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Philosophy as a Way of Life in Aristotle's *Eudemian Ethics* I: A Matter of Life and Death

Abstract:

Despite his inclusion in Hadot's foundational work on philosophy as a way of life (PWL), Aristotle tends to be sidelined in recent discussions. This is because Aristotelian contemplation is a goal in itself, not clearly associated with a project of transformation of the knower's practical life. In this article, I use evidence from the *Eudemian Ethics* (*EE*) to re-evaluate the relationship between contemplation and practical life by reflecting on the notion of *bios* (way of life) and the question about the best possible *bios*. The exploration of the three *bioi* in *EE* problematizes the relationship between *phronesis* and *theoria*. Furthermore, *EE* reframes the question of the best possible *bios* as a thought experiment from an antinatalist stance: for the sake of which would you choose to be born? The result is a reconsideration of Aristotelian contemplation as a matter of vital importance, and as a valid goal within PWL.

Keywords:

Aristotle, philosophy as a way of life, phronesis, theoria, contemplation, bios, antinatalism

1. A Question of Motivation?

The place of Aristotle among philosophy as a way of life (PWL) is a relatively contentious topic. Even Hadot, who dedicates a whole chapter of his *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie antique?* to Aristotle "and his school," does so starting from a defensive stance.[1] At least according to more common representations, Hadot tells us, Aristotle seems to contradict the fundamental thesis that philosophy was understood by the ancients as a way of life. The reason for this is that Aristotle affirms that the highest form of knowledge is the one that is chosen for itself, which therefore creates the impression that such a choice is unconnected with the actual way of life of the knower. In other words, Aristotle's view of the highest form of knowledge, the goal of the philosophical endeavor, is firmly placed beyond the facts of concrete human existence and its common concerns.

Defensiveness becomes outright exclusion among some prominent contributors to the current revival of the interest in PWL. According to Sharpe and Ure, Aristotle "proposes a solely discursive conception of philosophy, and a wholly theoretical conception of *sophia*."[2] This justifies his absence from the authors' synoptical account of PWL, since he belongs to a different strand of the philosophical tradition, a strand that engages predominantly, to use Hadot's terminology, in philosophical discourse.

In their brief mention of Aristotle, Sharpe and Ure refer to John Sellars' 2017 article "What is Philosophy as a Way of Life?" In this article, Sellars contrasts two different conceptions of philosophy – scientific and humanistic. Aristotle is an example of the scientific conception, while Socrates is an example of the humanistic. Only the latter corresponds to a philosophical way of life.

I disagree with Aristotle's exclusion and, like Hadot, I believe that he deserves a place in our discussions of PWL. However, although Sellars has since substantially revised his position regarding Aristotle, I think it is still fruitful to engage with the

1) See Hadot, *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie antique?*, chapter 6. Hadot's model is inspired by Hellenistic traditions, and harks back to the figure of Socrates. Including Aristotle is therefore not an obvious decision for a conception of PWL that puts much of its emphasis on spiritual exercises. On the other hand, Hadot's arguments focus on the practice of philosophy as a theoretical enterprise, and elucidate how *theoria* can itself be "spiritual" in the Hadotian sense, and constitute a way of life.

2) Sharpe and Ure, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 20.

views and arguments of the 2017 article.[3] The distinction between these two ways of engaging in philosophy hinges on which factor is given teleological priority. According to Sellars, "Socrates pursues knowledge *in order* to live a philosophical life, while Aristotle lives a philosophical life *in order* to pursue knowledge."[4] In other words, while both Socrates and Aristotle propose a philosophical way of life, the latter does not really count for the purposes of PWL because Aristotle does not live a philosophical life as an end, but rather as a result of the pursuit of knowledge as an end in itself. So, while Sellars agrees with Hadot in stating that Aristotle lives a philosophical life, the critical difference is one of motivation.[5] PWL is defined in part by having as its "ultimate motivation … to transform one's way of life."[6]

I disagree with Sellars' conclusions. Nevertheless, I believe the question of motivation is worth engaging with, since it draws attention to the fact that the philosophical way of life is neither a given nor a spontaneous acquisition. No one of their own accord and left to their own devices adopts a philosophical way of life. Philosophy needs a beginning, a trigger – it needs to be chosen or adopted. This is something we can easily lose track of as we discuss what exactly PWL is, and its different modalities and, especially, as we try to define it in contrast with other ways of engaging with philosophy. The issue, in my view, is that PWL tends – following a trend set out, for understandable reasons, by Hadot himself – to define itself in contrast with philosophy as an academic discipline, triggered by the realization of the latter's shortcomings.[7] But the shortcomings of academic philosophy alone do not justify the adoption of

3) As seen in Sellars, "Aristotle and Philosophy."

4) Sellars, "What is Philosophy as a Way of Life," 44.

5) Ibid., 43:

"It is true that the pursuit of theoretical knowledge might itself form a way of life, indeed the best way of life to which a human might aspire. However, the claim that this form of life is the motivating force for Aristotle seems less convincing. What matters to Aristotle most of all is understanding the way the world works; given that, naturally he will prefer a life devoted to the pursuit of that kind of understanding over a life devoted to the pursuit of anything else."

6) Ibid., 41.

7) See Chase, "Observations on Pierre Hadot," 262–86; Sellars, "What Is Philosophy as a Way of Life," 45–47; and Faustino, "Philosophy as a Way of Life Today," 359–60. Chase's proposal of PWL as a "third way" between continental and analytic philosophy emerges from his dissatisfaction with both main strands of philosophy as an academic discipline.

a different kind of philosophy, because such an attitude assumes without questioning that philosophy is a worthwhile activity to begin with. This positive bias toward philosophy is understandable. After all, the question about the pertinence of philosophy is always only seriously asked by those who are inclined to engage in philosophical inquiry in the first place, since this is in itself a philosophical question. Nonetheless, this fact should not inhibit us from considering the radical possibility of no philosophy (PWL or otherwise) being better for us than any kind of philosophy at all.

Furthermore, there is a tendency to overemphasize the differences between academic philosophy and PWL. While one could criticize Hadot and others for underemphasizing the theoretical components of any kind of philosophy, including PWL, I would look at the matter from a slightly different angle: the assumption that a life dedicated to philosophy in its academic modality could not somehow, even decisively, constitute a way of life. Curiosity, the yearning to learn and understand, to share and communicate one's discoveries, doubts, and perplexities – these can be very strong motivations, and define one's life in a decisive way. The fact that contemporary academic institutions are bound by other principles and constraints, and therefore might not be the ideal venue for this kind of intense intellectual pursuit, should not lead us to overlook the transformative potential of theoretical philosophical inquiry.

