Welcome to our third and final lecture on Aristotle’s ethics. Today we’re going to get into the details of his account of moral virtue and the life of contemplation.

We concluded last time talking about moral virtue as consisting of the successful application of practical reason to activity, to action. The morally virtuous person is the person who can identify the right thing to do and chooses to do the right thing. So moral virtue involves excellence both of the rational soul and the non-rational soul, specifically involves excellence of practical reasoning and excellence in volition taken in combination. Excellence in volition by itself is simply to choose strongly, let’s say — a volition is blind. It’s simply an impetus towards an object. So excellence in volition in and of itself is not a human virtue, is not a human good, but excellence in volition under the guidance of practical reason is a distinctively human form of excellence. It is the excellence that we call moral virtue. And I’ll alternatively refer to moral and civic virtue, or just moral virtue itself. These speak to the virtues of character as they arise within our interpersonal engagements and in our larger civic life.

Now, we’ve said that moral virtue arises as a result of the intersection of practical reason and activity, and this would suggest that moral virtue is in some sense rational. Inasmuch as it is a faculty of reason that identifies the virtuous thing to do, that would seem to suggest that virtue in some sense is rational. The question is, in what sense? What is rational about moral virtue?

And here it’s useful to remember that the word rational has a number of different senses, right? There are many different uses of the word rational. It means different things depending upon the context. One such use of the word rational, I would maintain, is the following. The rational person is conceived of as prudent and as moderate. If you just think about this, think about it the opposite, right? We often describe extremes. Extremes either of success or extremes of deficiency as irrational or crazy. Someone who engages in wild, extreme behavior we will often describe as
crazy. Similarly, a person who exhibits moderateness of temperament, evenness of temperament and moderateness of behavior, we commonly describe as rational. So this notion of prudence and moderation is one sense that we attach to the word *rational* and Aristotle says that this is precisely the sense in which the moral virtues are rational and the vices are irrational.

So in Aristotle’s view, the morally virtuous person is always the person of moderate temperament. The moral virtues, all the virtues that you can think of — the virtue of temperance, the virtue of courage, the virtue of honesty and others that Aristotle will list as examples — all of these virtues Aristotle will argue represent moderate states of character. They stem from the moderate temperament. The right thing to do, the right choice in any given circumstance, always will be the moderate choice and the wrong choices will always take the form of one extreme or another. The wrong choice will either be an extreme of excess meaning that it will represent doing two much of something or the wrong choice will involve an extreme of deficiency, doing too little of something.

There’s a fascinating sense here in which Aristotle is — Aristotle’s account of moral virtue encompasses what today we would also include under the umbrella of mental health. Aristotle makes this very interesting analogy at one point. He says that moderation is good for your mind — is good for the state of your character in the same way that it’s good for the health of your body.

If you look at page 25 of your reading, of your Aristotle, you’ll notice the following passage in the middle. He says, quote — he says, “Let us consider this. The fact that states like this are naturally corrupted by deficiency and excess as we see in the cases of strength and health. For both, too much exercise and too little ruin one’s health and, likewise, too much food and drink and too little ruin one’s health while the right amount produces, increases and preserves it.”
So he says, look, it’s the truth about the human body that extremes of excess and deficiency are bad for our health and moderation is good for it. If you work out too little, obviously it’s bad for you physically, but if you work out too much it’s also bad for you. I recall a professor I had in graduate school who had been a professional power lifter. Now, the man was 65 years old. He was so obese that he could not stand up from a chair, from a seated position, without great effort. I mean, he would stand up and that alone, standing up, would cause like sweat to pour down his face and cause him to breathe heavily. Now, of course, the reason was because he had lifted too many weights. He had become too big and it was something that his body could not sustain into his older age, and it all turned into fat. Aristotle’s point is neither excessive or deficient exercise is good for you; moderate exercise is good for you. Same thing with eating. If you eat too little and starve yourself, it’s bad for you. Of course, if you eat too much and become morbidly obese, it’s also bad for you. What’s good for you is to eat a moderate amount.

