

Managing the Good Life

*A Commentary for Business Practitioners on
Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*

By

Michael D. Ryall and Lauren Moss

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This book first published 2023

Ethics International Press Ltd, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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Print Book ISBN: 978-1-80441-129-2

eBook ISBN: 978-1-80441-130-8

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Preface

This book's genesis was an unexpected sequence of events. As an economist with a focus on game theory, my primary interest has always been understanding human learning in economic contexts, especially in business strategy. In 2013, a conversation with Jeremy Wilkins, then the Director of the Lonergan Research Institute at the University of Toronto, introduced me to Lonergan's magnum opus, *Insight*. Despite its challenging style, it compelled me to delve deeper into philosophy, from Aristotle to the modern thinkers who carry on his work.

My newfound zeal for Aristotelian philosophy found its way into my core MBA strategy classes at the Rotman School of Management. To get everyone settled down and focused, I began each class with a five-minute discussion of some interesting idea from my philosophy readings. These brief philosophical introspections unexpectedly became a highlight for many students. This enthusiasm birthed the Aristotle Reading Group, which became an over-subscribed annual affair among the MBA students.

All of this led to me being tasked with teaching the mandatory business ethics course for MBAs (which included close to 500 students per year). I took a non-conventional approach: assigning Aristotle as the course textbook, addressing controversial topics, and dealing out in-depth written exams. To my surprise, the feedback was overwhelmingly positive—I received the highest student evaluations of my career. Since I was the constant across all teaching evaluations over the course of my career, the difference had to be the content. This unexpected success made me pause and think carefully about why this was happening.

I concluded the following. Millennials and subsequent generations have a burning desire to make a difference. Yet, often, they lack a comprehensive philosophical framework from which to analyse how, exactly, to achieve that. Aristotle's philosophy, which resonates across various religious and cultural traditions, offers a robust approach. Equipping these future leaders with a comprehensive framework to guide them toward realizing their full human potential has now become a vocational calling.

Recognizing the challenge of diving directly into Aristotle's Ethics, led to the decision to craft a contemporary commentary. In that task, I joined forces with Lauren Moss, an Aristotle Reading Group alumnus, MBA/JD graduate, and now a lawyer. Lauren is brilliant, insightful, good-humoured, empathetic and, above all, virtuous. She personifies the Servant's Heart. Perhaps most importantly, she brings a poetic literary sensibility that complements my dry analytical style.

I extend my deepest gratitude to the initial members of the Aristotle Reading Group, particularly Michael D'Ercole, Carson Kotnyek, and Derek Visvanathan. Subsequent members like Nadia Al-Banna, Ameer Choksi, Daniel Simmonds, and Joseph Smith were instrumental in its success. My colleagues Brian Silverman and Mihnea Moldoveanu provided unwavering support, and my interactions with colleagues Byung Soo Lee and Shannon Liu were invaluable. A special mention to Bertie Dockerill ("Dr Proofread") for fine-tuning our manuscript.

Lauren and I are excited to present this labor of love. We hope it provides readers with valuable insights into ethics and philosophy in the modern age.

Michael D. Ryall
Boca Raton, 2023

Lauren Moss,
Toronto, 2023

Introduction

You are probably wondering how 2,000-year-old philosophical writings are relevant to business today. You might even question the value of reading ancient texts on ethics at all. But businesses are systems that require each of their parts to function well. It follows that businesses run by humans will thrive when the humans running them are thriving. Ethics, viewed in this way, is not about adhering to a codified set of rules and policies listing dos and do-nots, but a way of living that is designed to foster deep human flourishing. This is precisely the approach provided by Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. In this text, we take Aristotle's approach one step further by suggesting that applying Aristotle's framework to organizational management will help the organization to bloom to its full potential.

Aristotle's basic premise is that happiness is the ultimate end (or outcome) that we, as humans, seek—an end that is both meaningful and worthy of pursuit for its own sake. From his perspective, we are happy (in the deepest sense) when exercising our essential human faculties at their full potential. This means living a life of contemplative action—taking action that is supported by wisdom. The path to happiness involves developing core intellectual and moral virtues that work together to foster the wisdom that we need to know what is good for us, and the freedom to action what that wisdom indicates we should do. Exercising these abilities at a high-level leads to human flourishing. A flourishing person is someone who lives in accordance with reason—one who is fully alive to the moment, who has a deep sense of the good for themselves and others, and one who is committed to acting to promote beauty and flourishing in the world.

