Aristotle and the Virtues of Contemplation

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Introduction

What is “contemplation”? When one searches for a dictionary definition, several items stand out: (1) its philosophical meaning, deep or profound reflective thought, (2) its more religious meaning, prayer or meditation, and (3) its deep aesthetic appreciation of art or nature. While all three meanings are connected, my primary emphasis in this paper is on philosophical contemplation. I shall focus on Aristotle’s writings on contemplation, the first extended discussion of the topic in Western thought which have had an immense influence on subsequent thought. I shall concentrate on the claims Aristotle expresses in Book X of the *Nichomacheon Ethics*, that contemplation is the highest of the virtues, even god-like. But, even though his views were extremely influential, should philosophers continue to pay attention to Aristotle’s assertions about contemplation? In this paper I will argue that philosophers would do well to take many of Aristotle’s claims seriously, and, in a neo-Aristotelian spirit, to consider how to improve on them.

I begin by considering Aristotle’s arguments for his claim that contemplation is the highest virtue, hence the key to attaining happiness or eudaimonia. I then argue that there is a strong *prima facie* case to be made for modern day thinkers continuing to make sense out of Aristotle’s metaphysical claims. I then turn to Aristotle’s uses of contemplation in two further areas, namely morality and knowledge acquisition, that also continue to demand our attention, and argue that here too the case for the usefulness of contemplation can be sustained.
I then consider a serious contemporary criticism of Aristotle’s claims from modern cognitive psychology, which provides a powerful critique regarding reliance on contemplation, a criticism that is bolstered by historical considerations as well. In response, I offer suggestions on how we should modify our use of contemplation with respect to morality and knowledge acquisition. I conclude by arguing that a suitably modified use of contemplation continues to be one of the most valuable activities in which human beings can engage, and that, despite serious criticism, can still be plausibly defended as “god-like”.

**Aristotle on Contemplation**

In Book X of the *Nichomacheon Ethics*, Aristotle claims contemplation is the highest virtue, the “best activity” and involves “complete happiness”:

> If happiness is activity in accordance with excellence, it is reasonable that it should be in accordance with the highest excellence; and this will be that of the best thing in us. Whether it be intellect or something else that is this element which is thought to be our natural ruler and guide and to take thought of things noble and divine, whether it be itself also divine or only the most divine element in us, the activity of this in accordance with its proper excellence will be complete happiness. That this activity is contemplative we have already said.  

But, to understand why Aristotle could hold such a view we must first turn to his discussion of the Prime Mover. In *Metaphysics Lambda*, Aristotle argues for the existence of a Prime Mover to explain why there is motion in the world and why the world continues to exist.

The first mover, then, of necessity exists; and in so far as it is necessary, it is good, and in this sense a first principle.
One important worry for Aristotle’s account concerns what the Prime Mover might do. For Aristotle, since the prime mover is not dependent upon any other being, there is only one activity in which the Prime Mover can engage—contemplation.

This relates to Aristotle’s theory of happiness, in the sense that he rejects the view that happiness is “mere amusement” and instead puts forth the view that happiness is “an end in itself consisting of virtuous action”. The best life, Aristotle claims, is a life of contemplation.

But why should this be so?

Aristotle supports his conclusion with seven additional claims about contemplation.

1. Contemplation is the most continuous activity in us
2. Contemplation involves leisure
3. Contemplation implicates unweariness
4. Contemplation is the pleasantest activity
5. Contemplation is the most self-sufficient
6. Contemplation aims at no end beyond itself, and
7. Contemplation can make a human existence a god-like life.

The first three of these claims (continuity, leisure, unweariness) are relatively easy to grant, as they flow from the contemplative or reflective experience. As the rational animals that Aristotle defines human beings to be, we can engage continuously in rational thinking. We do not need special exercises to contemplate—it is basic to our nature. Thus, it is an activity in which we appear to constantly engage. It also follows that leisure, as opposed to physical labor, is naturally connected with contemplation, which also entails unweariness. Regarding Aristotle’s fourth claim about pleasure, there is a special sort of pleasure associated with contemplation, especially related to perception of great insights, appreciation higher truths or discovery of solutions to challenging mental puzzles.
However, Aristotle’s three other claims--no-goal, self-sufficient, and god-like--seem not to depend solely on aspects of conscious experience but on Aristotle’s broader metaphysical system. The Prime Mover’s contemplation has no end beyond itself because, as the greatest being, the Prime Mover cannot have an end beyond itself. Similarly, regarding self-sufficiency, the Prime Mover is clearly self-sufficient. In so far as we humans also contemplate, our contemplation must also be self-sufficient. Further, with respect to the feature of being the “pleasantest” activity, again, since the Prime Mover is the highest being, being like the Prime Mover as a contemplator is taken to be the best state, hence the most pleasant.

