

How Is Happiness Possible?—Aristotle on the Unity of Contemplative Life and Virtuous Actualization

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Abstract

The central question of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* is “How is happiness possible?” Aristotle’s fundamental answer is that happiness consists in an activity of the soul in accordance with virtue. This paper contends that complete happiness consists in the unified activity of both intellectual and moral virtue, with its highest expression found in the contemplative life. By analyzing the concepts of “good” and “the highest good”, the study first establishes happiness as the ultimate end of human striving. It then distinguishes between intellectual and moral virtue, demonstrating that both provide indispensable foundations for happiness—moral virtue secures the mean and excellence in practical conduct, while intellectual virtue orients us toward the contemplation of truth, which represents the most self-sufficient and divine form of complete happiness. Ultimately, the paper argues that a happy life is realized through the integration of virtuous practice within the polis and the love of wisdom, achieving a unified perspective that bridges virtue ethics and intellectualism in Aristotle’s account of happiness.

Keywords

Happiness, Virtue, Contemplation, Wisdom, Good

1. Introduction

At the heart of ethics lies the fundamental question: “How is happiness (eudaimonia) possible?” Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* provides a classic solution, defining happiness as “an activity of the soul in accordance with virtue”. (Aristotle, 2003) This definition, nevertheless, immediately raises a deeper problem: the human soul possesses both moral and intellectual virtues. Does happiness reside in

the actualization of one, the other, or both? This paper aims to demonstrate that Aristotle offers a complete and nuanced answer by establishing the contemplative life as the highest form of happiness, one that is unified with the practice of moral virtue. In the contemporary context, characterized by the interplay of utilitarianism and nihilism, re-examining Aristotle's integration of happiness and virtue not only helps revive a holistic view of human life but also offers classical resources for modern individuals seeking meaning and grounding in an era dominated by instrumental rationality. As numerous scholars have noted, Aristotle's theory of happiness holds significant reflective value in addressing the challenges of modernity (Wang, 2019).

2. From the Good to Happiness: The First Proposition of Ethics and Its Final End

The inquiry into "how happiness is possible" is transformed by Aristotle into an investigation of "what is the highest good". He begins the *Nicomachean Ethics* with a clear logical structure: all things aim at some good, and human life as a whole must point toward a final, complete end pursued for its own sake—happiness (Aristotle, 2003). Here, what Aristotle refers to as "politics" (*politikē*) as the highest form of knowledge is fundamentally different in meaning from the modern narrow conception of power struggles or public administration. It specifically denotes a comprehensive practical science aimed at pursuing the common good of the community (the polis). It is essentially an ethico-political practice focused on shaping excellent citizens and realizing the good life, rather than a technique of governance. This grounding of the "question of the good" is decisive: it elevates happiness from a vague emotional experience to an object of rational inquiry and endows it with a firm practical character. Happiness is no longer a matter of mere luck but a state of life achievable through activities performed in accordance with virtue. Thus, an initial answer emerges: happiness is possible because it is the ultimate end toward which all our rational life activities are directed.

Aristotle's argument starts from a teleological premise: "Every art and every inquiry, and similarly every action and pursuit, is thought to aim at some good" (Aristotle, 2003). This reveals the inherent purposive structure of human activity—namely, all actions aim at some "good". Whether in craft, study, or moral practice, the ultimate direction implies a pursuit of the good. Therefore, the inquiry into the good becomes the logical starting point for investigating happiness. Yet ends are hierarchical. Aristotle astutely observes that if something is pursued not for its own sake but for other, extrinsic ends, the search for its purpose regresses infinitely, leading to an untenable indeterminacy (Aristotle, 2003). To halt this regression, there must be a "highest good" (the supreme good), which is the final end of all ends, desirable solely for itself. Eudoxus's summary—"All things aim at the good" (Aristotle, 2003)—emphasizes the necessity of this ultimate end. Consequently, determining what constitutes the "highest good" becomes the primary task of ethics in its search for certainty.