Aristotle's *Ethics* is not a step-by-step how-to. Rather, it provides a framework of general principles that is flexible enough to apply to any person, profession, or situation. Given the infinite number of possible scenarios that we face in which we must deliberate, decide, and act, a simple rulebook will not do. We must develop the fundamental ability to apply the general principles to any given situation to determine what is

good in those circumstances. At its core, the goal of Aristotle's framework is to build solid character and provide a structure for decision-making. It accomplishes this by perfecting a set of virtues that make choosing well almost second nature. Thus, the application of the *Ethics* is not limited to ancient Greek society, but, because the principles are general, is relevant to everyone, including business professionals, students, and those seeking continuous self-development. It is also relevant at any stage—whether at the beginning of one's career or re-evaluating it; whether developing character or reinforcing it. The admonition to develop virtues such as justice, courage, and truthfulness, is found across virtually all cultures, faiths, and wisdom traditions. Thus although Aristotle's perspective was rooted in a specific time and place, his general principles are both timeless and ubiquitous.

The journey Aristotle's *Ethics* takes us on is a journey of self-reflection, of curiosity, and, ultimately, of discovering the path to happiness. The goal is not merely to learn about ethics, but to shape how we think about life, productivity, and wellbeing. It is a bigger project than simply learning about Aristotle's teachings—it is a way of living. Ultimately, it is about being an agent of human flourishing on a grand scale. Flourishing individuals are precisely those who contribute to the flourishing of their communities. A person operating at peak human capacity is a better friend, parent, employee, manager, and citizen. In like manner, a household, organization, or society that encourages and facilitates virtue development in the pursuit of happiness will create an environment in which each of its members can function at their highest capacity, thereby contributing to the betterment of the whole.

The key to unlocking this virtuous circle, in which individuals contribute to and benefit from the broader flourishing of their communities, is building knowledge about authentic individual happiness and how to attain it. Here, we pivot from the "why read Aristotle" question to the question, "Why read a commentary on Aristotle?" The reason is that—as relevant as the principles of the *Ethics* may be—trying to grasp those principles from an ancient text is hard-going for most modern readers. Our goal in writing this commentary is to make it easier for modern-day readers to grasp these principles by clarifying, summarizing, and providing concrete examples.

This book takes the *Ethics* through several layers of translation. The first layer is the literal translation from the original ancient Greek text. For this, we have used an 1893 translation by F. H. Peters. This translation has been used in academia for many years and is now in the public domain. However, while Peters' translation is certainly more accessible than Aristotle's ancient Greek, there are many sections where the language is out-of-date, clunky, and even misleading in a modern context. For this reason, we have substituted some terms in the translation and in our commentary for those found in the more recent translation by Joe Sachs (2002). This is the second layer of translation.

The third and final layer is the presentation of our own perspectives on the text. After years of reading, studying, mulling over, teaching, and discussing the *Ethics*, we hope to bring fresh insights into a few of Aristotle's difficult passages and, most importantly, to set out his overall framework as clearly and vividly as possible. The commentary offers plain-language summaries of each chapter, with examples that are relevant to modern readers, and with a particular focus on the perspectives of professional leaders.

We suggest that the best way to read this text is to begin at the source: to read Peters' translation of each chapter first, and to then look at the commentary for further information, explanation, and real-world examples. To make this back-and-forth easy, we have formatted the text and commentary to follow one another in the order in which they should be read. At the beginning of each book, we have included a summary to give readers a birds-eye view of what is to come, and where we are in Aristotle's overall project of getting to the bottom of what happiness is, what human flourishing looks like, and how we can achieve it.

You might wonder why, since we have already summarized Aristotle's teachings, you should still read Aristotle's challenging text for yourself. Is the added work necessary? We believe so, for several reasons. First, Aristotle's difficult, dialectic style plays a key role in the work that he is doing here—forcing yourself to read through it will help you to slow down and think through the details, internalize the little debates he has with himself throughout, and understand why he reaches the conclusions that

he does. Following along as he circles around certain concepts to clarify his process and provides a richness that a simple summary would not. Second, our goal in writing this commentary is not to spoon-feed you our own ideas or put our words into Aristotle's mouth, but to help you to engage meaningfully with Aristotle's actual text by giving you the tools and context necessary to understand and apply it. By reading the text directly, you will be able to critically examine his philosophy for yourself—an important freedom that will help you on your path to personal happiness and help you to create and sustain a thriving organization.