So moderation is the general principle of physical health. Similarly, Aristotle wants to say, moderation in temperament, moderation of character, represents a kind of spiritual health, the health of one’s character. See, we tend to separate questions of one’s moral fitness, one’s moral virtue, and questions of one’s mental health. For us, mental health is sort of a medical issue and moral soundness is within the purview of religion or ethics or wherever one derives one’s moral codes from. For Aristotle, this sort of separation is artificial. For Aristotle, the morally virtuous state is the state of mental health, right? To be temperate or to be courageous or to be honest represent not only moral virtues but also represent a healthy character, a healthy temperament.

So for Aristotle, moral virtue is rational in the sense that moral virtue always springs from moderate forms of character, moderateness of temperament, and always is manifested in moderate action. Choices which always reflect the mean in-between
extremes of excess and deficiency. That’s why he goes on — right after he says the business about exercise and food and drink, he then goes on to say, “The same goes for temperance, courage, and the other virtues. The person who avoids and fears everything, never standing his ground, becomes cowardly while he who fears nothing but confronts every danger becomes rash. In the same way, the person who enjoys every pleasure and never restrains himself becomes intemperate while he who avoids all pleasures as boors do becomes as it were insensible. Temperance and courage, then, are ruined by excess and deficiency and preserved by the mean.”

So the direct analogy between the conditions that are favorable to physical health and the conditions that are favorable to the health of one’s character. Moral virtue represents the health of one’s character. The morally virtuous person is the healthy person from a character perspective and physical health, of course, is what we look for in the case of our bodies and is also engendered by moderation in all things.

Now, Aristotle illustrates this idea — in the literature this theory that moral virtue always represents the mean between extremes of excess and deficiency, Aristotle — this theory has become known to be called the doctrine of the golden mean, mean meaning an in-between point. And golden, I guess the idea is that moral virtue which is golden always represents the modern position in-between extremes of excess and deficiency.

Aristotle helpfully illustrates this principle through a number of examples. I’m gonna talk about three: temperance, courage, and honesty. And the idea is to take these — here’s one way of confirming the truth of a moral theory in ethics like Aristotle’s. Take a number of commonly accepted virtues, things that everyone will accept are moral virtues, and then see if they can be fruitfully and successfully analyzed underneath the Aristotelian theory. In other words, if the theory of the mean that Aristotle is proposing gives an adequate treatment of these three virtues, we will at least
have good reason to think that the theory is true.

So if we can show that temperance, courage, and honesty — three virtues which I think everybody would agree upon, that they are moral virtues — if we can show that in each case these represent moderate states of character and moderate choices of action, that we will have gone a long way towards confirming the truth of Aristotle’s theory.

So let’s go through each one. The way we’re going to do this is we’re going to chart each one on a spectrum. So imagine a line segment, each pole of which reflects an extreme. So let’s say that one pole extreme reflects the extreme of excess, the other pole reflects the extreme of deficiency. The midpoint of the line segment represents the mean. If Aristotle is correct in his analysis of moral virtue, then we should always be able to plot the moral virtue on these little charts. The moral virtue should always fall at the midpoint and at each pole we should have corresponding moral vices.

So let’s take — the easiest example is courage, so let’s do courage first. Now, when we describe someone as courageous, what we’re speaking about is about their willingness to take risks. The virtue of courage speaks to a person’s willingness to take risks. Now, one can have too much of this. There is such a thing as a person who takes too many risks, who risks when nothing important is at stake. We don’t ascribe to such a person the virtue of courage. Rather, we ascribe to such a person the vice of rashness. So rashness represents an excess of the quality that underlies courage.

Of course, there are also people who have too little of this quality. They’re people who are too unwilling to take risks. People who, even when something enormously important is at stake, are not willing to risk one little hair on their head. Of course, we don’t ascribe the virtue of courage to these kinds of people, either. Rather, we describe them as having the vice of cowardice. This is a vice of deficiency.
reflects an insufficient amount of the relevant quality.

The courageous person, Aristotle says, sits in-between these two extremes. The courageous person is the person who’s willing to take risks in proportion to the importance of what one is taking a risk for. So the courageous person is a moderate risk taker, an appropriate risk taker. So at least in the case of courage it would seem that the Aristotelian analysis is successful. Courage does represent a moderate state of character, moderate behavior choices, and indeed the extremes of excess and deficiency do represent the corresponding vices of rashness on the one hand and cowardice on the other.

