

# Class Sixteen - Aristotle's *Ethics*, Book X

Philosophical Perspectives - Ryan Simonelli

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## 1 Aristotle On Pleasure

- **Against the Claim that Pleasure's the Good:**

- **Eudoxus's Basic Argument:**

- \* All things seem to aim at pleasure.
- \* As we said at the outset of Book I, "the good has rightly been declared to be that at which all things aim."
- \* So, pleasure is the good.

Note, this proposal aligns with the idea that whatever the good is, it must be desirable in itself and not for the sake of something else

- **Aristotle's Response:** Pleasure is surely *a* good, something at which many things aim, but it's not *the* good. Aristotle attributes the main argument for this claim to Plato:

- \* If something is *the* good, it cannot be made any better by the addition of any things other than it that are good in themselves.
- \* But, "the pleasant life is more desirable with wisdom than without."
  - Consider the experience of having an amazing meal in a double Michelin star restaurant. Surely, the experience will be pleasurable. But now imagine the same experience but with the understanding of the culinary craftsmanship that went into crafting the perfect dish. Isn't the latter better?
- \* So, wisdom must be a good, in addition to pleasure that, when added to pleasure, results in a state or activity that is, on the whole, better.
- \* Thus, pleasure is not the good.

**Question:** Might it be the pleasure associated with understanding that is good, in such a case, rather than the understanding itself?

- **What Pleasure Is:**

- **Complete In Itself:** It's always complete in itself, rather than a kind of movement towards something:

- **Quick bit of Aristotelian Metaphysics:**

- \* **Kineses (movements):** Progress from an incomplete state to a complete one—aimed at an end external to themselves.
  - Walking across the street.
  - Building a house.
  - Healing (from a wound).
- \* **Energieiai (activities):** Always complete insofar as they're ongoing—not aimed at an end external to themselves.
  - Seeing.
  - Contemplating.
  - Living.

- **On the Relation Between Pleasure and Activity:**

- \* But pleasure is not itself an activity, but, rather, accompanies activities.
- \* Pleasure tends to intensify the activities that it accompanies.
  - People who take pleasure in building (math, etc.) tend to build more, and do so better in virtue of the fact that the activity is pleasurable to them.
- \* Activities have a “proper pleasure,” that which comes with doing the activity.
- \* Animals have a “proper pleasure,” that which comes with living the sort of life that animals of that sort are supposed to live.
- \* So, the happy human being, who lives the sort of life that human beings are supposed to live, will live the most pleasurable life.

## 2 Aristotle On Happiness and Contemplation

- **Quick Recap:** Happiness (*eudamonia*, flourishing) is not a state but an activity. It’s not a state of being satisfied or amused, but a living of a life in accordance with virtue.
- **Clarification of “Virtue”:** Virtue, recall, includes both *moral* and *intellectual* virtues.
- **The Happiest Life:** The happiest life will be a life of activity in accordance with the *highest* virtue.
  - **“Highest” = Most Divine:** Recall Aristotle’s *scala naturae*, or “ladder of being,” with humans higher than animals or plants, but not as high as the gods.
- **The Contemplative Life:** Contemplation, the activity of the intellect as it understands things, is the best activity, and living the contemplative life is to live the happiest life. Aristotle gives several reasons in X.7:
  - It’s the most pleasant of virtuous activities, always being pure and complete.
  - It is *leisurely*. If we compare it with the activity of the practical virtues such as war and politics, it seems better than these.
  - The intellect is the most divine thing in us, and there’s a sense in which, through contemplation, we “make ourselves immortal,” (1177b, 35).
    - \* Recall a similar thought from Plato’s *Phaedo*. Question: Similar though it is, how does Aristotle’s thought here contrast with that of Plato?
  - Given that human is a *rational* animal, a *life of reason* is the most human life to live, and thus the life in which a human being best fulfills their function.
    - \* This itself doesn’t distinguish between practical and theoretical reason, so it’s not sufficient to secure that the contemplative life is the happiest.
- **The Activity of the Gods:** Gods are *living*, so they engage in a kind of *activity*, but what sort of activity could this be? It seems absurd to attribute to gods the kinds of actions that we engage in daily life, thinking of them as “making contracts and returning deposits [. . .] confronting dangers and running risks,” and so on. “Now if you take away from a living being action, and still more production, what is left but contemplation?”
  - Aristotle’s gods are clearly quite different than the very anthropomorphic gods of the Greek Pantheon.
- **The Requisites of Human Contemplation:** Unlike the gods, we’re not self-sufficient—we can’t just sit around contemplating all the time. Even though contemplating is the highest human good, the whole human good involves more than just contemplating.
  - Contemplation is thus best understood as *completing* a happy human life, rather than something in which a happy life completely consists.
- **The Turn to Politics:** We need to organize society through politics such that people live virtuously together, providing the conditions for widespread human happiness.