Which branch of knowledge is responsible for investigating the “highest good”? Aristotle assigns this mission to politics (Aristotle, 2003). He justifies this by presenting politics not as pure theoretical speculation but as a comprehensive practical science. First, its aim is to acquire certain knowledge about the good and use it to guide the life of the polis and its citizens. Second, it concerns how to educate citizens to acquire knowledge of the good and regulate their behavior accordingly, aligning it with noble moral virtue. Most crucially, Aristotle believes that “the good of an individual and the good of a city are the same, but the good of the city is a greater and more perfect thing to attain and preserve” (Aristotle, 2003). Thus, the good of the polis is more self-sufficient and complete than that of the individual. Therefore, the ultimate concern of politics is to realize this higher, more self-sufficient good in the concrete actions of each citizen. Aristotle further stresses that those who study politics must possess the capacity to discern truth and an unhindered desire to undertake this task (Aristotle, 2003). Contemporary scholars also highlight that Aristotle’s placement of the pursuit of the highest good under political science demonstrates the intrinsic unity between ethics and politics (Liu Wei, 2015).

The search for the highest good naturally progresses into an inquiry concerning the “first principles” of all things. Aristotle observes in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that theoretical knowledge, practical knowledge, and politics all share the same aim: to reach the highest good. While most agree that “happiness is the highest good”, opinions vary widely among the wise and the multitude regarding what exactly constitutes happiness (Aristotle, 2003). By identifying the highest good with happiness, the pursuit of one becomes synonymous with the realization of the other.

The profound debate concerning the nature of happiness naturally leads to the three forms of life available to the human soul: the life of enjoyment, the political life, and the contemplative life. These can be distinguished as follows: the life of enjoyment is devoted merely to bodily pleasures and lacks any pursuit of truth or certainty; the political life, though noble, pursues honor, which depends on external recognition rather than inner fulfillment—thus constituting a form of “good fortune” but incapable of conferring true worth or the highest good, since its end is not pursued wholly for its own sake. In contrast, the contemplative life aims at perfecting the highest element of human nature; its end resides in the very activity of contemplation, making it a life chosen purely for itself—the most self-sufficient form of existence, and the one most closely approximating the perfected condition of happiness (Aristotle, 2003). Moreover, the contemplative life is superior not only in virtue of its self-sufficiency and intrinsic completeness but also due to its divine character, since it engages the highest faculty of the soul—*nous* (intuitive intellect). Therefore, it represents not only human happiness but also an imitation of, and participation in, the divine life.

In defining the general concept of the good, Aristotle diverges from Plato’s “Form of the Good”. He rejects the idea of a separate, universal “Idea”, arguing

that such a separate form cannot be attained through practice. (Aristotle, 2003) In his view, what truly pertains to the highest good and can investigate the true good is the highest part of the human soul capable of pursuing truth—nous. Indeed, nous itself is the good of the human soul. (Aristotle, 2003)

The pursuit of the good is distinctly human. Human activity is directed toward multiple ends, and everything has its good. When an individual adopts the end of a thing as the aim of action, they pursue a “practicable good”. The good that is sought purely for its own sake, being most desirable in itself, is called the most self-sufficient and complete good. Aristotle classifies goods into those of the body, those of the soul, and external goods, explicitly affirming that “the goods of the soul are the most proper and true goods” (Aristotle, 2003). The realization of the highest good is happiness—an end most desirable in itself and a form of life that aligns most closely with the highest good and is guided by logos (Aristotle, 2003). Scholars have noted that Aristotle’s hierarchical classification of goods provides a clear framework for understanding happiness’s internal structure (Chen Yi, 2020).

How, then, is happiness attained? It cannot result from divine gift or mere chance, but must be achieved through “an activity of the soul in accordance with virtue”, pursued over a complete life dedicated to cultivating virtue. Aristotle decisively articulates this when he writes: “The human good turns out to be an activity of the soul in accordance with virtue, and if there are more than one virtue, in accordance with the best and most complete” (Aristotle, 2003). This definition marks a critical shift—relocating the realization of happiness from external, uncertain factors to an internal activity of the soul that is within human control.

