

On the Reasons for Contemplation to Provoke the Greatest Happiness: Aristotle's Conception of Intelligence

Marco Gomboso

(Universidad de Buenos Aires, Rijksuniversiteit Groningen)

Abstract

The article is an attempt to show why Aristotle conceives a link between Contemplation and Happiness, and how it is that Contemplation is the activity that constitutes Intelligence. By carefully analysing Book X of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, I try to give an answer to this question. Moreover, the outcome of the article intends to give a different perspective in relation to what we commonly conceive as happiness: Aristotle's position may be a good counterpart to the consumption-satisfaction paradigm that dominates contemporary society.

Introduction

In Book X of his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle defines complete happiness as the activity in accordance with the highest kind of virtue. This activity is conceived as thoughtful and named as contemplation.¹ Its main element is intelligence. This element is the main feature belonging to men (and the one that it is closer to what is divine), and Aristotle considers that life in accordance with it is the happiest.

This assertion, made by the philosopher in the last book of his *Nicomachean Ethics*, has led to many discussions regarding the nature

¹ All references to the *Nicomachean Ethics* will be done using the translation made by Christopher Rowe. The terms *virtue* and *contemplation*, which are used in other translations, are replaced by *excellence* and *reflection* respectively in Rowe's text. I will use, in my own text, the terms *virtue* and *contemplation*, only leading to Rowe's terms when introducing quotations from the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

of happiness, as well as its relation to theoretical and practical activities. These have pointed out, for instance, the problem of how to interpret the distinction between the happy life in accordance with contemplation and the one reached by the rest of the virtuous activities. Moreover, a core question arises in relation to the issue: why is it that this supreme activity (contemplation) is connected to the highest possible kind of happy life?

Aristotle establishes a difference between types of lives when he asserts that “second happiest is the life in accordance with the rest of excellence; for activities in accordance with this are human.”² The existence of this second happiest life denotes that, for any reason, happiness achieved by contemplation is of a better kind, of a greater value. These two “kinds” of life may make us think about the question of what the better kind has (that life based mainly in contemplation), which the other is lacking, for only the first enables the greatest happiness. In addition, we may think about how is that this greatest happiness is achieved, or in other words what is that allows this better happiness to occur.

My intention in this essay, indeed, will be to ask the reasons Aristotle proposes to affirm that contemplation gives the greatest happiness. In order to do so, I will first expose what the Greek philosopher understands by happiness, trying to show his appreciation of it, mostly as exhibited in Book I of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Afterwards, a focus on what constitutes absolute happiness will be posited. The specific condition of this kind of happiness will illustrate what elements of it lead Aristotle to bind it to intelligence and reflection. Finally, a close look at the characteristics he ascribes to contemplation will also be presented, for the relation between these two activities (contemplation and absolute happiness) should shed light on the reasons one entails the other.

Aristotle on Happiness

It would not be futile to start by what Aristotle discusses about happiness in the first book of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, because it is indeed in this book where the subject is most discussed. In I. 13, he gives an account of happiness, considering it an activity in relation to two main elements, namely soul and virtue:

² Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*. X. 8 (1178a10).

Since happiness is some activity of soul in accordance with complete excellence, we should discuss the subject of excellence; for perhaps in this way we shall get a better view of happiness too.³

But clearly it is human excellence we should inquire about, because it was the human good that we were looking for, and human happiness. By ‘human excellence,’ we mean excellence of soul, not of body; happiness, too, we say, is activity of soul.⁴

These two quotations clearly show that, according to Aristotle, happiness is only possible thanks to the exercise of virtue (and it will be complete if this last is complete as well) and, at the same time, entailed only by the soul. These two elements seem to be foundational. Thus, according to the philosopher, if we look for the nature of happiness we necessarily have to consider human virtue. This virtue is not tied up with the body, so the soul is the entity that entails it. Then happiness is mainly a soul activity. This immaterial feature of happiness is of great importance, for it may give a cause for the relation of it with the most non-material purposes of theoretical activity and intelligence.

Still, happiness involves other features which are capital too. One of this is completeness. Completeness refers to what is desirable in itself, because it is not sought for the sake of some other thing.⁵ This is consistent with the fact that anything which is not complete is in need of what is lacking. If something is “missed” then this incomplete thing leads us to look for it only if it is a medium for something complete. Aristotle thinks happiness fulfils the conditions for completeness, for its achievement does not imply a looking for something else.