Putting these four last features together, we can now understand Aristotle’s claim that contemplation is a god-like state, as contemplation is what the Prime Mover does. We can also appreciate the further claim that humans, are most loved of the gods, because of all creatures they are most like the gods, since, Aristotle holds, only humans are capable of contemplation.

What should we make of Aristotle’s psychological claims about contemplation? Some of them still ring true. Contemplation typically does require leisure and is also relatively self-sufficient. But from a contemporary neuroscience perspective, while contemplation is a very common activity in human beings, there seem to be other mental activities that are as or more continuous, such as consciousness. There are also those who claim that there is an evolutionarily supported goal or end for contemplation. Those who have been challenged by difficult mental activities will also admit that extensive contemplation can often be wearisome. And, while contemplation can be a moderately pleasant state, the behavior of many indicates that other drug-induced states are widely regarded as more pleasant.
What about Aristotle’s metaphysical claims? Modern day supernaturalists, those who think that in addition to the natural world there is at least one other non-natural element, such as God, who is responsible for the world’s creation and sustenance, will, following in the footsteps of their Medieval and Scholastic forebears, continue to find Aristotle’s metaphysical claims congenial. In addition to depending on a supernatural First Mover, it seems reasonable for modern supernaturalists to continue to grant that such a supernatural being must be capable of something very much like the seemingly pure mental state of contemplation. Supernaturalists typically insist that a Prime Mover is not only responsible for motion but also design in the universe, and design seems naturally to require great contemplation.

The metaphysical situation is somewhat less clear for naturalists, those who reject a supernatural prime mover, and restrict their world-views instead to wholly natural entities and forces. While it is also possible for them to accommodate an important role for contemplation, there are two different answers to consider, the non-reductive naturalist response and the reductive naturalist reply. Certain non-reductionist naturalists, namely those who embrace a form of pan-psychism according to which conscious thought permeates every part of the universe, might be tempted to hold that the whole universe is, in fact, engaged in something like contemplation. Other naturalists, on the other hand, while rejecting a person-like prime mover, typically recourse to a particular natural event as the first event, which ultimate led to the current state of the universe. While reductive naturalists doubt that such an event involved contemplation or that contemplation is required for the continued operation of the universe, they should still be attracted to Aristotle’s claims that there is definitely something
god-like about human beings, in terms of our abilities to contemplate and then to use the results of our contemplations to create remarkable new things.¹⁴

For many naturalists, the ability to engage in hypothesis formation, experimentation and evidence gathering, theory construction, and the rational critique and defense of theories that leads to increasingly powerful understandings of all aspects is indeed “god-like”. This is because these activities play one of the major roles traditionally assigned to the gods, namely to be able to understand the secret workings of the universe. A further role usurped from the gods was that of providing ideologies, based on special or secret knowledge, to move the masses, and, thus, to control the course of the planet. What most naturalists should now urge is that the sole responsibility for serious contemplation exclusively rests with humans, the only beings who may be able to address and alter the dangerous predicament in which they have put the planet.¹⁵

I shall now consider Aristotle’s theory of happiness. Aristotle claims that happiness consists in being both virtuous and contemplative remains an intriguing ideal. While most thinkers reject Aristotle’s account of happiness as psychologically unrealistic, I find it more helpful to interpret his account of eudaimonia as challenging human beings to be more “god-like” in how they construct and lead their lives. We should aim for lives worthy of the remarkable positive abilities humans possess. A contemplative life may be more valuable than a non-contemplative life without necessarily being more pleasant.¹⁶ And, as contemplators, human beings possess special capacities regarding the possibility of both moral and intellectual achievement. Let us now consider contemplation’s central role in these two vital areas, beginning with morality.
On the Place of Contemplation in Aristotle’s System of the Moral Virtues

Aristotle’s theory of virtue is one of the most important ethical theories. Instead of providing us with an account of what to do, Aristotle instead provides us with an account of what sort of person we should be. His answer is: a virtuous one. Aristotle develops a biologically based account of virtue, according to which a virtue is a habit which, if developed and regularly practiced, leads to human flourishing. It is a disposition which makes one a good person and enables one to perform one’s functions well. And, Aristotle claims, virtues typically fit the Golden Mean model of falling between the extremes of deficiency and excess. For instance, courage is the mean between cowardice and foolhardiness. But, this suggests that we might question in what sense contemplation might be considered a virtue for Aristotle.

