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Practical Contemplation and Happiness in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*

by

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Under the Direction of Tim O'Keefe, PhD

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ABSTRACT

In *Nicomachean Ethics* X.7-8, Aristotle surprisingly claims that happiness is a contemplative activity. Commentators generally assume that he means happiness consists exclusively in *theoretical* contemplation. In this paper, I challenge that assumption by examining how Aristotle uses the term *theōrein* ("to contemplate") to describe a practical kind of contemplation that is integral to virtuous action. Then, I argue that the contemplative activity Aristotle identifies with happiness in *NE* X.7-8 includes both practical and theoretical contemplation. This interpretation improves on existing explanations for why Aristotle thinks a life without theoretical contemplation can still be happy and why happiness requires moral virtue. Finally, I explain why Aristotle's account of happiness is philosophically appealing by arguing that happiness can be understood as the contemplative recognition of the value of fine (*kalon*) objects in the universe and in practical affairs.

INDEX WORDS: Aristotle, Happiness, Contemplation, Practical reason, Virtuous action

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my family, for all their encouragement and support.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

APo. *Analytica Posteriora* (Posterior Analytics)

DA *De Anima* (On the Soul)

EE *Ethica Eudemia* (Eudemian Ethics)

EN *Ethica Nicomachea* (Nicomachean Ethics)

GA *De Generatione Animalium* (On the Generation of Animals)

MA *De Motu Animalium* (On the Motion of Animals)

Met. *Metaphysica* (Metaphysics)

PA *De Partibus Animalium* (On the Parts of Animals)

Phys. *Physica* (Physics)

Pol. *Politica* (Politics)

Rhet. *Rhetorica* (Rhetoric)

Top. *Topica* (Topics)

1 INTRODUCTION

In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle offers an account of happiness (*eudaimonia*) that acts as the target or goal at which we should aim in everything we choose to do (*NE* 1094a23-24, 1102a2).[1] A notorious difficulty for any interpretation of this account arises from his claim in *NE* X.7-8 that happiness is a "contemplative" (*theōrētikē*) activity.[2] In standard terminology, this claim seems to demand a *monistic* account of happiness: happiness consists exclusively in the single activity of contemplation, since "happiness extends just so far as contemplation does…" (*NE* 1178b18).[3] Commentators generally assume that this claim refers exclusively to *theoretical* contemplation.[4] Thus, this claim seems strikingly at odds with the *inclusive* account of happiness that Aristotle seems to insist on in the rest of the *Nicomachean Ethics*: happiness consists in all the intrinsically valuable goods, including contemplation, honor, friendship, and virtuous action. In addition to the apparent inconsistency between *NE* X.7-8 and the rest of the work, the assumption that happiness is solely theoretical contemplation raises two important problems for interpreting *NE* X.7-8. First, how can Aristotle claim that the statesman's life is happy if his life aims at virtuous action and lacks any significant engagement in theoretical contemplation? Second, why does Aristotle think that the philosopher will act virtuously if he aims solely at the goal of theoretical contemplation?

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[1] I focus only on Aristotle's account of happiness in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, though I occasionally draw on evidence from the *Eudemian Ethics* to further support and clarify views that I take to be expressed in both works.

[2] Translations for all texts from Aristotle are based on Barnes 1984, with some modifications. The Greek text of the *Nicomachean Ethics* is from Bywater 1894.

[3] In contrast to monistic interpretations (e.g., Kraut 1989 and Richardson Lear 2004), inclusivist interpreters argue that happiness is the set of all intrinsically valuable goods, including but not limited to contemplation (e.g., Ackrill 1980). The distinction between these two possible interpretations of Aristotle's account of happiness comes from Hardie 1965, who uses the term "dominant-end" instead of "monistic."

[4] Nearly all commentators think that the contemplative activity Aristotle identifies with happiness in *NE* X.7-8 is exclusively theoretical contemplation, since it is the only genuinely contemplative activity. Examples include Ackrill 1980, Cooper 1999, Kenny 1992, Kraut 1989, Nightingale 2004, Nussbaum 2001, Richardson Lear 2004, and Rorty 1980. Roochnik 2009 offers reason to be skeptical of this position.

In this paper, I improve on existing answers to these problems by arguing against the assumption that Aristotle's account of happiness in *NE* X.7-8 refers exclusively to theoretical contemplation. Instead, I propose that the contemplative activity Aristotle identifies with happiness includes both practical and theoretical kinds of contemplation. In addition to resolving the two interpretive problems for *NE* X.7-8, this proposal also provides a philosophically appealing account of happiness that addresses several of the apparent inconsistencies between Aristotle's discussion of happiness in *NE* X.7-8 and the rest of the work. In Section II, I argue that Aristotle claims that the practical and theoretical intellects have the same function—actualizing knowledge, i.e., contemplation. In Section III, I explain how this claim is justified by his insistence on the structural similarity between practical and theoretical kinds of knowledge. Since the actualization of both kinds of knowledge consists in actively thinking about how the true conclusion of a syllogism is explained by its premises, practical and theoretical contemplation are two kinds of the same activity. In Section IV, I argue that practical contemplation of the intrinsic goodness of an agent's actions and goals plays an important role in virtuous action. In Section V, I answer the two problems posed above by arguing that Aristotle's account of happiness in *NE* X.7-8 includes both practical and theoretical kinds of contemplation. In Section VI, I detail the relationship between happiness and contemplation to show how Aristotle's account is philosophically appealing. In Section VII, I explain how this account is consistent with his discussion of happiness in *NE* I.

2 THE FUNCTION OF THE PRACTICAL AND THEORETICAL INTELLECTS

Aristotle distinguishes between the practical and theoretical intellects at the beginning of *NE* VI two separate times.[5] One feature common to both distinctions is his attribution of the same characteristic activity or function (*ergon*) to both parts of the intellect. Aristotle makes the second distinction in *NE* VI.2 as he begins investigating the virtues of both parts of the intellect (*NE* 1139a15-16). Since "the virtue (*aretē*) of a thing is relative to its proper function (*ergon*)" (*NE* 1139a17), Aristotle can determine the virtues of both parts of the intellect by determining the good states that enable them to function successfully. After claiming that the function of every part of the intellect is grasping truth and falsity (*NE* 1139a29), he concludes that the *successful* function of both the practical and theoretical intellects is grasping truth: "The function of both the intellectual parts, then, is truth" (*NE* 1139b12).[6] "Truth" here must be short for "grasping truth," since the virtues of both parts of the intellect are the good states of the intellect that enable us to reliably grasp the truth (*NE* 1139b13-17).

When Aristotle says that the function of both parts of the intellect is grasping truth, he has in mind the activity of actualizing knowledge,[7] i.e., thinking about a truth one has already grasped. He does not mean the mere possession of knowledge, since the functions of nonproductive states (such as the virtues of the practical and theoretical intellects) are activities (*EE* 1219a13-18), and the mere possession of knowledge is not an activity. Nor is he referring to the activity of inquiring into a truth, since we inquire only when we do not already know what we are inquiring about. Since I have an intellectual virtue when I already know the relevant truths, the activity enabled by

[5] Although there are important differences between Aristotle's two distinctions, I will not pursue them here. Regardless of their differences, both distinctions claim or imply that both parts of the intellect have the same function.
[6] Although the "good state" of the practical intellect is "truth in agreement with right desire" (NE 1139a30), the *function* of the practical intellect consists solely in grasping truth, since the intellect itself does not desire.
[7] By "knowledge" I mean only the cognitive state whereby one properly grasps some truth, not Aristotle's technical term *epistēmē* (scientific knowledge).

the intellectual virtues cannot be inquiring into those truths again. For example, the intellectual virtue of *phronēsis* (practical wisdom) "is a true state with an account[8] (*hexin einai meta logou alēthē)*" (*NE* 1140b20), which means that *phronēsis* is a state that enables me to think about some truth I already know, along with its explanatory account.[9] Actualizing knowledge presupposes the possession of knowledge and that one has successfully engaged in inquiry, but only the first of these activities is the function of both parts of the intellect.[10] To draw a comparison, the function that the moral virtues enable us to engage in is not their acquisition through habituation, but their actualization in virtuous action (*NE* 1098b30-1099a6).

The proposal that the function of both parts of the intellect is the actualization of knowledge receives further support from Aristotle's first distinction between the two parts of the intellect:

> And let it be assumed that there are two parts [of the soul] which possess reason—one by which we contemplate the kind of things whose principles are invariable, and one by which we contemplate variable things (*hen men hōi theōroumen ta toiauta tōn ontōn hosōn hai archai mē endechontai allōs echein, hen de hōi ta endechomena*). (*NE* 1139a6-9).