The other important feature is self-sufficiency, for happiness would stand alone and give its own purpose by itself. In other words, it is desirable in itself.⁶ Completeness and self-sufficiency may be tied up together: something that can stand by itself is not in need of anything else to justify its existence.

Consequently, happiness would be an activity, given by the soul, and oriented towards virtue. It would be a self-sufficient and complete

³ Ibid., I. 13 (1102a5)

⁴ Ibid., I. 13 (1102a15)

⁵ Ibid., I. 7 (1097b1)

⁶ Ibid., I.7 (1097b15)

activity as well. These characteristics lead to a thinking of happiness as a spiritual act, an act that can involve practical matters related to virtues such as generosity or courage, but retaining its independence from the body. Virtues of character will be dispositions of the soul engaged with daily matters (“habituation”), and happiness would be present in that compound between soul and matter, still keeping its condition of something that may be higher than it.⁷

The Highest Kind of Happiness and its Relation with Theoria (Contemplation)

We see that already in book I Aristotle makes the distinction between two kinds of wisdom, theoretical and practical, when considering two different groups according to the kind of virtues. One of them, regarded as “intellectual”, shows the path for what later will be presented, in book X, as contemplation. Intellectual virtue or theoretical wisdom will be a disposition of the soul when the highest kind of happiness acts. For the latter is also an activity according to Aristotle, and it will be of the highest kind if it acts in accordance with intelligence, contemplating. The question is, again, why is it that contemplation is related to this highest kind of happiness.

Aristotle gives some features of this supreme activity in book X:

For this is the highest kind of activity, since intelligence too is the highest of the things in us, and the objects of intelligence are the highest knowables; further, it is the most continuous, since we can engage in reflection continuously more than we can in getting things done, whatever they may be.⁸

Continuity and stability can be regarded as distinctive features of the supreme. If the greatest happiness is achieved thanks to it, and it also develops as an activity, we may say that, in addition to completeness and self-sufficiency (features that happiness in general possesses), the highest happiness is actually more stable and continuous as well. To contemplate or reflect denotes a steady behaviour too, for the need of quietness and not engagement in practical, pragmatic actions allows this

⁷ Ibid., X. 7 (1177b30)

⁸ Ibid., X. 7 (1177a20)

enterprise to be fulfilled. We can then see that one of the main reasons that contemplation gives the highest happiness resides in the fact that contemplation is indeed the most stable action, and the greatest happiness must not be something evasive or incidental, as could happen with other virtues that may lead to some happiness of lesser extent.

Aristotle also establishes that contemplation fits with happiness in a way that no other activity does. It shows completeness and self-sufficiency in a unique way:

Again, reflective activity would seem to be the only kind loved because of itself; for nothing accrues from it besides the act of reflecting, whereas from practical projects we get something, whether more or less, besides the doing of them. Again, happiness is thought to reside in leisure from business; for we busy ourselves in order to have leisure, and to go to war in order to live at peace. Now the context of the practical activity of the excellences is either the city or war, but actions in these spheres seem to lack the element of leisure, and warlike ones, in fact, lack it utterly (for no one chooses to make war for the sake of making war, or deliberately contrives it: if someone made his friends into enemies in order to create battles and killings, he would seem an utterly bloodthirsty type). But the politician's activity, too, lacks the element of leisure, and aims beyond the business of politics itself – at getting power, or honours, or indeed happiness for himself and his fellow citizens, this being distinct from the exercise of political expertise, and something we clearly do seek as something distinct. If, then, among actions in accordance with the excellences the political and warlike stand out in fineness and greatness, and these actions are lacking in leisure and aim at some end rather than being desirable because of themselves, while the activity of intelligence seems both to possess a greater seriousness, being reflective, and to aim at no end beside itself, and to have its own proper pleasure (and this contributes to increasing the activity); and if, finally, the elements of self-sufficiency, and of leisure, and of freedom from weariness, in so far as these are possible for human beings, and all the other attributes assigned to the blessed, are patently characteristics of this kind of activity: then *this* activity will be the complete hap-

piness of man, if it is given a complete length of life, since nothing about happiness is incomplete.⁹