There are several problems with fitting contemplation into the Aristotelian Golden Mean scheme for Virtues. First, it should be noted that like moral virtues such as courage and temperance, contemplation is not readily subject to the Golden Mean. While one’s activities can be identified as “contemplative” as opposed to “shallow”, which seems to work as a deficiency of contemplation, it is not clear what an excess of contemplation would be. Again, given the constant contemplative activity of the Prime Mover, who is also supremely virtuous, it is hard to see how there could be an excess. Secondly, if contemplation is a continuous, natural activity, then it is also difficult to understand why it should count as a disposition to be cultivated. If contemplation is a natural trait of rational minds, then no special cultivation is needed.

Still, contemplation counts as a virtue for Aristotle on other grounds. First, contemplation is an activity that leads to human flourishing; it makes happiness possible.
Further, we might think of contemplation as a “meta-virtue”, required for the development of the other virtues--one needs to contemplate, at least minimally, while working on eliminating vice and shoring-up virtuous habits of behavior.\textsuperscript{19} Aristotle notes that we also need to be aware which ways we typically fail to be virtuous with respect to specific virtues, such as tending more towards excess in some areas and deficiency in others, and then strive to correct ourselves.\textsuperscript{20} This requires contemplation. Perhaps most importantly, contemplation is required for the proper coordination of one’s activities as a virtuous person. Not all virtues are required in every situation; sometimes it is more appropriate to exercise one virtue rather than another. In any instance one needs to be able to determine which virtue or virtues need to be employed to handle the situation at hand. Contemplation is initially required to enable us to address this challenge. Thus, while the exercise of contemplation is not by itself sufficient to guarantee that only moral actions will be performed, by helping the agent identify relevant virtues to utilize, contemplation guides the agent in acting virtuously. Let us now turn to an noteworthy adaptation of Aristotle’s discussion of moral virtue to another major intellectual area, the acquisition of knowledge.

\textbf{The Role of Contemplation in the Intellectual Virtues}

When it comes to explaining knowledge, Aristotle is typically interpreted exclusively as a foundationalist--one who maintains that human knowledge consists of showing how particular claims about knowledge can be derived from more basic, foundational claims.\textsuperscript{21} But, while there is a strong foundationalist streak in Aristotle,\textsuperscript{22} it does not exhaust the whole of his influence in epistemology. It would seem reasonable that since Aristotle gives a prominent role to contemplation as the supreme virtue, this supremacy would also seem to have discernible
epistemic fallout. Successfully contemplative human beings in Aristotle’s view would not only be morally virtuous, but they would also seem to be epistemically well-positioned. What is a bit problematic, however, is the dearth of direct mention by Aristotle of using the virtues to acquire knowledge.

Still, many recent discussions in the theory of knowledge have focused on identifying specific behavioral dispositions that are conducive to forming and sustaining true beliefs. Those who identify as Virtue Epistemologists claim that knowledge is virtuously-produced true belief. Many virtue epistemologists cite Aristotle’s work on the virtues as their inspiration. One major branch of virtue epistemology insists that traits of intellectual character [intellectual courage, intellectual temperance, etc.,] must be in place to support knowledge efforts. While the claim is controversial, I maintain that the intellectual virtues play valuable roles in epistemology, especially with respect to (1) acquiring new knowledge, (2) revising existing knowledge claims, and (3) figuring out just what one knows and does not know. In all three of these activities contemplation plays a central role.