That is why I want to look at the question of motivation from a different point of view: contrasting PWL with other possible ways of life, engaged in other endeavors and pursuing other goals, and/or (if there is such a thing) the spontaneous and unsorted flow of experiences that would constitute a life lived at random. The question is not whether I ought to study philosophy as an academic discipline or else adopt it as a way of life; rather, the question is whether I should live philosophically (whatever shape that philosophical life might take) or adopt another way of life, or no way of life at all. So, in the next few pages I am inviting you the reader to think about philosophy not as member of a select group of researchers, teachers, and students of philosophy, but as a human being who has to live a life whose shape is not automatically or spontaneously determined, but is rather susceptible of taking up different configurations and follow different trajectories which need to be adopted deliberately and with a certain degree of self-awareness. The background question, therefore, is not what kind of variety or version of philosophy we ought to engage in – philosophy as a way of life,

or any modality of, roughly speaking, "academic" philosophy – but rather why adopt philosophy as a way of life at all.

I believe we can find a possible answer to this if we follow Hadot's advice and reconsider Aristotle's position within the PWL tradition. For Hadot, what rescues Aristotle from being banished from PWL as a mere producer of philosophical discourses is the way in which the philosophical activity that he engages in is integrated within the Aristotelian version of the traditional Greek trope of the three ways of life, the three *bioi*: the life of pleasure, the life of politics and the philosophical life. One might live for pleasure, one might live for politics, but the kind of life Aristotle associates with the highest good and greatest happiness for humankind is the one he himself partakes in: the life of philosophical research, what Hadot designates as "*vie selon l'esprit*."[8]

But I want to go further than Hadot. I am going to show that Aristotle deserves to be included in our discussions – and take pride of place within them – not so much because of the content of the way of life he proposes as his ideal, but foremost because of how he frames the discussion of this way of life. I am going to show this by focusing in particular on the less well-studied *Eudemian Ethics* (*EE*). The advantage of looking at the three *bioi* in *EE* – as opposed to the much less developed discussion in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (*EN*) – is that it brings to the forefront the question of motivation for the adoption of a philosophical way of life. The simple fact that we are dealing with a multiplicity of ways of life allows us to reframe the question not from a point of view that is called upon to decide between different modalities of philosophy, but rather one that needs to choose among a variety of other possible activities that might satisfy human aspirations. But the *EE* puts this question in an even more radical way, by integrating it into a discussion about what makes life worth living.[9] The pronouncements in *EE* allow us to think about the motivation to adopt philosophy as a way of life from a radical point of departure: as a matter of life and death. The choice, therefore, becomes not between different modalities of philosophy, or between philosophy and other ways of life, but rather between philosophy and not existing at all. In other

8) Hadot, *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie antique?*, 125; *Exercices spirituels*, 295; and *La philosophie comme manière de vivre*, 161.

9) *EE* I 1215b15–1216a37.

words, I am going to show that Aristotle invites us to think about the philosophical way of life not just as an existential possibility, but as an existential need.

2. Ways of Life in *EE* and the Greatest Good

The three *bioi* emerge very early in both *EN* and *EE* as part of the background of ideas Aristotle engages with as he develops his ethical thought.[10] The discussion of the three *bioi*, however, differs significantly between the two ethical works. In *EN*, Aristotle spends very little time dealing with them. The three *bioi* are introduced as part of a review on opinions commonly held on the nature of happiness, and are entirely dismissed (the life of pleasure – *bios apolaustikos*), or heavily and modified as candidates for the greatest good qualified (the political life – *bios politikos*), or else the discussion is simply postponed for a later moment (the contemplative life – *bios theoretikos*).[11]

In *EE*, the three *bioi* also appear in the context of a discussion about opinions commonly held on the nature of happiness, but they are explicitly introduced as part of a wider array of options – other possible ways of life – beyond the canonical three.

> There are various different modes of life, and some do not lay any claim to well-being of the kind under consideration, but are pursued merely for the sake of things necessary [ὡς τῶν ἀναγκαίων χάριν σπουδαζομένων] – for instance the lives devoted to the vulgar and mechanic arts and those dealing with business …; but on the other hand, the things related to the happy conduct of life being three, the things already mentioned

10) The three *bioi* examined by Aristotle are modelled closely on the goals of the tripartite soul examined in *Republic* IX, 580c8–583a11. But its earliest roots are possibly Pythagorean, as expressed in the famous allegory of life as a festival: some people come to take part in the competitions, others to buy and sell, others still simply to enjoy the spectacle. Likewise, some live for glory, some for gain, while others live for the truth. This tale is given in three different texts from Antiquity: Cicero, *Tusculanae Disputationes*, V.9; Diogenes Laertius, VIII.1.6; and Iamblichus, *De Vitae Pythagorae*, 58. The allegory is attributed to Pythagoras, as a way of explaining what a *philosophos* – a designation supposedly invented by Pythagoras – is. Aristotle uses the same image in *Protrepticus* B44 (Düring). See Nightingale, *Spectacles of Truth*, 17–18. While the actual Pythagorean origin of the three *bioi* has been contested, the number three becomes canonical from Plato and Aristotle onwards, even when there is some variation in the actual identification of the ways of life in question. See Festugière, "Les trois vies," 117–31.

11) *EN* I 1095b14–1096a6.

> as the greatest possible goods for men – excellence, wisdom and pleasure [ἀρετῆς καὶ φρονήσεως καὶ ἡδονῆς], we see that there are also three ways of life in which all those who happen to have the resources [οἱ ἐπ' ἐξουσίας τυγχάνοντες] choose to live, the life of politics, the life of philosophy, and the life of enjoyment [πολιτικὸν φιλόσοφον ἀπολαυστικόν].[12] (*EE* I 1215a26–37)

This passage illustrates the ambiguity of the term *bios*: it can designate a way of life, the way people live, but also what they have to do for a living. As most human beings do not live lives of ease, luxury, and idleness, a big chunk of their waking lives is determined by activities dedicated to survival. Lives dedicated to the pursuit of pleasure, of political activity, or to philosophy are only possible when human beings are not tied up by necessity, and are only available to those who have the resources (*eksousia*) to choose them. Any of those ways of life requires resources, time, opportunity – and indeed that others help or take over the burden of survival for us.[13]

From the very start, then, it is clear that these are ways of life that are limited to a small number of people, those rich enough to be freed from attending the bare necessities of life. But two qualifications are important. The first is that there is nothing in the nature of these ways of life themselves that make them only suitable for a small number of people – or, at least, nothing that can be deduced from the contrast with *bioi* dedicated to the acquisition of the bare necessities. One could conceive or at least imagine a society where, with the help of technology and systems of division of labor, the vast majority of people would be free and available to engage in a life of politics, philosophy, or pleasure-seeking.

