

Contemplation and Civic Happiness in Plato and Aristotle

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1 Introduction

Plato and Aristotle both treat intellectual contemplation (*theōria*) as the highest form of happiness (*eudaimonia*) possible for a human being. Plato does so in a number of dialogues (e.g. the *Phaedo*, *Symposium*, *Republic* and *Phaedrus*), Aristotle in the last book of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. This means that studying their approaches to contemplation typically involves an ethical focus. For instance, given the enormous value that contemplation has for the individual, what place is left in their life for the moral virtues of justice, courage and temperance? In this study, however, I shall examine contemplation from a political perspective, in the sense of looking at its civic value: even if it counts as a good for the individual, how does the state benefit from having a number of citizens contemplating? The texts on which I shall focus are the *Republic*, the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Politics*, works in which contemplation is viewed from a political angle as well as an individual one.

Initially, I shall tackle this question through the distinction between intrinsic and instrumental value: when looking at the issue from the perspective of social benefit, did Plato and Aristotle attribute both kinds of value to contemplation or only one of them? But to do justice to the complexity of the issue, we also need to address a broader question about the nature of civic *eudaimonia*: whether it is merely the aggregate of individual happiness or an organic quality that arises from the structure of the state. On the aggregative view, it is easy to see how individual contemplation contributes to civic *eudaimonia*: simply by having a number of citizens engaged in contemplation, one can in principle increase the overall happiness of the state (and the more people who contemplate, the happier the city). Seen in this way, contemplation is a component of civic happiness, something intrinsically good for the state, whether or not it has instrumental value as well.

In Section 2, however, I argue that Plato espoused an organic account of civic happiness and analysed it in terms of unity, harmony and proportion. This affects his stance on whether contemplation has intrinsic value for the state. He clearly believes that it is both instrumentally and intrinsically good for the individual; also, that it is instrumentally good for the state, as his defence of philosopher-rulers shows. But, because he associates civic happiness with structural properties like unity, contemplation is not a component of that happiness, but a means towards achieving it (through the activity of the philosopher-rulers). So, from the point of view of the state, it has only instrumental value.

In Section 3, I turn to Aristotle, who is quite clear that, for the individual, contemplation has only intrinsic value. If it also has value for the state – which it must, given that it is the task of the statesman to promote it – such value must

also be intrinsic. But how exactly does it contribute intrinsic value to the state? To answer this question, I turn again to the distinction between organic and aggregative accounts of civic happiness. Aristotle explicitly rejects Plato's account of civic happiness as unity in *Pol.* II 5. But it does not follow from this that he rejected any form of the organic conception. The starting point for understanding his position on this issue is his claim that civic happiness is the same for the state as for the individual. This means that we can turn to his definition of individual happiness to throw light on its civic form. We know that he defines *eudaimonia* as activity in accordance with virtue. But at the end of the *NE*, he distinguishes two forms, the activity of theoretical reason (perfect *eudaimonia*) and the activity of practical reason and the moral virtues (secondary *eudaimonia*). So civic happiness will follow suit: one form will involve the activity of contemplation within the state, the other requires activity in accordance with practical reason and the moral virtue. Whether he treats *eudaimonia* as organic or aggregative depends on the nature of the virtuous activities involved. Secondary *eudaimonia* involves structured relations between different groups in the state, primarily the rulers and the subjects, just as secondary *eudaimonia* in the individual involves the correct interactions between the relevant parts of the soul. (Aristotle, I shall argue, exploits his own version of Plato's state-soul parallel in developing this idea.) So civic *eudaimonia* of the secondary form is organic. But contemplation, the activity of theoretical reason, is a simpler affair: it is more solitary than collaborative. A 'contemplative' state is simply one in which a number of individual citizens are encouraged and enabled to practise contemplation. For this kind of *eudaimonia*, the aggregative account is more appropriate. There is no contradiction here, because Aristotle has two very different forms of *eudaimonia*, one involving a high degree of structure, the other not. Once we are clear on this, we can conclude that contemplation is intrinsically good for the state in the manner described earlier: the contemplative activities of individual citizens are components of the aggregate *eudaimonia*.