3. From Practical Wisdom to Contemplative Wisdom: The Hierarchical Structure of Intellectual Virtue and the Internal Logic of Happiness

The realization of happiness is essentially an activity of the soul in accordance with virtue. If moral virtue consists in finding the “mean” in feelings and actions, then the “right rule” that determines this mean becomes crucial. Establishing this rational standard must be traced back to the rational part of the soul—namely, intellectual virtue. Aristotle divides the rational part of the soul into the “practical intellect” and the “contemplative intellect” in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, clearly stating that the former “considers variable things”, thereby aiming to guide specific ethical and political practice and to enable correct choice in changing circumstances; the latter “contemplates invariable things”, its pure purpose being to grasp eternal and unchanging truth (Aristotle, 2003). The distinction and complementary functions of these two intellectual faculties together construct the indispensable rational foundation for the realization of happiness, transforming it from a benevolent wish into a reality achievable through rational activity.

To attain truth in both the practical and contemplative domains, the soul must cultivate five excellent intellectual qualities: craft (*technē*), scientific knowledge (*epistēmē*), practical wisdom (*phronēsis*), philosophical wisdom (*sophia*), and in-

tuitive reason (*nous*). Among these, practical wisdom is the perfect expression of the “practical intellect”. It is not mere cleverness but “a truthful practical state concerned with action in relation to what is good and bad for humans”, guided by reason (Aristotle, 2003). It considers what is truly good and beneficial for oneself and serves as the rational guide enabling moral virtue to find the “mean”. In contrast, scientific knowledge, philosophical wisdom, and intuitive reason primarily serve the “contemplative intellect”, dealing with the domain of unchanging knowledge. Scientific knowledge constitutes a body of knowledge obtained through logical demonstration, possessing necessity; whereas intuitive reason is more fundamental, concerning “the things which are the first principles of that which is demonstrated”, representing a rational capacity to intuitively grasp first principles (Aristotle, 2003). These five qualities form a complete spectrum for acquiring truth.

Among all these intellectual qualities, intuitive reason occupies the primary and foundational position. All scientific demonstrations must begin from certain ultimate premises (*archai*) that are themselves indemonstrable. These starting points cannot be provided by science or deduction themselves. Aristotle emphasizes that “scientific knowledge is a state that involves reason, and we say that intuitive reason is concerned with the starting points” (Aristotle, 2003). It is this intuitive, essential rational capacity of *nous* that lays the unshakable foundation for the entire system of knowledge and even for practical reasoning (including judgments about the ultimate good). Therefore, *nous* is not only the source of theoretical knowledge but also the faculty for apprehending the highest good in the practical realm, thus serving as the ultimate bridge connecting truth and good, knowledge and happiness.

It is particularly significant that the “bridging” role of *nous* is manifested in its dual function: in the theoretical realm (*epistēmē*), it intuitively grasps the first principles (*archai*) upon which scientific demonstration depends—principles that are themselves indemonstrable—thereby establishing the foundation for the entire system of knowledge; in the practical realm (*phronēsis*), it entails a non-discursive apprehension of the ultimate end of human action—namely, the “highest good”. It is precisely this intuitive grasp of the ultimate good that provides practical wisdom (*phronēsis*) with its final orientation and standard for deliberative judgment in concrete situations. Thus, *nous* becomes the essential link connecting theoretical wisdom (*sophia*) and practical wisdom (*phronēsis*), while also bridging the contemplative life and political virtue. This integration allows the complete happiness rooted in contemplation to become a unified, rather than fragmented, activity of the soul.

Based on the combination of intuitive reason and scientific knowledge, Aristotle identifies philosophical wisdom as the perfected form and pinnacle of intellectual virtue. He defines wisdom as “the most exact form of knowledge”, describing it as a combination of intuitive reason and science concerning the highest objects (Aristotle, 2003). Consequently, the activity centered on wisdom—contemplation (*theōria*)—is considered the most self-sufficient, continuous, and pleasant activ-

ity, since it maximally actualizes and perfects the most excellent, most divine-like part of the human soul. It is precisely on this basis that Aristotle explicitly judges the contemplative life to be the greatest happiness in Book X (Aristotle, 2003). The full manifestation and hierarchical structure of intellectual virtue thus provide a rigorous argument for the supremacy of the contemplative life in the pursuit of happiness. As research suggests, the hierarchical structure of intellectual virtues is central to Aristotle's argument for the supreme nature of the contemplative life (Zhang, 2018).

