ARISTOTLE ON THE ACTIVE AND CONTEMPLATIVE LIVES

Daniel T. Devereux

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Abstract:

The paper offers an interpretation of Aristotle's discussion of the active and contemplative lives in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. In the first section I outline an interpretation recently set out by John Cooper in his book *Reason and Human Good in Aristotle*. Through criticism of Cooper's interpretation I attempt to develop my own. In the second section I argue that the active life is a life devoted to practical activity and does not include philosophical contemplation as one of its constituents. I then take issue with Cooper's claim that the contemplative life rules out the possession of moral virtue, and try to show that Aristotle's conception of this life need not be regarded as unreasonably narrow. Finally, I note several respects in which the Nicomachean discussion represents a philosophical advance over the earlier *Eudemian Ethics*. 
Aristotle on the Active and Contemplative Lives

It sometimes happens that a philosopher will make adjustments in his moral theory in order to get a nice fit with his theories in psychology, metaphysics, or epistemology. The results are often disappointing. Aristotle is one philosopher who seems to have avoided this particular pitfall. He strongly advocates protecting ethics against the encroachments of other disciplines, and one finds in his moral treatises a strenuous avoidance of the technical distinctions and terminology so characteristic of his *Metaphysics* and other theoretical works.

But if John Cooper is right, Aristotle became a backslider in his old age. Cooper has argued recently that some of Aristotle's late work in psychology had a powerful and regrettable influence on his treatment of *eudaimonia* in the tenth book of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. The culprit, as Cooper sees it, is the theory of the separable intellect sketched in the *De Anima*. In the early treatise, the *Eudemian Ethics*, Aristotle conceives of the best life as a life including a number of different types of goods. Cooper contends that the theory of the separable intellect led Aristotle to scrap his earlier view, and to replace it with the ideal of a life devoted solely to intellectual activity. As a sort of consolation prize, the earlier ideal is called "*eudaimonia* of a secondary degree."

This change seems regrettable since it is hard to see why a life devoted solely to intellectual activity should be preferred to one which includes this good as well as other goods such as friendship and success in practical pursuits. Aristotle's earlier view seems more reasonable, and one wishes that he had resisted the temptation to bring his conception of *eudaimonia* into line with his late psychological theory.

But the regrets are unnecessary for the text does not compel us to interpret Aristotle's final views on *eudaimonia* in the way that Cooper does. I shall argue in particular that we are not forced to understand

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1*See, e.g., Nicomachean Ethics* 1094b11-28, 1096b30-31, 1102a23-26.

Aristotle's conception of the best life in the extremely restricted way that Cooper does. I believe there is more plausibility in Aristotle’s final position than Cooper’s interpretation allows, and I shall try to show that the Nicomachean treatment of eudaimonia represents a philosophical advance over the earlier Eudemian view. Let me begin with a summary of Cooper’s interpretation.

I.

In his earlier work, the Eudemian Ethics, Aristotle defines eudaimonia as a life of activity "in accordance with complete virtue."\(^3\) By "complete virtue" he means a combination of the moral and intellectual virtues. The best life will therefore consist of a mixture of different types of activity corresponding to these different types of virtue. Cooper calls it a "mixed life" (145); the mixture, however, is clearly weighted in favor of contemplative activity. As Cooper puts it:

In the constitution of this life the theoretical side is given special weight since, within the fixed frame provided by the moral virtues, intellectual values will be pursued and promoted to the maximum degree possible. Moral action is thus assigned a definite, but limited, value whereas pure thought is made the object of unrestricted pursuit once moral requirements are fully met. (144)

The definition of eudaimonia in the Nicomachean Ethics is strikingly different. Eudaimonia is not identified with activity in accordance with complete virtue, but with activity in accordance with "the best and most final of the virtues."\(^4\) In book ten Aristotle argues that the best and most final of the virtues is philosophical wisdom (sophia). So the best life turns out to be a life of activity in accordance with philosophical wisdom: that is, a life devoted to intellectual activity. On the Nicomachean view, the best life does not seem to involve a combination of different

\(^3\)Eudemian Ethics 1219a38-39; cf. Cooper, pp. 116-17.