**Epistemology and Ethics: A Parallel Noted**

Before moving to consider some problems with relying on contemplation in both the ethical and epistemic domains, it is worth contemplating a parallel between epistemology and ethics that our discussion of their respective virtues helps illuminate. Although Aristotle’s examination of the virtues predates other major normative ethical theories currently discussed, virtue theory did not experience a revival in ethics until the second half of the last century. At that time, defenders of virtue ethics argued for its replacement of other normative theories, which they claimed were wholly obsessed with the problem of determining
which action to be performed was morally correct or good, instead of being concerned with what features (virtues) make a person good. Now, however, it seems reasonable to grant that both concerns, determining right action and determining good-making traits are worthy of ethical inquiry, and which normative theory can do adequate justice to both remains to be identified.

I would argue that a similar observation can be made about current epistemological discussion. Expanding the focus in epistemology to include attention to the epistemic virtues has a similar potential. It can move us away from being exclusively concerned with trying to determine whether someone’s belief in a particular situation counts as knowledge to ask another important question, namely, what epistemic traits of character are worth developing and strengthening to improve our overall condition as knowers? The reason that this question is important in epistemology is the same as the reason a similar question is important in normative ethics. If we are concerned exclusively with figuring out the correct outcomes in tricky moral and epistemic cases, which may depend not on skill but luck, we risk ignoring the larger question of how we should develop ourselves as good beings with respect to both acting morally and being knowledgeable. And addressing this broader question requires contemplation.

Can contemplation lead us into error? As noted above, Aristotle takes contemplation to be a “god-like” activity and thus, seems not to take this possibility seriously. Is it permissible to take a similar stand and ignore skeptical concerns regarding contemplation? Uncritical reliance on contemplation has been significantly challenged by epistemically disturbing research results gathered in the last several decades by cognitive psychologists.
The Cognitive Psychology Challenge

To appreciate the gravity of the cognitive science data, let us recall a commonly invoked psychological model for human thought, the Two-Systems Model. According to proponents of the model, we engage in two different kinds of thought, System 1 thought and System 2 thought. System 1 thought is automatic while System 2 thought is reflective. Daniel Kahneman further characterizes these systems as follows:

System 1 operates automatically and quickly, with little or no effort and no sense of voluntary control.

System 2 allocates attention to the effortful mental activities that demand it, included complex computations. The operations of System 2 are often associated with the subjective experiences of agency, choice and concentration.

Examples of System 1 activities include: (1) Detect that one object is more distant than another, (2) Orient to the source of a sudden sound, (3) Answer to “2 + 2 = ?”. Examples of System 2 activities, by contrast, include, (1) Search memory to identify a surprising sound, (2) Count the occurrences of the letter a in a page of text, and (3) Check the validity of a complex logical argument. System 1 efforts seem automatic, take little or no effort; System 2 activities, however, are felt to require significant effort, and are accompanied with greater sense of achievement.

The surprising discovery is that System 1 claims tend to be more reliable than system 2 claims. This is surprising precisely because of the apparent greater cognitive effort expended. One would have thought that greater cognitive effort would be rewarded with greater accuracy, but this turns out not to be the case. In fact, the greater the apparent effort, the less reliable the results. Kahneman presents dozens of cases in which human beings are notoriously flawed when it comes to evaluating the conclusions they reach as a result of their own cognitive efforts. Some examples include the following:
1. We are subject to Availability Cascades, in which the importance of an idea is judged by the fluency and emotional charge with which it comes to mind.

2. We have various Overconfidence Problems, including Hindsight and Stock-Picking Skill Illusion.

3. We commit the Planning Fallacy, in which our forecasts are unrealistically close to best-case scenarios instead of consulting statistics in similar cases.

4. We substitute easier questions for harder ones.

5. We offer inappropriate causal interpretations of purely chance events. And,

6. We exhibit Confirmation Biases--deliberately searching for confirming evidence for our hypotheses.

Given many kinds of problems involving system 2 activities, it is indeed reasonable to question the unquestioned confidence Aristotle and his followers place in contemplation.

Many contemplative activities are likely to be subject to the fallacious tendencies listed above. When we contemplate an individual or situation, we can be influenced regarding the value or interpretation of what we are contemplating by factors having nothing to do with the individual or situation at hand, and everything to do with how questions were framed, previous experiences, overconfidence in our ability to discern, or failures in causal reasoning. We are especially bad at estimating our overall successes and failures as well as our overall happiness.