Based on the division of the five intellectual virtues, Aristotle makes it clear that practical wisdom (*phronēsis*) and philosophical wisdom (*sophia*) are two distinct qualities of the soul for attaining truth, pertaining to the variable and invariable realms respectively, and are fundamentally different in function, neither being reducible to the other. However, this does not mean they are entirely separate in the happy life. On the contrary, Aristotle's account implies a profound synergistic relationship: Practical wisdom is responsible for handling human, particular goods. It paves the way for the contemplative activity of philosophical wisdom by shaping good moral character and providing the necessary external conditions. Philosophical wisdom, as the highest intellectual virtue, in turn provides an ultimate, divine reference point for the "right rule" that practical wisdom seeks, elevating its pursuit of the "good" beyond immediate concerns and orienting it towards a higher, eternal order. Thus, possessing practical wisdom does not directly cause philosophical wisdom to arise, but it creates the indispensable ethical and practical space for its flourishing. While philosophical wisdom does not directly guide specific actions, it illuminates the ultimate meaning of the whole form of life that practical wisdom pursues by elevating the overall state of the soul. This relationship—distinct yet synergistic—is key to how Aristotle resolves the internal tension within the intellectual virtues and ultimately unifies happiness within the activity of a complete soul.

4. The Manifestation of Moral Virtue

Having established the role of intellectual virtue in providing the rational foundation for happiness, it is now necessary to examine how intellectual virtue concretely guides the realization of moral virtue in practice. This is precisely why Aristotle places the "right rule" at the core of moral virtue. If happiness is "an activity of the soul in accordance with complete virtue", the question arises: which virtue can embody this "completeness"? Aristotle's answer points to moral virtue. Based on the presence or absence of reason (*logos*), he divides the virtues of the human soul into intellectual virtues and moral virtues, indicating that the latter are essential for realizing happiness through practice in communal life (Aristotle, 2003). Moral virtue is not a divine gift but a form of human excellence attainable through actual engagement in activities, reflecting the fact that humans are political animals by nature.

Moral virtue (*ēthikē aretē*) etymologically derives from "habit" (*ethos*), mean-

ing it is not innate but a stable disposition developed through repeated practice within the customs and life of a social community. Aristotle succinctly states, “Virtue is formed and destroyed by the same causes and means” (Aristotle, 2003). Just as a lyre-player becomes one by playing the lyre, and a builder by building, so too is a person’s virtue wholly shaped by the nature of their activities. As scholar Liao Shenbai notes, “The core of Aristotle’s theory of moral virtue lies in emphasizing the decisive role of activity (*energeia*) in shaping character” (Liao, 2009). Therefore, a person’s character develops in accordance with their activities; virtue is achieved in practice.

The practice of moral virtue is always accompanied by direct affective experiences of pleasure and pain. A person’s attitude toward pleasure and pain directly determines the quality of their moral character. “Virtue is concerned with pleasures and pains”; when properly managed, they make a person good; when mismanaged, they make them bad (Aristotle, 2003). However, feelings themselves require the guidance of reason, which is the task of the “right rule”. Action in accordance with virtue requires not only that the action itself is correct but also that the agent acts from a stable good character, accompanied by correct rational judgment. As relevant research notes, “Aristotle’s ‘right rule’ is not an abstract formula but the practical wisdom (*phronēsis*) that grasps the mean in concrete situations” (Yu, 2011). This practical wisdom is prudence (*phronēsis*).

Having clarified the practical nature of moral virtue, Aristotle offers its classic definition: moral virtue is “a state of character concerned with choice, lying in a mean relative to us” (Aristotle, 2003). This definition contains two key elements: First, virtue is a “state” (*hexis*), not a temporary feeling or innate capacity; Second, virtue is a “mean”, i.e., the “intermediate” (*mesotēs*). The mean is not a mathematically precise midpoint but is “determined by reason”, lying between “excess and deficiency”. For example, courage is the mean between rashness and cowardice; generosity is the mean between prodigality and stinginess (Aristotle, 2003). Therefore, the realization of moral virtue essentially involves attaining this rationally defined point of moderation in concrete situations.

