

# Aristotle and Philosophy as a Way of Life

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## 1. Introduction

One potentially challenging case for Pierre Hadot's claim that all of ancient philosophy was ultimately a way of life is Aristotle. It is not uncommon for Aristotle to be seen as perhaps *the* master theoretician, developing complex systematic accounts across a wide range of topics, from metaphysics and ethics, through to the natural and social sciences. In this sense, Aristotle might be seen to share much in common with a modern academic philosopher, developing theories in both practical and theoretical philosophy, examining the foundations of the sciences, and insisting on the importance of the study of logic. Much of his time, we sense, was spent gathering information, whether that be studying the ideas of his predecessors, examining and dissecting animals, or collecting information about ancient constitutions.<sup>2</sup> All this feels a world away from the convention-flouting lifestyle of someone like Diogenes the Cynic or Epicurus' claim that philosophy is first and foremost a remedy for human suffering.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, it is interesting to note that a recent synoptic study of philosophy as a way of life includes chapters on Socrates, Epicureanism, Stoicism, and Platonism, while Aristotle is passed over in silence.<sup>4</sup>

Hadot's claim that in antiquity philosophy was understood as first and foremost a way of life might seem uncontroversial when thinking about *some* ancient philosophical

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this paper—in some ways quite different—was presented at the British School in Athens in April 2022 and I am very grateful to the audience for their comments. A later version was presented in April 2023 to the online seminar arising from the Exploratory Project “Mapping Philosophy as a Way of Life: An Ancient Model, A Contemporary Approach” (2022.02833.PTDC), funded by the FCT (Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology). I am also grateful to the editors of this volume for their feedback. It was originally intended to build on and fully justify claims that I had previously made in passing in Sellars 2009, 35–36, and 2017, 42–44. However, in the process of revising and developing it my view has changed quite a bit, not least in the final conclusion.

<sup>2</sup> On these activities and others, see the biography of Aristotle in Natali 2013.

<sup>3</sup> Diogenes' life is recounted in Diog. Laert. 6.20–81, who at 6.103 comments on whether Cynicism ought to be seen as a serious philosophy or merely a lifestyle. For Epicurus' statement see Porph., *Ad Marcellam* 31.

<sup>4</sup> See Sharpe and Ure 2021. They may, in part, be following my own previous statement (Sellars 2017, 42–44), cited at 20, that Aristotle had a primarily theoretical understanding of philosophy. By contrast, Cooper 2012 includes Aristotle in his account of philosophy as a way of life in antiquity.

texts, such as Seneca's letters or the notebook reflections of Marcus Aurelius. In some places in his many essays, Hadot seemed to limit his claim by saying that it was primarily in the Hellenistic and Roman periods that philosophy was seen as a way of life.<sup>5</sup> However, elsewhere Hadot was quite clear that he did not want his claim to be limited merely to these later periods (1995b, 269). He explicitly wanted to challenge the old narrative that presents Plato and Aristotle as the great masters of pure speculation, followed by a period of decline and fall in which the dogmatic Hellenistic schools offered mere practical ethical advice.<sup>6</sup> Central to Hadot's account of ancient philosophy, then, is the explicit claim that Aristotle too was committed to this idea of philosophy as a way of life. The problem, though, is that Aristotle looks like the archetypal theoretical philosopher, devoted to the pursuit of knowledge above all else.

As it happens, Hadot was well aware of the potential challenge that Aristotle might be seen to be to his general thesis. In the opening paragraph of the chapter devoted to Aristotle in his book *What is Ancient Philosophy?* Hadot wrote:

The usual idea of Aristotle's philosophy seems a complete contradiction of the fundamental thesis we wish to defend—namely, that the ancients conceived of philosophy as a way of life. Certainly, Aristotle strongly asserts that the highest knowledge is knowledge which is chosen for itself and which therefore seems to bear no relation to the knower's way of life. (Hadot 1995a, 123; trans. 2002, 77)

As an example of Aristotle's commitment to this pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, Hadot referred to the first book of the *Metaphysics* where Aristotle comments that knowledge (ἐπιστήμη) that is desirable in itself is closest to wisdom (σοφία) and certainly closer to wisdom than knowledge that is desirable for any results that might come from it.<sup>7</sup> Thus, philosophy—the pursuit of wisdom—ought to focus its attention on the pursuit

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<sup>5</sup> See e.g. Hadot 1995b, 265; also 56–59. This restricted claim may seem less controversial, although it too has been challenged. As just one example, when reviewing Martha Nussbaum's *The Therapy of Desire*, a book focused on the practical and therapeutic aspects of Hellenistic and Roman thought, Bernard Williams commented by asking what possible therapeutic benefit could come from reading the logical works of Chrysippus. See Williams 1994, reviewing Nussbaum 1994.

