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Phronēsis and Contemplation

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Abstract

An appealing interpretation of Aristotle's moral psychology argues that character virtue sets the goal of the good life. On that view, practical wisdom or *phronēsis* supplies only the means toward the end that is grasped by the character virtues. Yet, this view has trouble accounting for the supremacy of the contemplative life, which is clearly the best life in the paradigmatic or strict sense for Aristotle. In this paper, I argue that the intellect plays a role for Aristotle in realizing the priority of the contemplative life and integrating it into our practical lives as a whole.

Résumé

Une interprétation attrayante de la psychologie morale d'Aristote soutient que la vertu de caractère fixe la fin de la bonne vie. De ce point de vue, la sagesse pratique ou *phronēsis* ne fournit que les moyens vers la fin qui est saisie par les vertus de caractère. Pourtant, cette vision a du mal à rendre compte de la suprématie de la vie contemplative, qui est clairement la meilleure vie au sens paradigmatique ou strict pour Aristote. Dans cet article, je soutiens que l'intellect joue un rôle pour Aristote dans la réalisation de la priorité de la vie contemplative et son intégration dans la totalité de notre vie pratique

In this paper, I am concerned with the following question: how does the *phronimos*, that is, the person who possesses practical wisdom (*phronēsis*) come to know that the contemplative life is the best life? This question is coupled with a question of moral psychology: what is the division of labour between our rational and non-rational powers in the achievement of that knowledge? I will be assuming that the contemplative life is in some sense the primary achievement of happiness (*teleia eudaimonia*,

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EN X.7 1177a16) and I will make a brief incursion into the much-discussed issue of the two lives, the relation between the practical life of moral virtue and the contemplative life.¹

A problem concerning how the *phronimos* knows that the contemplative life is the happy life in the strict or paradigmatic sense arises when we embrace a compelling interpretation of Aristotle's moral psychology, which involves a non-intellectualist construal of *phronēsis*. This is Jessica Moss's interpretation. She construes Aristotle as advocating practical empiricism, which is the view that thoughts about the good ultimately derive from pleasurable perceptions (Moss, 2012, p. 46). I will be filling in some details of this interpretation in what follows but note that practical empiricism entails that our knowledge of the good is grounded in perception (*aisthēsis*), and that the intellect (*nous*) is not an independent source of insight into the good. The attainment of *phronēsis* therefore does not require knowledge of happiness arrived at through reflection. Moss advertises as a central advantage of her reading that it allows us to take at face value several passages in Aristotle that attribute the function of setting the goal to character virtue, that is, to the natural or acquired character of the non-rational part of the soul. The plainest of the Goal passages states: "Virtue makes the goal right, *phronēsis* the things toward the goal" (EN VI.12 1144a7–9). On Moss's interpretation, *phronēsis* issues in good deliberation, which arrives at the best way of realizing the end set by character virtue. *Phronēsis* is, of course, a *rational* state of grasping the truth about the practical human good, but the grasp of the human good by the rational part of the soul, on Moss's interpretation, adds no content. As she states, "the content of our goals comes entirely from our characters" (Moss, 2012, p. 223).²

This view raises some difficulties, I believe, for the way in which the *phronimos* comes to the realization that the contemplative life is the happy life in the strict or paradigmatic sense. Here there is a case that at least on its surface involves the intellect adding content to our understanding of the goal. After all, contemplation is an activity of *nous*, and of all the activities we engage in it is the least dependent on our bodies. Moss recognizes this issue as an "important complication" for her view, noting:

Habituation in virtuous activity cannot on its own give us any experience of contemplation, and thus cannot yield an appearance of the life of contemplation as good. ... If this is right then *phronēsis* does play a role in supplying the end: it supplies the ultimate end — the view of *eudaimonia* — for those who recognize the life of contemplation (Moss, 2012, p. 232)

This might seem a major concession for Moss's practical empiricist reading of Aristotle. Yet, she argues that it is not in fact such a major concession. As she goes on to argue:

... even if intellect does provide the content of the contemplator's ultimate goal in this way, it reaches this content not as the conclusion of pure practical

¹ I use the following abbreviations for the works of Aristotle referred to here: *de An.* = *de Anima*; *EE* = *Ethica Eudemia*; *EN* = *Ethica Nicomachea*; *Metaph.* = *Metaphysica*.