The second qualification is that even if only a small number of people have the means to adopt these ways of life, those who live in the pursuit of meeting the

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12) All translations of *EE* are by H. Rackham (Aristotle. *Athenian Constitution. Eudemian Ethics. Virtues and Vices*, 1935), slightly modified by me.

13) In the society examined by Aristotle, slavery is a crucial factor that affords a small group of people the opportunity to engage in these superior ways of life. Compare Aristotle, *Politics* I 1255b36: "Therefore all people rich enough to be able to avoid personal trouble have a steward who takes this office, while they themselves engage in politics or philosophy [αὐτοὶ δὲ πολιτεύονται ἢ φιλοσοφοῦσιν]" (translation by H. Rackham, 1932).

bare necessities would choose, if given the chance, one of these three ways of life for themselves. The reason for this is that, even if they are not available to all people due to specific circumstances, they are still the ways of life that allow for the acquisition and enjoyment of those things most people consider to be worthiest of choice, and are therefore essential constituents of a happy life: excellence, wisdom, and pleasure.

The adoption of each way of life is therefore linked to the perceived desirability of the goods that constitute the end of each of them. These are identified very early on in *EE* as the three possible contenders for the title of the greatest good – *to megiston agathon*.

> But to be happy and to live blissfully and finely may consist chiefly in three things deemed to be most desirable: some people say that wisdom [τὴν φρόνησιν] is the greatest good, others excellence [τὴν ἀρετήν] and others pleasure [τὴν ἡδονήν]. (*EE* I 1214a30)

What is meant by "greatest good" needs to be understood within the wider context of Aristotelian ethics. Implied here is the idea that any action is decisively determined by the nature of its goal (*telos*, pl. *tele*) – that which is aimed at by the performance of the action. The goal of any action is either a good or something that the agent perceives as or believes to be a good (an apparent good).[14] With that good as an object of desire, the agent will act in such a way as to achieve that goal, by using means – which are themselves desired as something that contributes to the achievement of those goals. But not all goals are equal. Some goals are pursued not for their own sake, but for the sake of something else.[15] I go to the gym in order to become physically fit, but although physical fitness is a goal that motivates many different actions, it is not an end in itself. Rather, it is a goal pursued for the sake of other goals – namely, for the sake of health, beauty, and self-esteem. In this regard, physical fitness as a goal is less final than the goals for the sake of which it is pursued. It is, so to speak, an interme-

14) *EN* III 1113a23–24, *EE* VII 1235b26–29.

15) The distinction between ends and means is at the center of the distinction between deliberation (*bouleusis*) and wish (*boulesis*): one wishes (*bouletai*) ends; one deliberates on means to achieve those ends. Ends are not defined by human action, but are themselves that which defines human action. See *EN* III 1111b25, 1112b11; *EE* II 1226a7ff., 1227a12ff., 1227b35ff.

diary goal, and in that regard, itself a means to those other ends, desired not simply for itself, but for the sake of those more final goals. And so, this distinction between goals (*tele*) and means (*ta pros ta tele*) establishes a hierarchy of goals as it applies to individual actions and chains of actions. But it can also be expanded to apply to life, understood as a whole constituted by an interlocking and interacting complex of actions. All those intermediary goals (which can themselves be taken as means for other goals) can be followed in the direction of the most final goal or set of goals – the good or goods for the sake of which all other goods are desired and pursued. This is the greatest good – the good that defines life as a whole.[16]

According to Aristotle, happiness will involve, in one way or another, the possession or enjoyment of at least one of those three goods, each desired as an end in itself, not as means to other ends: pleasure, excellence, and wisdom. It is in relation to these possible greatest goods that Aristotle defines each of the canonical three *bioi*.

> Of these the philosophic life denotes being concerned with excellence [βούλεται περὶ φρόνησιν εἶναι] the contemplation of truth [τὴν θεωρίαν τὴν περὶ τὴν ἀλήθειαν], the political life means being occupied with honorable activities (and these are the activities that spring from excellence), and the life of enjoyment is concerned with the pleasures of the body. (*EE* I 1215b1ff.)

The connection between *bios apolaustikos* and *bios politikos* and their respective greatest goods is relatively straightforward. Someone whose way of life is pleasure-seeking will direct the bulk of the activity they engage in of their own accord to the acquisition and enjoyment of the pleasures of the body: eating, drinking, sex, and so on. Someone whose way of life is political will endeavor to engage in honorable activities

16) In this context, the pursuit of the bare necessities of life is firmly enshrined among the intermediary goods – and, as such, as means to those more final goods. Aristotle's position regarding business and money-seeking (*ta khrematistika*) is illustrative of the ends-means distinction. Whereas Plato pairs money-seeking with pleasure-seeking under the argument that without the former the latter would not be possible (*Republic* IX 580e1–581a1), Aristotle connects money-seeking with the pursuit of the necessities of life and with vulgar and undignified pursuits. This means that while for Plato money-seeking is folded into the three canonical ways of life through its association with pleasure, for Aristotle money-seeking is placed well outside of them.

and thereby exercise their excellences as much as they possibly can. But the goal of the *bios philosophos* in this definition is a lot harder to understand.

The translation itself is complicated. So far, I have used slightly modified versions of Rackham's translations of Aristotle. But there is a serious problem with the translation of this passage: the English version only mentions "contemplation of truth," but the Greek includes *phronesis* – wisdom – as well as contemplation. The difficulties of translation, however, help to highlight a significant difference between *EE* and *EN*. Nowhere in *EN* is the phrase *bios philosophos* ever used, only *bios theoretikos*. In other words, the terminology used in *EN* puts *theoria* – contemplation – front and center as the only and defining goal of the third way of life. The *EE*, on the other hand, puts *phronesis* alongside *theoria* as one of the goals of the *bios philosophos*.