The word translated as "we contemplate" (*theōroumen*) appears only once in the Greek text but is clearly shared by both clauses. This mutual dependence on a single use of "contemplate" makes a striking point: both parts of the intellect engage in the same activity, and this activity is contemplation. As we have seen, Aristotle next asserts that actualizing knowledge is the function of both parts of the intellect. The connection between these two claims is made clear when we recognize that "to contemplate" (*theōrein*) is often used by Aristotle to mean "to actualize

[8] Moss persuasively argues that "*logos*" here and elsewhere in Aristotle's ethical works means "explanatory account" (Moss 2014). I say more about the sense in which knowledge is explanatory in Section III below.
[9] *Phronēsis* also plays an important role in deliberation, insofar as the deliberator must think about practical knowledge they already have in order to determine what the right course of action is (e.g., universal knowledge of what distributive justice consists in).
[10] *Contra* Olfert, who suggests that the function of the intellect is inquiry into truth (Olfert 2017, 88).

knowledge."[11] This definition of *theōrein* is drawn from Aristotle's *De Anima,* where he explains two senses of the term "actuality" (*entelecheia*): "the one answers to knowledge (*epistēmē*), the other to contemplating (*theōrein*)" (*DA* 412a23).[12] Aristotle's distinction is between *having* knowledge and *actualizing* or actively thinking about one's knowledge. Only the latter activity corresponds to contemplation.[13] Thus, Aristotle's claim that "the function of both the intellectual parts is truth" must be understood as "the function of both the intellectual parts is *contemplating* truth," where one contemplates some truth by actualizing one's knowledge of that truth.

[11] Aristotle uses *theōrein* to describe a range of activities beyond actualizing knowledge, including inquiry and observation. I take "to actualize knowledge" to be the focal meaning of *theōrein* for Aristotle, which organizes these other activities by being their ultimate end.

[12] Several other uses of *theōrein* unambiguously support this definition, including *NE* 1153a22, 1176b30; *Met.* 1048a34, 1072b24; *Phys.* 255a33-b5; *GA* 735a9. This list is from Eriksen 1978, 82-84.

[13] Burnet makes a similar point about the definition of *theōrein*: "The verb *theōrein* expresses the *energeia* of knowledge" (1900, 258).

3 PRACTICAL AND THEORETICAL KNOWLEDGE

I have argued that the practical and theoretical intellects have the same function—actualizing knowledge, i.e., contemplation. Aristotle is clear that contemplation is essential to the successful function of the theoretical intellect (*NE* 1177b1-2; *Met*. 993b21-22). While it is also clear that the actualization of practical knowledge is essential to the successful function of the practical intellect, commentators generally identify this actualization with virtuous action rather than contemplation. In the next section, I will argue that Aristotle identifies the actualization of practical knowledge as a kind of contemplation, and that virtuous action involves this practical kind of contemplation. I lay the groundwork for that argument in this section by sketching the parallel explanatory structures of theoretical and practical knowledge.

Theoretical knowledge centers around demonstrative syllogisms that explain why some assertion is true. When a philosopher knows the theoretical truth "All planets are non-twinklers," she knows this truth as a conclusion to a demonstrative syllogism that explains why the conclusion is necessarily true. If the philosopher lacks this explanation she cannot count as knowing the truth, even if she can assert the true conclusion. Aristotle calls this demonstrative theoretical knowledge *epistēmē* (scientific knowledge). Here is a favorite example of Aristotle's found, among other places, in *APo.* 1.13:

(Major Premise) All planets are close to the earth.
(Minor Premise) All things close to the earth are non-twinklers.
(Conclusion) All planets are non-twinklers.

This syllogism deductively explains why the predicate "non-twinklers" belongs to the subject "all planets" because of some third term, which Aristotle refers to as the "middle term." Here, the middle term is "close to the earth," and it is through the fact that this term belongs to "all planets" and the predicate "non-twinkling" belongs to it that the conclusion is demonstratively proven. In

terms of Aristotle's causes, the middle term is the cause because of which the conclusion is true. In the theoretical sphere, inquiry is the search for the middle term that will explain why the conclusion is true. The finished product of inquiry, of which we have *epistēmē*, is not only the conclusion of the syllogism but the entire demonstration that explains this true assertion.[14]

Aristotle cannot allow all knowledge to have this explanatory structure, however, since then explanations would either go on infinitely or circle back around. Aristotle denies both possibilities, and instead proposes that there are certain first principles we come to know that are not themselves demonstrated or explained (*APo*. 99b20-25). Theoretical knowledge of these indemonstrable first principles is called *nous*. Beginning with *nous* of two first principles, a philosopher can demonstrate some true conclusion, which can then be used as a premise in some further demonstration, and so on. Demonstrative syllogisms are chained together in this way to demonstrate true assertions about domains of theoretical knowledge (e.g., physics or biology).

When a philosopher has both *nous* and *epistēmē* in some domain of knowledge, she has *sophia* (philosophical wisdom) (*NE* 1141a18-21). The actualization of *sophia* is theoretical contemplation (*theōria*), which presupposes but does not involve inquiry (*NE* 1177a19-27). Aristotle's remarks about theoretical contemplation are sparse and enigmatic, but the importance of explanation in theoretical knowledge indicates it will involve substantially more cognitive effort than merely rehearsing true assertions. The philosopher engaging in theoretical contemplation is actualizing her *knowledge* of a truth, which means she is actively thinking about how the premises of a demonstrative syllogism explain the truth of its conclusion.

Practical knowledge is no less concerned with explanatory accounts than its theoretical counterpart. Indeed, *phronēsis* (practical wisdom) is "a true state with an account (*logos*)" (*NE*

[14] Partly for this reason, Burnyeat and others have translated *epistēmē* as "understanding" (Burnyeat 2012), which highlights the significant cognitive achievement involved in attaining *epistēmē.*

1140b20-21). Practical knowledge concerns a practical kind of truth about variable objects that is distinct from the theoretical kind of truth about invariable objects (*NE* 1139a7-9). Although commentators widely agree that practical truth is no less genuinely true than theoretical truth, practical truths are not necessarily true since they concern variable objects.[15] I will assume Christiana Olfert's highly plausible view that practical truths are assertions about what is good for an agent to desire and choose to do given her particular circumstances (2017, 105). Practical syllogisms like the one below are accounts (*logos*) that explain the truth about the goodness of actions:

(Major Premise) It is good to help my friend (or, I should help my friend).[16]
(Minor Premise) I can help my friend by giving him a loan.
(Conclusion) It is good to give my friend a loan (or, I should give my friend a loan).

This syllogism explains why the action in the conclusion is good or should be done by showing how it will bring about the goal asserted to be good in the major premise (*NE* 1144a31-33). The minor premise connects the major premise and the conclusion by specifying how the action will achieve this goal. In terms of Aristotle's causes, the goal is the final cause of my action that explains why my action is good and why I am undertaking it. *Phronēsis*, which corresponds to *epistēmē*, is the state of knowing this explanatory account and grasping the practical truth about the goodness of the action in the conclusion. Deliberation is the kind of inquiry by which we determine how to act to bring about the goal in the major premise (*NE* 1142a32-33). Aristotle's insistence on the importance of reaching the conclusion by the correct syllogism indicates that, just as in the theoretical realm, the finished product of deliberation is not only the good action but

[15] Olfert summarizes several interpretations that understand practical truth to be a genuine kind of truth before proposing her own (2017, 92-104). Broadie convincingly argues that practical truth is just as "rich" as theoretical truth (Broadie 2020). That is, the successful grasp of practical truth requires an understanding of reality that is comparable to the successful grasp of theoretical truth. Thus, grasping either kind of truth "deserves praise in the highest alethic terms" (2020, 268).

[16] I take the goals or first principles of practical knowledge to be specific aims like this one, following Morison 2020, 233; Broadie 1991, 225-242; Allen 2015, 56-58.

also knowledge of the syllogism that correctly explains why that action is good (*NE* 1142b21-27; see also Allen 2015, 53; Broadie 1993, 226).

Some goals are only good insofar as they lead to some further good (e.g., money is only good insofar as I can buy things with it). Eventually, any chain of goods must end in some *intrinsic* good that is desirable for its own sake, since deliberation cannot go on indefinitely (*NE* 1113a2). Such goods are fine (*kalon*), since the "fine is that which is desirable for its own sake" (*Rhet*. 1366a33). Thus, the fine is the object of the good man's rational desire (*boulēsis*) (*NE* 1119b16). When the good man desires the fine because he recognizes it as intrinsically good, "he judges each class of things rightly, and in each the truth appears to him" (*NE* 1113a29-31; see also *EE* 1249a8: "the things good by nature are fine"). The good man has the kind of practical knowledge that corresponds to theoretical *nous* when he makes fine goals the objects of his rational desire "by seeing the truth" about them (*NE* 1113a31-34).[17] Examples of fine goods desirable for their own sake include friendship (*NE* 1155a29), honor, and virtue (*NE* 1097b1-5).

