

Is Political Life A Happy Life According To Aristotle?

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Aristotle's conception of happy life is still a matter of debate among scholars. It is not obvious whether in his works Aristotle introduced only one idea of happy life or more. The status of political life is neither clear and further questions can be raised; does Aristotle consider it as a happy life, does happiness constitute of political life and what is the relation between political and theoretical life. In this article I shall try to examine these issues. I shall refer to the best known and accomplished Aristotelian interpretations by Kraut and Broadie as well as to interpretative articles by other authors. First I shall reconstruct their main line of argument, then I shall try to show the advantages and drawbacks (if any) of their interpretations and finally I shall give my own point of view on this matter and, perhaps, reconcile different views on the connection between political and theoretical life in Aristotle's ethics. As most commentators, I shall focus mainly on the *Nicomachean Ethics* and occasionally refer to other Aristotle's ethical works. I think that this approach can be justified by the fact, that, firstly, it is mainly the *Nicomachean Ethics* that raises difficulties in interpreting Aristotle's view on happy life, secondly, as some may argue, Aristotle contradicts himself in this treatise. Although Richard Kraut is sure about consistency of Aristotle's ethical theory, he is aware that this kind of argument can be raised: "Of course, if Aristotle says in one place that happiness consists in contemplation alone, and elsewhere that it consists in other goods as well, then he has contradicted himself"¹. Secondly, the conception of a happy life presented in the *Eudemian Ethics* is much more uniform and thus easier to define².

¹ Kraut [1989] p. 4.

² For example Cooper [1986] p. 122 and Kenny [1992] p. 19-22 far more easier reach conclusions about which form of happiness is presented in the *Eudemian Ethics*. Kenny, however, stresses that the last page of the treatise is difficult to interpret.

In the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle asks what is the chief human good as “every action and undertaking seems to seek some good. Hence people are right to affirm that the good is «that which all things seek»” (1094a2-3)³. Because Aristotle is doing a practical investigation, he does not want to be far from everyday experience, common sense and common opinion, to which he often refers. It is no wonder that he is doing so at the beginning of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Then, what is the “topmost of all achievable goods”? (1095a16). The answer is: “happiness”. And happiness is something that most people agree to identify with the topmost good. Aristotle agrees with this common opinion, but he states that people are not so unanimous in specifying what they actually mean by happiness. One can say, that this is only a “nominal consent” as we come across different opinions. Some may say that happiness is pleasure, others find it in honours or excellence, and there is the life of pleasure and the political life accordingly. Aristotle also adds “the life of reflection” (1096a4). It is worth noting that every life that can be chosen is somehow centralised by one good, e.g. pleasure. This notion is quite characteristic of the ancient Greek tradition of debating which life is the best to be chosen. In *Ethics* Aristotle is committed to continuity of this tradition⁴. In order to define happiness more precisely, Aristotle refers to the “characteristic function for a human being” (1097b32), which is the “activity of soul in accordance with reason” (1098a8). This activity distinguishes us from every other being. Finally, Aristotle comes to the conclusion, that “the human good turns out to be activity of soul in accordance with excellence (and if there are more excellences than one, in accordance with the best and the most complete)” (1098a16-18).

Interpreters tend to agree that in the first book of the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle identifies happiness with the virtuous practical activity⁵. Life devoted to exercising virtues is the life of a politician. What was quite obvious for Aristotle and for the ancients does not have to be so clear to a modern reader. Let me justify this thesis. A politician is the one, who makes “the members of the citizen-body

³ All quotations from the *Nicomachean Ethics* after Aristotle [2002].

⁴ See: Morrison [2001].

⁵ See: Kraut [1989] p. 5.

good, and obedient to the laws" (1102a8-9). There is also something god-like in his activity, because a politician does it for a nation and not for his own sake (1094b7-11). One should bear in mind that practical matters, which concern Aristotle in *Nicomachean Ethics*, are subject of political science. As Brown puts it: "When we come to consider the good life as a life of ethically virtuous activity, then, we should realise that the best life of ethically virtuous activity is devoted to fostering ethically virtuous activity for the city as a whole; **it is a fully political life**"⁶. I think that the claim that in the first book of the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle identifies happiness with political life is now well justified and therefore the transition from ethically virtuous activity to political activity is quite clear.