This long passage shows very important assertions for the relation between the greatest happiness and contemplation. The latter is an activity with no pragmatic purpose or end, thus it distinguishes itself from any practical activity, even from those that are considered virtuous. For these kind of activities have a particular purpose that goes beyond them, therefore they are mediums, instruments, and they look for a thing other than themselves. The incompleteness of this kind of activity is evident in this way, because they lack their end, the objective for which they aim. Conversely, an activity that is complete does not lack anything (including its own end, of course), and that is a reason for completeness. Contemplation possesses this property, because its own nature implies the non-necessity of something else other than itself. It fulfils its own requirements just by being exercised. Thus, it is complete and self-sufficient. In addition, Aristotle introduces the notion of leisure: a state only achieved by being in possession of what is desired. Only complete activities can entail leisure, for they do not go through any roughness in order to be fulfilled. Happiness, in its most absolute, is the opposite of incompleteness according to Aristotle. It would not be then an irrational thought, to think about the exercise of intelligence as bringing this kind of happiness.

The distinction between two kinds of activities, namely contemplative and practical, may then play a role in understanding the reasons Aristotle has for linking the first to complete happiness, and it also may give a chance to understand its nature. And if contemplative activity is stable, complete and self-sufficient, and it reaches happiness in the greatest way (for it fulfils not only the general conditions to have a happy life, but also the stability and continuity that sporadic happiness lacks), then the relation between the two is at least clear in terms of similarity.

However, it is still strenuous to establish the precise reasons why contemplation allows for this highest kind of happiness. This also resides in the fact that Aristotle gives more emphasis to the explanation of intellectual activity than to the greatest happiness in itself. Even so, it

⁹ Ibid., X. 7 (1177b1-1177b26).

appears possible to characterize it, by considering the implicit assertions he makes about it when placing it in relation to different kinds of activity. In his work *Aristotle on the Human Good*, Richard Kraut mentions this tangled situation as well:

What does Aristotle mean by “perfect happiness”? He does not explain this term, and it occurs nowhere else in the *NE*. But if...X. 7-8 compares two competing plans of life, both of which are happy but one of which is happiest, then a certain interpretation of “perfect happiness” suggests itself. The two lives differ in that each assigns a certain primacy to a different good, a primacy that consists in being an ultimate end...Contemplation is desirable in itself, it is not desirable for the sake of anything else, and every other good is desirable for its sake.¹⁰

The highest happiness comes thanks to the fact that the life lived in accordance with intelligence has everything it desires: itself. So maybe Aristotle is concerned with showing this difference with the other kind of lives, those that, even if they are virtuous by other means, nevertheless are intended to look for something other than themselves. Again, for something to bring complete happiness, it must for sure be unmitigated in nature.

Yet, some have seen in this difference between these two lives a problem, for it may be not clear how a person can or should choose one or the other. This leads to confusion about the reasons why the happiest life is the happiest indeed, given that human beings would not always take part in it. This paradox, however, may not be actually present in Aristotle’s thought. And the reason for it is located in the divine character of contemplation.

Godlike Activity

So, does Aristotle mean that human beings, in order to achieve this highest kind of happiness, should be constantly engaging in contemplation? As we said, many authors have considered this as a problem. For instance, John Cooper, in his work entitled *Reason and Human Good in Aristotle*, regards the issue as “unfortunate”:

¹⁰ Richard Kraut, *Aristotle on the Human Good* (Princeton University Press, 1989), 42-43.

How is then one to interpret the other member of this pair of contrasted lives? It is described as a “life of moral virtue,” and of course it is on this aspect of it that Aristotle’s interests focus, since its provision for morally virtuous activities is the salient characteristic of this life, and that which distinguishes it from the intellectual life already discussed. But because his principal aim in these chapters is to explain and defend his preference for the intellectual mode of life he does not enter into the details of the contrasted moral life. This is unfortunate from our point of view, since it makes it difficult to be absolutely certain of the relation between the “moral life” of the tenth book of the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the flourishing life as it is conceived in the *Eudemean Ethics*.¹¹