These discoveries are problematic for Aristotle’s followers because instances of contemplation seem to be included in System 2. This in turn casts serious doubt on the accuracy of contemplation as well as Aristotle’s claims regarding its special status. If contemplation does not have such a special status, then it cannot be trusted to provide correct understanding. And, if contemplation cannot be counted on to provide correct understanding, then uncritical reliance on contemplation in matters of ethics and epistemology also becomes suspect.
Re-thinking Contemplation

So, how should those who support Aristotle’s account of the virtues, both with respect to morality and epistemology, respond to the challenge from cognitive psychology research? These results provide the kind of test Aristotle specifically recommends in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that we make of his theory of contemplation. He says that any theory must be tested by considering “what we do and how we live.” Given Aristotle’s empirical spirit it seems fitting not to reject the data, but embrace it and formulate a better system to minimize our shortcomings. I propose four suggestions.

(1) We need to address *scope* of the problem. If certain contemplative activities are prone to serious error, as contemplators we need to become aware of these limitations. While we may enjoy free-form contemplating without hindrance, we should also be cognizant of the limitations of what we are able to accomplish while contemplating in certain conditions. For instance, many of the problems discovered by cognitive researchers with reflective knowledge concern self-evaluation. Thus, contemplation with respect to oneself should be treated with caution. If we find that others can support the results we found through contemplation in these areas, that will provide a safety test for our claims. Being aware of which factors lead our reflections astray is an important first step.

(2) One explanation that we can give for the value of consulting others is that, unlike solitary wasps, human beings are--as Aristotle told us--*social creatures.* We can share the fruits of our contemplations with fellow humans, who can, in turn, contemplate, and then discuss their reactions with us. We already use other humans to determine the accuracy of many System 1 claims involving perception and memory. We rely on others’ testimony to
provide checks on claims we make about the world. We should employ the same strategy to help evaluate and revise the fruits of our contemplations. If we find that we are unable to convince our colleagues about the results of our contemplation, then this should give us good indication that some of the issues listed by Kahnemann may well be at play. Furthermore, there are additional reasons to share as the product of our contemplation has valuable ramifications. Some have argued that the humanities, including history, morality, philosophy and religion are all the fruits of contemplation, as are mathematical (including logical), natural and social sciences.

(3) Another important moral one can learn with respect to common problems regarding reflective knowledge is that all too often the range of contemplation has been too limited: if not restricted to oneself, then only to one’s friends, community, country, or culture-circle. It is noteworthy that numerous remarks made by Aristotle about those he would have taken to be “others” (women, slaves, barbarians, and animals) strike our ears as un-reflected. According to Aristotle, no members of any of these groups is capable of contemplation. To explain how Aristotle could have competently observed sea urchins but badly contemplated ½ of his species, ¾’s of his own city, and 9/10’s of his known world one must appeal to prejudices inherent in the Greek society of his time (classism, sexism, natural slave-ism, ethnocentrism) which appeared unproblematic to Aristotle. But, it should be granted that other famous philosophers, such as Kant, have also fallen prey to such views.

(4) Therefore, a further recommendation to overcome human limitations regarding reflective thought consists in having the intellectual courage to confront unfamiliar claims, to consider potential counter-examples and take them seriously, and to question one’s basic
assumptions. An important philosophical example of such a contemplator is Montaigne. In an age beset with numerous prejudices, Montaigne’s discussions of customs in other cultures and the abilities of other peoples is refreshingly modern in its approach, relatively free from bias and open to granting full personhood and normality status to a wide variety of groups and customs. Montaigne’s consideration of differences between his culture and others and his observation that these differences are not morally significant displays a more reliable contemplative effort than those of many of his predecessors, contemporaries, and successors.

Montaigne is apparently willing to ask the question: if those in other cultures or communities view things differently from the way that I do, do they have evidence or reasons that I am not considering adequately? This willingness to ask such questions and then investigate the answers demonstrates the intellectual courage that is required to check for bias in contemplation. To be sure, when we now look at even Montaigne’s discussions we will, with the aid of several centuries of increased understanding, find ourselves occasionally cringing. But, the lesson that we should take from our reactions is not that humans are mostly doomed to ignorance, a view that Montaigne is usually interpreted as holding, but that the acquisition of great insight using, among other important tools, contemplation, is a long and arduous process, and final success in any area is not guaranteed to any person or group.