Let me, however, propose a different reading of the first book of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. I am not sure whether Aristotle really thinks that the ethically virtuous activity is really happiness. In chapter 5 of this book Aristotle introduces three types of life: – candidates for a happy life – the life of pleasure, the political life and the life of reflection. The life of pleasure is immediately dismissed as a life of the "slavish sort of people" (1095b20). People, who choose to live a life of a politician, aim at excellence. Aristotle, however, states that "excellence too appears somewhat incomplete" (1095b32-33). In my opinion, this remark shows that the political life is not the best candidate for a happy life. "Third of the three lives in question, then, is the life of reflection, about which we shall make our investigation in what follows" (1096a5-6). As we had had three possibilities, and two of them were discarded, we have been left with one, that is the "life of reflection". Aristotle will focus on it in book X. One can think that this will be the happy life, as we have no other options. My answer is: yes and no. Aristotle's theory is much more complex and – as we shall see – the political life is not totally dismissed. I shall consider this matter further, but I wanted to make it clear that I have some objections to the opinion that Aristotle thinks in book I that the happy life is the life of the ethically virtuous activity, i.e. the political life. This, however, is difficult to reconcile with the statement, that the topmost good, i.e. happiness is the subject of political expertise. I shall try to overcome this difficulty at the end of this article.

⁶ Brown [www] p. 9 [emphasis mine – T.K.].

The political life is a candidate for a happy life in the whole bulk of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (except book X, of course) rather than in book I. My objection, however, has no impact on the following discussion.

In the beginning of chapter 7, book X, Aristotle claims that the highest activity is the reflective activity and calls it the “complete happiness” (1177a18). In book I he announced only he would take this activity into account but did not suggest he would raise it to the highest level. Now it is high time we brought issues identified at the beginning of this article. Firstly, we should decide whether Aristotle changed his mind and characterised happiness in a different way. It seems quite obvious that he did not change his definition of happiness. It is still “an activity in accordance with its own proper excellence” (1177a18). Nevertheless, it is the activity itself, he has in mind, that changed. The happy life is no longer a life of a politician, but a life of a philosopher, who contemplates. Does this mean that Aristotle contradicts himself?

Kraut in his *Aristotle on the Human Good* emphasises that “the *Nicomachean Ethics* does not contain this internal conflict”⁷. According to his interpretation, “Aristotle holds that there are two good ways of answering the question «What is happiness»”⁸. The first answer is the virtuous practical activity. The second, which is better and at the same time the best, is the theoretical activity. If one wants to be perfectly happy, one should be a philosopher and not a statesman. If this is not possible, one ought to become a politician, as political life is a happy life, but not the perfectly happy life. Kraut also thinks that both the end of the theoretical life and the end of the political life have dominant character, i.e. they arrange humans’ ends in a hierarchy and “place virtuous activity (whether practical or theoretical) at the top”⁹. It stems from this that in order to be perfectly happy one must contemplate as much as one can. According to Kraut, however, under circumstances it is better to do something else than to contemplate, e.g. to help one’s old and ill father who needs assistance. What is crucial is that a person who was

⁷ Kraut [1989] p. 5.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

forced by accident to abandon the theoretical life will not be as happy as a person who has been continuously contemplating for the same amount of time. Both kinds of lives are separate from each other. The aim (good) of the political life is strictly of political kind and is in no way a mixture of something else, particularly of theorizing. "If contemplation is to have any place at all in the political life, it must be something sought for the sake of the unique end of politics. [...] Contemplation cannot play this subordinate role: it produces no further good beyond itself"¹⁰. Let us examine some points Kraut makes, which in my opinion, are not self-evident.

According to Kraut, contemplative activity implies ethical activity. That means that a philosopher is a morally good person. Kraut thinks that these types of life have the same core, the idea, that the highest aim is to "use reason well"¹¹. This means that in both cases, in contemplation and in the political arena, a human being uses his reason, both theoretical and practical. The claim that a philosopher must be a morally good person seems to be compatible with the common sense, but at the same time at odds with what Aristotle suggests in book X, chapter 8. A philosopher does not need many external goods, which are necessary for performing virtuous actions. I do not want to suggest that a person who contemplates can be a vicious man. All I want to say is that I cannot see any necessary connection between achieving the most happy life by first becoming a virtuous person. A similar point is made by Cooper, who thinks that "There is, then, no direct evidence for, and some evidence against, the hypothesis that Aristotle thought a morally virtuous character necessary for the fullest possible realization of intellectual values"¹². I do not want to repeat his position at large, but we must be aware of that difficulty. Personally, I am convinced that a philosopher must be a virtuous person. I agree with Kraut that other option would be inconsistent with the whole theory put forward in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and with common sense to which Aristotle so often refers. What we do lack is the