\(^4\)Nicomachean Ethics 1098a16-18. Aristotle actually says "activity of soul in accordance with virtue, and if there be more than one virtue, in accordance with the best and most final." But obviously there are more than one virtue, so the definition may be reformulated as "activity ... in accordance with the best and most final of the virtues." Cf. Cooper, p.100, n.10.
sorts of activities, but rather the single-minded pursuit of one kind of activity. It is an unmixed life devoted to purely contemplative activity.

As I mentioned before, Cooper argues that it is the doctrine of the separable intellect which accounts for this change in Aristotle's conception of the best life (175-77). In the De Anima, a comparatively late treatise, the theoretical intellect is not regarded as a part of the soul, but as a separate soul unto itself. On this view, each individual has two souls, one which can exist apart from the body and one which cannot. Cooper suggests that Aristotle, faced with the question which of these two souls was the true self, plumped for the theoretical intellect. Once this step is taken, eudaimonia can no longer be considered as including the exercise of faculties other than the theoretical intellect. The exercise of faculties which are no part of the individual cannot be part of his eudaimonia (163). Since morally virtuous conduct involves the exercise of practical and emotional faculties, it cannot be part of the best life. The best life consists simply and solely in the activity of the theoretical intellect.

Cooper goes one step further, arguing that on Aristotle's view the possession of the moral virtues is in fact incompatible with the contemplative life (163-65). The moral virtues entail a commitment to good conduct as something valuable in and of itself. But there is no basis for such a commitment once the individual is identified with his theoretical intellect. He may on occasion perform such good actions, but he cannot possess the moral virtues.

Most of the Nicomachean Ethics is concerned with a different sort of life, one which Aristotle calls "the life of moral virtue." In the tenth book, this life is termed "eudaimonia of a secondary degree." As a form of eudaimonia, it falls short of the contemplative life. Cooper contends that this second-best life is most plausibly understood as the same as the mixed life ideal of the Eudemian Ethics (167). Thus the major difference between the Eudemian and the Nicomachean treatments of eudaimonia is the addition of the contemplative ideal in the later treatise. The Eudemian mixed life ideal is carried over without modification to the Nicomachean Ethics; it is simply demoted to second place.

One regrettable consequence of this change of doctrine which has already been mentioned is the unreasonable narrowness of Aristotle's later conception of the best life. There is another which Cooper fails to note: if Aristotle does in fact hold that the individual is identical with his theoretical intellect, it is hard to see how he can with consistency regard the mixed life as a genuine form of eudaimonia, even of a secondary degree. The mixed life is based on a different conception of human nature, one which regards the theoretical intellect as only one part of the human
being. These conceptions cannot both be true. If the human being is identical with the theoretical intellect, then the mixed life ideal must be based on a false view of human nature. How can a life based on a false view of human nature count as a genuine form of eudaimonia? If Cooper's interpretation is sound, Aristotle's final position on eudaimonia is both inconsistent and implausible. I suggested earlier that these consequences are avoidable; let me now try to show how.

II.

I shall start by examining Cooper's claim that the ideal life of the Eudemian Ethics is equivalent to the second-best life of the Nicomachean Ethics. This second-best life is described as a life devoted to practical activity, and, following tradition, I shall refer to it as the "active life." I am in full agreement with Cooper's contention that the active and contemplative lives of the Nicomachean Ethics are not meant to form parts of a single life (159-60). In addition to the evidence he cites, one might appeal to Aristotle's use of the threefold classification of lives. In the first book, three contenders for the title of eudaimonia are mentioned: the life of pleasure, the political life, and the contemplative life. These three lives are clearly treated as alternative ideals. Aristotle brusquely dismisses the life of pleasure, but says nothing in book one about the relative merits of the other two contenders. When he returns to this question in book ten, the natural presumption is that he still regards the political and contemplative lives as alternative ideals. In his argument for the advantages of the contemplative over the active life, Aristotle never suggests that the contest between them might be resolved by combining the two in a single ideal life. So the presumption remains that the two lives are meant to be alternative ideals.

In what I have just said, I have been assuming that the active life is a life characterized by political or practical activity, a life in which philosophical contemplation has at best a secondary role. This assumption seems to be borne out by the way in which Aristotle speaks about the active life in book ten. He compares the active and contemplative lives by drawing contrasts between the activities of the statesman or politician

5Nicomachean Ethics 1095b14-19.