Whether this constitutes a substantial difference is hard to tell. The term *phronesis* itself is difficult to pin down. Considering that Aristotle is discussing existing perspectives on the nature of happiness, it is likely that he is using *phronesis* in a more generic sense: the ability to think, to judge, to use one's reason. In this book it does not seem to have the more restricted, technical meaning that it acquires in book 5 (which is the same as book 6 of *EN*) – a practical intelligence that allows for the ethical judgment of particular circumstances. If we were to understand *phronesis* in this passage in this way, this would suggest a conception of *bios philosophos* different from the exclusive focus on the kind of contemplation that has tended to lead scholars to exclude Aristotle from the ranks of PWL – the contemplation of the truth detached from the concerns of life, as suggested in *Metaphysics* and book 10 of *EN*. But even if we were to take *phronesis* in the more generic sense, the kind of rational activity envisaged need not be exclusively restricted to contemplation, but may possibly include the application of rational knowledge and judgment.[17]

17) See Rowe, "The Meaning of *Phronesis*," 73–92. According to Rowe, in *EE* Aristotle does not make the sharp distinction between theoretical and practical that lies at the heart of *EN*. The use of *phronesis* in *EE*, therefore, merges the two components. While Rowe does not develop the consequences of this reading for the definition of *bios philosophos*, this suggests to me that there might be such a thing as a philosophical life that is expressed in action, not just in contemplation. However, the evidence is scant, and the matter is very obscure, requiring a detailed analysis of book 8 of *EE*. Further work would be needed, but it might be possible to extract from *EE* a different model of philosophical life than the one found in *EN*. In contrast, however, see Buddensiek, *Die Theorie des Glücks*, 46–50.

How *phronesis* and *theoria* come together to constitute the goal of this way of life is therefore unclear. Are they supposed to be read as distinct but related goals? If so, are they supposed to be equal in standing, or is one of them more important than the other? Or, alternatively, is contemplation of the truth simply a description of what this conception of *phronesis* entails? The translation of *kai* is key here: is it a mere copulative "and," a stronger "and especially," or epexegetical "that is"? Any of these alternatives is grammatically possible, and any decision requires the translator to make assumptions. Ultimately, the solution to this problem would require further research and a detailed analysis of the connection between *theoria* and *phronesis* in the other books of the *EE*, which is outside the scope of this paper.[18]

Whether standing alone as the sole greatest good, or in combination with something else, contemplation plays a crucial role in both *EE* and *EN*. And here lies the main stumbling block for the inclusion of Aristotle within PWL, which is tied up with the main divide in the interpretation of Aristotle's ethics.[19] Is happiness, founded on contemplation, inclusive of other goods, such as the practical excellences and external goods? Or is contemplation in and of itself sufficient? From the point of view of our current discussion, the problem with adopting a dominant stance is that it reinforces the impression of contemplation as far detached from the concerns of ordinary human beings. One of the reasons for this impression is that Aristotle goes out of his way to contrast contemplation and action at several points in *Metaphysics* and *EN*. In the former, the distinction between the objects of contemplation and the objects of action are emphasized.[20] In the latter, there is an insistence on the difference between the happiness that is attained through contemplation and the one that is attained through the exercise of the excellences of action.[21] Aristotle also emphasizes

18) In particular, book 8, with its very complex discussion of perfect excellence, *kalokagathia* and its obscure connection with *theoria*. For some attempts to make sense of this discussion, see Kenny, *Aristotle on the Perfect Life*, chapter 7; Wolt, "*Phronesis* and *Kalokagathia*," 1–23; Bonasio, "*Kalokagathia* and the Unity of the Virtues," 27–57; Bonasio, "Complete Virtue," 172–87; Buddensiek, *Die Theorie des Glücks*, chapter 6.

19) The scholarly debate about Aristotle's notion of happiness in *EN* tends to be divided between inclusive-end and dominant-end (or monist, intellectualist or exclusivist) readings. For an overview of the debate, see Long, "Aristotle on *Eudaimonia*," 92–94; Ackrill, "Aristotle on Eudaimonia," 15–33; Annas, "Aristotle on Virtue and Happiness," 35–56; and Kraut, *Aristotle on the Human Good*, 3–9.

20) Aristotle, *Metaphysics* II 993b19–21.

21) *EN* X 1177b1–15.

the practical uselessness of contemplation.[22] The activity of contemplation exercises that part of human nature that is most like the gods, and therefore, disconnected and disengaged from ordinary human concerns.[23] These factors go some way to explain why it is difficult to argue for the inclusion of Aristotle within PWL, especially as the contemporary incarnation of PWL, as expressed throughout this volume, puts a significant emphasis on the practical and pedagogical dimensions of its project.[24]

But even an inclusivist position needs to account for the importance Aristotle awards to contemplation. If we understand contemplation as something detached from ordinary human life, we still need to account for its role alongside the exercise of practical excellences and the possession of external goods. In what way and to what degree do those other goods contribute to the attainment of happiness? Or, seen from a different angle, how does contemplation contribute to the exercise of practical virtues and to the maintenance of life? In other words, what is the use of contemplation for human life? These problems are not merely of scholarly interest, since whatever solutions might be found will influence decisively one's journey toward the attainment of happiness, and are therefore of crucial importance for PWL as an existential project. Any way of life that includes contemplation might still be far removed from ordinary human life, and therefore an unlikely candidate for inclusion within PWL.

These debates, however, tend to focus on *EN*, with little attention given to the evidence we can find in *EE*. Nevertheless, in book 1 of *EE* we can find some hints that might show how even a *bios philosophos* focused on contemplation might still be included within PWL. I have shown that the three *bioi* are defined in relation to their goal, conceived as the greatest good – *to megiston agathon*. But how is each *bios* connected to its own specific goal? The phrase used in the definition is that a certain *bios* "*bouletai peri* X *einai*." This leaves room for considerable ambiguity. The verb *boulomai* admits several meanings, including "to mean," and together with *peri* + accusative, to be concerned with something; but it can also mean to want, to wish, to aspire to. If we take this latter meaning (perhaps the most common in collo-

22) For example, Aristotle, *Protrepticus,* B44 Düring; and *Metaphysics* I 982b11–27. See Nightingale, *Spectacles of Truth*, chapter 5; Walker, *Uses of Contemplation*, chapter 2.

23) *EN* X 1177b27ff., 1178b8ff.; Aristotle, *Metaphysics* XII 1072b24–26.

24) See Faustino, "Philosophy as a Way of Life Today," 358–74.

quial Ancient Greek), the association with the notion of *boulesis* stands out.[25] *Boulesis* is the desire that an agent has toward the ends (*tele*) of one's actions.[26] It differs from the relation the agent has with the means (*ta pros ta tele*), which is one of deliberation (*bouleusis*) and finally choice (*prohairesis*). While the agent deliberates on and chooses the means to achieve an end, the end itself cannot be deliberated on or chosen – one can only wish for or desire it. In other words, there is a distinction between desiring an end or goal and having the means to obtain it.[27]

If reapplied here to the notion of *bios*, this distinction might hint at a way for contemplation to be the greatest good in a way of life that is not beyond human concerns. *Bios apolaustikos* or *politikos* or *philosophos* is a way of life that desires and aspires to the particular goal that is conceived as its greatest good, but it is not necessarily a way of life that has attained that goal. This reading of the definition of *bios* in *EE* might support Hadot's point that Aristotle's *bios theoretikos* (and even *bios philosophos*, although Hadot is not thinking of *EE*) is "*vie selon l'esprit*." The emphasis is on the way of life as determined by the aspiration for the goal, not on the attainment of the goal itself.