There is a significant cognitive achievement involved in knowing the truth about what goals to pursue, just as there is with theoretical *nous*.[18] If we are to understand and appreciate the value of fine goods, we must learn their value for ourselves by appropriately pursuing and taking pleasure in them (Burnyeat 1980). Aristotle calls this process "habituation" (*ethismos*), whereby we form deep affective commitments to "loving what is fine and hating what is base" (*NE* 1179b30). He directly compares habituation to the process of "induction" (*epagōge*) by which we

[17] For the purpose of this paper, it does not matter whether rational desires are determined by reason, character, or some combination of the two. See Moss 2011 for a good overview of this debate.

[18] When Aristotle explicitly uses *nous* to describe a state of practical knowledge, this state refers to knowledge of the minor premise, since this premise is never acquired from prior reasoning (*NE* 1143b9-13). Morison offers an extended discussion of this practical kind of *nous*, but he also acknowledges that there must be practical knowledge of the goal asserted to be good in major premise of the sort I am discussing here (2020, 241).

acquire theoretical *nous* (*NE* 1098b3-4). In both cases, knowledge is acquired by repeatedly experiencing the same sort of phenomenon until it is generalizable (*NE* 1142a18-19).[19]

I have *phronēsis* that my chosen actions are good when I can explain why they will bring about the fine goals that I know are desirable for their own sake. This knowledge is essential for acting virtuously, according to the criteria Aristotle sets out for properly virtuous action: 1) an agent must have knowledge; 2) he must choose his acts for their own sake; and 3) his action must proceed from a firm and virtuous character (*NE* 1105a23-34). When I have *phronēsis* of why my action is good (condition 1), I will also have a firm and virtuous character that results from learning to properly appreciate the intrinsic goodness of fine goals through habituation (condition 3), since *phronēsis* and moral virtue entail one another (*NE* 1144b30-32). Good actions done for the sake of the fine are themselves fine, which means that good actions are desirable for their own sake (condition 2). Indeed, Aristotle writes that "to do fine and good deeds is a thing desirable for its own sake" (*NE* 1176b7-8). To act virtuously by choosing a good action for its own sake, I must know why it is good, which requires knowing that the goal I aim to achieve by choosing this action is fine. To conclude, acting virtuously requires a distinctly practical kind of knowledge that is similar in structure to theoretical knowledge but concerns practical truths about human goods.[20]

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[19] An important caveat to the parallelism between practical and theoretical knowledge is that the objects of practical knowledge are not eternal and invariable (*NE* 1140b20-21), and so we can strictly speaking have only opinions (*doxa*) about them (*NE* 1140b25-28; *APo.* 1.33). *Epistēmē* and theoretical *nous* in the strict, technical sense describe only the grasp of *necessary* truths about eternal, unchanging, and invariable objects (*NE* 1139b18-23; *APo*. 71b9-12). Other differences between practical and theoretical knowledge are not difficult to find: the role of desire in practical knowledge, the ever-shifting nature of *phronēsis* and the invariability of *epistēmē*, their relative precision, etc. Still, as I have explained, *phronēsis* is analogous to *epistēmē* in its explanatory structure, which justifies the claim that *phronēsis* is a state of significant cognitive achievement concerning practical truth (Allen 2015).

[20] What about spur of the moment virtuous actions undertaken without deliberation and explicit practical knowledge? In such cases, the virtuous person is still aware of what she is doing and could explain why it is good, even if she did not deliberate to that conclusion before acting (Annas 2011, 28-30). Thus, her action is backed by (implicit) reasons that lead her to act as she does, including her love of the fine and her knowledge that the fine is truly worth pursuing. This practical knowledge separates her fully virtuous actions from merely naturally virtuous ones (*NE* 1144b13-32).

4 WHAT IS PRACTICAL CONTEMPLATION?

There is wide agreement that when an agent acts virtuously, she is actualizing her practical knowledge. Acting virtuously is not itself the actualization of practical knowledge, however, since this actualization is more precisely an *intellectual* activity that contributes to virtuous action. In this section, I argue that this intellectual activity is a practical kind of contemplation, and that practical contemplation contributes to virtuous action by keeping an agent's mind on the reasons her chosen actions are good, so that she can execute her choices virtuously.

Aristotle indicates the importance of practical contemplation for virtuous action in his description of *phronēsis* (practical wisdom) in *NE* VI.5:

> It remains, then, that practical wisdom (*phronēsis*) is a true state with an account (*hexin alēthē meta logou*), a practical one, concerned with what is good or bad for man. For (*gar*) while making has an end other than itself, action cannot; for good action itself is its end. It is for this reason (*dia touto*) that we think Pericles and men like him have practical wisdom—because they contemplate (*theōrein*) what is good for themselves and what is good for men in general… (*NE* 1140b3-9).

Aristotle claims that *phronēsis* is a state that enables us to grasp the truth about what is good and bad through an explanatory account (*logos*), i.e., a practical syllogism. His support for this claim (indicated by "*gar*") is that the proper goal of any action is doing that action well, and achieving this goal requires knowing why that action is good (as I argued in Section III). From these claims (indicated by "*dia touto*"), Aristotle concludes that the practically wise are distinctive because they actualize their knowledge ("*theōrein*") about what is good to achieve their goal of acting well. In other words, their engagement in practical contemplation is critical to their ability to act virtuously.

Further description of practical contemplation is found in the *Eudemian Ethics*:

> …the deliberating part of the soul is that which contemplates a cause of some sort (*esti gar bouleutikon tēs psuchēs to theōrētikon aitias tinos*), and the object of an action is one of the causes, for we call cause that owing to which a thing comes about, but the purpose of a thing's existence or production is what we specially call its cause. (*EE* 1226b25-28).

The cause of an agent's action is her goal, which is the final cause for the sake of which she acts. To act virtuously, she contemplates why her action is good (i.e., because it is for the sake of a fine goal), so that she can choose her action for the sake of its goodness. When the agent engages in practical contemplation, she is actualizing her knowledge of the goodness of her action, which involves actively thinking about how the premises of a practical syllogism explain the truth of its conclusion. Since theoretical knowledge is actualized via theoretical contemplation in this same way, the actualization of practical knowledge is a genuinely contemplative activity, vindicating Aristotle's claim that the practical and theoretical intellects have the same function—the actualization of knowledge, i.e., contemplation.

One might object that only theoretical contemplation is a genuinely contemplative activity. Aristotle is often thought to introduce a technical sense of "contemplation" (*theōria*) in *NE* X.7-8 distinct from his more general uses of the verb "to contemplate" (*theōrein*) elsewhere (e.g., Nightingale 2004, 6; Kraut 1989, 16). This technical sense of contemplation is limited to the actualization of theoretical knowledge, just as the technical sense of *epistēmē* can only describe theoretical knowledge of necessary truths about invariable objects (*NE* 1139b18-23; *APo*. 71b9-12). Since practical knowledge cannot qualify as *epistēmē* in this technical sense (*NE* 1140b25-28), Aristotle's frequent use of *epistēmē* to describe practical knowledge is only a loose application of the term. Similarly, practical contemplation is only loosely a contemplative activity.[21]

The comparison between *epistēmē* and contemplation is not justified because *epistēmē*, but not contemplation, can only be directed at invariable objects that admit of the necessary truths required for *epistēmē*. However, the activity of actualizing knowledge of some truth is not

[21] Roochnik rejects this sharp distinction between theoretical and practical contemplation, arguing that the activities are importantly connected (2009). Although our accounts of contemplation substantially differ, I have greatly benefited from his article while thinking about and researching this paper.

dependent on what that truth is about to count as a genuinely contemplative activity. In other words, contemplation concerns all intelligible objects, unlike *epistēmē.* Practical and theoretical truth are both genuine kinds of truth, even though they are directed at different subsets of intelligible objects. Practical contemplation actualizes knowledge of why some practical assertion is true, just as theoretical contemplation actualizes knowledge of why some theoretical assertion is true. The fact that assertions about practical matters can be true is not enough to qualify practical knowledge as *epistēmē* since practical truths are not *necessarily* true. However, this fact is enough to make knowledge of practical truths an appropriate object of contemplation. Like practical and theoretical truth, practical and theoretical contemplation are two kinds of the same genuinely contemplative (*theōrētikē*) activity.[22]

Even if practical contemplation is a genuinely contemplative activity, how does it contribute to virtuous action? Aristotle provides a helpful example in his description of the virtue of magnificence. He says that "the magnificent man is similar to someone with theoretical knowledge (*epistēmoni*); for he can contemplate what is fitting (*to prepon gar dunatai theōrēsai*) and spend large sums tastefully" (*NE* 1122a35-36). The magnificent man knows and contemplates how to spend his money, and he spends virtuously "for the sake of the fine; for this is common to all the virtues" (*NE* 1122b6-7). When the magnificent man chooses to commission the construction of a trireme for the sake of the fine (*NE* 1122b18-24), for example, he is acting virtuously because he knows why his action is good and he chooses it for the sake of its goodness. He contemplates why his action is "fitting" (*prepon*) for the circumstances in order to execute his action virtuously by ensuring that he keeps his mind on the reason his action is worth choosing—the fine goal that explains why his action is good (e.g., the trireme is for the sake of honoring his *polis*).