Let’s do the same thing with temperance. Temperance speaks to our capacity and willingness to control ourselves in the pursuit of pleasures, typically sensory pleasures — food, drink, sex. So temperance speaks to that capacity and willingness to exercise self-control in the pursuit of pleasure. Now, of course the most familiar corresponding vice is the vice of deficiency. That is, there are many people who have insufficient self-control. These are people who simply pursue pleasure to the ends of the earth, no matter what harm it causes them. The word that comes to mind to describe this vice of deficiency — because again, it’s a deficiency in the relevant quality. It’s a lack of sufficient self-control. There isn’t one word to cover all the varieties of insufficient self-control, but the word that’s used with respect to food, of course, is gluttony. So the vice of gluttony is precisely the deficiency of the relevant quality, a deficiency of self-control with respect to food.

But now, of course, there’s also a vice of excess. One can be excessively self-controlling. The sort of person who never indulges in any pleasure. You know, the proverbial church-lady type who, you know, even at their daughter’s wedding won’t take a drink “because we don’t drink.” That sort of thing. And Aristotle, in my view, quite correctly says, “Well, this is not a virtue either. This is not temperance.” He
refers to this vice of excessive self-control as insensitivity. This is a person who’s
insensible, a person who is incapable of enjoying sensation. The word that probably
we are most familiar with reflecting this kind of excessive self-control with respect to sex
is prudishness. Prudishness is not a virtue; it’s a vice of excess, excessive self-control.

I think that this example of temperance raises an interesting point. Of course if
you know your American history, you know that there was a movement called the
temperance movement. And, of course, the temperance movement involved complete
and total abstention from alcohol, from any drinking at all. So we’re not just talking
about drinking, you know, a 24-pack of beer. A person in the temperance movement
thinks you shouldn’t even have one with a meal. You shouldn’t have a glass of
champagne to celebrate someone’s nuptials. And there may be any number of
reasons for this. You know, maybe somebody’s a raging alcoholic and really, really
ought not drink anything. But we’re talking in general. Is temperance a virtue?

Aristotle would say that if, by temperance, what you mean is complete
abstention, it is not a virtue. It reflects a defect, a deformity of character, an extreme of
character. And I think that this speaks to a certain — a very important difference
between the way Aristotle thinks about moral virtue and the way that moral virtue, that
we tend to think about it, and specifically those of us who come out of the
Judao-Christian tradition. In the Judao-Christian tradition, there are any number of
absolute prohibitions and absolute requirements and these, of course, are extreme. To
completely prohibit something or to completely require something is a form of excess or
deficiency, right? It’s for Aristotle always would be too much or too little.

And I think that we often think today of moral virtue as either complete — you
know, total and complete abstinence, refraining from something, or complete and total
commitment to doing something. So on the one hand you have the sort of the prudey,
teatotaling sorts of people who sort walk up buttoned up to their throats, never enjoy
themselves, never do anything. They’re just completely, you know, excessive in their self-control and in their refusal to ever indulge. And then, of course, you have people who are sort of incessantly charitable and always do-gooding and always spreading the word, so to speak. This also reflects extremes.

Now, I’m not necessarily saying that this is incorrect. What I’m trying to do is point out how distant this is from Aristotle’s view. To the extent to which today we tend to think of morality in terms of absolute prohibitions and absolute requirements. We are totally afield from Aristotle’s conception of morality. For Aristotle’s conception of morality, morality always reflects moderation. That middle road. Never too much but also never too little. The virtuous person enjoys but enjoys in a limited fashion. The virtuous person puts themself out or is obligated but not till the ends of the earth.

Another example of this — I think a very good example and the last one I’ll stress — is honesty. I think today that if you ask somebody what is meant by the virtue of honesty they would say someone who always tells the truth. Well, for Aristotle, of course, this of course is a vice of excess. There can be such a thing as excessive truth-telling. We have names for the excessive truth-teller. We might refer to him or her as a tattler or someone with a loose tongue. Surely we’re not always required to tell the truth. Surely sometimes the moral thing to do is to lie. If I’m sitting in my house and the doorbell rings and it’s, you know, the axe murderer of the month, and the axe murderer of the month says to me, “Well, I’m trying to find this person so I can go chop off their head. Do you happen to know where they are?” Suppose you know where they are. You certainly are not required to tell the axe murderer where the person is.