<sup>6</sup> This view goes back to Hegel, on whom see Sellars 2009, 1–2, and Sharpe and Ure 2021, 230–33.

<sup>7</sup> See Hadot 1995a, 123, citing Arist., *Metaph.* 1.2.982a15 (i.e. 14–17).

of knowledge that is desirable in itself and not for some further practical goal, such as living a certain way of life.

In what follows, this is the issue that I want to explore further. Can Aristotle be accommodated within Hadot's model of philosophy as a way of life? If he cannot, that would seem to be fatal blow for Hadot's account of ancient philosophy. Any attempt to offer a general characterization of ancient philosophy that struggles to include Aristotle can hardly be taken seriously, for the obvious reason that Aristotle is by no means a marginal figure in ancient philosophy; on the contrary, some may judge him to be the greatest ancient philosopher of all.

Of course, Hadot himself made a case for why he thought Aristotle could be accommodated within his model, despite first appearances to the contrary. Before turning to examine his case, first we shall consider what Aristotle himself had to say about what he thought philosophy was. Then we shall look at Hadot's interpretation, before returning to some further evidence from Aristotle.

## 2. Aristotle on Philosophy

There are a number of places where we might look for an account of what Aristotle thought philosophy was. Perhaps the most obvious is the *Metaphysics*. In the opening chapter of Book 1, Aristotle gives an account of what he takes wisdom (σοφία) to be, wisdom being the thing that philosophers are trying to secure.<sup>8</sup> Famously, he opens with the statement that all human beings by nature desire to know.<sup>9</sup> He goes on to suggest that our principal source of knowledge is our senses, especially sight. So, our pursuit of knowledge begins with sensation (αἴσθησις). When we add to that the ability to remember, we are able to move on from bare sensation to what Aristotle calls experience (ἐμπειρία). Someone who has seen the same thing happen multiple times will implicitly draw inductive conclusions about what might happen in the future. While such experience is valuable, better still is skill (τέχνη), which moves from a basic ability to do things to a proper understanding of how to do them. Someone who is a real expert will have a complete understanding of how and why things happen as they do—they will “possess a

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<sup>8</sup> For a detailed commentary on *Metaph.* 1.1, see Cambiano 2012.

<sup>9</sup> Arist., *Metaph.* 1.1.980a21: πάντες ἄνθρωποι τοῦ εἰδέναι ὀρέγονται φύσει.

theory and know the causes.”<sup>10</sup> This sort of skill, however, is usually directed at some useful or practical outcome, responding to a human need. Higher still is scientific knowledge (ἐπιστήμη) of the way the world works. This knowledge serves no practical purpose and simply fills our desire to understand the world around us. It is this knowledge, which is knowledge of first causes (πρῶτα αἴτια), that Aristotle identifies with wisdom (*Metaph.* 981b28–9). This is what philosophy pursues. The philosopher—the lover of wisdom—is someone who does not yet have this knowledge but is trying to attain it. This, Aristotle says, is a leisure activity, to be pursued after the practical essentials of life have been secured (982b22–4). It is pointless, we might say, but certainly not in a negative sense; it is pointless in the same way that art, music, and literature are all pointless, done for its own sake because it is intrinsically valuable rather than as a means to some other end.

This is what we find in the *Metaphysics*. Another place where we might expect to find some comment on the nature of philosophy is Aristotle’s dialogue *On Philosophy* (Περὶ φιλοσοφίας), which—given its title—presumably addressed this issue directly.<sup>11</sup> Unfortunately this work is lost but the fragments and testimonia that survive suggest that this was a substantial work in ten books that in fact touched on a wide range of topics, many of which overlapped with the contents of the *Metaphysics*.<sup>12</sup> There is one piece of evidence for *On Philosophy* that seems especially relevant in the present context. The Aristotelian commentator John Philoponus reports that in this work Aristotle considered the different ways in which people used the words “wisdom” (σοφία) and “wise” (σοφός).<sup>13</sup> According to Philoponus, Aristotle mentioned five different ways in which one might understand these terms. Someone might be described wise if i) they develop practically useful means to aid survival; ii) they engage in artistic production; iii) they offer good political leadership; iv) they engage in the study of nature; and v) they study unchanging divine things. This list is presented as a hierarchy: in the most primitive societies the man

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<sup>10</sup> Arist., *Metaph.* 1.1.981b6: κατὰ τὸ λόγον ἔχειν αὐτοὺς καὶ τὰς αἰτίας γνωρίζειν.