Considering *bios philosophos* or *theoretikos* in comparison with the other two canonical ways of life, helps us put this matter into perspective. In Aristotelian terms, one does not adopt one of these ways of life "in order to transform one's way of life."[28] Rather, the individual way of life is taken up for the sake of the greatest good that corresponds to it. In other words, each way of life is defined by the *telos* toward which one's *boulesis* is directed. The adoption of a *bios apolaustikos* correlates with the acknowledgement of pleasure as the greatest good; and the same with *bios politikos* and excellence, and likewise with *bios philosophos* or *theoretikos* and wisdom or contemplation. The transformation of our way of life is a concomitant effect, never the goal. And this is no less true of the *bios politikos* or the *bios apolaustikos* as it is of the philosophical way of life.

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25) See Woods' very literal translation: "Of these [lives], the philosophical aspires to a concern with wisdom and speculation about the truth." (Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics Books I, II and VII*, 4).

26) *EN* III 1111b25, 1112b11; *EE* II 1226a7ff., 1227a12ff., 1227b35ff.

27) In this regard, Aristotle does not differ substantially from both the Platonic and Pythagorean traditions, which also frame the matter in terms of motivation and desire.

28) *Pace* Sellars, "What Is Philosophy as a Way of Life," 41.

Furthermore, imagining what the maximum attainment of the goals of the other *bioi* would look like can also help us put the super-human veneer of the attainment of a life of contemplation into perspective. While we would have little trouble imagining a life defined by the pursuit of pleasure, it is a lot more difficult to imagine what a whole life filled with nothing but continuous pleasure would be like.[29] Would it even be recognizable at all as a human life? In Ancient Greek religious thinking, such a life is something at most attainable by the gods who live at ease – and even they might experience the occasional moment of discomfort. Likewise, can we imagine what a superlatively successful political life would be? In the Platonic conception, this would be a life defined by unlimited power – the ability to vanquish all foes and surpass all rivals – accompanied by the admiring acknowledgement of one's superiority from every rational creature in the universe.[30] Is this not similar to the power of the gods, and the worship that is owed to them? In the Aristotelian conception of the political life, the goal instead is practical excellence. This feels like a more attainable human goal. But once we consider the myriad individual excellences we are called upon to master and the intellectual capability – in the form of *phronesis*, in the specific sense used in *EE* book 5 (same as *EN* book 6) – required to navigate the changeability and unpredictability of human experience, it becomes clear that we are dealing with something extraordinarily difficult to attain. And even if such a thing is attainable, a life entirely filled with the perfect and continuous execution of excellent actions is a life most human beings would be unfamiliar with. The difficulty, perhaps, is that we are limited beings driven toward the unlimited. Our desire runs ahead of our ability to comprehend and to attain – and therefore we fall short of where our *boulesis* pulls us.

So, while *bios theoretikos*, in its perfection or completeness, might look very different from anything we might recognize as a human life, the other ways of life, if

29) Aristotle provides some concrete examples of people who live for the attainment of pleasure: the Assyrian king Sardanapalus (*EN* 1095b22; *EE* 1216a16) and Smindyrides of Sybaris (*EE* 1216a17). But these function more as cautionary examples of the danger and degradation that comes with a life dedicated to pleasure.

30) Compare Plato, *Republic* IX 580c8–583a11. In *EN* 1095b25ff., Aristotle is keen to point out that the real goal of the *bios politikos* is *arete* – excellence – and not *time* – honor, the admiration of others. This is another point in which Aristotle, although clearly inspired and influenced by Platonic tripartition, deviates from Plato's conception.

understood in their perfect and maximalist version – with the perfect attainment of their respective goals – might be comparably difficult to conceive. But such a way of life in development, as it unfolds, and in particular as the setting for the aspiration for the goal, is very much recognizable to us as a way of life – a way of life dominated by intellectual curiosity, and the desire to acquire and share knowledge.

3. Philosophy and What Makes Life Worth Living

So far, we have seen how the three *bioi* – including the philosophical way of life – emerge within an existence that is freed from striving for the bare necessities, and that is directed toward attaining the greatest good. While the bare necessities are the minimum that makes life possible, the greatest good is the maximum to which we aspire. However, this minimum and this maximum are not on the same plane. The bare necessities are factual or practical – we need them, or otherwise we perish. On the other hand, they are not in themselves the object of aspiration; they are means, not ends. It is possible, however, to live without attaining the greatest good. In fact, that is one of the implications of my argument so far. The greatest good is a matter of desire or aspiration. One can live – or at least survive – without attaining it.

But the maximum of the greatest good can be conceptually contrasted with a different kind of minimum – a minimum situated on the plane of desire, not factuality. This is the minimum that would make life worth living, while still falling short of attaining the greatest good. This minimum would be the threshold and the conditions that make life worth living – that make it acceptable or choice-worthy. The question, therefore, becomes: what is the minimum that would justify the desire to be alive? This might coincide or not with the bare necessities. In fact, some might argue that being alive is always preferable or desirable no matter the circumstances. Others might, on contrary, put the bar much higher and demand goods and circumstances that go far beyond the satisfaction of the bare necessities. Regardless of any specific answer, from a formal point of view, there is a distinction between the question of what makes life possible and the question of what makes life desirable. And each of those questions are distinct from the question about what constitutes the greatest good.

This issue, which is entirely absent from *EN*, comes to the forefront in *EE* 1215b15 –1216a37, in connection with the doctrine of the three *bioi* we have discussed so far.[31] What I propose to do in the next few pages is take up the question about what makes life desirable or worthy of choice as discussed in this passage to think through the implications for the philosophical way of life. Could the *bios philosophos*, besides being the way of life that aspires to *phronesis* and/or *theoria* as the greatest good, also constitute the minimum threshold for life itself to be worthy of choice?