[22] This response does not show that Aristotle has both practical and theoretical kinds of contemplation in mind when he calls happiness a contemplative activity in *NE* X.7-8. I argue for that claim in Section V below.

As the magnificent man illustrates, practical thought must continue into action if we are to execute our chosen actions virtuously.[23] Practical contemplation is the activity by which we bring practical thought into action. Acting virtuously is complicated, and there is rarely a straightforward path toward achieving one's goals even after a choice to act in a certain way has been made. The faculty that allows us to execute our choices is cleverness, which is not itself sufficient for virtuous action, since it must be guided by *phronēsis* (*NE* 1144a20-30). The actualization of *phronēsis* enables us to be guided by our knowledge of why our choices are good when executing our actions. In other words, the virtuous person contemplates why her chosen action is good to ensure that she executes her choice virtuously.[24] The magnificent man, for example, must contemplate his knowledge of what is fitting given the circumstances to ensure that the trireme he commissions tastefully honors his *polis* (e.g., the trireme is not too gaudy, it does not take too long to build, it sends the right kind of message, etc.). Practical thought does not end once the good choice has been made, since the chosen action must still be executed, and the virtuous person will need to respond to shifting circumstances in the execution of her choice. She contemplates the practical knowledge that explains why her chosen action is desirable for its own sake, so that she can be guided by her knowledge when acting. Thus, acting virtuously involves practical contemplation of the intrinsic goodness of one's fine goals and actions.

A problem arises from the way I have so far characterized the "intrinsic goodness" of goals and actions. If the sole constituent of happiness is contemplation, as Aristotle seems to claim in *NE* X.7-8, then in what sense are goals and actions *intrinsically* good, or desirable for their own

[23] Price 2016 also argues that thought extends into action to make sense of Aristotle's difficult claim that the conclusion of a practical syllogism is the agent's action (*MA* 701a22-23).

[24] Piñeros Glasscock 2019 argues that *phronēsis* ensures that an agent continues to be guided by her good reasons for acting throughout the execution of her action, and that Aristotle's argument for the usefulness of *phronēsis* in *NE* VI.12 revolves around this function. On my interpretation, practical contemplation is the activity that the agent is engaging in when she continues to think about and be guided by her good choice.

sake, if they are not constituents of happiness?[25] Goals and actions are not intrinsically good because they contribute to happiness, but because pursuing and choosing them is fine given the circumstances. For example, the virtuous person's goal to help her friend is not intrinsically good *because* it will make the virtuous person herself happy. Rather, the goal is intrinsically good because helping one's friends for their own sake is fine (Annas 1988, 12). Aristotle defines the fine in terms of what is "fitting" (*to prepon*) (*Top.* 135a13-14; *EE* 1249a9).[26] Virtue itself is identified as a fitting and intermediate state—the doctrine of the mean (*NE* 1106b36-1107a2, 1138b18-20). Recall the magnificent man, who "contemplate[s] what is fitting" and acts virtuously "for the sake of the fine; for this is common to all the virtues" (*NE* 1122a35-1122b7). Goals that are fitting for the situation are fine and thereby desirable for their own sake, i.e., intrinsically good (*NE* 1176b7-9). The virtuous person recognizes the intrinsic goodness of her goals by seeing the truth that they are fitting and therefore fine. She acts virtuously by deliberating about how to achieve her fine goals, which culminates in *phronēsis* of the goodness of her chosen action, before contemplating the goodness of her choice while executing her action. Thus, the virtuous person engages in a contemplative activity by pursuing fine goals and acting virtuously.

[25] Weller 2001 raises this problem for monistic interpretations of Aristotle's account of happiness in more detail.
[26] Recall the magnificent man who contemplates "what is fitting" in order to act virtuously for the sake of the fine (*NE* 1122a35-36).

5 TWO CONTEMPLATIVE LIVES IN *NE* X.7-8

I have argued that acting virtuously is a genuinely contemplative activity—practical contemplation. In this section, I argue that Aristotle's account of happiness as a contemplative activity in *NE* X.7-8 includes this practical kind of contemplation, and I show how this interpretation helps to answer the two problems I set out in the introduction. The discussion of happiness in *NE* X.7-8 begins as follows:

> 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 the intellect or something else (*eite dē nous touto eite allo ti*) that is this element which is thought to be our natural ruler and guide and to take thought of things fine (*kalon*) 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 complete happiness. That this activity is contemplative (*theōrētikē*) we have already said. (*NE* 1177a12-18).

Aristotle does not decisively identify the part of the soul to which the activity of happiness belongs. Is it "intellect" (*nous*), which most likely refers to the theoretical intellect (see especially *NE* 1178a18-23), or "something else that… is thought to be our natural ruler and guide," which is far closer to a description of the practical intellect? Aristotle calls the practical intellect the "ruling part" of us (*NE* 1112a6), and when he explicitly contrasts the practical and theoretical intellects at the end of *NE* VI.13, it is the practical intellect that issues orders for the sake of the theoretical (*NE* 1145a6-11), indicating that it is the practical intellect that rules in the sense of guiding us with orders (see also *DA* 432b26). Aristotle also describes the human goods that are the objects of practical thought as fine throughout the *Nicomachean Ethics*, and even calls them divine (e.g., *NE* 1094b10, 1101b27, 1102a2, 1141a34). Thus, there is a genuine question about which part of the intellect is in fact the best thing in us and "is thought to be our natural ruler and guide."

Without answering this question, Aristotle concludes that the activity of the best part of us is contemplative, and that this contemplative activity is happiness. This conclusion is warranted,

however, since he has already defined the function or characteristic activity (*ergon*) of both parts in question as contemplating truth (as I argued in Section II). The activity in accordance with the virtue of the theoretical intellect, then, is also the activity in accordance with the virtue of the practical intellect. Thus, Aristotle's claim that happiness is a contemplative (*theōrētikē*) activity leaves open the possibility that he is referring to both practical and theoretical kinds of contemplation.[27] In the remainder of this section, I show how Aristotle's arguments in the rest of *NE* X.7-8 rely on an account of happiness that includes both practical and theoretical contemplation.

The initial ambiguity about whether the practical or theoretical intellect is the highest part of us sets the agenda for the rest of *NE* X.7-8, where Aristotle's main aim is to argue that the happiness of the philosopher whose ultimate goal is contemplation is superior to the happiness of the statesman whose ultimate goal is virtuous action (*praxis*).[28] Aristotle makes his argument against the practical life by citing the inferiority of actions in comparison to theoretical contemplation. This strategy is not surprising since the statesman aims at virtuous action, not at the contemplation of practical truth, and practical contemplation is instead constitutive of virtuous action. In comparison to the philosopher's life, the statesman's life is concerned with less divine objects, is less self-sufficient (*NE* 1177a27-34), aims at nothing desirable for its own sake alone (*NE* 1177b1-18), and lacks leisure (*NE* 1177b7). The statesman's life is presumably also deprived of any substantial engagement in theoretical contemplation. However, Aristotle only concludes from these deficiencies that the statesman is happy to a secondary degree (*NE* 1178a9-10).

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[27] Similarly, Broadie claims that "contemplative" (*theōrētikē*) does not necessarily refer to theoretical reason in contrast to practical reason (Broadie and Rowe 2002, *note ad loc*). Moreover, Aristotle uses *theōrētikē* to describe practical contemplation at *EE* 1226b25 (cited above).

[28] I assume that the lives of the philosopher and statesman are competing alternatives, and not two aspects of the same life (*contra* Keyt 1989). See Richardson Lear 2004, 177-181 for a defense of this assumption.

