotle warns us in the following passage.

That moral virtue is a mean, then, and in what sense it is so, and that it is a mean between two vices, the one involving excess, the other deficiency, and that it is such because its

character is to aim at what is intermediate in passions and in actions, has been sufficiently stated. Hence also it is no easy task to be good. For in everything it is no easy task to find the middle, e.g. to find the middle of a circle is not for everyone but for him who knows; so, too, anyone can get angry—that is easy—or give or spend money; but to do this to the right person, to the right extent, at the right time, with the right motive, and in the right way, *that* is not for everyone, nor is it easy; wherefore goodness is both rare and laudable and noble. (*Nicomachean Ethics*, Book II 1109<sup>a</sup>20-29.)

For Aristotle *eudaimonia*, or human flourishing is distinguished from fleeting happiness because the development of virtue takes a lifetime of practice, and because it is not easy to always grasp the intermediate. In fact, in the above passage Aristotle says it is a difficult thing to be good, and this is because being good rests upon the ability to grasp the intermediate, which is also in itself something that is not easy. It takes a lifetime of practice with reason by which our actions create virtues, or states of character. The possessor of *phronesis* may attain *eudaimonia*, then, because he has both the practical wisdom necessary to distinguish amongst reasoned choices, and the ability to judge what is appropriate in particular situations.

Perhaps for Aristotle teleology was as apparent in human nature as it was to him in biological processes. If there is a final end to human nature then the actions and choices it is composed of become in a way functional processes that resemble the biological processes found in living organisms in that they all have a purpose. The then so-called functional processes (i.e. all actions and choices) of human nature aim at a positive goal. For biological processes the goal is the healthy overall existence of an organism. For the functional processes of human nature it is the attainment of *eudaimonia*. Aristotle posits the idea of striving for the intermediate in relation to actions and choices because the extremes, i.e. excesses and deficiencies fail to cultivate moral virtues which through practice lead to *phronesis* and *eudaimonia*.

### **The Best Life Worth Living**

In searching for what this highest good is Aristotle in Book I, chapter 5 and Book X, chapters 7 and 8 identifies three general types of lives and their corresponding types of happiness. The first is the life dedicated to enjoyment, for the men who lead this type of life are only concerned with pleasure. Aristotle thinks that most men lead lives of this kind, and that they are vulgar and resemble beasts in their actions, and that they mistakenly identify happiness with pleasure. The second type is the political life. Those that live this kind of life pursue honor, for they think that is what happiness is. Aristotle also dismisses those that lead this life as mistaken. Honor, the end of the political life, is not necessarily an awful thing, however, Aristotle notes that it is usually given to men by someone else, and that one is not truly in possession of honor because it can also be taken away. Aristotle is searching for something deeper, something essential in humans that cannot be taken away and something that is not transient. The third type of life is the contemplative life, which Aristotle identifies as the type of life that comprehends and strives for *eudaimonia*. Aristotle posits such an idea in the following passage.

If happiness is activity in accordance with virtue, it is reasonable that it should be in accordance with the highest virtue; and this will be that of the best thing in us. Whether it be reason or something else that is this element which is thought to be our natural ruler and guide and to take thought of things noble and divine, whether it be itself also divine or only the most divine element in us, the activity of this in accordance with its

proper virtue will be perfect happiness. That this activity is contemplative we have already said. (*Nicomachean Ethics*, Book X, 1177<sup>a</sup>11-18.)

Aristotle here is concerned with identifying what *eudaimonia* is and what activity can properly grasp after it. Since it is the best type of happiness, it will correspondingly be found to be the supreme part of humans. Aristotle equates this with divinity, and confirms that it is the contemplative life that can properly grasp for and attain such happiness. The contemplative life is divine in the sense that the human element required for this activity is a faculty of the intellect, or *nous*. For Aristotle *nous* is divine because it is eternal and it is a non-sensible substance. Concerning *nous* and the contemplative life Aristotle states the following.

Now this would seem to be in agreement both with what we said before and with the truth. For, firstly, this activity is the best (since not only is reason the best thing in us, but the objects 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 ought to have pleasure mingled with it, but the activity of philosophic wisdom is admittedly the pleasantest of virtuous activities; at all events the pursuit of it is thought to offer pleasures marvelous for their purity and their enduringness, and it is to be expected that those who know will pass their time more pleasantly than those who inquire. (*Nicomachean Ethics*, Book X, 1177<sup>a</sup>18-27.)

Here Aristotle asserts some reasons why the contemplative life is the best type of life worth living. It may seem to some that the contemplative life lacks action or activity, however, this is not true. It is for Aristotle the best activity because of the ideas that the faculty of *nous* thinks about are the best ideas that humans can be cognizant of. Another reason is the duration of the activity involved in the contemplative life. A person can be engaged with the best ideas using the best faculty available to him or her longer than any other kinds of virtuous actions. The study of philosophy and the acquisition of philosophical wisdom are also more copacetic than other virtuous activities due to the nature of the content of the objects of understanding.

Consequently, what should we do with this study of ethics? Well, perhaps it would be best to carry on, with reasoned purpose, aware that our good actions make us good in that our virtues are developed, and this, in turn, leads to a well-lived life. Attaining *eudaimonia* in actuality might be a difficult task to accomplish, however, if we listen to Aristotle, it becomes clear that a life dedicated to the cultivation of virtues is the best type of life worth living, and it is a type of life that is indeed truly worth pursuing.

## References

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