This supposed problem Cooper manifests is one of the most discussed, and does not even appear central answering the main question of this paper. It is central, however: for the nature of contemplative activity, regarded as the highest kind of possible activity, is distinguished because it is divine as well. Aristotle considers human beings capable of taking part into some degree of divinity¹² when acting in accordance with contemplation. However, the human condition is different from that of the gods: humans can engage in contemplation and this is the best thing to do, but this does not mean they don’t need to be concerned with practical matters. It would be actually more accurate to say that, what Aristotle is trying to show, is that if we have these different kinds of activities and different *degrees* or kinds of happiness, it is not because we don’t want to achieve the highest good always, but because that is only possible for the gods. Indeed, gods do not need the distinction, for their only activity is the most desirable and complete, namely, to contemplate. Virtues of character are human, then, and even though they are not as supreme as the latter, they are indispensable for human happiness as well:

But the one who is happy will also need external prosperity, in so far as he is human; for human nature is not self-sufficient for the purposes of reflection, but needs bodily health too, and the avail-

¹¹ John M. Cooper, *Reason and Human Good in Aristotle* (Hackett Publishing Company, 1986), 165.

¹² Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*. X. 7 (1177b28)

ability of nourishment and other kinds of servicing. And yet, if it is not possible to be blessedly happy without external things, still it should not be thought that the happy person will need many of them, and on a large scale, in order to be so.”¹³

What we have then is human beings, that in order to achieve the most desirable and happiest activity (contemplation) take part in it when this is possible. And this is not *always* possible because they do need to take part in other kinds of virtues as well (namely virtues of character) and practical matters. And this situation is of extreme importance for the understanding of the highest happiness and its relation to contemplation: for it is a divine, godlike activity. Human beings can act like gods sometimes, but they reside and are part of the practicalities of the material world. This divine character also brings us to the beginning of the nature of the highest virtues: they are closer to the soul and the spiritual than to other things or compounds.

Sarah Broadie, in her work *Ethics with Aristotle*, sharply explains it in these terms:

The reason why theōria counts as best, or why that element counts as best of which theōria is the activity, should have a bearing on this question. It is best because ‘divine.’¹⁴

Aristotle is not in a position to argue that theōria is a divine activity on the ground that it is the best, for the latter proposition, so far as it has any practical bearing for us, is what has to be established. Instead he argues the other way round.¹⁵

The cause for this can be traced in Aristotle’s own explanations. The argumentation given by the philosopher may begin from what is divine, and afterwards consider human possibilities. Because we think about gods as happy to the highest degree, we must therefore think of what they do in their lives, what kind of activity they develop, and then we will have before us the activity that leads to complete happiness. So, what do gods do? What is the activity of the gods? For sure, it cannot be a practical activity: for gods do not engage with life by doing things in

¹³ Ibid., X. 8 (1178b33 - 1179a3)

¹⁴ Sarah Broadie, *Ethics with Aristotle* (Oxford University Press, 1994), 400.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 401

order to get to or arrive at something other. And as the purpose of any practical activity is to get to or arrive at other things or states which are lacked, and if we also think that gods do not have needs, then their activities are not practical activities. According to Aristotle, what we have then is only contemplation. The only activity that is not practical, and in addition is not done because it looks for something, is contemplation. Therefore, this is the activity of the gods, and moreover is the one that leads to complete happiness.¹⁶

Consequently, we may think that Aristotle draws a scenario where happiness is possible for human beings, and the highest kind of it as well.¹⁷ However, the latter is only achieved if we exercise the activity considered natural for gods: contemplation. The reason why this is the happiest possible life comprises all those features previously discussed (self-sufficiency, completeness, continuity) which are synthesized in the very fact of divinity. For gods have them all, (therefore they don't *need*), and if they have an activity, then this will be the happiest. And when men participate in it, they are even in a relation with the gods themselves, for that is why Aristotle says that they receive their love. This might constitute an unarguable reason for being blessed with the highest kind of happiness:

And the person whose intelligence is active, and who devotes himself to intelligence, and is in the best condition, seems also to be the most loved by the gods.¹⁸

¹⁶ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*. X. 8 (1178b24)

¹⁷ The argument Aristotle gives for this seems to rely on the supposition that practical activities do not allow the highest kind of virtuosity. This assertion could be challenged or even attacked by someone who thinks that every activity that has a noble purpose may be considered as of the highest kind as well. For the criteria to define what constitutes the supreme excellence of any activity might be relative. However, this relativistic view could face problems, for it would find difficult to refute the arguments for self-sufficiency and completeness that most of virtues do not achieve, for instance.

¹⁸ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*. X. 8 (1179a23)