If we assume with most commentators that the contemplative activity Aristotle identifies with happiness is exclusively theoretical contemplation, then how can he conclude that the statesman's life is happy? One way of answering this question is to propose that Aristotle relies on two different accounts of happiness in *NE* X.7-8. Richard Kraut, for example, argues that the philosopher is made happy by theoretical contemplation, while the statesman is made happy by virtuous action, which does not involve a contemplative activity (Kraut 1989, 5). However, Aristotle's claim that "happiness extends just so far as contemplation does" decisively undermines any attempt to locate two separate accounts of happiness in *NE* X.7-8 (*NE* 1178b28).[29]

Another possible answer is to explain how theoretical contemplation can make the statesman's life happy, even though his life does not involve any significant amount of theoretical contemplation. Gabriel Richardson Lear takes this approach by arguing that the statesman is happy because his virtuous actions *approximate* theoretical contemplation and derive intrinsic value from this teleological relationship (2004, 193-196). The central passage she identifies in which Aristotle explicitly endorses this relationship of approximation between virtuous action and theoretical contemplation is his claim that "happiness must be some kind of contemplation (*theōria tis*)" (*NE* 1178b28-32), which is meant to include virtuous action as an approximation of contemplation on her view (2004, 195). As Pierre Destrée correctly objects, however, this claim reasserts the earlier claim that happiness is a "kind of contemplative activity (*theōrētikē tis energeia*)" (*NE* 1178b7-8), where Aristotle is arguing that the kind of contemplative activity humans can engage in is only an "approximation" (*homoiōma*) of the contemplative activity of the gods (*NE* 1178b26-27; Destrée 2006). Aristotle's concern in claiming that happiness is a "kind of contemplation" (*theōria tis*),

[29] Kraut's response to this objection is that Aristotle only means that an increase in contemplation is also an increase in happiness, not that any increase in happiness requires an increase in contemplation (1989, 62-63). This interpretation cannot be right, however, since then the argument of the preceding sentence would be fallacious, as Aristotle concludes that animals are not happy *solely* because they lack contemplation (*NE* 1178b25-28).

then, is that human contemplation approximates divine contemplation, not that one human activity (virtuous action) approximates another (theoretical contemplation). Thus, Richardson Lear's interpretation does not successfully explain why the statesman's life is happy.

As I argued above, we do not need to assume that Aristotle is identifying happiness solely with theoretical contemplation at the beginning of NE X.7-8, since the contemplative activity he identifies with happiness is the function of both the practical and theoretical intellects. If we reject this assumption, then Aristotle may instead be claiming that happiness consists solely in the contemplation of truth, of both practical and theoretical kinds.[30] Thus, the statesman's life is happy because of his engagement in practical contemplation. Some support for this explanation comes from Aristotle's claim in *NE* I.10 that happiness is relatively permanent because the happy man will always "do and contemplate what is virtuous (*praxei kai theōrēsei ta kat' aretēn*)" (*NE* 1100b19-20). The happy man will be happy throughout his life because he acts virtuously by contemplating his fine goals and virtuous actions. Although Aristotle is not here arguing that happiness is exclusively contemplation, he is identifying practical contemplation as a rational activity involved in virtuous action that makes a significant contribution to happiness.

Aristotle's explanation of the statesman's happiness in *NE* X.7-8 is short, but that he should be counted as happy is evidently justified by the "just and brave acts, and other virtuous acts, we do in relation to each other, observing what is fitting (*diatērountes to prepon*) to each person with regard to contracts and services and all manner of actions…" (*NE* 1178a11-13). The statesman's activity of "observing what is fitting" in each of his virtuous actions recalls the original meaning of *theōrein*: "to look at." Aristotle has good reason to avoid using *theōrein* to describe the

[30] On my view, practical and theoretical contemplation are two ways of achieving the same end of contemplation, similar to how courageous and temperate actions are two ways of achieving the same end of virtuous action. Thus, the happy person ultimately aims at a single good (contemplation) that can be achieved in two ways, rather than aiming at two analogously related but separate goods (contemplation and virtuous action), as Charles argues (1999).

statesman's activities here, since he uses *theōrein* and *theōria* in *NE* X.7-8 primarily to contrast the philosopher's goal of theoretical contemplation with the statesman's goal of virtuous action. Recall that Aristotle's main aim in *NE* X.7-8 is to argue for the superiority of the philosophical life, not to explain why the statesman's life is happy. This argument would be needlessly confusing if he used *theōrein* and *theōria* to describe the activities of both lives. However, he shows throughout his ethical works that acting virtuously involves contemplating what is fitting and fine about one's actions (as I argued in Section IV). The statesman's activity of "observing what is fitting" about his virtuous actions recalls this contemplative activity. Both lives are happy, then, because they are both contemplative.

Aristotle's final two arguments for his claim that happiness is contemplation further support my interpretation that happiness can be constituted by either practical or theoretical contemplation. In the first argument, Aristotle claims that the gods do not act at all, let alone virtuously, and since we cannot suppose that they are inactive, we must conclude that they are contemplating:

> Therefore the activity of god, which surpasses all others in blessedness, must be contemplative; and of human activities (*tōn anthrōpinōn*), therefore, that which is *most akin* (*suggenestatē*) to this must be most of the nature of happiness (*eudaimonikōtatē*). (*NE* 1178b21-23; emphasis added).

Since theoretical contemplation is the human activity that is most akin to the contemplative activity of god, it is most of the nature of happiness. However, this claim does not imply that theoretical contemplation is the *only* human activity that is of the nature of happiness. Instead, the above passage suggests that there may be more than one human activity akin to god's contemplative activity. Since even theoretical contemplation is not identical to god's activity, any human activity

will be of the nature of happiness on account of some likeness to god's activity.[31] The statesman does not engage in any significant amount of theoretical contemplation, so his happiness must be constituted by some other activity that is less akin to the contemplative activity of god than theoretical contemplation, but has enough similarity to still be of the nature of happiness. Both theoretical and practical contemplation consist in the actualization of knowledge, so both activities bear a likeness to the contemplative activity of god. Practical contemplation is therefore still a genuinely contemplative activity that is "of the nature of happiness" and akin to the contemplative activity of god. Thus, Aristotle can describe the statesman's activities as "godlike" (*NE* 1094b10). Aristotle's ranking of the two happy lives requires that they are both happy. This requirement is met insofar as both lives are genuinely contemplative.

In the second argument, Aristotle explains that animals cannot be happy because they are completely deprived of any godlike activity:

> For while the whole life of the gods is blessed, and that of men too in so far as some likeness of such activity belongs to them, none of the other animals is happy, since they in no way share in contemplation. (*NE* 1179b24-28).

Animals are lacking in theoretical thought, but Aristotle also thinks they lack the sort of practical thought that can lead to virtuous action (e.g., *NE* 1099b33-35, 1139a20). Since this second argument relies on the claim that animals lack the activity that makes humans happy, and the activity of the practical intellect is lacking in animals, the conclusion that theoretical contemplation alone is happiness hardly follows. Instead, the argument includes practical contemplation among the human activities that have some likeness to the activity of the gods but are completely lacking in animal life. This interpretation is further supported by Aristotle's remark in *NE* I.9 that animals

[31] Theoretical contemplation cannot be identical to god's contemplative activity because god's thought is not composite (*Met.* 1075a5-11), but theoretical contemplation is composite insofar as it actualizes knowledge of conjunctions of premises that form syllogisms (see Section III above). See Reece for a thorough argument for why god's contemplative activity is not identical to any human activity (Reece 2020).

cannot be happy because they are not capable of virtuous action (*NE* 1099b33-35). Thus, animals cannot be happy because they lack *both* practical and theoretical contemplation. Aristotle concludes:

> Happiness extends, then, just so far as contemplation does, and those to whom contemplation more fully belongs are more truly happy… Happiness, therefore, must be some kind of contemplation (*theōria tis*). (*NE* 1178b28-32).

Since happiness and contemplation have the same extent, a life entirely devoid of contemplation is entirely deprived of happiness. The statesman's happiness must be due to his engagement in practical contemplation, which is a genuine "kind of contemplation" (*theōria tis*) that humans can engage in to approximate the contemplative activity of god. However, his happiness is still secondary to the happiness of the philosopher because the statesman ultimately aims at virtuous action, rather than the contemplation of truth itself, and therefore has an incomplete conception of happiness. Thus, he misses out on the theoretical kind of contemplation that is most akin to the activity of god and most of the nature of happiness.

The philosopher has the correct conception of happiness and ultimately aims at the contemplation of truth, but if we assume with most commentators that Aristotle only has in mind theoretical contemplation, why does the philosopher act virtuously (*NE* 1179a23-31)? One way of answering this question is to explain how moral virtue is necessary or especially useful for theoretical contemplation. Richard Kraut, for example, argues that the philosopher develops a virtuous character and acts virtuously because the moral virtues are more conducive to successful engagement in theoretical contemplation than other character states (1989, 178-182). However, this solution is empirically suspect. Even if acting virtuously is often the best way to promote theoretical contemplation, there will surely be other occasions when a vicious action would do so better. The best course of action with a view to theoretical contemplation would be to develop a

flexible character that is not concerned with doing good actions for their own sake, but only when they lead to theoretical contemplation.

If Aristotle's account of happiness in *NE* X.7-8 encompasses both practical and theoretical contemplation, as I have argued, then the philosopher who aims at the correct conception of happiness will develop a virtuous character in order to engage in contemplation of practical truth. Aristotle relies on this kind of reasoning in the following passage:

> He who exercises his intellect (*nous*) and cultivates it seems to be both in the best state and most dear to the gods. For if the gods have any care for human affairs, as they are thought to have, it would be reasonable both that they should delight in that which was best and most akin to them (i.e., intellect) and that they should reward those who love and honor this most, as caring for the things that are dear to them and acting both rightly and finely. And that all these attributes belong most of all to the wise man is manifest… (*NE* 1179a23-31).