<sup>11</sup> The fragments of *On Philosophy* are gathered together in Rose 1886, 24–40, Walzer 1934, 66–98, and Ross 1955, 73–96. They are translated in Ross 1952, 78–99.

<sup>12</sup> See fr. 8 Ross for the claim that *On Philosophy* was in 10 books. See also fr. 11, which suggests that, like the *Metaphysics*, it spent a good deal of time discussing Plato’s theory of forms, and fr. 26, which suggests that it addressed topics in theology.

<sup>13</sup> See Philop., in *Nicom. Isag.* 1.1 (Ross 1955, 76–77; trans. Ross 1952, 80–82).

who makes advances in farming or irrigation is called wise, while in a cultured *polis* those capable in artistic creation and political leadership are valued more highly. Unsurprisingly, Aristotle places the study of the natural world and divine things—physics and metaphysics—higher still, and the passage ends by saying that knowledge of unchanging divine things is “the highest wisdom” (κυριωτάτη σοφία).<sup>14</sup> If philosophy is to be understood as the pursuit of wisdom, and this is the highest wisdom, then presumably philosophy in its highest form is the pursuit of this kind of knowledge.

The hierarchy outlined in this report of *On Philosophy* clearly echoes the account in the *Metaphysics*, with both placing purely theoretical understanding above practically oriented knowledge or skill. For Aristotle, it seems, philosophy in its highest form aims at theoretical knowledge pursued without any regard for practical benefit. But before taking this as Aristotle’s final word on the subject, we might want to attend to how he uses the word φιλοσοφία and its cognates throughout his works. That is potentially a large task to undertake but fortunately Christopher Moore has done it for us, in a survey and analysis of how Aristotle uses these terms.<sup>15</sup> Moore concludes that there is no one single way in which Aristotle understands φιλοσοφία, “philosophy”; instead, there are a cluster of related meanings. These include clever thinking, an intellectual pursuit, a way of doing other activities, a problem-solving activity, the pursuit of knowledge, the study of first principles, a worthwhile leisure activity, and using logical argument in debate. This range of uses, Moore comments, broadly reflects the wider usage of these terms in the fourth century BC, with one or two that might be Aristotle’s own additions, such the image of philosophy as a leisure activity.<sup>16</sup> In other words, for the most part Aristotle was not being

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<sup>14</sup> Philop., in *Nicom. Isag.* 1.1 (Ross 1955, 77; trans. Ross 1952, 82).

<sup>15</sup> See Moore 2019. For a full list of instances, see Bonitz 1955, 820–21.

<sup>16</sup> Moore 2019, 346–47. A similar view can also be found in Natali 2013, who argues that Aristotle did not turn to philosophy in search of a way of life or as a means to earn a living. He was not looking for guidance to help him in a career in politics, in part because as an outsider he was excluded from political life in Athens (cf. Cic., *Off.* 2.2–6 where Cicero reports turning to philosophy as a past time only when he was unable to take part in politics). Instead, as a relatively wealthy man he simply faced the question of what to do with all his free time. What would be the most appropriate leisure activity for someone in his situation? It was in response to this question, Natali argues, that Aristotle settled on intellectual activity as the best way to spend his time (2013, 67). He did this for his own personal satisfaction, not in order to earn a living or to contribute to public life. In the process, Natali argues, Aristotle created a new image of a philosophical life, unlike any of those that existed beforehand (2013, 71). This new image of the philosophical life has sometimes been called “aristocratic” (e.g. Walker 2018, 9). However, as Helder Telo reminds me, an image of philosophy as a leisure activity can already be found in Plato’s *Theaetetus*, at 172d–176a. There, Plato’s Socrates argues that only a free man with leisure has the opportunity to pursue knowledge independent of practical considerations.

especially innovative but simply following common usage. Moore thus argues that we ought not to take the account of “first philosophy” in the *Metaphysics* as Aristotle’s authoritative or final statement on the subject. Nor should we assign priority to any of these meanings over any of the others. As Moore comments, in Aristotle’s works “*philosophia* is said in many ways” (2019, 340).

