

What Contemporary Business Institutions can Learn about the Common
Good from Aristotle's Notion of Completeness

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Abstract

Pope Francis has called the vocation of the businessperson a “noble vocation” insofar as it enables one to “serve the common good by striving to increase the goods of this world and to make them more accessible to all.” However, contemporary business institutions are sometimes structured in ways that impede this. As noted by the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace in its reflection on the *Vocation of the Business Leader*, the “divided life” is one of the chief obstacles that stand in the way of realizing the common good and sharing in the activity of the Creator.

The goal of this paper is to deepen understanding of the common good, especially in the context of contemporary business institutions, through a careful investigation of Aristotle’s notion of a “complete life”. As Paul Farwell has noted, Aristotle presents us with an almost poetic description of a complete life, a *bios teleios*. "One swallow does not make a spring, nor does one day, and in the same way, one day or a brief period does not make someone blessed or happy." However, as Farwell observes, it is not immediately clear what Aristotle means by “a complete life”. Indeed, Aristotle’s treatment of the complete life, which is not presented in a systematic manner, seems surprisingly incomplete. To remedy this, we bring into focus *eleven* contexts in the *Nicomachean Ethics* in which Aristotle discusses “completeness”.

1. The good of the polis (community, city) as complete.
2. Happiness as complete.
3. The most complete virtue.
4. The complete possession and actualization of a virtue.
5. Complete virtue as gathering in the other virtues and activating the virtues in relation to others.
6. Practical wisdom as complete virtue.
7. Theoretical wisdom as the best and most complete virtue.
8. A complete life as a succession of days, seasons, and periods.
9. External and internal goods as requirements for completeness in a happy life.
10. The completeness of a human life with a complex set of roles.
11. Complete friendship as integral to a complete life.

We conclude by suggesting that a more complete account of Aristotle’s understanding of “the complete life”, especially as it pertains to the pursuit of the common good, can advance the conversation about ways in which business institutions can address the problems of the divided life at both the personal and the institutional level.