My reading of this passage hinges on how it reflects the old pessimistic tradition that I designate as ancient antinatalism, and which we are more familiar with – mainly through Nietzsche's paraphrase in *The Birth of Tragedy* – as the wisdom of Silenus.[32] It is best for humans not to be born, and the second best is to die as quickly as possible. The connection with ancient antinatalism is clear, first of all, from how Aristotle frames the question.[33]

> While there are many different things as to which it is not easy to make a right judgement, this is especially the case with one about which everybody thinks that it is very easy to judge and that every man can decide – the question which of the things contained in being alive is to be chosen (τί τῶν ἐν τῷ ζῆν αἱρετόν), and which, when somebody attained it, would fully satisfy their desire. For many of life's events are such that they cause life to be thrown away, for instance, diseases, excessive pains, storms; so that it is clear that on account of these things

31) See Machek, *The Life Worth Living*, 1–8. In his chapter on Aristotle, Machek only briefly considers the evidence from *EE*. What he finds there is "the most sustained discussion of the conditions of a life worth living in the Aristotelian corpus." (Ibid., 86)

32) So-named after the story of the capture of Silenus told in a fragment from Aristotle's lost dialogue *Eudemus or On the Soul*: fr. 44 Rose = 6 Ross. This is an extreme version of Greek pessimism that articulates the idea that the best is not to be born, the second best to die as quickly as possible. This is an idea in Ancient Greek culture with a very long afterlife and recurs in a huge variety of literary genres and contexts, as in, for example, Theognis, 425–28; Bacchylides V, 53–55; Sophocles, *Oedipus Coloneus*, 1225–238; Euripides, fr. 285 (Kannicht); Alexis, fr. 145 (Kassel-Austin). See Easterling, "Sophocles and the Wisdom of Silenus," 193–204; Arnott, *Alexis*, 429–30.

33) Some scholars, however, see this passage as a mere catalogue of misfortunes: Natali, *The Wisdom of Aristotle*, 218; Rowe, *The Eudemian and Nicomachean Ethics*, 16–17. I disagree entirely with this view.

> any way it would actually be preferable, if someone offered the choice, not to be born (αἱρετὸν ἦν, εἴ τις αἵρεσιν ἐδίδου, διά γε ταῦτα τὸ μὴ γενέσθαι). *(EE* I, 1215b15–22)

The question is complex. What starts as a discussion of what we desire in life transitions to a discussion of what makes life itself undesirable and something to be rejected. The assumption is that being alive has a conditional value that depends on what a life contains: there are certain contents of life that make life worth having, while others might make life not worth having. The key, however, is the very last sentence in the passage. There Aristotle frames the question not as a matter of throwing away one's life in certain circumstances, but rather one of preferring not to have been born at all – if we could ever have had that chance. This represents a significant shift, because the focus is not on the negative value of the life contents themselves, but rather on the value of life as a whole. The choice is not between going through storms and diseases or not (that choice would be quite an easy one to make), but rather whether one would choose to exist at all in the knowledge that one's life would be determined by those negative occurrences. The question is therefore reframed from an antinatalist point of view. There are circumstances where it would be preferable not to be born at all; what are the circumstances that would make being born worthwhile?

To understand this shift in point of view, we need first to look at how it is framed. The question about what makes life worth living is immediately preceded by an anecdote featuring the philosopher Anaxagoras.[34]

> Owing to this, different people give the name of happy to different persons, as was said before too; and Anaxagoras of Clazomenae when asked "Who is the happiest man?" said "None of those whom you think, but he would seem to you an odd sort of person." But Anaxagoras answered in that way because he saw that the man who put the question supposed it to be impossible to receive the appellation "happy" without being great and beautiful or rich, whereas he himself perhaps thought that the person who humanly speaking enjoys bliss is he that lives by the standard of

34) Compare *EN* X 1179a13–16. See Gigon, "Das Prooimion," 113–15.

> justice without pain and in purity, or participates in some form of divine contemplation. (*EE* I, 1215a6–14)

The setup is a recurring trope in Greek culture: a figure of wisdom like a philosopher or, in most cases, one of the Seven Sages, is asked a question or posed a riddle, often to do with a superlative: what is the best in life, what is the strongest thing, the most powerful, the most pleasurable, and so on.[35] Here we are not given Anaxagoras' actual reply, but we get a teaser: the questioner will be surprised by the actual answer, since it will go against their expectations and assumptions. Aristotle himself provides an interpretation of what Anaxagoras might have meant, and in doing so contrasts the kinds of goods and attributes most people associate with happiness – greatness, beauty, wealth – with the kind of answer Anaxagoras might have given: living without pain, in purity and according to justice, and/or participating in divine contemplation.[36]

The question of what would satisfy desire, together with the alternative – not to be born – firmly places what comes next within the search for the greatest good. The suggestion at this point is not yet that only the greatest good would make life worth living – the focus is still on specific and very dramatic instances of lack of value. But the allusion to the trope is clear enough, especially in the hypothetical formulation: it would be more choice-worthy not to be born, if someone gave us that choice.

The Anaxagoras anecdote provides the transition between the initial presentation of the three *bioi* and the discussion of what would make one choose to be born rather than not be born. To understand this move, we need to consider the second Anaxagoras anecdote, which appears near the end of the discussion. It is in this second anecdote featuring Anaxagoras that we get the full formulation of the previous discussion from an antinatalist point of view.[37]

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35) See Konstantakos, "Seven Sages as Riddlers," 20; Ohlert, *Rätsel und Rätselspiele*, 105; Davies, "Existential Riddles," 458.

36) The anecdote is used to illustrate the diversity of opinions regarding happiness, but already against the backdrop of the three *bioi*. All possibilities are covered or at least hinted at: a life without pain (a possible connection with a life of pleasure and enjoyment), a life of justice and purity – a life in pursuit of excellence, which is the political life, a life of *theoria*.

37) The same anecdote is told in *Protrepticus,* B18–20 Düring.

> Now it is said that when somebody persisted in putting various difficulties of this sort to Anaxagoras and went on asking for the sake of what one would choose to be born rather than not (τίνος ἕνεκ' ἄν τις ἕλοιτο γενέσθαι μᾶλλον ἢ μὴ γενέσθαι), he replied by saying, "For the sake of contemplating the sky and the whole order of the universe." (*EE* I, 1216a11ff.)

The question itself is key: for the sake of what would someone choose to be born rather than not be born? It is very similar to the question Midas asks of Silenus in Aristotle's *Eudemus*: what is best for human beings and what is most worthy of choice of all?[38] The answer is that the best is to not be born, the second best to die as quickly as possible. The final question asked of Anaxagoras sums up what has been happening so far in the *EE* passage. Aristotle is engaging in a thought-experiment which takes as its basic assumption a qualified version of an antinatalist thesis: considering that *prima facie* life is not worth choosing, is there any life content, any possibility in life that could justify choosing to be born instead of not being born?[39] In other words, is there anything in life that could overcome the all-cancelling, all-annihilating proposition that we would all be much better off not having been born at all?