² Moss reiterates this thought in her 2014 chapter, p. 234.

reasoning, but only by abstracting from a non-rational appearance furnished by character. (Moss, 2012, p. 232, emphasis added)

Her idea appears to be this: habituation cannot on its own (without *nous*) yield an appearance of contemplation as good; still once the distinctively wondrous (*thaumastias*) pleasures of contemplation have been tasted, the non-rational part of the soul (especially *phantasia*) as conditioned by virtue is involved in representing those pleasures as to be pursued. The intellect alone provides this object, possibly also the pleasure taken in it, but, when we are in a position of determining how to act, it is *phantasia* that will lead us to recall the distinctive pleasures of contemplation, drawing us back to it, and, in more complex situations, it will represent those pleasures in deliberation. Deliberation, on Moss's reading, involves *phantasia* conjuring pleasurable and painful images, and somehow synthesizing "one out of these many *phantasmata*" (as Aristotle puts it in *de An.* III.3, 434a7–8) that will then govern our overall motivation (Moss, 2012, p. 148ff.). These deliberations will inevitably bring us to engage in contemplation where doing so would not require actions inconsistent with virtue, since, as Aristotle says, "whatever choice and acquisition of natural goods ... will most of all make for the contemplation of god, this is best and this is the finest limit" (*EE* VIII.3 1249b18–19). So, although on Moss's reading the form of activity that constitutes the best life is furnished by the intellect, it is taken up into our practical lives via the non-rational part of the soul. Finally, Moss contends that the contemplative life is really just an alternative specification of the same generic end that is pursued by the virtuous practical agent. Both pursue the life of excellent activity. It's just that the contemplative agent has discovered that the finest sort of activity is the activity of *nous*, whereas the virtuous practical agent may lack that insight. For Moss, the important point is that the contemplator is oriented toward the fine activity of his intellect through proper habituation, even if that habituation does not deliver contemplation as the content of the good life.

There is a consistent interpretation here, but I believe it obfuscates the intellect's contribution and, as a result, downplays the distinctiveness of the contemplative life, its uniqueness, *vis-à-vis* other ends shared with animals, of the highest human good, which involves our *nous*-driven capacity for becoming godlike through engaging in contemplation. It is through this capacity that our lives may be re-oriented toward an activity that wholly transcends necessity, an activity that is no part of securing the needs of our continued animal existence.

There are three important issues to distinguish: first, the source of the content of our view of the good life, second, how the content is integrated into our overall view of the good life and how it becomes practical, and third, how to classify views of the good life, specifically whether the comparison suggested in *EN X* involves a comparison between two specific views of the generic good life.

On the first issue, there is some agreement that *nous* provides the content of the happiest life. But Moss does not provide us with a detailed view of how we encounter the life of contemplation so as to become aware of its superiority; she only says that it does not and cannot come about through habituation. As Myles Burnyeat emphasizes in his famous discussion of habituation, learning to be virtuous is a matter of learning to enjoy virtuous activity, which is at the same time learning that it is enjoyable