How, then, can one grasp this elusive “mean” in ever-changing circumstances? The ultimate measure remains reason (*logos*), embodied as the practical wisdom of prudence. *Logos* here is not merely discursive reason but the ordering principle governing the cosmos and human life. To establish the highest cognition within moral virtue—the mean—one must rely on *logos* to “determine the truth”, i.e., to make correct judgments. Aristotle emphasizes that “virtue is a state in accordance with right reason” (Aristotle, 2003). The prudent person can discern, in their concrete practical judgment, what action is most appropriate in the present moment. Therefore, the realization of moral virtue is never a mechanical following of rules but, under the guidance of practical wisdom, the flexible attainment of the unique good between excess and deficiency. Chinese scholars emphasize that the practical nature of the Doctrine of the Mean reflects the practical wisdom characteristic of Aristotle’s ethics (Wang, 2016).

5. Tension and Unity: The Synergistic Role of Moral and Intellectual Virtue in Realizing Happiness

To fully answer “how happiness is possible”, the relationship between the two core virtues of the soul—moral virtue and intellectual virtue—must be clarified. The realization of happiness is an activity of the soul in accordance with complete virtue, and this completeness requires both virtues to operate in concert, as an inseparable whole. They are like the two pillars supporting the edifice of happiness: one oriented to human relations and practice (moral virtue), the other to truth and contemplation (intellectual virtue). Aristotle’s profundity lies not in opposing them, but in constructing a model of unified tension, whose final conclusion is: “The highest happiness of humankind lies in contemplative activity”. Yet the attainment of this contemplative happiness depends precisely on the practical foundation laid by moral virtue (Aristotle, 2003). The mechanism for this lies in the fact that moral virtue creates the necessary internal stability and external conditions for contemplative activity by shaping both the individual’s internal order and the harmonious social environment. On the internal level, virtues such as temperance (*sōphrosynē*) bring peace and focus to the soul by regulating desires and emotions, thereby providing the stable inner space required for the intense concentration and sustained effort of contemplation. On the external level, justice (*dikaiosynē*) maintains the peace and order of the polis, generosity (*eleutheriotēs*) ensures moderate wealth and the sharing of resources, and friendship (*philia*) provides partners and a support network for the shared pursuit of truth. The internal stability and external conditions collectively forged by moral practice clear the practical obstacles to the contemplative life, transforming it from a mere possibility into a lived reality.

Aristotle’s argumentative strategy exhibits a refined unity. He first establishes happiness as the highest good in Book I, then elaborates on various moral virtues (e.g., justice, friendship, generosity, temperance) in Books II-IX. This is not a digression but paves the way for the argument concerning contemplation’s superiority in Book X. As a scholar points out, “Aristotle’s detailed analysis of moral virtues aims to depict the personal qualities and external environment that make the contemplative life possible” (Yu, 2011). For instance, justice, as the “perfect virtue”, maintains polis and interpersonal harmony, providing a stable social space for contemplation; friendship, especially virtue-friendship, as the “most necessary” external good, provides companionship and support for contemplative activity; temperance and generosity create inner tranquility and external material conditions for contemplation by regulating both desires and resources. Therefore, the excellent practical life shaped by moral virtue is not the opposite of contemplation but its necessary condition and preparatory stage.

Although complementary, the two virtues and their corresponding forms of happiness differ fundamentally in hierarchy. This difference is rooted in the different parts of the soul they employ. Moral virtue is a quality “in accordance with

reason”; its actualization is dependent upon concrete practical situations and other people, hence its pleasure is noble but limited and dependent. Intellectual virtue, especially its peak—contemplation guided by wisdom—is the best actualization of “reason itself”. Aristotle states, “The intuitive element [nous] is the best thing in us, and its objects are the best of knowable objects”; therefore, the activity in accordance with nous—contemplation—is “the most complete happiness” (Aristotle, 2003). In his research, Kraut (Kraut, 1989) conducted an in-depth analysis of the primacy of intellectual virtue in the constitution of happiness, identifying this as a defining feature of Aristotle’s theory of happiness.