The philosopher ultimately aims at the exercise and cultivation of his intellect, and Aristotle elsewhere says that it is the duty of philosophers to pursue truth above all else (*NE* 1096a14-18). The philosopher's human nature forces him to make choices (*NE* 1178b5-6), which involve assertions about what is good and worth pursuing (*NE* 1139a21-26). His duty to truth ensures that he will inquire into the practical truth so that his practical assertions are true, or else he risks reasoning falsely and holding false beliefs. Since a virtuous character is required for the practical wisdom (*phronēsis*) necessary to grasp practical truths (*NE* 1144b30-32), the philosopher must develop a virtuous character. Circumstances often arise where it is fitting and fine to give up time spent contemplating theoretical truths to act virtuously, and the philosopher's virtuous character will ensure that he has the dispositions to think, feel, and act virtuously in these situations (*NE* 1178b5-6). Thus, Aristotle can claim that the quality of acting virtuously "belongs most of all" to the philosopher because he exercises and cultivates his intellect by fulfilling his duty to the truth.

The philosopher's life is happiest, then, because his duty to the truth ensures that he aims at the correct conception of happiness—contemplation of both practical and theoretical truth.

One might object that the philosopher has no need to inquire into or contemplate practical truth because contemplation of theoretical truth should be sufficient for happiness. To answer this objection, consider the case of an amoral scientist who identifies her happiness with contemplation of theoretical truths, without any regard for the practical truths about how she should act. At first glance, her life seems comparable to the life of Aristotle's statesman. Both aim at a conception of happiness that will invariably lead them to contemplation of truth. Moreover, the scientist's life seems even happier than the statesman's because she engages in a contemplative activity that is closer to the activity of god. If Aristotle accepts the claim that scientist's life is happy, then there is no reason to think that the philosopher must care about practical truths and act virtuously.

The scientist's life cannot be happy on Aristotle's account, however, because her engagement in virtuous activity does not stretch over a complete life. Aristotle claims that happiness requires virtuous activity of the soul "in a complete life" in his discussions of happiness in both *NE* I and *NE* X.7-8 (*NE* 1098a18-19, 1177b25). Although the scientist may often engage in the highest kind of virtuous activity by contemplating theoretical truths about the universe, the fact that she is a human being entails that she must live with others and engage in practical affairs (*Pol.* 1253a 27–9; *NE* 1178b5-6). These practical affairs are occasions for her to engage in a virtuous activity that Aristotle identifies with happiness—practical contemplation. Without knowledge of the practical truth about what is good for her to do, she will be unable to engage in this virtuous activity. Thus, large parts of her life will be lacking in the virtuous activity that Aristotle identifies with happiness, since even the luckiest human lives involve little theoretical

contemplation in comparison to engagement in practical affairs.[32] Since the scientist exercises virtue only intermittently, she fails to engage in virtuous activity throughout a complete life. Though the statesman misses out on the best kind of contemplative activity, he lives his entire life virtuously, thereby exercising virtue in a complete life. Likewise, the philosopher's life is happy because his duty to both practical and theoretical kinds of truth ensures that he engages in both practical and theoretical kinds of contemplation, thereby exercising the virtuous activity that Aristotle identifies as happiness throughout a complete life.

[32] What if the scientist is practically wise and morally virtuous but tries to organize her life entirely around her theoretical pursuits, minimizing her sociality as far as possible? I think Aristotle would grant that her life would be happy, so long as she does not viciously abandon her social obligations to her parents, community, etc. Depending on the kind of life she is born into, however, it may not be possible for her to virtuously forego her social obligations. For example, if she is next in line for the throne and her community depends on her guidance, it may be vicious of her to decline this responsibility to pursue philosophy (Kraut 1989, 41). More mundanely, she may have inescapable obligations to her community for raising and educating her.

6 CONTEMPLATION AND HAPPINESS

I have argued that Aristotle identifies happiness as the single activity of contemplation in *NE* X.7-8, but that this activity encompasses both practical and theoretical contemplation. Although this interpretation helps to resolve two pressing difficulties for *NE* X.7-8, it is not yet clear why it amounts to a philosophically appealing account of happiness. In this section, I show why Aristotle's account is appealing by explaining how it can be understood as identifying happiness as the proper recognition of the value of fine (*kalon*) objects in the universe and in practical affairs through the activity of contemplation. I justify this interpretation by explaining the relationship between the value of contemplation and the value of the objects of contemplation.

I have so far limited my discussion of the fine (*to kalon*) to practical contemplation, the objects of which are goals and actions that are intrinsically valuable because they are fine. However, the fine functions equally well as a description of the intrinsically valuable objects of theoretical contemplation. For example, here is Aristotle's justification for why we should study even the lowliest of creatures at the beginning of *Parts of Animals*:

> …so we should venture on the study of every kind of animal without distaste; for each and all will reveal to us something natural and something fine (*kalon*). Absence of haphazard and conduciveness of everything to an end are to be found in nature's works in the highest degree, and the end for which those works are put together and produced is a form of the fine (*kalon*). (*PA* 645a23-27).

Aristotle's point is that even the creatures that might appear unworthy of serious scientific inquiry are worth closely studying because their teleological nature makes those creatures fine. This fact alone makes them worthy of study. Since we study in order to know, the fact that these animals are fine gives them their value as objects of theoretical knowledge. This fact also justifies the value of theoretical contemplation, as evidenced in Aristotle's argument in *Metaphysics* Λ.9 that divine thought must think about itself. There, he argues that if divine thought did not think about itself,

"there would evidently be something else more precious than thought, namely, that which is thought" by divine thought (*Met.* 1074b32). For "if [the divine] thinks, but this depends on something else, then… it cannot be the best substance; *for it is through thinking that its value belongs to it*" (*Met.* 1074b18-22; emphasis added). The reason that divine thought must think about itself is that the value of thought depends on the value of the object of thought. If divine thought was valuable by virtue of thinking of something other than itself, then the value of divine thought would depend on the value of the object about which it thinks. The value of thought, then, depends on the value of the object of thought. When humans engage in theoretical contemplation of some object in the universe, their activity is valuable because of the value of that object. That is why Aristotle justifies the value of studying even seemingly distasteful creatures by appealing to their fineness. Insofar as contemplation is valuable because of the value of its objects, the fineness of even the lowliest creatures makes contemplation of them valuable.

Further evidence for this relationship between contemplation and its objects is supplied in Aristotle's discussion of the comparative value of *sophia* and *phronēsis* in *NE* VI.7. There, he argues that *sophia* is superior to *phronēsis* because the former concerns the highest and most divine objects, while the latter concerns merely human goods, which are not among the best things in the universe (*NE* 1141a21-23, 1141a35-b2). This argument relies on the idea that the value of both virtues of the intellect is dependent on the value of the objects they enable us to know. As a result of this value dependency, the superiority of theoretical contemplation is at least partially explained by the superior fineness of its objects.

Crucially, the objects of theoretical contemplation are valuable regardless of whether they contribute to my happiness. Instead, my happiness, insofar as it consists in theoretical contemplation, is valuable because of the value of the objects of my contemplative activity.

Although Aristotle writes that happiness "is the first principle and cause of goods" (*NE* 1102a2), this remark can only mean that happiness is the cause of things being good *for me*, since the goodness of objects of theoretical contemplation is independent of their relationship to my happiness.

The fine objects of practical contemplation stand in a similar relationship to my happiness as the fine objects of theoretical contemplation. When I engage in practical contemplation while acting virtuously, I must contemplate fine human goods, since fine goods like friendship and honor are intrinsically valuable goals for the sake of which I choose to act. Consider someone who chooses to act liberally by lending her friend some money. Part of the explanation for why this chosen action is good will involve the fineness of her friendship and her friend. She must contemplate her friend's intrinsic goodness to keep her mind on her knowledge of why her choice to help him is good. Just as with theoretical contemplation, this contemplative activity is good because it concerns fine objects (her friend, her goal to help him, and her action). These fine objects are intrinsically valuable independently of whether they contribute to her happiness, vindicating Aristotle's remark that there are intrinsically valuable goods other than happiness that we choose for their own sakes (*NE* 1097b1-5). Insofar as she contemplates these goods, however, they become good *for her* because they contribute to the contemplative activity that Aristotle identifies with happiness.

Of course, fine goods like friends and honor also contribute to happiness in more straightforwardly instrumental ways. For example, friends provide opportunities to act virtuously (*NE* 1169b10-13), thereby providing opportunities to engage in practical contemplation. Or, if a scientist's research is honored and held in high esteem, they may receive financial support to spend more time engaging in theoretical contemplation. Insofar as friends and honor are themselves fine,

however, the intrinsic value of these goods will make contemplation of them valuable.[33] Thus, their intrinsic value becomes good *for me* and contributes to my happiness when I contemplate them.