Like all teachers and writers, Aristotle was shaped by his social context and relied on examples from his day to illustrate points to his audience. Unfortunately, certain examples are based upon ancient tropes that modern readers will find vexatious, such as ancient views about the role of women in society. Similarly, seeing casual references to slavery popping up in the middle of a discussion on friendship and justice is quite jarring. As you will see, Aristotle rejects the egregious practice known as “chattel slavery,” in which human beings were treated as property. However, he does appear to have made allowances for some social arrangements that are now recognized as exploitative. We discuss these issues in much greater detail later in our commentary.

Considering these examples, one thing must be made crystal-clear: Aristotle's general principles ultimately demand recognition of the human dignity of *all* people. The path to deep human happiness requires us to act with excellence, to choose to do good, and to contribute to the flourishing of those in our broader communities. This framework—rightly understood and applied—is an antidote to racism, elitism, and sexism, not a perpetuation of them. Our heightened awareness of these issues today makes such a framework especially relevant to business managers who seek not only to lead a fully integrated life that leads to a robust form of happiness, but also to accomplish great things by building organizations that contribute in significant ways to the betterment of society.

We now turn to the book itself. As you will see, the *Ethics* takes us on a journey that explores the contours of human happiness. In our efforts to understand how to achieve happiness, we undertake a longer, richer

journey to discover what it means to live our lives fully and robustly as humans, and what that means for us in our broader communities. This journey is in some ways universal but, at the same time, intensely personal. We encourage you to approach it with curiosity, seriousness, and open-mindedness. After all, our world is better off for each additional person who reaches a state of happiness as Aristotle describes. We hope this book will be a meaningful part of your journey.

Book I: Happiness is the Highest Good

The *Nicomachean Ethics* takes us on an intellectual journey towards understanding what is essential for living a happy and fulfilling life. Importantly, a person living a happy and fulfilling life will contribute towards creating professional and communal spaces in which others may similarly thrive. Aristotle sets the parameters for this journey in Book I by proposing that there is a highest form of good for each of us—happiness. At first blush, this may sound trivial. Yet, what follows is anything but trivial. Here, we begin a deep dive into the meaning of happiness and the requirements for its attainment. How does one manage to lead the “good life”? How do you realize your full potential as a human being? How does your professional vocation fit into this picture? These are all questions we will be exploring, beginning now.

In Book I, Aristotle sets a high bar with respect to what constitutes happiness. First, happiness must be self-sufficient. It cannot be a means to an end but must be an end in itself. After all, if it were a means to an end, then it would not be the highest good. Second, the principles of human happiness are universal. They must apply to all of us—otherwise, they would not be core principles of human happiness. Third, happiness must be something that can be effected through our own efforts—if the principles are not actionable, time spent thinking about how to achieve happiness would be time wasted.

Word Study Eudaimonia (happiness, flourishing)

For Aristotle, this is the ultimate desire of any human being. It refers to a state of enduring well-being and fulfilment that comes from realizing our full potential as animals endowed with the capacity to conceptualize and reason. As such, it is more than the fleeting feeling of pleasure we typically associate with the word “happiness”. According to Aristotle, Eudaimonia is achieved by living a good and meaningful life—which happens when one acquires virtues, especially the highest or most complete of them.

For Aristotle, it is axiomatic that human happiness lies in realizing our full human potential. When we flourish as the kind of thing we are—human—then we attain happiness. It follows, that understanding the essence of being human is a critical part of understanding what it takes to make us happy in the deepest sense.

What follows in this book and the books to come is not just a philosophical inquiry. It is an invitation—an imperative, really—for you to take the steps necessary to grow and flourish as a complete, and fully integrated human being. Only by embarking on this journey will you grow into the best person, friend, leader, and citizen you can be.

Chapter 1: All Things Aim at Some Good

Every art and every kind of inquiry, and likewise every act and purpose, seems to aim at some good: and so it has been well said that the good is that at which everything aims. But a difference is observable among these aims or ends. What is aimed at is sometimes the exercise of a faculty, sometimes a certain result beyond that exercise. And where there is an end beyond the act, there the result is better than the exercise of the faculty. Now since there are many kinds of actions and many arts and sciences, it follows that there are many ends also; e.g. health is the end of medicine, ships of shipbuilding, victory of the art of war, and wealth of economy. But when several of these are subordinated to some one art or science,—as the making of bridles and other trappings to the art of horsemanship, and this in turn, along with all else that the soldier does, to the art of war, and so on,—then the end of the master-art is always more desired than the ends of the subordinate arts, since these are pursued for its sake. And this is equally true whether the end in view be the mere exercise of a faculty or something beyond that, as in the above instances.