With these four guidelines in hand let us now return to our original concern regarding the trust-worthiness of contemplation. While we should take the lessons both from current cognitive science as well as embarrassing aspects of the historical record of human thought to heart and grant that we cannot guarantee that our contemplative efforts will always yield correct results, we should also come to realize that we are in a similar situation with respect to
contemplation that we are with respect to other virtues. Increased knowledge can always help us do better. Improvements we can observe from one generation to the next provide encouragement that courageous use of contemplation will help keep us on the right track.

Thus, armed with these four suggestions we can and should continue to engage, though more cautiously, with contemplation both in moral and intellectual matters. Suppose I contemplate and arrive at some insight. If I then check to make sure that I have also courageously challenged basic assumptions in my investigation, that I have consulted with a respectable variety of others whom I can trust to provide good criticism, that I have not been biased in various ways in my own favor in my investigations, and that I have taken into account psychological findings regarding the ways that contemplation may lead me astray, then it seems reasonable for me, at least for now, to trust the results of my contemplative labors and, as appropriate, make them available to others.

But, this trust should always be provisional. We are now painfully aware that further investigation may reveal factors that should cause us to modify or abandon our contemplative discoveries. But if our trust in our contemplative efforts always needs to be provisional, then must we abandon Aristotle’s claim that contemplation is a “god-like” feature? Perhaps so. There are certainly both naturalist and supernaturalist thinkers who regard any attempt to call any human activity “god-like” as simply delusional. These would include supernaturalists who maintain that human activity is so far from resembling God that any analogy between humans and God is sinful hubris and naturalists who regard all imagined reference to God or gods as an unnecessary distraction. If not, supernaturalists and naturalists would need to account for how human contemplation might still be deemed “god-like”. Let me suggest the following.
While granting that divine and human contemplations are radically different with respect to insight, the supernaturalist may still claim a weak analogy between the two. To be sure, God’s grasp of creation is much greater than the human grasp with respect to [1] the universe’s completeness, [2] its causal order, and [3] the nature of the relations between its various parts. Given the limitations on our cognitive powers which cognitive science has helped to make clear to us, as well as the limitations on our knowledge with respect to the three items just noted, human efforts to discover the workings of the universe improve only gradually over time. One can thus view human contemplation at any point as attempting to approach total understanding.\(^45\) By contributing to the effort of attempting to resemble God in this way, human contemplators are part of a larger endeavor itself deserving of the title, “god-like”.\(^46\)

A similar strategy applies to the naturalist. While naturalists reject reference to God or the gods, being historically knowledgeable they acknowledge typical functional roles these entities have played in the history of human thought. To label an activity as “god-like” is not necessarily to attribute to it all features typically assigned to God or the gods and to the same degree, but only some features and to some degree. Two relevant godly features even naturalists have to consider are considerable knowledge and power. With respect to increased knowledge of the physical world’s operations and our ability to manipulate aspects of the environment for our own purposes, humans now seem much more “god-like” than when such understanding and power were assigned to the gods alone. Thus, we can conclude, for both the supernaturalist and naturalist alike, that by relying on revised and more careful forms of contemplation, which to some extent makes us humbler, we are simultaneously contributing to grander on-going intellectual efforts that, in turn, makes us more god-like!\(^47\)
Appendix

Religious and Aesthetic Contemplations

The religious version of contemplation, meditation or prayer, is connected with the notable religious tradition of the contemplatives, those who isolate themselves from worldly concerns and dedicate their lives to prayer and meditation, or, alternatively, to contemplating God. That the contemplative life so-conceived by Medieval Philosophers was derived from their appropriation of Aristotle is seen in the following quote from Aquinas, addressing the question, “Whether the contemplative life consists in the mere contemplation of God, or also in the consideration of any truth whatever?”. Aquinas answers:

I answer that...a thing may belong to the contemplative life in two ways: principally, and secondarily, or dispositively. That which belongs principally to the contemplative life is the contemplation of the divine truth, because this contemplation is the end of the whole human life. Hence Augustine says (De Trin. i, 8) that “the contemplation of God is promised us as being the goal of all our actions and the everlasting perfection of our joys.” This contemplation will be perfect in the life to come, when we shall see God face to face, wherefore it will make us perfectly happy: whereas now the contemplation of the divine truth is competent to us imperfectly, namely “through a glass” and “in a dark manner” (1 Cor. 13:12). Hence it bestows on us a certain inchoate beatitude, which begins now and will be continued in the life to come; wherefore the Philosopher (Ethic. x, 7) places man’s ultimate happiness in the contemplation of the supreme intelligible good.48

We can see from these remarks that Aquinas and Augustine are both profoundly influenced by Aristotle’s discussions of contemplation, and have transformed the activity to be engaged in by requiring that contemplation be solely directed towards God.

