

Aristotle on *Nous*'s Role in Practical and Intellectual Capacities

Aristotle scholars are divided on the relation between the contemplative and practical lives. The debate centers on Aristotle's formulations of the concept of *eudaimonia*. This paper suggests we may better approach this problem from Aristotle's description of *nous*, an essentially human capacity at work in both practical and intellectual activities.

One way to formulate this problem is to ask whether philosophical wisdom and practical wisdom ever coincide? This question marked ancient philosophy, at least since Socrates and, if we are persuaded by Vernant, philosophy's very beginnings were tied up in the dialectic about who should rule the city and how it should be ruled (1962). The tradition of the Lyceum and its founder Aristotle, however, are often identified as the source of a properly scientific philosophy. Allegedly disinterested and objective, Aristotle's approach catalogued nature's various forms and arranged them in a deductive system. So Aristotle's students were likely unsurprised when his concluding lectures on practical life in the final books of the *Nicomachean Ethics* identified philosophy and the pleasures of contemplation, not politics and ethical virtue, as the best human life (Arist. *EN* x.6–8).

These latter sections of the *Nicomachean Ethics* have proved difficult for philosophers, especially those interested in leveraging *eudaimonia* as the fulcrum of ethics. Squaring them with the opening book of the *Ethics* has involved some contortion: for example, Ackrill's now famous argument suggests contemplation may or may not be included in the best human life, just as the best sundae may or may not include the cherry on top (1980). (Or, if you prefer Ackrill's British version: just as the best breakfast may or may not include tomatoes with its bacon and eggs.) Others have taken a more direct approach. On the one hand, Hadot takes Book X as Aristotle's

final word: The life of contemplation is best (1995). On the other hand, Cooper claims both the political and contemplative ways of life are each individually best (2012).

While these approaches are indeed helpful, I offer a different tactic. I approach this problem by asking how Aristotle characterizes practical and intellectual capacities. I claim that for Aristotle a human's practical and intellectual capacities are continuous. By "continuous" I mean that their function differs only in degree and not in kind. A metaphorical way of putting it: both activities train the same set of "muscles."

The evidence for this claim relies on Aristotle's description of *nous*. While Aristotle describes *nous* throughout his corpus, I follow three of its prominent roles: (1) in scientific inquiry (*APo* II.19), (2) in practical thinking (*EN* VI), and (3) in human psychology (*DA* III.4–6).

For Aristotle, the core of *nous*'s operation is its immediate grasp of ultimates. Aristotle cites perception (*aisthēsis*) as an analogue. That is to say, *nous* does not depend on inference; it goes to the very thing itself. In the case of scientific inquiry *nous* grasps the non-deductive principles from which scientific demonstrations must ultimately begin. Such principles are first in the order of knowledge but last in the order of discovery. Similarly, *nous* grasps the individual target of practical thought, that is, what Aristotle calls the "mean" of ethical virtue. Such action initiates ethical practice, but concludes practical reasoning. These operations are explained in Aristotle's psychology (Burnyeat 2008 offers a persuasive interpretation of this difficult passage). *Nous* is a unique, human function; it is the active rapport of the human soul with others. The human comportment then is that we can "see" what it is we must do and, likewise, "see" how things must be. This kind of "sight" is the operation of *nous*. It involves the same function of an active posture of reception, whether in intellectual or practical activity.

The advantage of this approach is that we need not think of the philosophical and political lives as discontinuous. Nor do we need to think one as better than the other. A good human life will include both a polished practical and intellectual capacity; it will recognize what must be done in the *polis* and how things must be in the *kosmos*.

Select Bibliography

J. L. Ackrill. 1980. Aristotle on eudaimonia. In *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*, ed. Amélie Oksenberg Rorty, 15–34. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Myles Burnyeat. 2008. *Aristotle's divine intellect (Aquinas lecture)*. Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press.

John M. Cooper. 2012. *Pursuits of wisdom: Six ways of life in ancient philosophy from Socrates to Plotinus*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Pierre Hadot. 1995. *What is ancient philosophy?*, trans. Michael Chase. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Jean-Pierre Vernant. 1962. *Les origines de la pensée grecque*. Paris, France: Presses universitaires de France.