One of Aristotle's arguments for why the happy man needs friends in *NE* IX.9 relies on this relationship between contemplation and happiness to explain why the happy man contemplates his friend's virtuous actions:

> For we have said at the outset that happiness is some activity… If happiness lies in living and being active, and the good man's activity is virtuous and pleasant in itself, as we have said at the outset, and if a thing's being one's own is one of the attributes that make it pleasant, and if we can contemplate (*theōrein*) our neighbors better than ourselves and their actions better than our own, and if the actions of virtuous men who are their friends are pleasant to good men (since these have both the attributes that are naturally pleasant)—if this be so, the supremely happy man will need friends of this sort, since he chooses to contemplate fitting actions (*theōrein prohaireitai praxeis epieikeis*) and actions that are his own, and the actions of a good man who is his friend have both these qualities. (*NE* 1169b18-1170a4).

Aristotle's argument relies on the idea that happiness is the activity of contemplating one's own "fitting" actions—that is, practical contemplation as I have described it so far. The happy man also chooses to contemplate his friend's actions because they have both qualities that makes actions fitting and worth contemplating (namely, being virtuous and being one's own). Since everything

[33] This interpretation is thus able to resolve what Gabriel Richardson Lear refers to as the "problem of middle-level ends" (2004, 6; 37). Middle-level ends are those goods (like friendship) that are valuable and choiceworthy both for their own sake and for the sake of some further good (namely, happiness). Since the end that a good is choiceworthy for the sake of sets the standard for what it is to be a good of that kind (2004, 11-15; *Phys*. 194b32-35), how can this standard be set by both the good itself (if it is meant be intrinsically valuable) and happiness (the further end that it is also chosen for the sake of)? The problem lies in finding some explanation for how the standard set by the good itself aligns with the standard set by happiness. On my view, these standards align because happiness consists in contemplation of the truth about why some fine object is fine. In the case of the intrinsically valuable good of friendship, for example, there is a standard set by friendship itself as a good choiceworthy for its own sake. When I contemplate my friendship, then, I contemplate the truth about why my friendship is fine. That is, I contemplate the truth about why my friendship counts as a good friendship, which means contemplating why my friendship meets the standard set by the end of friendship itself. This same line of reasoning explains how all intrinsically valuable goods are choiceworthy both for their own sake and for the sake of happiness.

he chooses to do is for the sake of his happiness, the happy man's contemplation of his friend's virtuous actions must contribute to his own happiness.

To see how, recall that in the practical realm intrinsic goods like friendship function like the first principles grasped by *nous* in the theoretical realm, insofar as such goods explain why chosen actions are good. Since first principles are "most true (*alēthestaton*)" (*Met*. 993b26-30), they are preeminent objects of theoretical contemplation. I propose that intrinsic goods, the objects of rational desire that act as first principles of practical knowledge, are likewise preeminent objects of practical contemplation. In this case, the happy man recognizes the intrinsic goodness of his friend in his friend's virtuous character, for his character is what his friend essentially is (*NE* 1156b7-9). Since his friend's virtue is most clearly expressed in his actions, the happy man contemplates his friend's actions as a way of recognizing the truth about the fineness of his virtuous friend. Clearly, the virtuous friend is fine regardless of whether the happy man is made happy by his fineness. However, the virtuous friend's fineness becomes good for the happy man insofar as the latter contemplates the former. Aristotle concludes that the happy man will need virtuous friends because he is better able to contemplate their fineness than his own. Since their intrinsic value is easier to discern than the intrinsic value of his own virtuous character and actions, contemplation of his virtuous friend is an especially valuable kind of practical contemplation that the happy man cannot live without.

One final remark is worth making about the connection between practical contemplation and action. Since we cannot know why some fine object is intrinsically valuable without coming to appreciate its value through affective attachment (Burnyeat 1980), practical contemplation will often involve considerations of these affective attachments. Further, fully appreciating the value of fine objects in practical affairs will often require acting for their sake, since practical knowledge

is constituted by the practical syllogisms that represent choices to act for the sake of fine goals. Thus, practical contemplation will often require acting virtuously as the appropriate response to appreciating the value of fine goals.

Aristotle's claim that happiness consists exclusively in contemplation initially seems implausible, particularly given his insistence on the importance of other intrinsically valuable goods like honor and friendship. However, this claim becomes more philosophically appealing when we recognize the relationship between fine objects that are intrinsically valuable and the contemplation of those objects that constitutes human happiness. We might rephrase Aristotle's account of happiness as the activity of recognizing value in the universe and in practical affairs. On Aristotle's view, we recognize value by knowing why valuable objects are fine. The activity of recognizing value is therefore the actualization of knowledge—i.e., contemplation.

7 HAPPINESS IN *NE* 1

Any interpretation of Aristotle's account of happiness in *NE* X.7-8 must confront the apparent discrepancies between this discussion and the discussion of happiness in *NE* I. Although Aristotle does not say that happiness consists exclusively in contemplation so early on, we should not expect that he can throw this surprising claim at us without first explaining the importance of the moral virtues, the relationship between the practical and theoretical intellects, the importance of friendship in the happy life, etc. It is only once Aristotle has provided us with these details of a good human life in the first nine books of the *Nicomachean Ethics* that he is in a position to offer his considered account of happiness in its final chapters. However, we should expect to find that the rough sketch of happiness in *NE* I is consistent with this later view.[34] In this section, I show how this expectation is borne out by considering four components of the discussion of happiness in *NE* I that might seem problematic for the monistic interpretation I have argued for: the definition of happiness, self-sufficiency and choiceworthiness, the impact on happiness of losing and failing to achieve external goods, and posthumous harm.

7.1 The Definition of Happiness

In *NE* I.7, Aristotle begins searching for a preliminary definition of happiness by determining the human function. Since the human function is an activity of the rational part of the soul, the successful function of a human being will be the virtuous activity of the rational part of the soul. He concludes that happiness is the "activity of the soul exhibiting virtue, and if are there are more than one virtue, in accordance with the best and most perfect[35] (*teleiotatēn*)" (*NE* 1098a16-18).

[34] Aristotle himself admits that the discussion of happiness in *NE* I is only a rough sketch (*NE* 1097a20-21).
[35] I translate "*teleios*" as "perfect" instead of Ross' "complete" so as not to favor the inclusivist claim that Aristotle intends for happiness to involve all parts of human virtue (discussed below).

Commentators are generally divided into two camps on Aristotle's use of the superlative of *teleios* ("perfect") here. Since monists contend that happiness consists in a single end, they argue that *teleios* picks out the single activity of the single best virtue, which turns out to be the contemplative activity of *sophia* (philosophical wisdom) in *NE* X.7-8. However, this interpretation faces a serious challenge from inclusivists, who argue that happiness must require the activity of all the virtues. They point to a parallel passage in the *Eudemian Ethics* where Aristotle clearly intends for *teleios* to mean "complete," in the sense of having all the appropriate parts (*EE* 1219a35-39). There, happiness is the activity of complete virtue in the sense that it involves all the virtues. The main challenge for inclusivists lies in accounting for Aristotle's insistence that he is referring to a *single* activity: "For these properties [being most noble, best, and most pleasant] belong to the best activities; and these, or one—the best—of these, we identify with happiness" (*NE* 1099a30).

My interpretation of contemplation as the function of both the practical and theoretical intellects offers a middle ground that avoids the difficulties facing both interpretations: there is a single best activity that constitutes happiness, and through this activity we can actualize all the human virtues. The single virtuous activity that Aristotle identifies with happiness is contemplation, as we learn in *NE* X.7-8. Since practical contemplation is the actualization of *phronēsis*, this sort of contemplation also involves the actualization of the moral virtues because it is impossible to have *phronēsis* without being morally virtuous (NE VI.13). Theoretical contemplation actualizes the theoretical intellectual virtues. Contemplation is thus the single best virtuous activity that actualizes all the human virtues.

This solution resolves the problem facing monistic interpretations because it accords with Aristotle's insistence that happiness involves complete virtue and grants a place for all the human

virtues in a happy life. It also resolves the problem facing inclusivist interpretations because it properly identifies the single virtuous activity that Aristotle insists is identical to happiness. By recognizing that all the human virtues enable us to engage in this single virtuous activity, we can see why Aristotle thinks that this activity alone can constitute happiness while still insisting that a happy life requires all the virtues.

7.2 Self-sufficiency and Choiceworthiness

Just before offering his preliminary definition of happiness, Aristotle describes two qualities that happiness must exhibit: self-sufficiency and choiceworthiness. Concerning self-sufficiency, he writes:

> The self-sufficient we now define as that which when isolated makes life desirable and lacking in nothing; and such we think happiness to be. (*NE* 1097b15-17).