This thought-experiment opens the space to consider what exactly we want; or, in its more radical formulation, what it is that we would choose to live for, and without which – at least posited as a goal – we would not even bother to come into life. Starting from an antinatalist stance, the thought experiment acts as a kind of acid test: it destroys all possibilities that would be incapable of fulfilling the requirements, leaving only behind those who can withstand the corrosion. The process is complex and is made all the more difficult by the fact that Aristotle provides us only with the barest of outlines. The results are mostly negative, that is, we can extract a list of all the possibilities that are excluded.[40]

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38) See Aristotle fr. 44 Rose = Plutarch, *Consolatio ad Apollonium* 115b–e. See Davies, "Midas and Silenus," 682–97; Segev, "Death, Immortality," 438–61; *The Value of the World*, 119–26.

39) In my views on ancient thought experiments, I am indebted to Ierodiakonou's work. See Ierodiakonou, "Ancient Thought Experiments," 125–40; "Remarks," 37–49; and "Triple life," 31–42.

40) Aristotle provides only the barest of outlines of the process that leads to the three *bioi*. The results are mostly negative, and at best we can extract a list of all the possibilities that are excluded: 1. to live the life of a

Through the rejected possibilities – and reasons behind that rejection – a kind of generic profile emerges of what possibility or possibilities might resist the corrosive power of the antinatalist stance. The thing for the sake of which we would choose to be born rather than not be born must (1) be an end in itself, (2) be sustainable for an extended period of time, (3) be in conformity with the normative conception of human nature mentioned above, and (4) involve pleasure in some capacity (although the role of pleasure is problematic).[41]

The possibilities that emerge from this experiment are *bios apolaustikos*, *bios politikos*, *bios philosophos*.[42] Since, as we have seen, these are defined by their goals – by what they posit as their greatest good – this means, in the terms of the thought experiment, that one would choose to be born only for the sake of one of these goods: bodily pleasure, excellence or wisdom, and/or contemplation of the truth.

The answer given by Anaxagoras amounts to something like a *bios philosophos* or *theoretikos*. Moreover, the kind of activity endorsed by Anaxagoras seems to be, strictly speaking, entirely contemplative.[43] This means that, according to Anaxagoras, the reason why one would choose to come into being – as opposed to not existing at all – is to have the opportunity to engage in philosophical activities as one's predominant way of life. In other words, *bios philosophos* or *theoretikos* is the motivation for living. Aristotle, however, leaves open the possibility that any of the other two might correspond to happiness, since all three match the profile that emerges from his analysis.[44]

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child (*EE* 1215b23, compare *EE* 1216a5); 2. to experience neither pleasure nor pain (*EE* 1215b25); 3. to enjoy a ἡδονὴ μὴ καλή (*EE* 1215b26); 4. to perform activities for the sake of something else, (i.e., as means and not ends in themselves) (*EE* 1215b29); 5. to enjoy the pleasures of food and sex (*EE* 1215b31): 6. to enjoy the pleasure of sleep (1216a3). For detailed analyses of the argumentative structure of this passage, see Gigon, "Das Prooimion," 115–18; Kenny, *Aristotelian Ethics*, 194–95; Buddensiek, *Die Theorie des Glücks*, 56–59; Zillig, "O fim," 357–71.

41) On the problematic role of pleasure, see Simpson, *The Eudemian Ethics*, 205–13.

42) *EE I* 1216a28ff.

43) Anaxagoras tips the scale toward *bios philosophos*, in a purely theoretical form. The association between Anaxagoras and *theoria* is a recurring theme in Aristotle's work: see *EN* VI = *EE* V, 1141b2–12; and *Protrepticus*, B18–20 (Düring). However, his association with Pericles complicates this picture. See Nightingale, *Spectacles of Truth*, 22–26, 32.

44) *Bios apolaustikos* is problematic. But, unlike *EN*, it is not dismissed out of hand as a possible candidate. *Bios politikos* is the object of further clarification: it is a life lived in the pursuit of actions that are performed

The two Anaxagoras anecdotes can be read as two parts of one extended anecdote, with the discussion in the middle standing for the imagined philosophical back and forth between Anaxagoras and the questioner. It is a riddle of the superlative with a dialectical discussion in the middle. If we take the two anecdotes together, then, we can see that the second question is in fact a reformulation of the first. It goes from "who is the happiest person?" to "for the sake of what would one choose to be born rather than not being born?" A transition like this only makes sense if it is assumed that anything short of a life directed at attaining the greatest good would not make life worth living, that one would not choose to be born for anything other than the best. Anything less than that, and we need not bother.

Therefore, what happens between the two Anaxagoras' anecdotes is a reframing of the question for the maximum within a discussion that modern scholars tend to understand as one about the minimum: what is enough to make life worth living?[45] What allows for this reframing is the assumption of the antinatalist stance as a hermeneutical tool. In the context of a worldview that assumes by default that life is not worth living, nothing short of the maximum could even get close to justify the choice of being born – or to continue living.

In contrast with the Silenus story, in Aristotle's examination of what happiness might be, "not to be born" is not taken as the final answer, but rather as a challenge. We are looking for what happiness is. Happiness is the best. But some say that the best is not to be born. Let us assume that they are right. Let us take them at their word and imagine that we have not yet been born but are capable of making choices. Adopting an antinatalist stance, if we were given the choice of whether to be born or not, we would, in normal circumstances, choose not to be born. But is there anything in life that could make us change our choice – and say yes to being born? This is how the question for

for the sake of excellence. This is a similar point to the one made in *EN*. As in *EN*, Aristotle might adopt the three ways of life model from his wider cultural milieu, but he engages critically with this model and does not hesitate to modify it according to his own ethical findings.

45) See Woods' note on Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics Books 1, II and VIII*, 53–54; Macheck, *The Life Worth Living*, chapter 2. Woods, for example, seems to become genuinely confused and perplexed by Aristotle's argument: what could the bare minimum to make life livable have to do with the search for the good – indeed the best – life? While I agree with Machek that the question about happiness and the question about what makes life worth living can indeed be formally detached, Aristotle nonetheless brings the two questions together in this part of *EE* – the two questions become virtually merged.

happiness is reframed by the antinatalist stance and that is how Anaxagoras goes from answering (or better, not answering) a question about who the happiest person is to answering a question about what is the thing for the sake of which we would choose to be born. And since the antinatalism of Silenus is framed as a superlative – as the best – the whole discussion is also reframed not as a debate about the minimum necessary for us to choose life, but about the greatest good itself – that is, the maximum.[46]

The antinatalist stance therefore constitutes a radical starting point for any questioning about what happiness is. The question is no longer what is the greatest good in life. If that were the case, failure to acquire the best or to engage in the best activity would result in a life that fails to be happy, but would not be catastrophically wretched. In other words, adopting a philosophical way of life (or one of the other ways of life that might aspire to the greatest good) would be desirable, but failure to do so would not deplete life of its value. But once the question is reframed from the point of view of the antinatalist stance, failure to adopt a way of life that aspires to the greatest good becomes catastrophic. The question is: since life is not worth living without X, what is X? And if X is the greatest good, whatever that might be, then a life not directed toward the greatest good is a life that ought not to be desired, accepted or endured. And so, choosing a way of life that is directed toward the greatest good becomes a matter of life and death – since the greatest good is not simply a pleasant and desirable extra in a life that is overall worthy of being lived, but that very element without which one would not even bother existing. And if the *bios philosophos* is one of the very few possible contenders for what makes life worth living, then not living a philosophical way of life is potentially tantamount to throwing your life away. You would be better off not having been born at all.