6At Nicomachean Ethics 1095b22-1096a2 he argues that two ends associated with the political life, honor and virtue, cannot be identified with eudaimonia. This does not mean that he rejects the political life as a form of eudaimonia; if the end of the political life were specified as "virtuous activity," the objections made earlier would no longer apply.
on the one hand, and of the philosopher on the other. 7

Cooper argues, however, that the active life is the same as the mixed life of the Eudemian Ethics; it would therefore be a life in which philosophical contemplation plays a very important if not predominant part. 8 He suggests that Aristotle concentrates exclusively on the practical side of the active life in order to contrast it with the purely contemplative life (167). But if Aristotle thought philosophical contemplation played such an important part in the active life, it is unlikely that he would have said nothing about it. His silence here is more plausibly taken as evidence that he did not regard philosophical contemplation as an important part of the active life.

It might even be doubted whether Aristotle thought of the active life as a mixed life. Although he stresses the inseparability of moral virtue and practical wisdom in several places, 9 he never says that philosophical wisdom has a similar connection with either moral virtue or practical wisdom. He apparently thinks that one need not be a philosopher in order to be morally virtuous and practically wise. In chapter 8 of book ten, he describes the second-best form of eudaimonia as a "life in accordance with the virtues of our composite nature," and he specifies these as the moral virtues plus practical wisdom; philosophical wisdom is not a virtue of our "composite nature." This way of characterizing the second-best form of eudaimonia at least suggests that the exercise of philosophical wisdom is not an essential constituent of the active life. 10 If we adopted such an interpretation of the active life, we would not be compelled to view it as a life devoid of intellectual pursuits. 11 Aristotle's phronimos, the man of practical wisdom, is one who has studied and thought deeply in the fields of moral and political philosophy; his life cannot be com-


8In saying that philosophical contemplation plays a "predominant part," I do not mean to imply that moral virtue would be subordinated as a means to the end of contemplation.

9Nicomachean Ethics 1144a29-b17, 1144b30-32, 1178a16-19.

10If Aristotle did regard the exercise of sophia as an essential constituent of the second-best life, one would have expected him to characterize this life as eudaimonia in accordance with complete virtue.

11In other words, I do not have in mind what Cooper calls "the life of the good but stolid burgher" (161, 166).
pletely taken up with practical activities. But in his pursuit of eudaimonia, the phronimos need not cultivate philosophical wisdom; that is, he need not take up the study of metaphysics and the other higher theoretical sciences. According to such a view, the active life would involve intellectual pursuits, but would be characterized by practical activity.

If one finds this interpretation unsatisfactory, and prefers to regard the active life as a mixture of philosophical contemplation and practical activity, still I think it must be admitted that the mixture is weighted in favor of practical activity. The available evidence in book ten clearly suggests that Aristotle has in mind the life of a statesman or politician, and not that of a philosopher. The best life of the Eudemian Ethics, on the other hand, is definitely not the life of a statesman or politician. According to the Eudemian ideal, an individual will engage in practical pursuits and exercise the moral virtues, but he will arrange his life so that most of his time and attention is devoted to philosophy. I therefore think it is a mistake to claim, as Cooper does, that the active life of the Nicomachean Ethics is identical with the mixed life of the Eudemian Ethics.

Turning now to Cooper's account of the contemplative life, the most controversial claim he makes is that the possession of the moral virtues is incompatible with such a life. Many would surely balk at the suggestion that Aristotle is setting up as an ideal a life in which justice, temperance, courage and practical wisdom have no place. I must hasten to note that Cooper does not maintain that the contemplative is an unjust or licentious person: he will simply be beyond both virtue and vice (179). The contemplative will of course have to tame his passions and appetites so that they do not interfere with his pursuit of philosophical contemplation. In this respect his condition will be closer to virtue than to vice. But on Cooper's interpretation, there is nothing to prevent the contemplative from being quite ruthless in pursuing his goal. For example, he may by betraying a friend gain a large sum of money and thereby assure himself years of leisure for philosophizing. What would hold him back?

Confronted with such unpalatable consequences, one wants compelling

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12 At Nicomachean Ethics 1141b23-33 Aristotle indicates that the phronimos must have a knowledge of political philosophy; ethics is of course a branch of political philosophy, on Aristotle's view. Philosophical wisdom is characterized as theoretical knowledge of the "highest things" at 1141b2-3.