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

¹² Cooper [1986] p. 110.

justification of the thesis, that a philosopher must be a virtuous man. In my opinion Kraut falls into a trap set by himself. He thinks that “the philosopher will engage in ethical activity, but will do so for the sake of contemplation”¹³, whereas political life does not contain theoretical activity, because this activity cannot be chosen for the sake of something else. But the same point applies to the ethical activity! If we want to act virtuously, we have to act for the sake of these actions and nothing else. Aristotle says: “the thing that come about in accordance with the excellences count as done justly or moderately not merely because they themselves are of a certain kind, but also because of facts about agent doing them – first, if he does them knowingly, **secondly if he decides to do them, and decides to do them for themselves**, and thirdly if he does them from a firm and unchanging disposition” (1105a29-33; emphasis mine – T.K.).

Lastly, I would like to refer to the point Kraut makes on 1178b28-32: “For the life of gods is blessedly happy throughout, while that of human beings is so to the extent that there belongs to it some kind of semblance of this sort of activity; but of the other animals none is happy, since there is no respect in which they share in reflection. So happiness too extends as far as reflection does, and to those who have more of reflection more happiness belongs too, not incidentally, but in virtue of the reflection; for this is in instead to be honoured. So then happiness will be a kind of reflection.” Although Kraut does not commit himself to maximising contemplation, he thinks that the phrase “to those who have more of reflection more happiness belongs too” refers not only to different species (animals and humans) but also to individuals. Thus Kraut suggests that if we compare two different persons, the one who spent more time contemplating is more happy than the other. This interpretation is at first sight plausible, but from my point of view it leads to rather peculiar consequences and can easily turn into absurdity. According to Kraut, a person can have other duties to commit himself to, which disallow him to contemplate, like her ill parents. It is wise to look after them and it would be vicious to abandon them for intellectual values. But this means, that this kind of person may not achieve happiness or will be less happy than someone

¹³ Kraut [1989] p. 25.

else. It all leads to odd conclusions. Firstly, one can have more chances of being happy if one is lucky and is not constrained by adversities. In other words, a philosopher, who is so “fortunate” to have healthy parents or whose parents died instantly, can be more happy than a philosopher, whose contemplation is disturbed by the duty of taking care of his loved ones. Although Marcus Verhaegh does not draw these kind of conclusions, he also thinks, that at this point, Kraut is mistaken: “My main thesis is that while Kraut gets many things right, he nevertheless goes wrong in at least one crucial way. Kraut ascribes what I will term the maximalist view to Aristotle”¹⁴. Secondly, one person is happier than the other according to the divine standard. It is god/gods that is/are really happy. And if they are infinitely happy, it is difficult to compare two lines of two humans’ happiness to the infinite line of god’s/gods’ happiness. The point is also made by Verhaegh: “Does a slightly longer line bear a better «likeness» to an infinite line that does the slightly shorter one?”¹⁵. My thesis is, and it rests also on Verhaegh’s interpretation, that it is not plausible to compare the amount of happiness among humans. If Kraut is wrong, perhaps Verhaegh is right in assuming, that “the life containing the minimum of contemplation plus a great deal of political activity will be just as happy as the purely theoretical life”¹⁶. The goods of theoretical life are thus secured and a person – being a social animal – can interact with others in the political arena and does not lead a solitary life, which is what Aristotle dismisses.

Sarah Broadie’s interpretation is different and, to my opinion, much more plausible than that of Kraut¹⁷. According to Broadie in her *Philosophical Introduction to the Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle considers two forms of happiness, i.e. two forms of lives (life of pleasure is good for the slavish and is not worth reflection). Hence, we come across the same issues: “which one is better?”. Broadie sees the key in answering this question in resemblance and forms a different problem:

¹⁴ Verhaegh [2002] p. 17.