These are radical conclusions that are derived from a radical starting point: a thought experiment that deals with an impossible circumstance. In reality, we cannot choose whether and for the sake of what we are to be born. What the thought experiment does is find and make salient the goals that would motivate such a choice, if it were possible. In other words, it identifies the ultimate goal, the greatest good. However,

46) This, of course, does not mean that for Aristotle only the maximum is enough. There is ample evidence, as Machek argues in his book, to show that this is not the case. But it means that, at least within this particular discussion in *EE*, that is the assumption he chose to adopt. See Machek, *The Life Worth Living*, chapter 2.

as we have seen when discussing the definitions of the three *bioi*, there is a significant difference between aspiration and attainment. Becoming fitter is the goal of my going to the gym; and that is so regardless of success or failure in attaining that goal. The thought experiment makes this even more salient since its prenatal setting allows us to set aside any considerations about resources needed to satisfy the bare necessities of life that might be used to object to the adoption of any of the canonical ways of life. What we are looking at is not an actual life with constraints such as health issues, family and work commitments, financial burdens, and the like; but rather life as it could be lived – as it ought to be lived – putting all those factors aside. That, of course, does not mean that one could easily put aside those constraints if one were to decide to adopt one of those three *bioi*, but rather that decision might lead to a reorganization of priorities and a radical change in one's life nonetheless. All those other factors and commitments would derive their meaning and place in our life as facilitators of the main goal: pleasure, excellence, or wisdom; instead of pleasure, excellence, or wisdom being pursued only intermittently, whenever those other factors allow it.

However, within the narrow scope of this thought experiment, no decision is made regarding which of the three lives is more worthy of choice. Therefore, the life of pleasure and the political life still stand as potential alternatives to the philosophical life. So how do we choose between the candidates? The question about the connection between the thought experiment and the rest of the ethical discussion in *EE* is left open. Does the *bios politikos* correspond to a life of excellence as understood in the rest of the book? Does *bios philosophos* correspond to a life dedicated to *theoria*? And what, if any, is the connection between *theoria* and excellence? *EE* provides us some tantalizing clues that we cannot follow in this study. But even if we accept that *bios philosophos* consists only of *theoria*, then *theoria* is presented as something essential, something crucial, something we could not live without. Although ultimately, it seems that Aristotle leaves behind the radical approach I have outlined, it at least shows us that such a perspective is conceivable, and it invites us to perhaps rethink the role *theoria* might play in our discussions about PWL.[47] Perhaps it is not so much

47) It would be a mistake to conclude that Aristotle is a proponent of the wisdom of Silenus. He adopts it in *EE* and in fr. 44 Rose for argumentative purposes. See Segev, "Death, Immortality," 438–61; *The Value of the World*, chapter 4.

a matter of seeing how philosophy can fit into our lives and help us live happier and fuller lives. Perhaps philosophy is the only possible or valid or even livable life. We need philosophy so that our lives are worth living. And if that is the case, everything else should be subordinate to it and help or at least not hinder its pursuit.

4. Conclusion

While I reject the idea that motivation should be seen as a crucial factor for defining philosophy as a way of life, it is nonetheless important to understand why such a way of life ought to be adopted – since it is not innate or spontaneous. The thought experiment in *EE* goes some way to clarify what that motivation could be. *Bios philosophos* is not merely a way of life one may or may not adopt. This is a way of life that takes wisdom or contemplation – or even both – not only as the greatest good, but also as the minimum that makes life living. This is not a matter of adopting a philosophical way of life to add value to one's life or to somehow transform it. Rather, philosophy emerges as one of the candidates for the very reason for wanting to be alive at all. The possibility the passages I have examined invite us to consider is that philosophy fulfils an existential need; without it, one might not bother to choose to live at all. One could object that these conclusions are built upon the normative conceptions that underpin Aristotelian ethics. But even if we were to set these aside, I believe that the invitation to consider this issue from this radical point of view still stands. We might therefore profit from reframing the question. Instead of why we should adopt philosophy as a way of life, we should perhaps ask: could we live a worthwhile and meaningful life without it?

Seen from this angle, the specific modality of philosophy adopted is less relevant than the fact that it fulfils a radical existential need. Even if the modality of philosophy at stake is purely contemplative – and, as we have seen, the evidence for this in *EE* is complicated and worthy of its own separate study – the connection between this and the antinatalist stance makes it clear that we are dealing with a matter of life or death. Contemplating the truth might be the only or one of the few motivations for anyone to choose to live in the first place, and to continue to live afterwards. This might surprise those who see contemplation as detached from life, but it makes sense even if we consider works such as *Metaphysics*. Contemplation, after all, is the

goal of a desire described as innate to human beings.[48] If all human beings by nature desire to know, then why would they not desire the kind of knowledge that surpasses all others? Why would they not desire the best kind of knowledge and live their lives in the pursuit of it?

However, at the practical level – at the level in which PWL is being explored by us – we are not discussing the perfect attainment of the goal of *theoria*, but whether a life dedicated to the pursuit of *theoria* ("*vie selon l´esprit*," to use Hadot's formulation), has a place within PWL. It would be odd if we were to exclude a kind of dedication to knowledge itself that is so ingrained within one's reasons for living as this. Once we take this into account, there is no incompatibility in principle between the pursuit of knowledge for knowledge's sake and PWL.

Therefore, the inclusion of Aristotle in our discussions about PWL opens the space to consider the role and value of philosophy as a radical existential possibility – even if considered only as *theoria*. This might even allow us to reassess the value of philosophy pursued for the sake of knowledge, and furthermore, to reflect on the value of the desire for learning for the sake of learning as an existentially valuable way of living. Ultimately, it might even go some way toward addressing the anxieties and concerns that lie at the heart of PWL as a philosophical "third way" by teasing out the possibility of rehabilitating academic philosophy as an intellectual endeavor authentically and passionately pursued.

48) Aristotle, *Metaphysics* I 980a21.

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