If you want to make this less fanciful of an example, during the Second World War, of course, there were many conscientious gentiles who hid Jews from the Germans. The Germans were, of course, rounding up millions of Jews and sending
them to the gas chambers, and there were any number of conscientious gentile neighbors, friends, etc., or townsfolk who thought this was monstrous and would hide Jews in their basements and in their attics and so on and so forth. Now, certainly the moral virtue of honesty does not require such a person to tell the Germans where they’re hiding the Jews if the Germans asked.

And so honesty is one of those examples where I think that we tend to think of it as a virtue constituted by extreme, right? You know, only tell the truth. But Aristotle would say that’s not a virtue to only tell the truth. To tell the truth when the truth is not appropriate, to tell the truth when really what’s required is a lie, is not a virtue but a vice. For Aristotle honesty is again going to represent the mean. The honest person is going to be the person that tells the truth when the truth is warranted, when the truth is appropriate. And, of course, this virtue has two corresponding vices. There is, of course, the vice of being a liar. That is a vice of deficiency, insufficient truth-telling. And, of course, as we’ve just argued, there’s also the vice of being a tattler or being a loose tongue and this is a vice of excess, of excessive truth-telling.

So in all of these cases — all these cases would seem to vindicate Aristotle’s view that moral virtue always represents the mean between extremes. That is not to say that there are not problematic examples. There, of course, are. I’m not going to go into them here. Not because I’m trying to shill for Aristotle, but simply because of limitations of time and space. But I will tell you that there are cases, there are virtues that don’t succumb as — that don’t fall as easily under this rubric as the ones that we’ve listed. The ones that we’ve listed really, I think, work best for Aristotle.

Now, let’s just notice one thing about this, one important thing. The judgment that something represents a moderate state of character and a moderate choice of action is always a relative one in the fine sense. What counts as moderate depends on the circumstances. In other words, the sane action is not going to count as moderate
in every circumstance.

So let’s just take the example of drinking. What counts as moderate drinking at someone’s wedding party is not the same as what counts as moderate drinking the night before your final exams. And so what counts as the virtue of temperance will depend on the circumstances. Similarly, what counts as courageous or rash, what counts as an appropriate level of risk-taking, is going to differ, for example, in war and in peacetime. If your country is under attack and you’re at war, and you have to go off to fight, it may be courageous to run directly at a person, pointing a gun and shooting at him. But in your ordinary life, to go seek out the local crime boss and get him to chase you down the street with a gun, that wouldn’t be considered courageous. That would be considered stupid.

And so it’s important to understand that while Aristotle does offer a general account of moral virtue in the abstract — that is, the moral thing to do is always going to be the moderate thing to do between two immoderate extremes — what counts as moderate and immoderate depends on the circumstances. And this is why, although Aristotle offers a general account of moral virtue, he offers no general moral principles or rules. Notice there are no rules in Aristotle. Aristotle never says anything like, “You should never do X” or “You should never do Y.” Because, of course, whether you should or shouldn’t do X or Y is going to depend on the circumstances.

I think that this is an aspect of morality that is absolutely crucial, that is too often forgotten, and is what makes Aristotle’s ethics so plausible and applicable. I think too many people today think that morality is a matter of rigid principle. Never do this, always do that. And the problem, of course, is that the circumstances of life are many, varied, and heterogeneous — and open-ended. That is, there’s an indefinite number of different possible circumstances one may run into and to stand on a rigid principle means that you’re going to be doing the wrong thing an awful lot of the time. To stand
on the principle “Never lie no matter what” means you’re often going to tell the truth when you shouldn’t.

And so I think that this point about there being no general moral principles, there being no general moral rules although there is a general account of ethics, the moral thing to do is always moderate relative to the immoderate choices, what counts is moderate or immoderate surely is going to change when circumstances circumstance. This is why — and let’s go back to discussions from last time — this is why the chief attribute of the morally virtuous person is practical wisdom. Because the ability to determine and choose the appropriate cause of action requires good judgment. It’s not something for which there can be a predetermined list of instructions. Precisely the reason why you need practical wisdom, why you need good judgment in order to be moral, is because there isn’t a predetermined list of rules available. The list would have to be of indefinite length and of infinite variety because circumstances are of indefinite number and of infinite variety.

There’s a fundamental difference between following instructions and exercising judgment. When you bake a cake you follow instructions. There’s a list: do this, do that, do that and the other. If you do all those things, you’ll have a cake. There are no such instructions that if you follow them you’re going to do the right thing. Because those instructions would have to anticipate every possible circumstance. Because what the right thing depends on the circumstances. The problem is, the number of possible circumstances is of indefinite length and the types of possible circumstances are of infinite variety.