In Section 4, I turn to a related question. For a state to derive value from contemplation, how many citizens need to be contemplating – just a select few, or a much broader swathe of society? In Plato's case, the answer is clear enough: only a very few citizens, the philosopher-rulers, will engage in contemplation. But the issue is much more difficult where Aristotle is concerned. There are signs from his discussion of contemplation in *Politics* VII that he thought it should be widely practised in the state. And yet, to judge from remarks in the *NE*, it is a highly *recherché* activity involving the study of metaphysical theology, which is surely only possible for a few. The purpose of Section 4 is to show how Aristotle resolved this tension.

2 Plato on the Social Value of Contemplation

2.1 Preliminaries

In the context of the *Republic*, I shall take contemplation to involve knowledge of forms – knowledge that Socrates terms *noēsis* in his image of the divided line (VI 511d8).¹ The objects of contemplation therefore include all the examples of forms that we are given in the central books of the *Republic*: goodness (506b2–509b9), beauty (476b9–480a13 and 501b2), justice and temperance (501b2), as well as largeness and smallness (523e1–524c11). The form of the good plays a pivotal role, providing the first principle in terms of which the other forms are understood.

There are two distinctions to bear in mind here. First, although contemplation and *noēsis* are intimately connected, they are not identical: contemplation requires the act of focusing upon knowledge (whether it is being used for practical ends or not). Put in these terms, my main interest will be in the value of actualising *noēsis*, not merely in its possession.² Second, while perfect contemplation involves *noēsis*, there might be imperfect types that involve lesser cognitive states. At one point, for instance, Plato uses the language of contemplation in connection with mathematical understanding (*dianoia*), the state that stands immediately below *noēsis* on the divided line.³ Another example of imperfect contemplation would be thinking about forms without yet having apprehended the nature of the good. This level of attainment is reached when the trainee guardians study dialectic between the ages of thirty and thirty-five. They only acquire knowledge of the good at fifty, which is when perfect contemplation becomes possible for them. In what follows, my main interest will be in the activity of perfect contemplation and its value for the state, but at certain points I shall discuss the value of forms of contemplation that fall short of the ideal.

Of course, the *Republic* is not the only dialogue in which Plato discusses contemplation. There is a particularly lyrical description in the *Phaedrus*, in which the souls of the gods, and even of some humans, journey to a place beyond the heavens. Here they are moved in a circle and watch the spectacle of the forms (247c3–248a5). In our earthly life, we can but glimpse flashes of beauty to aid our recollection of that discarnate vision. The *Phaedo* also talks of

¹ Plato uses the term *theōria* to refer to contemplation of forms at *Rep.* VII 517d5. He also uses the verb ‘contemplate’ (*theōrein*) in relation to the forms at *Phaedrus* 247c1 and d4.

² This distinction is made explicitly in *Theaet.* 197b9–198b7. It is, of course, well-known in Aristotle. See *NE* VII 3, 1146b31–4, *An.* II 1, 412a22–7, *Met.* IX 6, 1048a32–5, and *Phys.* VIII 4, 255a33–4.

³ *Rep.* VI 511c4–8; cf. also 486a8. For another example of contemplation being used of a cognitive state that falls short of knowledge of forms, see *Symp.* 210d4.

contemplation in relation to the afterlife and sounds sceptical as to whether we can attain knowledge of forms in our earthly existence. Finally, the *Symposium*, like the *Phaedrus*, focuses on contemplation of the form of beauty, but talks as if we can attain knowledge of it even in this life (212a2–7).

The *Republic* also seems optimistic about the chances of at least some humans acquiring knowledge of forms in this life. But what distinguishes its treatment of contemplation from these other dialogues is the political context: contemplation is something promoted by and for the ideal state. Hence our main question: what kind of value does contemplation bring to the city that sponsors it?

To answer this question, I shall start with the well-known distinction between instrumental and intrinsic value. This distinction appears early in *Republic* II, where Glaucon challenges Socrates to show that justice is not merely good for its consequences, but also in itself (357b4–358a3). Assuming this distinction, he marks out three types of good: things that have only intrinsic value, things that have only instrumental value, and things that have both. As we attempt to pin down the kind of value that contemplation has for the state, it will be relatively easy to show that it has instrumental value. The challenge will be to show whether it also has intrinsic value. Ultimately, I shall argue that it does not. Such value applies only at the level of the individual.