(Burnyeat, 1980, p. 76). And we can be led to engage in activities without the prior knowledge of the fact that they are enjoyable, and hence without prior motivation to pursue them for their own sakes. We are motivated to do just acts initially, perhaps, through a concern to avoid punishment or to remain in good standing with a mentor, and then perhaps find that the activity is pleasurable: we see the point of it and really for the first time understand the activity. We first engaged in the acts of a skier, to borrow Burnyeat's example, without quite understanding the activity of skiing as a distinctive sort of pleasant pastime. Likewise, as Aristotle tells us in *EN* II.4, we become virtuous through doing acts of the sort a just or temperate person would do. The case of contemplation cannot work that way. In order to taste the pleasures of contemplation, I must first develop understanding. I cannot be led to acts of contemplation from without, as it were, as I can be led to pleasurable acts like skiing. There is not an outwardly noetic act that is like an act of understanding but not from understanding as there is an act of the sort that a just or temperate person would do that is not done from the virtue of justice. The recitation of a text without understanding, for example, will be entirely without the pleasure of reading it with understanding. It is presumably through teaching that I begin to glimpse pleasure in gaining understanding and knowledge; as Aristotle states (*EN* II.1 1103a14) "[virtue] of thought is both produced and increased mostly through teaching." What this educative process does in the case of theoretical *nous* is give the student a handle on the intelligible forms present in perceptible objects, eventually retained in memory as abstracted from perceptible objects. Teaching of the theoretical sciences initiates the student onto the path of philosophy, and then (if all goes well) it leads to the attainment of theoretical wisdom.

That there is a role for teaching in bringing us to see the pleasure of the life of theoretical wisdom indicates, contra Moss, that the universal is not practically irrelevant for the good life in the highest sense. She contends that *Metaph.* A.1 shows that wisdom is practically inert, since in the realm of making (*poiēsis*), someone with experience alone may be just as successful as someone the proper craftsman, who possesses a theoretical account of the craft. Likewise, though *phronēsis* makes us better at acting, it is not through a grasp of the universal that it does so, on Moss's view; rather, it only makes us better at grasping the "things toward the end" (*EN* VI.12 1144a7–9), i.e., working out the further particulars that would constitute or promote happiness. As regards *technē*, Moss is surely correct about the practical irrelevance of universals for Aristotle. But the grasp of the universal in the case of theoretical wisdom has implications for our conception of *teleia eudaimonia*, and it is thereby practically relevant. And since this is part of the insight of the *phronimos*, the grasp of universals is practically relevant for him. Of course, this is happening in part through our progressive grasp of the distinctive pleasures of theoretical insight. Hence, one might argue that it is not the content of the teaching that is practically relevant, but the fact that it shows up to us as exceedingly and enduringly pleasant that gives teaching in the theoretical sciences their practical relevance. But in the case of the contemplative life, our grasp of universals is surely also playing a directive, practical role, and hence, for example, with the six arguments regarding the superiority of the life of contemplation in *EN* X.7, teaching has an ineliminable role in shaping our conception of the good life; these aren't merely a matter of the

intellect christening in beliefs what habituated character delivers. It is via theoretical insight into the superiority of *nous* to other faculties, along with other observations, that the contemplative life is confirmed as *teleia eudaimonia*. The *phronimos* draws the practical conclusions from that theoretical insight. As Allan Silverman observes, Aristotle's teachings in *EN* X.7–8 rebut the received view that Aristotle (contra Plato) affirms the independence of ethics from metaphysics (Silverman, 2010, p. 89). Further, because the pleasures of contemplation are of another order and coming from another source than the pleasures of practical virtuous activity, their relation to these other activities must themselves be worked out through reason rather than simply being given as the upshot of our habituation for reason to merely confirm, and this is what Aristotle attempts to do in *EN* X.7–8.

Moss implies that these arguments can be read as specifications of the generic idea of the good life; hence, she suggests that they are deliberative arguments, specifying our generic, character-given goal of the life of virtue, and bringing it into focus on the contemplative life. It is true that, by the time we are absorbing the teachings of *EN* X, we are presumed to be formed in our character so as to be pursuing the life of virtue. Yet, it is important to note that there is here an autonomous grasping of a good by *nous*; it is good in the way that the gods are good, which is not a practical good since we cannot become gods. Still, we can become god-like through engaging in contemplation. Hence, we respond to the insight into the goodness of *nous* by exercising it in its distinctively autonomous activity of contemplation.