Moore is surely right to caution us before coming to any kind of firm conclusion about how Aristotle understands the term φιλοσοφία. As he notes, many of Aristotle’s uses simply reflect the common meanings associated with the term in his day. Even so, and with that warning duly noted, the account that Aristotle gives us in the *Metaphysics* (along with the parallel one in *On Philosophy*) looks to be something of a different order, namely a carefully thought out attempt to define what he means by philosophy and, in particular, what he took to be the highest or most important form that philosophy could take. For Aristotle, philosophy is an activity aimed at the acquisition of knowledge that is valuable for its own sake. It is about understanding the world in which we live, prompted by our natural desire to know. There is a sense in which this is something that all human beings do, in so far as he suggests that all humans desire to know. This is both a descriptive and a normative claim. People naturally desire to know but it is also by using our rationality in this manner that we become good human beings, fulfilling our function as rational animals.

### 3. Hadot on Aristotle

Having set out in a very preliminary way what Aristotle thinks about philosophy, let us now turn to Pierre Hadot. There are a number of places where Hadot mentions Aristotle in the context of his reflections on the idea that in antiquity philosophy was a way of life. The first can be found in a piece entitled “Philosophy as a Way of Life,” published in 1985.<sup>17</sup> This begins by highlighting the very practical approach to philosophy that we find in authors of the Hellenistic and Roman periods, drawing on examples from Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius, Sextus Empiricus, and others. However, Hadot notes that this was nothing new and that this model of philosophy can be traced back at least to Socrates

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<sup>17</sup> See Hadot 1984–85, reprinted in 1987, 217–27, and translated in 1995b, 264–76.

who, in turn, inspired Plato, the Cynics, and other Socratic schools. He then makes the following remark:

It is sometimes claimed that Aristotle was a pure theoretician, but for him, too, philosophy was incapable of being reduced to philosophical discourse, or to a body of knowledge. Rather, philosophy for Aristotle was a quality of the mind, the result of an inner transformation. The form of life preached by Aristotle was the life according to the mind. (Hadot 1987, 221; trans. 1995b, 269)

Thus, he concludes, the idea of philosophy as a way of life was not an innovation of the Hellenistic period; it was already embraced by Socrates, Plato, *and* Aristotle.

Hadot also mentions Aristotle in an essay entitled “The Figure of the Sage in Greek and Roman Antiquity.”<sup>18</sup> There he tackles head on the account of philosophy in the opening book of the *Metaphysics*. In particular he comments that Aristotle’s point of departure there is the image of the sage—a person living a certain way of life.<sup>19</sup> Aristotle’s focus, Hadot argues, is not wisdom in some abstract, disembodied sense, but instead the living example of the wise person. The sage who lives a life of contemplation aspires to a divine mode of life, in brief moments transcending the human condition (1998, 238–39; trans. 2020, 189–90). The goal, then, Hadot implies, is not abstract theoretical knowledge but to become a sage, which means to try to become like God.

In a third essay, entitled “Ancient Philosophy: An Ethics or a Practice?,”<sup>20</sup> we get some slightly longer remarks. As before, he begins by commenting that there is no doubt that philosophers in the Hellenistic and Roman periods engaged in a variety of practical philosophical exercises and saw philosophy as a way of life. But what about Plato and Aristotle? Weren’t they the giants of pure speculation? With regard to Aristotle, Hadot writes:

One tends to think that Aristotle’s philosophy is essentially “theoretic,” for it truly aims at knowledge for the love of knowledge itself. There is, in this conception, a confusion

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<sup>18</sup> See Hadot 1991a, reprinted in 1998, 233–57, and translated in 2020, 185–206.

<sup>19</sup> See Arist., *Metaph.* 1.2.982a4–8. In fact, Aristotle here begins with an investigation into wisdom (σοφία), adding that it might be easier to get clear about wisdom by turning to consider the sage (σοφός).