The first step that Aristotle takes on this journey is to introduce the concept of “good”. He explains that all things (including humans) aim to achieve some good. That good is anything by which an entity becomes a better example of the kind of thing that it is. For example, what is “good” for an oak tree is anything that causes it to flourish—to grow, become strong, and produce new oak trees.

What is good for humans, particularly the “ultimate good”, is subtle and requires more analysis. Nevertheless, as Aristotle points out in this chapter, we immediately grasp the “good” with respect to our vocational ends. The investor seeks to maximize returns, the athlete to win competitions, and the artist to create meaningful works of art.

Each of these ends is a “good” that the given professional activity aims to achieve. An investor who consistently makes a superior return on

investments through their investment skills is a better example of an “investor” than someone who persistently loses money or who profits not from their skill but by insider trading. Likewise, we think of a great athlete as one whose superb physical skills lead to their attaining success against other athletes.

Word Study to Agathon (the good, the ultimate good)

The ultimate objective of human existence is to develop a stable capacity to choose those actions which cause us to flourish. A person with this capacity is said to have a virtuous character or, simply, to have virtue, or to be virtuous. A person can do virtuous acts before acquiring a virtuous character. Indeed, the deliberate practice of virtuous acts—especially when choosing them is strugglesome—is how virtuous character is built. Peak humanity is realized when one’s spontaneous emotions are consistently well-managed and integrated with desires that are ordered toward goals that are truly healthy, both physically and spiritually. This is being virtuous, the ultimate good. Achieving the ultimate good leads to Eudaimonia.

Maximizing an investment return, successfully finishing a project, or getting a promotion are all ends within professional contexts. Yet, they are also means to other ends. Towards what good beyond itself does a promotion aim?

Chapter 2: The Highest Good is an End in Itself

If then in what we do there be some end which we wish for on its own account, choosing all the others as means to this, but not every end without exception as a means to something else (for so we should go on ad infinitum, and desire would be left void and objectless), — this evidently will be the good or the best of all things. And surely from a practical point of view it much concerns us to know this good; for then, like archers shooting at a definite mark, we shall be more likely to attain what we want.

If this be so, we must try to indicate roughly what it is, and first of all to which of the arts or sciences it belongs. It would seem to belong to the supreme art or science, that one which most of all deserves the name of master-art or master-science. Now Politics seems to answer to this description. For it prescribes which of the sciences a state needs, and which each man shall study, and up to what point; and to it we see subordinated even the highest arts, such as economy, rhetoric, and the art of war. Since then it makes use of the other practical sciences, and since it further ordains what men are to do and from what to refrain, its end must include the ends of the others, and must be the proper good of man. For though this good is the same for the individual and the state, yet the good of the state seems a grander and more perfect thing both to attain and to secure; and glad as one would be to do this service for a single individual, to do it for a people and for a number of states is nobler and more divine.

This then is the aim of the present inquiry, which is a sort of political inquiry.

Not every activity aims at a higher good. It would seem rather meaningless if everything we did was merely for the sake of something else, which was itself for the sake of something else. If this were so, we would never feel as though anything we did accomplished anything truly meaningful.

For example, decent high-school grades can lead to acceptance into a reputable university, which may result in a degree, which could open the door to an entry level job, from which promotions or other jobs within a

given industry may follow. Yet, what are your reasons for having a profession? One is the income it brings, which you need to buy a home, to support your family, to enjoy your hobbies, and so on. Many, many things in your life will be both an end and a means to a higher end. Yet, at some point in this long chain of means and ends, you seek an end that is simply an end: something that is desirable entirely for its own sake. This is the ultimate end towards which all your other ends are a means. Aristotle refers to this as the “highest good”.

For humans, the “highest good” must be that which leads to our flourishing at the apex of our uniquely human capacities. Therefore, the task of the *Ethics* is to set out a roadmap for the attainment of what is truly good for us, both individually and collectively. What is it? How do we implement it?

Although your path to happiness will be unique to you, it will follow general principles. As we will see, these principles are applicable—in broad terms—to the community as well. Though we may well consider the good for a city to be a greater good than the good for an individual, these goods are complementary things. A flourishing individual is a “good” for every group to which that person belongs: family, firm, city, and world.

To achieve the highest good is not merely to obtain the good for yourself. It is also to achieve a state of being that makes you good for all your communities. In this sense, it is “sort of political.”