13 Given the inseparability of moral virtue and practical wisdom, if the contemplative lacks the moral virtues, he must also lack practical wisdom.
evidence that Aristotle actually committed himself to this view. As I mentioned earlier, Cooper regards the incompatibility of moral virtue with the contemplative life as a direct consequence of Aristotle's identification of the individual human being with his theoretical intellect. Now it is a condition of being morally good that one value virtuous acts for their own sake. But since such acts are of no direct concern to the theoretical intellect, the contemplative will not value them for their own sake; he therefore cannot be said to possess the moral virtues. The basis for Cooper's claim that Aristotle identifies the human being with the theoretical intellect is the following passage in chapter 7 of book ten.

But one ought not to follow those who advise that, being human, one should be mindful of human affairs, or that a mortal should be mindful of the affairs of a mortal, but one ought so far as possible to act as an immortal and do everything with a view to living in accordance with what is highest in oneself. For even though it is small in bulk it exceeds everything by far in power and worth. And it would seem that each person is this, if this is the authoritative and better part. It would be odd, then, not to choose one's own life but someone else's. And what was said earlier applies now: what belongs peculiarly to each thing is naturally best and pleasantest to it. So also for the human being the life of the intellect (nous) is best, if this most of all is the human being.14

Aristotle, in saying that each person is his intellect, does seem to be identifying the individual with the intellect. But are we entitled to infer from this passage, as Cooper does, that Aristotle holds that the individual is nothing but his intellect? The last sentence of the passage is hard to square with this reading. Aristotle says "if [the intellect] most of all is the human being;" following Cooper's view, one would have expected him to say something like: "if [the intellect] alone is the human being." The point Aristotle seems to be making is that the intellect, more than any other part of the individual, is what makes him what he is, and not that the individual is nothing but his intellect.15 Even if we understand

14I follow Cooper's translation (158), with one slight change in the last sentence.

this passage in the way that Cooper does, that would not settle the issue. For there are a couple of passages later in book ten which clearly imply that the individual is more than his intellect. For instance, in speaking of the contemplative in chapter 8, Aristotle says: "But, being a human being, one will also need external prosperity; for our nature is not self-sufficient for the purpose of contemplation, but our body also must be healthy and must have food and other attention."\(^{16}\) To be a human being involves possessing a body, and a fortiori other psychological faculties in addition to the theoretical intellect. In the passage quoted from chapter 7 Aristotle perhaps flirts with the view that the human being is nothing more than a bare intellect, but it is not something which he definitively affirms; and in subsequent passages he clearly implies that the human being is more than his theoretical intellect. If Aristotle's considered view is that an individual is made up, not only of intellectual, but emotional and practical faculties as well, then we have no basis for saying that the possession of moral virtue is incompatible with the contemplative life.

It is true, as Cooper points out, that although Aristotle speaks of the contemplative acting virtuously he does not explicitly say that such a person will be morally virtuous. But he may have thought that this was so obvious that it did not need to be said. He speaks of the philosopher or contemplative being dear to the gods partly for the reason that he acts rightly and nobly;\(^{17}\) there is no hint that the philosopher has a grudging attitude towards action in accordance with the virtues, or that he acts virtuously only when and to the extent that it furthers his end of contemplation. Aristotle's remarks about the contemplative's moral activity do not suggest that he is a person who regards moral demands as a burdensome distraction from his real interests.

In fact, Aristotle seems committed to holding that the contemplative must possess the moral virtues. In the sixth book he argues that moral virtue is a necessary condition of a correct understanding of the supreme good or final goal of action.\(^{18}\) Now if the contemplative lacks moral virtue he will also lack an understanding of the nature of the supreme good. So he must either possess moral virtue or be in the rather peculiar situation of enjoying the best life without realizing that he is doing so.

I do not pretend that these considerations add up to conclusive evidence

\(^{16}\)Nicomachean Ethics 1178b33-35; cf. 1178b5.

\(^{17}\)Nicomachean Ethics 1179a24-29; cf. 1178b5-6, 1178b33-1179a8.

\(^{18}\)Nicomachean Ethics 1144a29-36.
that Aristotle thought the contemplative must possess the moral virtues. But I think there is at least as much support in the text for this view as for the view that the contemplative need not be morally virtuous.