This superiority manifests in multiple aspects: contemplation is the most self-sufficient, most enduring, offers “the most wonderful pleasures”, and is loved for its own sake. Most crucially, nous is considered the “divine” element within us; contemplative activity elevates humans beyond the purely human state, allowing participation in the divine life. However, this does not render moral virtue unimportant. Precisely because humans are “composite beings possessing both nous and logos”, not pure gods, the second-best life—the political life in accordance with moral virtue—remains a genuine and valuable form of happiness for humans as political animals. Although the contemplative life is established as the highest happiness, Aristotle does not devalue the moral-practical life. On the contrary, as beings who are “composite”, humans can only lay the realistic and social foundations for the contemplative life through the practice of moral virtue within the polis. Therefore, while secondary to contemplation, the moral-practical life remains a genuine form of human happiness even though it is secondary (Aristotle, 2003). Thus, Aristotle’s view of happiness presents a clear hierarchical structure: the contemplative life is the highest happiness; the moral-practical life is secondary, yet genuinely human happiness. Together, they constitute a complete spectrum of happiness, ranging from the human to the quasi-divine, from practice to theory. Broadie (1991) observed that Aristotle’s distinction and connection between the two kinds of happiness constitute the complexity and integrity of his ethical system.

6. The Practical Path and Necessary Conditions for Realizing Happiness

Having clarified the nature of happiness and the relationship between the two kinds of virtue, the final task is to investigate the concrete path and necessary conditions for its realization. Aristotle’s conception of happiness is not an ideal suspended in theoretical abstraction but a practical plan rooted in real human life. The realization of happiness requires individuals, within the specific contexts of polis life, to cultivate core virtues and utilize necessary external support, thereby transforming the potential for happiness into a reality of flourishing life.

The realization of happiness first requires the individual soul to achieve inner harmony, accomplished through practicing the “mean”. As the core concept of Aristotelian ethical practice, the mean requires seeking the “relative to us” inter-

mediate point in feelings and actions. “Virtue is a mean state, insofar as it aims at the median” (Aristotle, 1994). Achieving this mean is not a matter of intuition but depends on the judgment of practical wisdom, enabling one to avoid both excess and deficiency in specific situations. It is through such sustained activity of the soul that the individual lays the internal foundation for happiness.

However, as social beings, human happiness cannot be achieved in isolation. Aristotle profoundly observes that “no one would choose to live without friends, even if he had all other goods” (Aristotle, 1994). True friendship, as the “most necessary external good”, not only provides support in times of trouble but, more importantly, offers partners for sharing and reflecting upon noble thoughts and activities. Within the context of friendship, the activity realizing happiness becomes more enduring and complete; a friend is like “another self”, allowing the individual’s good to be enhanced through interaction.

Extending the individual’s good to the community level requires cultivating the pivotal virtue of “justice”. Justice, as the “complete virtue” and “virtue in relation to others” (Aristotle, 1994) harmonizes the individual’s pursuit of happiness with the common interest of the polis. On this basis, Aristotle naturally integrates individual happiness with that of the polis, believing that “happiness exists both in the individual citizen and in the polis as a whole” (Aristotle, 2003). As scholars note, “In Aristotle, ethics ultimately points toward politics; the individual’s highest good can only be fully realized within the framework of the polis” (Xu, 2007). The polis provides the institutional and cultural guarantees for individual happiness, while the excellent life of citizens constitutes the foundation of the polis’s prosperity.

Although happiness is essentially “an activity of the soul in accordance with virtue”, Aristotle soberly recognizes that its realization requires certain external conditions. He classifies goods into goods of the body, external goods, and goods of the soul, explicitly stating that “happiness also requires external goods as supplements” (Aristotle, 2003). Moderate wealth, health, friends, and other external goods, while not the essence of happiness, facilitate the smooth operation of virtuous activities. However, among these three, the goods of the soul—namely, intellectual and moral virtue—remain the “truest goods” and the decisive factor. When a person “is sufficiently equipped with goods of the soul, body, and external goods, and engages in activities in accordance with virtue”, they achieve the most complete happiness possible for a human being (Aristotle, 2003). This comprehensive picture of happiness demonstrates the unique character of Aristotelian ethics, combining ideal height with practical concern. Although the contemplative life is established as the highest happiness, Aristotle does not devalue the moral-practical life. On the contrary, as beings who are “composite”, humans can only lay the realistic and social foundations for the contemplative life through the practice of moral virtue within the polis. Therefore, while secondary to contemplation, the moral-practical life remains a genuine form of human happiness (Xu, 2007). Also emphasizes that the city-state, as a necessary external condition for the realization of happiness, plays an indispensable role in Aristotle’s ethics.