If happiness consists exclusively in contemplation, then contemplation alone should be sufficient to make us happy. The self-sufficiency of happiness does not mean that no goods other than contemplation are required for a happy life. Insofar as a happy person successfully engages in contemplation, her life will also include whatever instrumental goods are required to support that activity (e.g., food, shelter, etc.). Thus, all the necessities of achieving happiness must be in place in a happy life (Richardson Lear 2004, 48-51).

However, Aristotle seems to think that there is more to a happy life than contemplation alone, evidenced by his insistence on the important contributions to happiness made by good looks, the fortunes of friends and children, etc. (*NE* 1099b3). Since these goods are not straightforwardly required for the happy person to engage in contemplation, why does Aristotle think that contemplation alone is sufficient for a happy life? Richardson Lear provides a convincing solution: happiness is sufficient as the final cause of a happy life (2004, 51-53). As she puts it, “the question whether a monistic good such as contemplation is self-sufficient, therefore, is the question whether

a person who does everything for the sake of that good would have a life worth choosing" (53). Contemplation does not need to satisfy every desire we have. Instead, contemplation is the final goal at which we aim that provides a standard for making sense of the value of everything we pursue and choose to do. Since contemplation consists in the activity of recognizing value, it is self-sufficient as the end of a happy life.

In addition to being self-sufficient, happiness must also be maximally choiceworthy:

> … we think [happiness] most choiceworthy of all things, not a thing counted as one good thing among others—if it were so counted it would clearly be made more choiceworthy by the addition of even the least of goods; for that which is added becomes an excess of goods, and of goods the greater is always more choiceworthy. (*NE* 1097b16-20).

Aristotle's point is that happiness cannot be made more choiceworthy by the addition of goods other than happiness. This quality of happiness has led some commentators to conclude that happiness must be inclusive of all intrinsically valuable goods, which thereby blocks the possibility of counting it as one good among others because it already includes them all.[36] However, Aristotle writes as though there are plenty of external goods that are needed *in addition to* happiness (*NE* 1099a29-32), which tells directly against this inclusivist interpretation (Richardson Lear 2004, 65). Instead, this passage can be explained by appealing to an account of happiness that consists exclusively in contemplation: adding more goods other than contemplation to a happy person's life does not make her life any happier, except insofar as she contemplates those goods.

For example, consider a happy person who accomplishes some virtuous deed and happens to be honored for it. It is intuitive to think that her happiness is somehow improved by being honored. Since happiness consists exclusively in contemplation, however, it cannot be that honor all by itself explains the increase in her happiness. Instead, the increase in her happiness is best

[36] For example, Ackrill 1980, 21.

explained by her active recognition of the fineness of being honored—i.e., contemplation of the intrinsic value of honor.[37] Honor is intrinsically valuable regardless of whether it contributes to her happiness (*NE* 1097b1-5). However, the intrinsic value of honor only becomes good *for her* when she contemplates its fineness. Happiness consists exclusively in contemplation, so the happy life can only be made happier by the addition of more contemplation. By adopting the wider notion of contemplation that I have argued for in this paper, however, this initially difficult conclusion becomes more reasonable.

7.3 Losing and Failing to Achieve External Goods

I have shown how external goods can increase happiness either 1) instrumentally, by providing more time to engage in theoretical contemplation or more opportunities to act virtuously and thereby engage in practical contemplation; or 2) by acting as the intrinsically valuable and fine objects of practical contemplation. Importantly, Aristotle also endorses the claim that losing or failing to achieve certain external goods can decrease happiness:

> Yet evidently, as we said, happiness needs the external goods as well; for it is impossible, or not easy, to do fine acts without the proper equipment. In many actions we use friends and riches and political power as instruments; and there are some things the lack of which takes the lustre from happiness—good birth, goodly children, beauty; for the man who is very ugly in appearance or ill-born or solitary and childless is not very likely to be happy, and perhaps a man would be still less likely if he had thoroughly bad children or friends or had lost good children or friends by death. As we said, then, happiness seems to need this sort of prosperity in addition. (*NE* 1099a31-b7).

Aristotle is arguing for the importance of external goods in the happy life. The first set of examples is unproblematic: certain goods such as friends and wealth can be instrumentally necessary for the accomplishment of virtuous actions and the practical contemplation that intellectually constitutes

[37] Honor might also instrumentally contribute to her happiness by securing her additional resources with which to spend more time contemplating, as in the example from the last section.

those actions. The second set poses a serious problem. A virtuous person who suffers misfortunes in the form of bad birth, bad children, or ugliness is not wholly deprived of opportunities to contemplate. Indeed, it is entirely plausible that such an unfortunate person could still engage in practical and theoretical contemplation and thereby lead a happy life. If these misfortunes do not prevent contemplation, why is good fortune needed for happiness?

For the virtuous person to know practical truths, she must be capable of recognizing the intrinsic value of the fine goods that are the objects of her rational desire. This recognition is only possible insofar as she becomes affectively attached to these fine goods and thereby comes to fully appreciate their value (Burnyeat 1980). Thus, she makes herself vulnerable to the psychological harms of failing to achieve or losing goods that she has become affectively attached to. These psychological harms can prevent her from spending time engaging in virtuous activity, including both practical and theoretical contemplation.[38]

In addition to this solution, there is a further reason why the virtuous person's failure to achieve her fine goals can have a negative impact on her happiness. Aristotle thinks that the fineness of virtuous actions is partially dependent on their success:

> …it is debated, too, whether the choice or the deed is more essential to virtue, which is assumed to involve both; it is surely clear that its perfection involves both; but for deeds many things are needed, and more, the greater and finer (*kalon*) the deeds are. (*NE* 1178a34-b2).

The virtuous person makes the right choice by aiming at a fine goal and successfully deliberating toward its achievement. Her action may be virtuous even if she fails to achieve her goal, but it will be less fine. Since the value of her contemplative activity is dependent on the fineness of the objects of her contemplation, contemplation of a failed action is less valuable than contemplation of a successful one. Thus, the happiness constituted by the former is less valuable than that of the latter.

[38] This explanation is largely based on Brown 2007.

When we fail to achieve the fine goals we set out to accomplish, we lose out on some degree of happiness because our contemplative activity is made less valuable.

7.4 Posthumous Harm

One underdiscussed challenge to any monistic interpretation of Aristotle's account of happiness is his discussion of posthumous harm. In *NE* I.11, he considers whether the fortunes of the happy person's children and friends can affect her happiness after she dies, concluding that "the good or bad fortunes of friends, then, seem to have some effects on the dead, but effects of such a kind and degree as neither to make the happy not happy nor to produce any other change of the kind" (*NE* 1101b5-8). Thus, it seems that the fortunes of the happy person's children can affect her happiness, if only to a small degree. But if happiness consists exclusively in contemplation, how can the happy person be made even marginally less happy once she has died, given that the contemplative activities that made her happy have already been completed?

To answer this question, I will focus on the fortune of the happy person's children. As she raises her children, she rationally desires that they live happy lives because it is fine to raise happy children. This goal explains the goodness of a great deal of her virtuous actions. Thus, she will spend large amounts of her life contemplating the intrinsic goodness of raising her children to be virtuous and happy people, along with the intrinsic goodness of the virtuous actions she undertakes to achieve that goal. As we saw in Section VII.3, the fineness of actions partially depends on their success. Thus, the goodness of the contemplative activities she engages in while acting virtuously for the sake of her children partially depends on whether her children successfully lead virtuous and happy lives. If she dies before her children, whose lives turn out to be vicious and unhappy, then her virtuous actions will have failed to achieve their goal.[39] Her life will therefore be

[39] I borrow this explanation of Aristotle's discussion of posthumous harm from Tim O'Keefe.

marginally less happy because some of the objects that she contemplated will turn out to be less fine than they otherwise could have been.

8 CONCLUSION

How should we understand Aristotle's claim at the end of the *Nicomachean Ethics* that happiness consists exclusively in theoretical contemplation? I proposed an answer to that question by arguing that both the practical and theoretical intellects enable us to engage in a genuinely contemplative activity that fulfills our human function. This activity makes our lives happy because it allows us to recognize the value of fine objects in the universe and in practical affairs. My interpretation can thereby explain the happiness of practically virtuous people who do not spend any significant time engaging in theoretical contemplation, like Aristotle's statesman, by appealing to practical contemplation. I have also shown that a happy human life must be morally virtuous in order to meet Aristotle's requirement that a happy person live a complete life of virtuous activity. Finally, I argued that Aristotle's final account of happiness in *NE* X.7-8 is consistent with his remarks about happiness in *NE* I, and I explained how external goods like friendship and honor are important for happiness because they act as the intrinsically valuable objects of practical contemplation.

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