If you look on pages 24 to 25, Aristotle says this quite clearly. He says, “The idea of acting in accordance with right reason is a generally accepted one. Let’s take it here for granted. But what right reason is and how it is related to the other virtues. But this we must agree on before we begin. The whole account of what is to be done
ought to be given roughly in an outline.” Next page. “The accounts we demand should be appropriate to their subject matter and the spheres of action of what is good for us like those of health have nothing fixed about them. Since the general account lacks precision, the account at the level of particulars is even less precise. For they do not come under any similar set of rules. Agents must always look at what is appropriate in each case as it happens, as do doctors and navigators.”

So what he wants to say is there is not going to be a preset list of rules such that if you follow them, you’ll be a morally righteous person. Like there’s a preset list of rules that if you follow them you’ll make a good cake. Rather, moral virtue requires that in each case a person examine the situation and determine the right course of action, and that is a matter of sound judgment and not of having memorized a list of moral rules.

Let’s talk for a minute about the acquisition of moral and civic virtue. Because this question of whether or not moral behavior is a form of rule-following or whether it is a form of — whether it is the result of exercising judgment, of soundness of judgment, goes directly to the question of how the moral virtues are acquired. If moral virtue is the result of rule-following, if moral behavior is a form of rule-following behavior, then ethics should be teachable. You should be able to hand a person a list of instructions, have them memorize it, send them out, and they should then be able to act morally. But if moral virtue instead is a matter of soundness of judgment, then ethics cannot be taught in the sense of explicit instruction. That is, a teacher issuing a set of true statements that the person learns and then is able to follow later.

Aristotle argues that moral virtue is about the inculcation of — it’s more about inculcating sensitivity to circumstances rather than learning and following rules. Think about what sound judgment consists of. Sound judgment consists of the ability to look at a situation and figure out what the right thing — and sense what the right thing to do
is. The ability to follow rules requires no cultivation of judgment whatsoever, no cultivation of sensibility. It is, in a sense, could be done by a moral idiot. “Don’t shoot these people. Do shoot those people. Don’t give these people money. Do give those people money.” If that’s what moral behavior consisted of, was following lists, it would require no judgment at all. It would require no reason. If moral virtue was like cake-making, we wouldn’t need to be rational at all. Just be able to memorize instructions.

But moral virtue, Aristotle thinks, is all about good habits and sound judgment. Indeed, the word ethics derives from the Greek ethos, which means habit. And this is why Aristotle compares the development of moral virtue to the acquisition of a skill much more than like learning, being taught something explicitly. An acquired skill is — the Greek for acquired skill is techne. The person who has acquired an excellence in some skill or other, typically the word is used to describe a master craftsman. A master craftsman possesses techne with respect to his particular craft.

Aristotle believes that ethos, ethics, is very much like techne. It is the result of apprenticeship, not explicit teaching. If you think about how someone acquires a skill and craft, how someone becomes a good cabinetmaker, how someone becomes a good roofer, how somebody — all right. It’s done through practice under the guidance, under the supervision of a master craftsman. You become a good roofer by building roofs under the supervision of a master roof-builder. You become a good cabinetmaker by making a lot of cabinets under the supervision of a master cabinetmaker. You don’t learn to become a good cabinetmaker by sitting in a classroom and having somebody give you a set of instructions on how to make cabinets.

Notice when you’re in an apprenticeship program, there’s very little by way of explicit giving of instructions. There may be factual knowledge at least to be learned,
certainly in crafts or skills that involve technology, that involve electronics. One may have to learn circuitry, one may have to learn certain principles of physics. But the main process of acquiring skill is a process of apprenticeship, of supervised experience, supervised practice. There are no lessons. There’s just practice, observation, and correction. It is learning by doing, learning by experience.

And Aristotle argues that moral and civic virtue is acquired in a very similar way. A young person is under the care of adults. Adults, presumably, are already morally virtuous and the process of raising a child is similar in this sense to the process of apprenticeship. He says this on page 23 — pages 23 to 24. First sentence of page 23 he says, “Virtue is of two kinds, virtue of the intellect and of character” — all right. There are virtues of intellect, practical reason and philosophic reason, and then there’s the virtue of character which is moral and civic virtue. He says, “Intellectual virtue owes its origin and development mainly to teaching.” By which he means explicit instruction. “For which reason entertainment requires experience and time. Virtue of character is a result of habituation for which reason it has acquired its name through a small variation on ethos which means habit.”