Before we discuss the civic value of contemplation, it will help to ask about its value for the individual. As we shall see, answering this question involves less controversy than the political case, and some of what can be said of the individual can easily be applied to the state.

2.2 The Individual: Intrinsic and Instrumental Value

It is uncontroversial to say that the contemplation of forms is intrinsically good for the individual. In the *Republic*, this is clear from the famous passage about the return to the cave (VII 519d4–521b11): the philosophers appear reluctant to return and rule the city because they would much rather stay in ‘the isles of the blest’ (519c5; cf. 540b6). The assumption underlying this whole passage is, of course, that contemplation is the activity of supreme happiness. This also coheres with passages in other dialogues, such as the *Phaedo*, *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*, which place philosophical contemplation at the apex of human life, even as something divine, or at least akin to the divine.⁴

What about instrumental value? There is no doubt that using one’s knowledge of forms is essential for leading the truly good and just life. Plato’s view is that

⁴ *Phaedo* 81a4–10, *Symposium* 212a5–7 and *Phaedrus* 248a2. The *Republic* makes the connection with divinity at VI 500c3–d3.

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such knowledge can be applied in practical decision-making. Whether the outcome of this application involves a *bona fide* case of knowledge is a famously disputed question.⁵ Perhaps true knowledge can only be of forms. Even so, philosophers who apply their knowledge of forms to particulars will still be far better at practical decision-making than those ignorant of the forms.

However, this establishes only the instrumental value of contemplative knowledge, not of contemplative activity. Imagine a philosopher who attains knowledge of the good and, with it, full knowledge of the other forms. They are now able to engage in perfect contemplation. But when they do so, will they accrue instrumental benefit, or does such benefit only arise when they abstain from pure contemplation and apply their knowledge to practical decision making?

One way to show that contemplation has instrumental value is to focus on its relation to pleasure. Actively contemplating the forms, even without any thought for practical decision-making, produces pleasures of the greatest and purest kind, as Socrates attempts to establish towards the end of book IX (583b2–588a10).

There is another way in which contemplation could have instrumental value for the individual. At the beginning of book VI, Socrates argues that, in addition to having the capacity for true knowledge, philosophers naturally possess a range of moral qualities that sound very much like virtues (484a1–487a5). The philosophical mindset is relatively disinterested in material pleasures, which leads it to become temperate; it is also just, because such a person will lack incentives to renege on their agreements. Since philosophers contemplate ‘all time and all being’,⁶ they acquire grandness of perspective or vision; from such a perspective, even death seems a small matter, so they are also rendered courageous. On this argument, therefore, sustained contemplation is useful by generating a whole string of moral virtues.

This sounds like clear evidence for the instrumental value of contemplation. But there is a complication. When Socrates talks of the philosopher here, he is probably not thinking, first and foremost, of someone who has acquired full philosophical knowledge, but of someone in the process of acquiring it. The character whom Socrates is discussing, someone who has a philosophical nature, possesses that nature ‘from youth onwards’ (εὐθὺς νέου ὄντος, 486b10–11). This nature reveals gradually itself through the love of learning, not about the world of

⁵ Much of the debate centres on the interpretation of *Rep.* V 476a1–480a13, where Socrates seems to argue that knowledge is only of forms, belief only of particulars. This reading has been disputed by Fine (1990) esp. 87–95. Also relevant is VII 520c4, which seems to suggest that the philosopher who returns to the cave will have knowledge of particulars, not just forms. Fine leans heavily on this passage, though Sedley (2007) 260–61 disputes her reading.

⁶ 486a8–9: μεγαλοπρέπεια καὶ θεωρία παντὸς μὲν χρόνου.

becoming but of being. As this desire starts to become satisfied, the qualities just mentioned, such as temperance and courage, emerge – and they do so while the person is young (485d3–4). Socrates must be thinking of someone intellectually precocious, who shows an intense curiosity quite early in life about being rather than becoming. The qualities termed temperance, justice, magnanimity and courage start to arise the more they satisfy this curiosity, because their desires for physical pleasures diminish and their vision becomes increasingly broad. However, not yet being backed by fully fledged knowledge, these are not full-blown virtues, but qualities that will eventually grow into the virtues.⁷ Strictly speaking, therefore, this passage tells us that ‘imperfect’ contemplation or, perhaps, inquiry into forms, will be useful in generating certain qualities of character;⁸ it is not primarily talking about perfect contemplation, that is, the actualisation of full knowledge. Such contemplation does not actually *produce* such qualities. What we can say, however, is that continued contemplation in the full sense helps to maintain the qualities (which are by now *bona fide* virtues) and keep them locked in place. This would constitute a further instrumental value, still from the point of view of the individual.