Let us suppose that this interpretation is correct, and that according to Aristotle the philosopher must possess the moral virtues; he will therefore regard virtuous action as something valuable in itself, for this is a defining condition of moral virtue. The contemplative life begins to look more or less the same as the mixed life ideal of the Eudemian Ethics. Why, then, doesn't Aristotle describe it as a mixed life? Why doesn't he characterize it as a life in accordance with complete virtue?

We may answer by pointing out that the contemplative life is not the same as the Eudemian ideal. Aristotle's contemplative stands apart from the political arena, and his involvement in practical affairs is minimal. The contemplative life is not in any real sense a "mixed life." What defines this life, what gives it shape, is the activity of philosophizing. It is not that the contemplative neglects the moral virtues, but simply that they are not what shapes his life. Philosophical contemplation is thus definitive of a kind of life and of a kind of eudaimonia, without being the only thing of value in such a life. Friendship, family affection, moral values - all of these may have their place and value in such a life. Since the contemplative life is not a mixed life, it is not defined as a life of activity in accordance with complete virtue. Nevertheless, if my analysis is correct, the contemplative life has more affinities with the Eudemian mixed life than does the active life. The contemplative life and the Eudemian ideal are both lives in which philosophical wisdom plays a dominant part, but this is not true of the active, political life. On Cooper's interpretation, what is new and different about the Nicomachean discussion of eudaimonia is the addition of the contemplative life; on mine, the important change is the upgrading of the political life. In the earlier treatise

19 Nicomachean Ethics 1105a26-33; cf. 1144a13-20.

20 See the passages cited above, in n. 7; cf. also 1178b33-1179a9 where Aristotle says that the contemplative (1178b34), in contrast to the statesman or politician, does not need much in the way of external goods to carry out his virtuous activity.

21 Cooper might wish to call the contemplative life, understood in this way, a mixed life. I have no objection to this, as long as "mixed life" is not taken to mean a life in which both practical and contemplative activity play an important part.
Aristotle holds that one cannot achieve eudaimonia unless one is a philosopher. In the *Nicomachean Ethics* he comes around to the common sense view that others besides philosophers lead admirable and worthwhile lives. Thus the later treatise improves on the earlier.

But there is another change in the later treatise which seems to go against common sense. As I have presented Aristotle's view, neither the contemplative nor the active life is a truly mixed life. It might seem that a mixed life, such as the Eudemian ideal, would be fuller and richer than either of these lives inasmuch as it would combine the best of both. It is odd, and perhaps a difficulty for my interpretation, that Aristotle does not consider this possibility in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Let me hazard a guess as to why he doesn't - that is all one can do, for the text provides no hints. My suggestion is that Aristotle in his later years came to the view that one cannot successfully combine the active and contemplative lives. If one is to be an effective statesman or politician, one must devote most of one's time and energy to this endeavor, and similarly with philosophy. This more modest view of human nature does not seem at variance with common sense. I am inclined to view the implicit rejection of the mixed life ideal in the *Nicomachean Ethics* as another improvement on the earlier view.

Let me now sum up my remarks. I first argued against Cooper's view that the second-best life of the *Nicomachean Ethics* is the same as the Eudemian mixed life. I tried to show that the active life is a life devoted to practical activity, and that it differs significantly from the Eudemian ideal which puts emphasis on intellectual pursuits. I then questioned Cooper's claim that the contemplative life of the *Nicomachean Ethics* rules out the possession of moral virtue. There is some evidence, as I indicated, that Aristotle thought the contemplative life required moral virtue; at the very least, we are not compelled by the text to take Aristotle to be maintaining that the possession of the moral virtues is incompatible with the contemplative life. And in general, we need not attribute to Aristotle an unreasonably narrow conception of the contemplative life. The interpretation which I have argued for seems to have as firm a basis in the text as Cooper's. If it is correct, there is no need to have regrets about Aristotle's revisions: his final position on eudaimonia may be viewed as an improvement on his earlier theory.

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22It should perhaps be noted that, given the nature of many Greek city-states, a sizeable proportion of the population could participate in political activity and thus have the opportunity to achieve Aristotle's second-best form of eudaimonia.
Daniel T. Devereux
Corcoran Department of Philosophy
521 Cabell Hall
University of Virginia
Charlottesville, Virginia 22901