Chapter 3: We Cannot Expect Complete Precision

We must be content if we can attain to so much precision in our statement as the subject before us admits of; for the same degree of accuracy is no more to be expected in all kinds of reasoning than in all kinds of handicraft.

Now the things that are noble and just (with which Politics deals) are so various and so uncertain, that some think these are merely conventional and not natural distinctions. There is a similar uncertainty also about what is good, because good things often do people harm: men have before now been ruined by wealth, and have lost their lives through courage. Our subject, then, and our data being of this nature, we must be content if we can indicate the truth roughly and in outline, and if, in dealing with matters that are not amenable to immutable laws, and reasoning from premises that are but probable, we can arrive at probable conclusions.

The reader, on his part, should take each of my statements in the same spirit; for it is the mark of an educated man to require, in each kind of inquiry, just so much exactness as the subject admits of: it is equally absurd to accept probable reasoning from a mathematician, and to demand scientific proof from an orator. But each man can form a judgment about what he knows, and is called "a good judge" of that — of any special matter when he has received a special education therein, "a good judge" (without any qualifying epithet) when he has received a universal education. And hence a young man is not qualified to be a student of Politics; for he lacks experience of the affairs of life, which form the data and the subject-matter of Politics. Further, since he is apt to be swayed by his feelings, he will derive no benefit from a study whose aim is not speculative but practical. But in this respect young in character counts the same as young in years; for the young man's disqualification is not a matter of time, but is due to the fact that feeling rules his life and directs all his desires. Men of this character turn the knowledge they get to no account in practice, as we see with those we call [unrestrained]; but those who direct their desires and

actions by reason will gain much profit from the knowledge of these matters.¹

So much then by way of preface as to the student, and the spirit in which he must accept what we say, and the object which we propose to ourselves.

Here, Aristotle says something that he repeated many times throughout the *Ethics*: that inquiry into human happiness does not allow the extreme precision that is possible in other fields of study, such as science, mathematics, or classical music.

As in Aristotle's age, not only is there great uncertainty about what is noble and just, but we face great disagreements and inconsistencies on this topic. The relativist takes this as evidence that there is no universal good for human beings. Rather, each person's experience defines their own good and that, beyond that, we must simply agree to disagree on such matters.

Aristotle was no relativist. He was willing to stipulate that we are each endowed with particular attributes and find ourselves in our own particular situations. It follows, that the exact details of our individual journeys toward human fulfillment are intensely personal. Nevertheless, if there is such a thing as human fulfillment—and Aristotle believed that there is—happiness itself is not relative. Moreover, Aristotle provides us with a general framework for achieving it!

Aristotle notes that before you undertake this journey, you should ensure that you have the judgment required to undertake it well. Solid education and experience are central. This does not mean that you need formal education or grand leadership experience. Rather, you must be emotionally mature, with enough knowledge and life experience to exercise careful judgment unclouded by the passions of the moment.

¹ Occasionally, to improve readability for a modern audience, we substitute specific words from Peters' translation with those from Joe Sachs' (2002) translation. Here, for instance, we replace "incontinent" with "unrestrained". We indicate these substitutions in brackets.

Chapter 4: Is Happiness the Highest Good?

Since—to resume—all knowledge and all purpose aims at some good, what is this which we say is the aim of Politics; or, in other words, what is the highest of all realizable goods? As to its name, I suppose nearly all men are agreed; for the masses and the men of culture alike declare that it is happiness, and hold that to “live well” or to “do well” is the same as to be “happy.” But they differ as to what this happiness is, and the masses do not give the same account of it as the philosophers. The former take it to be something palpable and plain, as pleasure or wealth or fame; one man holds it to be this, and another that, and often the same man is of different minds at different times,—after sickness it is health, and in poverty it is wealth; while when they are impressed with the consciousness of their ignorance, they admire most those who say grand things that are above their comprehension.

Some philosophers, on the other hand, have thought that, beside these several good things, there is an “absolute” good which is the cause of their goodness. As it would hardly be worth while to review all the opinions that have been held, we will confine ourselves to those which are most popular, or which seem to have some foundation in reason. But we must not omit to notice the distinction that is drawn between the method of proceeding from your starting-points or principles, and the method of working up to them. Plato used with fitness to raise this question, and to ask whether the right way is from or to your starting-points, as in the race-course you may run from the judges to the boundary, or vice versa.