Further, this insight is transformative for our view of the good life. It isn't as though the practical life acquired through habituation is left untouched by the alternative life of contemplation. Rather, it provides a new interpretation of the point of the practical life: that contemplation is the activity that the practical activity of someone with good character was all along trying to make room for. We are to make as much room as possible for contemplation in our lives and in our *poleis* (city-states), in that it gives the point of our practical undertakings. If we are well brought up, the place for contemplative activity will have been already made; we will presumably have been given some teaching and the appropriate introduction to noble leisure, *scholē*, through music.

The issue, for Aristotle, is not a matter of distinguishing the generic life of excellence and two competing specific instantiations of it in the contemplative and practical lives, but rather a consideration of whether the practical life without contemplation is a complete specification of the good life — and it turns out that it is not. I follow John Cooper in thinking that the alternatives are, in the end, a vaguer and less vague version of the same view (Cooper, 1999, p. 225). On Moss's understanding, the two lives are two distinct specifications of an underlying generic life of excellence that is set as a goal by our habituated character. We then respond to the superiority of the life of contemplation. But these are not two self-contained lives. Rather, the upshot of the discussion in *EN* X.8 is a reconsideration of the nature of the practical life, given its domination by the contemplative life. As a result of the comparison, any life of excellence will be oriented toward making room for contemplation, at least as its Utopian target, to use Gavin Lawrence's term (Lawrence, 2006, p. 71). That is, if our current circumstances do not allow for engaging in contemplation, we will be aiming to bring about circumstances favourable to contemplation.

The version of the practical life that is second best derives from an acknowledgement of the supremacy of the good in contemplation. It is what we are fighting for, ultimately, in courageous action as we aim at achieving peace and freedom from enemies who would enslave us say. As Gabriel Richardson Lear has argued, the life of virtue can be oriented toward the life of contemplation in two senses: in that the practical life instrumentally strives to make room for contemplation, but also in that the practical truthfulness of virtuous action approximates and celebrates the life of contemplation (Richardson Lear, 2004, p. 205). On Richardson Lear's understanding, the relation between practical virtue and contemplation is not one of maximization and the relation between them is not purely instrumental. Hence, the contemplative life yields a new way of looking at the virtuous life, an interpretation of it as approximating and expressing the value of the contemplative life. Her interpretation shows that putting contemplation at the heart of any understanding of the good life, for Aristotle, simultaneously puts *nous* at the heart of any understanding of the good life.

Hence, on my view, *nous* is supplying crucial content to our conception of the good life; our motivations are directed to it, if we are virtuous, and what counts as practical virtue is shaped by being directed to contemplation in the two senses Richardson Lear suggests. The secondary status of moral virtue is essential to it. As I have argued, then, *nous* is the source of the *phronimos*' conception of *teleia eudaimonia*; it is introduced to him and integrated into his overall conception of the *eudaimōn* life through experience and teaching, and thoroughly shapes his understanding of all excellent activity. Yet, this reading maintains a significant agreement with Moss's non-intellectualist reading. The intellect is not an independent source of motivation, even if it is an independent source of content, and so the life of contemplation depends on proper habituation.

What about the Goal passages? Do we have to give up on a literal reading of those passages, as Moss contends? It seems to me that the passages should be read with Book X in mind, which Moss does not do. Hence, character virtue can make our goal right [*aretē ton skopon poiēt' orthon*] without determining the content of the goal. Rather, character virtue secures the conditions under which we can develop understanding and discover the content of the goal in contemplation. It points us toward the goal, directing the mind to it. This is motivational, true, but it does not preclude reading the passages in a fairly literal way: virtue can be instructive (*didaskalikos*) of the goal (as *EN VII 8 1151a17*) without itself providing the content — it can instruct by pointing or prompting once the content of excellence is presented by *nous*. Practical wisdom prescribes for the sake of theoretical wisdom, the goal, but does not stand above theoretical wisdom, directing it (*EN VI.13 1145a9*). *Phronēsis* does not itself supply the goal because the goal is *theoria*, which is the activity corresponding to the state of theoretical wisdom (*sophia*) and the goal is grounded in the scientific rather than the calculative intellect. On my reading, then, there is a key ingredient missing in Moss's reading, which is theoretical wisdom; it comes in only as an afterthought (it is not even mentioned in her 2014 chapter). Character virtue directs us, motivationally, to *sophia*; this is making the aim right. It is not merely making us want the end, but also pointing us toward it, and therefore setting the stage for our coming to know it; *phronēsis* works out the means to wisdom, but the full blown, universal knowledge that the life of contemplation is the best life is