7. Contemplation: The Realization and Justification of the Highest Happiness

Having systematically examined the respective functions of moral and intellectual virtue and their interrelationship, we can return to the initial core question: which activity can bear “complete happiness”? Aristotle’s answer is clear and profound: Happiness lies in the soul’s activity in accordance with complete virtue, and contemplation (*theōria*), as the activity of the highest form of intellectual virtue—wisdom (*sophia*)—is the definitive embodiment of this completeness. It does not exclude moral virtue but relies on it as a necessary foundation, thereby realizing the highest state attainable by human nature.

In the final stage of discussing the realization of happiness, Aristotle turns to the issue of pleasure. This is not a digression, because “pleasure perfects activity” and is inherently congruent with human nature (Aristotle, 2003). For happiness, the key is not to deny pleasure but to distinguish between pleasures of different qualities. Aristotle demonstrates through his analysis that not all pleasures are worth pursuing; only those “pleasures that perfect the activities of the excellent person” are true pleasures accompanying happiness (Aristotle, 2003). This means the value of pleasure depends on the quality of the activity it perfects. The pleasure accompanying contemplative activity, perfecting the noblest human activity, thus becomes the truest, purest form of pleasure.

Based on this profound understanding of the relationship between pleasure and activity, Aristotle delivers his final and most famous judgment on happiness in Book X. Through a series of rigorous arguments, he establishes that the contemplative life is the “most self-sufficient activity”. This is because: first, contemplation is the most continuous and enduring; second, activity in accordance with wisdom is “the most pleasant of virtuous activities”; third, contemplation is loved for its own sake and involves true leisure; most importantly, contemplation employs the “best part” of the human soul—*nous*, the part closest to the divine. Therefore, “the life according to *nous* is best and most pleasant for humans, and this life is the happiest” (Aristotle, 2003). According to scholars, Aristotle’s argument for contemplative happiness ultimately establishes the theological dimension of his ethics (Bao, 2014).

Thus, it becomes clear who is the happiest and what life is most worth living. The happiest are those who “love and pursue wisdom” (*philosophoi*); their life is the life of contemplation. This is not due to external contingencies but because contemplative activity’s inherent self-sufficiency, durability, and purity make it the activity most fitting the definition of happiness. It follows that the life of the wise can be considered the happiest life, wherein they not only realize the highest excellence of their individual souls but also most closely approximate and share in the completeness of the divine.

8. Conclusion

Through a progressively layered argument, Aristotle ultimately constructs a sys-

tem of happiness that integrates intellectual rigor with practical concern. He locates the greatest happiness in the contemplative life grounded in intellectual virtue, while fully affirming the secondary happiness attainable through moral virtue within the polis community. This system emphasizes the ontological significance of individual soul excellence in realizing happiness while illuminates the inherent unity between individual happiness and the prosperity of the polis. Individuals achieve excellence of soul through the pursuit of the contemplative life, and the polis realizes its collective good through the cultivation of such citizens. Therefore, Aristotle's view of happiness is not only a profound response to the ancient question "How is happiness possible?" but also provides humanity with a timeless guide for pursuing divine-like fulfillment within the concrete context of polis life.

In the modern condition, where instrumental rationality often reduces life to utilitarian calculations and nihilism threatens to erode foundational values, Aristotle's ethics offers a powerful antidote. His integrative vision of happiness starkly contrasts with the fragmentation of the human person by asserting the unity of virtuous action and contemplative wisdom. Against utilitarianism, it reasserts that the highest good is not mere pleasure or utility but an activity of the soul in accordance with excellence, with contemplation representing the most self-sufficient and intrinsically valuable end. Confronting nihilism, it provides a robust teleological framework, affirming that human life has a purpose (telos) oriented toward a meaningful and achievable good—eudaimonia. By grounding happiness in the excellent activity of the rational soul, attainable through the cultivation of virtue and friendship within community, Aristotle provides a classical resource for modern individuals seeking meaning, integrity, and a holistic conception of the good life that transcends mere instrumentalism or existential despair. In general, Aristotle's theory of happiness achieves the dialectical unity of virtue theory and rationalism, individual good and the common good of the polis, leaving a valuable intellectual resource for later generations (Ni, 2022).

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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