Well, we must start from what is known. But “what is known” may mean two things: “what is known to us,” which is one thing, or “what is known” simply, which is another. I think it is safe to say that we must start from what is known to us. And on this account nothing but a good moral training can qualify a man to study what is noble and just—in a word, to study questions of Politics. For the undemonstrated fact is here the starting-point, and if this undemonstrated fact be sufficiently evident to a man, he will not require a “reason why.”

Now the man who has had a good moral training either has already arrived at starting-points or principles of action, or will easily accept them when pointed out. But he who neither has them nor will accept them may hear what Hesiod says —

*The best is he who of himself doth know;
 Good too is he who listens to the wise;
 But he who neither knows himself nor heeds
 The words of others, is a useless man.*

Many of us would agree that happiness is the highest good and that happiness has something to do with “living well”. If we follow the logical progression of our pursuits, we will see that in most cases we pursue the goals that we believe will lead to better, more fulfilling lives—happiness. Since everything we do is for the sake of happiness, it makes sense that happiness is the highest good. Even so, we often have different opinions about what happiness is at different moments in our lives: when between jobs, happiness may appear to be an interview and, when gainfully employed, finding a long-term home or a life-mate.

Yet despite this, if happiness is an end in itself, then the goalposts cannot change as we progress through the stages of our lives and career.

So, what is happiness? Aristotle urges us to start from what we know. This is why he notes the importance of education and experience in Chapter 3. A certain level of maturity is required before we can meaningfully approach the question of what happiness is. We cannot grasp what is good for us, our families, firms, or the world at large, until we have taken a serious look at our own state of development. We require a sufficient level of good character to participate in an earnest, deliberate, and thoughtful search for the highest good.

Chapter 5: Three Kinds of Lives

Let us now take up the discussion at the point from which we digressed. It seems that men not unreasonably take their notions of the good or happiness from the lives actually led, and that the masses who are the least refined suppose it to be pleasure, which is the reason why they aim at nothing higher than the life of enjoyment.

For the most conspicuous kinds of life are three: this life of enjoyment, the life of the statesman, and, thirdly, the contemplative life.

The mass of men show themselves utterly slavish in their preference for the life of brute beasts, but their views receive consideration because many of those in high places have the tastes of Sardanapalus. Men of refinement with a practical turn prefer honour; for I suppose we may say that honour is the aim of the statesman's life. But this seems too superficial to be the good we are seeking: for it appears to depend upon those who give rather than upon those who receive it; while we have a presentiment that the good is something that is peculiarly a man's own and can scarce be taken away from him. Moreover, these men seem to pursue honour in order that they may be assured of their own excellence,—at least, they wish to be honoured by men of sense, and by those who know them, and on the ground of their virtue or excellence. It is plain, then, that in their view, at any rate, virtue or excellence is better than honour; and perhaps we should take this to be the end of the statesman's life, rather than honour.

But virtue or excellence also appears too incomplete to be what we want; for it seems that a man might have virtue and yet be asleep or be inactive all his life, and, moreover, might meet with the greatest disasters and misfortunes; and no one would maintain that such a man is happy, except for argument's sake. But we will not dwell on these matters now, for they are sufficiently discussed in the popular treatises.

The third kind of life is the life of contemplation: we will treat of it further on. As for the money-making life, it is something quite contrary to nature; and wealth evidently is not the good of which we are in search, for it is

merely useful as a means to something else. So we might rather take pleasure and virtue or excellence to be ends than wealth; for they are chosen on their own account. But it seems that not even they are the end, though much breath has been wasted in attempts to show that they are.

According to Aristotle, there are three kinds of life that we can live: a life devoted purely to physical pleasure, a life devoted to honour, or a life devoted to contemplation. He immediately dismissed the life that pursues pleasure as its end, but initially praises a life of honour, noting that “Men of refinement ... prefer honour,” which he sees as the goal of the statesman.

However, he also notes that people seem to pursue honour mainly to convince themselves that they are good. These types of people seek praise and affirmation to be stable in their own virtue. In other words, they act for the approval of others rather than for intrinsic purposes.

Aristotle concludes that virtue must be a higher goal than honour. Yet, Aristotle also notes that virtue is itself incomplete because we can have virtue while suffering from great tragedies and hardships. Therefore, simply having virtue does not seem to be what we mean by happiness. Setting the groundwork for the chapters and books to come, Aristotle narrows his investigation to the third option: living the contemplative life. Through so doing he reminds us that happiness must be an end in itself, not merely a means to an end, and as such, happiness cannot mean material wealth.

As you will see, the “contemplative life” does not mean a passive life of sitting around musing over deep philosophical issues. Rather, it is a life of action—of full-on engagement with the world.