For the religious contemplative, the benefits of the contemplation of God are not to be found in this life but in the next. Regarding this claim it is common to agree with Montaigne:
“Only this end, of another life, blessedly immortal, loyally deserves the renunciation of the comforts and sweetnesses of this life of ours. Whoever can set his life ablaze with the fire of this living faith and hope, really and constantly, builds in his solitude a voluptuous, delicate life beyond any other life form.”

But, while the ascetic stakes her case for doing just that with contemplation, the question remains whether there might not indeed be other forms of life which might similarly justify a life of contemplation. What other models might we cite?

Certain researchers would seem to be likely candidates, those who renounce the pleasures of family and material comforts to pursue a great theoretical end, such as solving a great unproved mathematical theorem, making a major scientific breakthrough, or producing a remarkable literary or artistic effort. Further, some will suggest that a most valuable life can be accomplished by those who combine both significant contemplation with active social involvement. Martin-Luther King and Mahatmas Gandhi are two powerful examples of such a combined life, in which contemplation combined with significant renunciation or a long, untroubled and comfortable life seems required to then conjoin with social activism to bring about momentous social progress. Curiously, all four of these efforts seem to involve another sort of immortality as well, one that can provide benefit to others, and which is perceived by the contemplator not be tied to a personal reward, either in this life or a next. Such an unselfish immortality might be evaluated by some as even more praiseworthy than the search for personal immortality.

But what about the third sort of contemplation, the appreciation of nature. Here I will be quite brief. Nature contemplation is a form in which all of us can and should engage. While
most are not suited to the hermit life, we can certainly appreciate elements that nature contemplation has in common with Aristotle’s philosophical contemplation and Aquinas’ contemplation of God. These include [1] the sensed profundity of the experience, [2] the joy and ease of the activity of contemplating, and [3] the feeling of doing something that is its own, great reward. If these characteristics are common to all three forms, perhaps that is argument enough for all of us to respect and support the contemplative activities in which we all engage.

NOTES

1 One often finds this form of contemplation in the work of poets, especially romantic poets such as Wordsworth. See his sonnet, “Placid Objects of Contemplation,” in The Book of the Sonnet, eds. Leigh Hunt and S. Adams Lee, London: Sampson Low, Son and Marston, 1867, online reference: http://www.bartleby.com/341/82.html

2 In the Appendix to this paper I show how two other major forms of contemplation, religious and aesthetic, develop out of Aristotle’s discussion, and propose how one might unite all three forms of contemplation.

3 Nichomacheon Ethics, 1177a18-1860.

4 Metaphysics 1072b13-1694

5 Ibid.

6 NE 1175b30-1176b12. Aristotle in the Politics, however, is standardly interpreted as claiming that the life of the stateman is as valuable as the contemplative life.

7 Aristotle does point out the singular pleasantness that attaches to certain powerful intellectual states, so perhaps this is an observable feature as well.

8 There is some disagreement among cognitive scientists as to what the default mental activity actually is, but contemplation seems not to be a current leading contender.
9 See, for example, Yuval Noah Harari, *Sapiens*, New York: Harper Collins, 2015. See Section 2 for suggestions on how *Homo sapiens*’ abilities to contemplate led to the species’ great evolutionary success over other, related groups.

10 See the discussion of Aquinas in the Appendix to this paper.

11 Consider the discussion of Creation in Genesis, Chapter One, in which God contemplates each of the various stages and judges of each “that is was good”.


13 See the late Stephen Hawking, “Did God Create the Universe?” (2011) [37 min. youtube]  www.youtube.com/watch?v=VuyYGVDCdN0

14 Obvious examples include cloning, genetic engineering, nuclear physics, etc. With respect to these activities it is common for critics to accuse those who engage in them of “playing God”!

15 Many have claimed that humans have taken on god-like roles. For a recent version, see Harari, op. cit.

16 I am indebted to Tom Carson for this point. On this interpretation, Aristotle may be taken as an early influence on Stoicism.

17 At 1053q20 Aristotle does mention “excessively contemplating”, but it is clear from context that he means that there are occasions on which one should do something other than contemplate, which is not the same.