itself a component of *sophia*; it is metaphysical knowledge, since it involves insight into the divine and our likeness to it through the possession of theoretical wisdom.

In an important passage from *EN* X.8, Aristotle contrasts *phronēsis* and the character virtues from the virtue of *nous* in that the former are concerned with the compound of body and mind, while the latter is “separated” (*kekorismenē*, *EN* X.8 1177a23). As is clear from *de An.*, this is a function of the separateness of *nous* itself (*de An.* III.5 430a17–23). Aristotle, in *EN* X.7, advises us to “immortalize” (*athanatizein*), and to live in accord with the element (*nous*) that is most excellent (*EN* X.7 1177b36). Taking these passages seriously means registering that the life of contemplation overcomes, at least to some degree, even the moral psychology that governs our *praxeis* (actions). True, there is a pure and wondrous pleasure associated with contemplation, and this is crucial to its motivational foothold on us humans, but it is a pleasure taken in the activity of the active intellect and for that reason wondrous in its purity and stability. It is arguably something like Immanuel Kant’s *Achtung* in that it reflects reason acting on our non-rational souls (see Kant, 1996, p. 56 at 4:402n). To the extent that we can set aside our human concerns, the press of necessity, we can open up to these pleasures grounded in the intellect itself. Contra Moss, then, this points to something like pure practical reason in Aristotle.

Moss canvasses two basic types of intellectualist position: one that holds that virtue is itself a partly intellectual state, and because of that can set the goal; another accepts that virtue is non-rational but denies that it literally supplies the goal. My view is a version of this second approach. Yet, unlike the views that she canvasses, I am not trying to make the case that *phronēsis* is on its own supplying the goal. Yet, the fact that *phronēsis* does not supply the goal does not mean that the non-rational soul is doing so, since this is a false dichotomy. There is a third option, which is that *nous* supplies the goal, specifically through the attainment of theoretical wisdom and its exercise in the activity of contemplation, and practical wisdom as shaped by character is prompted and prepared to receive this through its association with character.

Moss imputes a practical empiricism to Aristotle, which aligns him more closely with the moral psychology of the British empiricists. I have been trying to bring forward the centrality of *nous*-driven philosophical life to Aristotle’s view of happiness. Some scholars are drawn to this view through a concern to distance Aristotle from Kant. Moss argues that “Aristotelian practical thought is far less sovereign and self-standing than its Kantian and Platonic counterparts” (Moss, 2012, p. 235). John McDowell inveighs against understanding the end as an “autonomous object of the practical intellect” (McDowell, 2009, p. 47). Yet, there seems to be some ambiguity and caricature in these contrasts. Even Kant, in the *Tugendlehre*, recognizes “aesthetic conditions for the receptivity to the concept duty” (Kant, 1996, p. 528 at 6:399). So, to say (as Moss does) that reason is dependent on the non-rational soul for its genesis and operation does not pick out a very distinctive a position. The real question, it seems to me is whether *nous*, in a virtuous adult, is contributing something of its own, and I think the answer to this, in light of the importance of the contemplation of god and that this consists of cognition happening “without matter,” (*de An.* 430a4) is yes. Even if *nous* is deploying *phantasmata* in that reflection, this does

not mean that there is not an autonomy to that reflection, at least in the form of freedom from the senses. Even if *phantasia* is an aspect of our power of perception and it is deployed in thinking about god (which is questionable), it is possible that *phantasia* can be deployed actively by the mind to its own purposes and that doing so is central to the realization of its highest form of activity, *theoria*.

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