A little further down, second paragraph, he says, “Virtues we acquire by first exercising them. The same is true with skills. Since what we need to learn before doing we learn by doing. For example, we become builders by building and lyre players by playing the lyre. So too we become just by doing just actions, temperate by doing temperate actions, and courageous by doing courageous actions.”

So it is precisely because moral virtue — what counts as morally virtuous depends on the circumstances that is predicated primarily upon soundness of judgment. A cultivated sensitivity to circumstance and the ability to make good judgments depending upon the circumstances. As a result, moral virtue is not something that can be taught by way of explicit lessons. One can teach or impart in a lesson a set of
instructions. One cannot impart in the lesson a set of habits and soundness of judgment. That has to be cultivated in a quasi-apprenticeship mode. It has to be acquired by doing, by practice.

Aristotle says no one is born morally virtuous. We are born with the capacity to virtue. We’re born with all the equipment. We have the volitional soul, we have the rational soul, but these need to be trained to work in tandem with one another. We need to learn self-control, we need to acquire soundness of judgment and good habits, and these are not things that can be explicitly taught in the manner of teaching that we think about in a classroom with a person talking and everybody sitting and listening.

Let’s talk for a little while about the contemplative life. You know, Aristotle spends nine books talking about the life of moral virtue and how it comprises the human good. He spends nine books in the ethics talking about Eudymonia as the life of moral virtue. But then we get book 10 in which he changes gears entirely and now he’s discussing Eudymonia as the life of contemplation. Indeed, to make things spicy, he says that the contemplative life is the highest form of Eudymonia. If there are two forms of the human good, the life of contemplation, Aristotle says, is the highest. It’s higher than the life of moral virtue. And, if you want to make this even spicier, he then goes on to say it also is an amoral life. And by amoral, let’s be careful. Amoral does not mean immoral. Immoral means bad. Amoral means neither good nor bad.

So this is an awfully interesting position. He says there are basically two forms of the human good. There’s two forms of Eudymonia: the life of moral virtue, the life of contemplation. He says the life of contemplation is the higher of the two and it is an amoral form of life. So the highest form of life for man is a life that is neither good nor evil. It is a life purely spent in the quest for knowledge. Why does he think this? What does this position say more broadly about Aristotle’s outlook on human nature and on human life?
Aristotle believes that contemplation is the life of the gods, that the contemplative life is essentially the life of a god but it is a life that some human beings in some circumstances can live. That is, in certain circumstances, certain people can live a life that is essentially the life of a god. This life is the life of contemplation. What’s the explanation of this? I mean, for most of us — and I suspect that most people in the audience are from the Judao-Christian tradition — we don’t think of God as a contemplator. Remember what contemplation is. Contemplation is the application of reason to the truth rather than to activity. Contemplation is a purely intellectual endeavor. It is the pure pursuit of the truth, the pure pursuit of knowledge. We don’t think of God as sort of a divine scholar so where does this view come from? Why does Aristotle think this and what are the implications?

Well, he comes to this view on a very sort of straightforward and rational road. He says — look. A human being is a combination of a physical and a divine element. We have physical bodies that are capable of physical activity. This is the physical side of our being and it’s what we share with all the animals. But we also have reason, this non-physical dimension of the soul, some portion of which is directed toward the physical part — that’s practical reason — but another part of which, the theoretical reason, which has no relation to embodiment or to activity at all. It operates on its own with respect to the truth.

Now, moral virtue is an excellence that’s comprised of the combination of these elements. Moral virtue arises out of the combination of the divine element — reason — watching over and guiding the physical element, the body and its activities. It is a prerequisite for moral virtue, then, that one be embodied. You cannot — one cannot be disembodied and be morally virtuous because moral virtue requires activity. Moral virtue arises as the intersection between reason and activity. A disembodied creature by definition cannot engage in activity and thus cannot be morally virtuous. Gods, of
course, are neither embodied nor do they engage in physical activity.

