

# Epicurean gods and Aristotelian contemplation

Post by “Cassius” of September 3, 2023 at 6:35 AM

I see a summary introduction here: <https://philarchive.org/archive/WALAOT-11>

For Aristotle, philosophical contemplation, or theôria, is, in some sense, the ultimate end for human beings. Contemplation is that for the sake of which our rational actions aim. The power to contemplate also has a special position in the human soul – for Aristotle, an integrated system of life-functions. Contemplation is the authoritative, or dominant, function for the sake of which the human soul’s subordinate functions (e.g., nutrition, perception, and practical reasoning) exist. As the telos of our rational actions and of our other life-functions, contemplation is, for Aristotle, the main organizing principle in our kind-specific good as human beings.

On standard readings of Aristotle, contemplation has another, striking feature: it is thoroughly useless. Choiceworthy for its own sake, and lacking subservience to any higher functions, contemplation is free and leisured. Its proper objects eternal and divine, contemplation does not concern itself with pressing issues in the contingent realm of human affairs. Unlike other life-functions, it seems, contemplation makes no contribution to human self-maintenance.<sup>1</sup>

Standard readings of Aristotle’s remarks on contemplation’s uselessness are partly correct. On Aristotle’s account, contemplation’s objects are eternal and divine. Contemplation is not directly concerned with practical affairs. Nor does contemplation subserve any functions higher than itself. No higher functions exist in the human soul, after all, for contemplation usefully to subserve. So, Aristotle provides good reason to think that contemplation is, somehow, a useless activity.

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In sum: even if contemplation has the divine objects Aristotle explicitly insists it does, contemplation still has a role in meeting basic vital human needs. Even if contemplation is useless in a certain sense, contemplation can still be useful in the way that Aristotle’s broader views suggest it should be. Ultimately, I contend, Aristotle’s account of the human good is fully at home in Aristotle’s larger vision of the world.