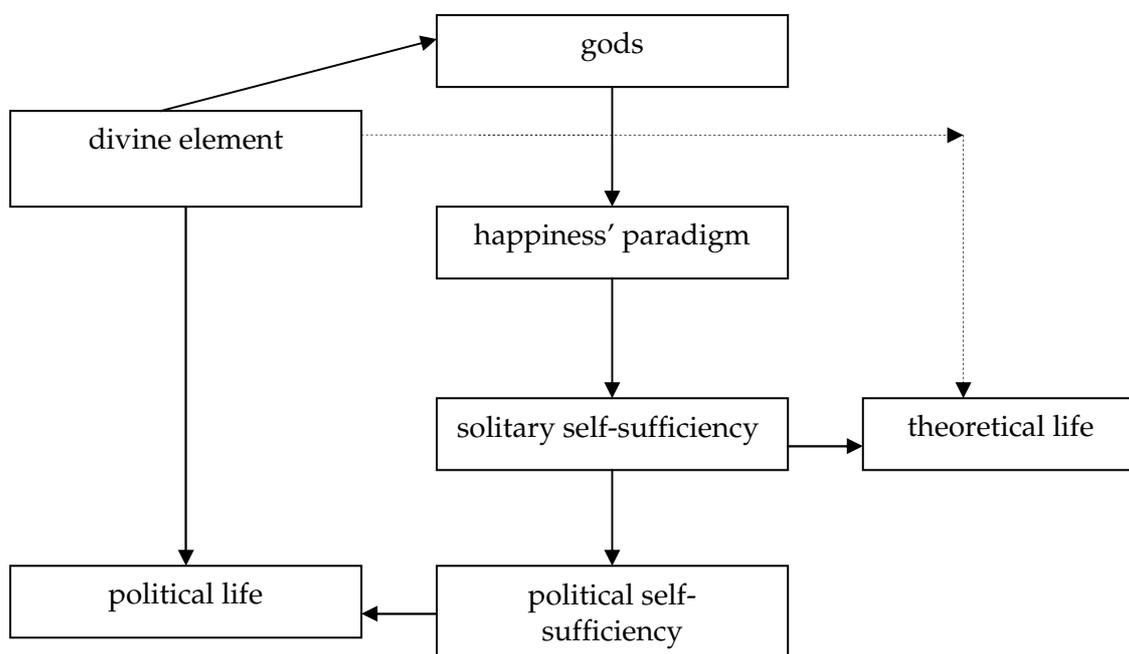
¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

¹⁷ Aristotle [2002] p. 74-81.

“Does fine theoretical reflection count as happiness because it resembles outstanding political activity, or is it the other way round?”¹⁸. Broadie thinks that according to Aristotle it is the other way round. A good politician acts according to his reason, “he operates by means of the intellect and by discourse, and minimally by physical strength”¹⁹. And if the lives of gods are paradigms of happiness, then theoretical life is closer to them as it is self-sufficient, and, finally, it is better than the political life, which is also a happy life (because there is also something divine in it, as I mentioned above) but in the secondary sense.

Let us picture these connections below. Gods’ happiness gives us a paradigm. We know that they are self-sufficient and that one of the criteria of our happiness is also self-sufficiency. According to Brown²⁰ we can differ two kind of self-sufficiency: solitary and political, and the former is more self-sufficient than the latter. They are divine in one respect: they imply rationality. Both the politician and the philosopher operate by their reasons, but philosophers’ activity is more self-sufficient.



¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ See: Brown [www] p. 4.

Sarah Broadie makes a crucial point in her interpretation. She reminds us that ethical enquiries are the subject of political science. This means that theoretical activity – as a form and an ideal of life – is the subject of “the political mission to uphold”²¹. She argues that Aristotle is creating “a new kind of cultural hero”²², that is the philosopher. If a virtuous activity is considered to be respectable and is the core of happiness, because – as Broadie similarly to Kraut thinks – rational activity implies ethical activity, and the crucial role in achieving this kind of life is played by reason, then the activity which is more rational can be respectable to even a higher degree.

Broadie also emphasises that the rational activity is basically for the elevated ones. That is why Aristotle, after identifying happiness with this form of life, returns to considerations on the state and its institutions. The task of *polis* is to bring up people and make them virtuous. This requires theoretical knowledge of laws and the functioning of state institutions and is only available to philosophers, as politicians’ domain is only of practical character: “it is the business of philosopher of ethics to think about the fundamentals of legislation and politics in general”²³.

It is quite plausible to assume that finally Aristotle identifies happiness with the theoretical activity and thinks that theoretical life is essentially assigned to men. But, as I said before, political life is not dismissed by the Philosopher. We know now that it is happy in the secondary sense. At the end of this article, I will put forward my opinion on these matters, raising a few questions and difficulties, which I find important.