Aristotle has a hilarious passage here where he says gods don’t give loans, gods don’t make contracts. So how can they have the virtue of honesty? How can they have the virtue of justice if they don’t engage in the kind of acts that can be honest or that can be just? Gods don’t engage in any activity at all because they’re disembodied. Their souls consist entirely of reason. The soul of a god is nothing but contemplative reason, is nothing but theoretical reason.

Thus, the life of a god cannot be the moral life. So for Aristotle, the gods are obviously amoral because they’re not embodied. They have neither a vegetative nor a volitional soul. Thus, there is no activity for their reason to attach to. Thus, the opportunity for moral virtue never arises. Gods are contemplators and the life of contemplation is an amoral life. He says this on pages 197 to 198. Bottom of 197. “We assume the gods to be supremely blessed but what sorts of actions should we attribute to them? Just actions? Will it not be ridiculous if they make contracts, return deposits, and so on?’ In order to be just, you have to engage in just activity. Well, what are just activities? Keeping your promises, honoring your contracts, repaying loans. Do gods take out loans? Do gods make contracts? Of course not. So they have no opportunity to act justly. Thus, they can’t have the virtue of justice. You see how he’s thinking?

This is a very logical progression. It’s utterly alien to our traditions because we tend to think of God, if anything, as the giver of moral law. But in this Greek tradition, Aristotle focuses on the fact that gods are disembodied and therefore literally cannot engage in the kinds of activities from which moral virtue arises. He says, “Can they be courageous enduring what is fearful in facing dangers because it’s noble to do so or generous? To whom will they give? And it will be absurd if they have money or anything like it. What would their temperate acts consist in? Is such praise not cheap
since they have no bad appetites? If we were to run through them all, anything to do with actions would appear petty and unworthy of gods. Nevertheless, everyone assumes that they are at least alive and therefore engage in activity. So if we remove from a living being the possibility of action and furthermore the possibility of producing anything, what is left apart from contemplation? So the gods' activity which is superior in blessedness will be contemplative."

"So the gods are contemplators, contemplation being a complete disembodied form of representing a disembodied form of activity. Reason operating alone has no connection to activity and thus has no connection to moral virtue. And because the gods are higher than us, the life of the gods must be higher than the life of a mere human being. Thus, the life of contemplation must be a higher form of life than the life of moral virtue."

There's only one last point to add. "While the life of contemplation is for Aristotle the highest form of life, it is also a dependent or parasitic form of life. In order to be able to support a class of contemplators, a society must be prosperous — that is, it must be able to afford a group of people who engage in no productive activity but who merely think. It must be prosperous, it must be politically stable, and it must have a far greater number of morally virtuous people. People who will appreciate the value of having a class of contemplators and who will lead society in such a way so as to make room for such a class of people."

The life of contemplation is a luxury and so in that sense it's dispensable. You couldn't have civilization without morally virtuous people. You can have civilization without contemplators. However, though it is a luxury, it at the same time represents the pinnacle of civilization. It represents the pinnacle of human achievement. So while you can have a civilization without contemplators, you cannot have a great civilization without contemplators. So in this sense they are parasitic and dispensable
but in another sense they are essential. They’re not essential to having civilization. They’re essential to having great civilization.

Let me just say one last thing. The way I read Aristotle I would say that the following accurately characterizes the view he’s trying to get across here. The life of moral and civic virtue is the distinctively human form of flourishing. Because only human beings have that unique combination of divine and bodily element that working in tandem can produce this unique form of excellence. The life of contemplation is essentially the excellence of a god, but it is an excellence that some human beings can share in in some circumstances. When we have those circumstances, it is very desirable that we have such people. But the reason why nine books of the ethics are devoted to the life of moral virtue and only one to the life of contemplation is because the life of moral virtue, more than anything else, constitutes human fulfillment in our capacity as human beings. This is why the life of moral virtue is what receives Aristotle’s greatest attention in this book.

Okay. We’re out of time. I will not leave you with a next time. Well, we’ll talk a little bit about ancient Greek politics so we’re gonna read a few selections — more selections from the ethics as well as from the politics. I won’t give you anything to think about. You have enough to think about right now. We’ll talk about ancient Greek politics next time and then we’re going to start moving to modern ethics and modern political philosophy. We’ll spend more time on modern political philosophy. So I will see you all next time and have a good day, afternoon, evening, whatever time it is you’re watching this. Thank you.