18 Further, it seems odd that Aristotle would not acknowledge that contemplation develops over time, and that some are much better at it, or more prone to it, than others.

19 It might be objected that it is deliberation, not contemplation, that is required to repair one’s moral virtue defects. But, it would seem that deliberation would also require initial contemplative activity as well as judgement regarding subsequent success or failure, which again would involve some contemplation.

20 NE 1109a30-1109b29.


22 NE 1139b36-1139b36.
It would also seem that in order to engage in the foundationalist project of showing how some claims can be derived from certain principles some contemplation would definitely be required.

There are however indirect references to virtues. For example, Aristotle does discuss the importance of deliberation in Book VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, and I argue that deliberation requires at least minimal contemplation.

The employment of contemplation in figuring out what one knows provides a direct connection between the virtue of contemplation and Aristotle’s own foundationalist methodology. Aristotle claims in the Nichomacheon Ethics (1139b19-1139b35) “Knowledge, then, is a state of capacity to demonstrate.” Such demonstration initially requires contemplation.

Current major views include consequentialism, social contract theory, rights theory, etc. Perhaps the only exception is the Divine Command Theory, which received its most telling critique from Aristotle’s teacher, Plato.


I have yet to find a reference among the dozens of discussions of contemplation in Aristotle’s corpus to contemplation resulting in error.


It might be objected that some of the features that Aristotle attributes to contemplation, especially unwearisomeness and continuity, would indicate that contemplation should rather be put in System 1. I have raised objections to Aristotle’s attributing these two features to contemplation earlier.

*NE*, 1179a20

As defenders of Aristotle up through the Middle Ages famously did. Another strategy would be to follow A.O. Rorty and insist that by “contemplation” Aristotle restricted himself to contemplation of pure relations between the forms. See “The Place of Contemplation on Aristotle’s Ethics,” Chapter 20, pp. 377-394, in A.O. Rorty, ed., *Essays on Aristotle’s Ethics*, Berkeley, CA, University of California Press, 1980. Such an interpretation, however, in addition to worries about making it consistent with the many references that Aristotle makes throughout his corpus, is also subject to similar skeptical concerns regarding whether even such a restricted use of contemplation must be error-free. The well-known critique of Descartes that we can conceive of false geometric relations seems to pose an insuperable objection.

*Politics* 1253a1-20.
As well as relevant instruments, including certain animals, such as drug-sniffing dogs.

While Aristotle may have been guided by the model of pure mathematics, the other areas just mentioned all require evidence and corroboration from others. While it is nice to have someone else verify that one’s proof of an especially difficult theorem actually works, for the pure mathematician there is an important sense, in which her seeing the correct proof for the first time counts as establishing its correctness.

See, again, Harari, op. cit.

To make matters worse, Aristotle is often prone to concoct physiological or climatic explanations to justify his prejudices. I am indebted here to Mary Krizan.

Aristotle, to be sure, is not alone among influential philosophers for having made similar comments that now appear to us to be remarkably benighted. Aristotle’s comments on women are all-the-more surprising, as his teacher, Plato, did not defend similar views, and appeared to count at least some women among the philosophical, hence contemplative, ranks. For further discussion see Nancy Tuana, ed., Feminist Interpretations of Plato, University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994.


This is not a mere matter of opinion. Claims of inferiority are conclusively refuted by power empirical evidence that Aristotle would now find convincing. His own physiological explanations can now be shown to be groundless.

Kraemer, op. cit.


This view seems to lie behind Aquinas’ rejection of Anselm’s Ontological Argument. See Summa Theologica, Part I, Question 2, Article 1.

The analogy of continuous human counting efforts attempting to reach infinity is both helpful and misleading here: Helpful with respect to the enormity and impossibility of achieving the task, but misleading in that it implies that there is no final understanding to be achieved.
The suggestion proposed here should be interpreted as an attempt to bridge what I have taken to be a radical inconsistency in the approaches to human knowledge that I find when comparing the strategies of supernaturalists Alvin Plantinga and Robert Audi. Compare Plantinga’s *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion and Naturalism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011 and Audi’s *Rationality and Religious Commitment*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.

I am very grateful to Mary Krizan and Francine Klein for helpful comments.

Aquinas, *On the Contemplative Life*: Article 4