One might think that, once a philosopher has acquired the virtues, they can never be erased. In the passage we have just discussed from book VI, Socrates talks of the philosopher who achieves ‘perfection’.⁹ In terms of the curriculum that he will go on to unveil in book VII, this is someone who has spent ten years studying mathematics, five on dialectic, fifteen back in the cave performing military and administrative tasks, before finally studying the form of the good at the age of fifty. During the fifteen-year period in the cave, they are tested to see if they really can be trusted to hold power in the state (VII 539e3–540a2). All this seems to suggest that those who make it through to the end will not be liable to corruption of any kind.

In the *Phaedo*, however, Plato presents a different perspective. Here, true knowledge of the forms can only be achieved with the complete separation of the soul from the body, that is, at death. While still embodied, the philosopher’s work is never complete: although he detaches himself as far as possible from the body, there will always be corporeal influences that impede his understanding (66d3–67b1). From this perspective, the philosopher never achieves perfection, as the *Republic* seems to suggest at VI 486e1–487a8.

⁷ See Scott (2021).

⁸ Or even inquiry situated lower down the divided line, in mathematics. See Section 2.1 with n. 3.

⁹ See 486e1–487a8. At 486e2–3, he talks of soul that is going to have ‘a sufficient and perfect apprehension of reality’ (τῇ μελλούσῃ τοῦ ὄντος ἱκανῶς τε καὶ τελῶς ψυχῇ μεταλήψεσθαι). He then talks of entrusting the state to people who ‘are perfected (τελειωθεῖσι) by education and maturity of age’ (487a7–8).

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Perhaps the two dialogues just differ on this point. But there may be more convergence between them. In *Rep.* X 611b9–612a6, Socrates appears to take a perspective closer to the *Phaedo*, when he invokes the image of the sea-god Glaucus to describe the soul in its incarnate and discarnate states. While attached to the body it is ‘maimed’ (611b10–11). This could be taken to imply that, for any incarnate soul, bodily accretions (the senses and the non-rational desires) threaten to impede the work of reason. So, the *Republic* might differ from the *Phaedo* in allowing that philosophers can attain knowledge of forms even when incarnate (hence the references to perfection in VI 486e1–487a8). But this does not completely remove the risk of slippage: the verb ‘maimed’ (λελωβημένον, 611b10–11) is in the perfect tense, suggesting that the condition persists into the present. So, immersion in the world of particulars, that is, returning to the cave, might have deleterious effects on even the best characters, occluding their vision and even undermining their virtues. But this risk can be counteracted by long periods of contemplation outside the cave, which will sustain the philosopher’s wisdom and keep the other virtues locked in place.

2.3 The Instrumental Value of Contemplation for the State

We can now turn to the civic value of contemplation. Because the question of intrinsic value will turn out to be more controversial in this context, I shall start with instrumental value. Here we can see how some of the points just made about the individual can easily be carried over to the state. This is obviously the case where the instrumental value of knowledge (*noēsis*) in practical decision-making is concerned. In fact, the point of introducing the forms in books V–VII is precisely to discuss something that will be useful – indeed indispensable – for the good running of the state (cf. 476a1–480a13, 484b4–d7, 520c3–d2 and 521b8–9).

Again, however, this is a point about the value of knowledge rather than contemplation. Are there grounds for saying contemplation itself is instrumentally good for the state? There are two. One follows directly on what we said earlier, about the way in which contemplation generates a string of moral qualities in the soul. This kind of instrumental value applies as much to the state as to the individual. In fact, Socrates discusses it primarily in a political context. At the beginning of book VI, he is still very much concerned to rebut the idea that philosophy and politics are incompatible with each other. So, in this passage, he is explicitly arguing that contemplation of forms generates a whole string of qualities required of a political leader. (Earlier, I was relying on the assumption that such qualities are also important in an individual’s life.) Again, one might say that the contemplation here envisaged is only imperfect, not being based on full knowledge of the forms. But we can still say, as we did