First I want to emphasise that I am in favour of the opinion that the *Nicomachean Ethics* is a coherent treatise and that Aristotle does not contradict himself. In justifying this claim I do not want to refer to *De Anima* as Cooper does²⁴. In my opinion one cannot strictly oppose political and theoretical activity.

²¹ Aristotle [2002] p. 76.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 80.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 450.

²⁴ Cooper [1986] p. 175-177.

Therefore Kraut is wrong in maximising (not in his but Verhaegh's sense of this term) theoretical activity. One has just to remember, however, that he is also committed to treat the *Nicomachean Ethics* as a coherent entity. There are also interpretations in which authors argue that the whole bulk of the *Nicomachean Ethics* is at odds with book X,²⁵ others think that Aristotle has difficulties in defining human nature²⁶.

Ethical enquiry is the subject of politics as a science. According to Aristotle politicians only act, but they do not theoretically reflect on their actions. It is a job for political/ethical philosophers to prepare an intellectual background for good governing that will lead to establishing a good *polis* and bringing up good and happy humans²⁷. This means that – although a political philosopher contemplates – his conclusions can be of practical importance and of political value. It is he to whom a politician can refer in order to be a good statesman. A very interesting point was made by Amélie O. Rorty in *The Place of Contemplation in Aristotle's "Nicomachean Ethics"*²⁸. She argues that a philosopher can contemplate “the moral life in activity”²⁹, that “it is the task the of moral philosopher to analyze the activity of the phronimos; to get the proper descriptions of his activities and processes, to determine their priorities in the light of general human ends”³⁰. Contemplation is done for its own sake but, according to Rorty, it does not mean that a philosopher as a person cannot deepen his moral understanding³¹. Contemplating “the moral life in activity” helps to understand what humanity is and to identify with the human species. The fact of having friends enables us to perceive our own humanity/human nature. In contemplating our own moral life, we will grasp the notion of humanity only if we are morally good persons. And this is the task for a

²⁵ See: Brown [www] p. 20.

²⁶ See: Nagel [1981].

²⁷ I am leaving aside the question whether *polis* brings up good people or good citizens or both. On this, see: Duvall & Dotson [1998].

²⁸ Rorty [1981].

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 378.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 381.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 387.

statesman. He is the one to bring about the conditions required to being well brought up. The contemplator of humanity begins with “dialectical account of the basic political and practical *energeiai*”³². If conditions of a proper political system are not met, one has no “basic political and practical *energeiai*”, i.e. one is deprived of the possibility of contemplating his own virtuous life because it is impossible to achieve it. One is left with the possibility of contemplating something else. I do not want to suggest that objects of contemplation can form a kind of hierarchy. To my mind in a bad *polis* one cannot achieve his full humanity, because one cannot morally develop oneself. This is how politics is connected with becoming what a human being essentially is.

The answer to the main question is not so obvious. We can definitely state that a politician can be happy in the secondary sense and I tend to agree on that. What is more puzzling is the possible necessity of involving in political activity by a philosopher. I think it is possible that the situation will require him to take part in governing a *polis* as he is the only one equipped with appropriate knowledge. It would be rather strange to call him less happy just because he committed himself to something less happy than contemplation. I agree with Verhaegh that after securing contemplative goods, one can engage in politics. In *Politics* Aristotle has difficulties in defining the role in *polis* that can be played by the individuals who surpass others in terms of virtue. He is committed to the notion of equality and thinks that the power in one hand is against nature but on the other hand, he thinks that it will be just for others to give in to his powers³³. This example illustrates a state of necessity I was referring to. There is also another point connected with the natural order. If the better ones are to govern, why should philosophers subdue themselves to the rule of the inferior. Would it not be against nature?

Finally, if the *polis* brings up people, achieving a happy life (the theoretical activity) is paradoxically intrinsically associated with adequate circumstances and proper functioning of the state. If people are to develop their nature, a person who

³² *Ibid.*, p. 392.

³³ See: *Politics*, III/8, VII/3-4.

governments must know how to live in order/to be able to contemplate. And this is a task for a philosopher.

As we have seen, the brought up issues are quite complex and it is almost impossible to give an unproblematic interpretation. Nevertheless, it is possible to give a positive answer to the question raised at the beginning, adding that philosophers can or sometimes must engage in political activity. It seems therefore that the ancient and contemporary intellectuals' dream of having influence on political matters can be defended on the grounds of Aristotle's thought.

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