<sup>20</sup> See Hadot 1993, reprinted in 1998, 207–32, and translated in 2020, 55–79.

between “theoretic” (*théorique*) and “theoretical” (*théorétique*). The “theoretic” is opposed to “practice”. The “theoretic” discourse is opposed to a philosophy which is practiced, lived and, therefore, “practical”. But the adjective “theoretical” designates the *activity* of contemplation, which for Aristotle is the highest human activity. (Hadot 1998, 225; trans. 2020, 71–72)

The distinction that Hadot wants to draw here does not easily translate into English.<sup>21</sup> We might try to gloss it as a distinction between pure theory and the practice of theoretical reflection. By making this distinction Hadot thinks he can reconcile the claims that i) Aristotle is most concerned with theoretical knowledge and ii) he sees philosophy as a lived practice. Aristotle’s ultimate goal is not knowledge, on this view, but a life of theoretical contemplation.

The remarks in the three essays that we have just considered are all very brief, not much more than a paragraph or so each. Hadot’s only extended discussion of Aristotle comes in his book *What is Ancient Philosophy?* (1995a; trans. 2002). As we have already seen, the discussion of Aristotle in this book opens by fully acknowledging the problem that I outlined at the outset, namely that a fairly common view of Aristotle’s philosophy sees it as something in “complete contradiction” to the claim that all ancient philosophers “conceived philosophy as a way of life” (1995a, 123; trans. 2002, 77). Hadot also acknowledges that “Aristotle strongly asserts that the highest knowledge is knowledge which is chosen for itself” (*ibid.*). In this discussion, then, Hadot is well aware of the issues we have considered so far.

In order to set out his account of Aristotle’s philosophy understood as a way of life, Hadot turns to consider the Lyceum. He argues that Aristotle’s school was set up as a space in which to live a philosophical life and as a place to train others to do the same (1995a, 124; trans. 2002, 78). It was, then, an institution devoted not to the acquisition of knowledge but to living the contemplative life. Just as Aristotle claimed that knowledge is pursued for its own sake, Hadot comments that:

Life in accordance with the mind does not seek any result other than itself, and is therefore loved for itself. It is its own goal and its own reward. (Hadot 1995a, 126; trans. 2002, 79)

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<sup>21</sup> See the helpful extended translator’s note in Hadot 2020, 72, which explains the background to this distinction. Note also the discussion by Davidson in the Introduction in Hadot 1995b, 29.



This life in accordance with the mind is what might be called a theoretical way of life and in this context Hadot returns to his distinction between “theoretical” and “theoretic.” As he notes, this division is never made by Aristotle himself, who only uses one term, θεωρητικός. Hadot says that Aristotle uses this term to refer both to i) knowledge that is pursued for its own sake, and ii) a way of life devoted to the pursuit of such knowledge (1995a, 128–9; trans. 2002, 80–1). In this second sense we can talk about something being “theoretical” even though it is also entirely practical.

Hadot goes on to set out what such a life might look like. To put it somewhat anachronistically, we might say that it will be the life of a scholar, built around the activities of research, observation, and analysis of information. But for Aristotle this is not dispassionate study, for it is grounded in an intense sense of wonder about the natural world.<sup>22</sup> It involves, Hadot says, “an almost religious passion” (1995a, 131; trans. 2002, 82). This also comes through, he argues, in the final chapters of the *Nicomachean Ethics* where the ideal of the contemplative life is described as perhaps “too high” a life for human beings, in so far as it is an attempt to partake in a divine activity (1177b26–8). This idea of aspiring to divine contemplation takes us well beyond the mundane activities of the modern scholar and suggests something quite different. It also takes us beyond the acquisition of mere theoretical knowledge. The goal is nothing less than to experience—albeit in fleeting moments—what goes on in the divine mind.<sup>23</sup> Hadot concludes his discussion by commenting that for Aristotle, “the philosopher, for his part, should choose a life devoted to disinterested research, study, and contemplation” (1995a, 144; trans. 2002, 90).

It is clear, then, that Hadot thinks that Aristotle outlines an image of an ideal way of life for a philosopher.<sup>24</sup> Aristotle tried to live that life himself and founded the Lyceum

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<sup>22</sup> On wonder (θαυμάζειν), see Arist., *Metaph.* 1.2.982b12–13.

<sup>23</sup> See Hadot 1995a, 136–37; trans. 2002, 86. Note also Hadot 1983, 25; trans. 1995b, 60. On this topic, cf. Burnyeat 2008, esp. 43: “What is special about the exercise of *nous*, the highest form of cognition that humans can attain, is that it is no longer a more or less distant imitation of the divine life. It is a limited span of the very same activity as God enjoys for all time.”

<sup>24</sup> Another comment worth noting refers to Aristotelians rather than Aristotle himself: “As among the Aristotelians, one is more attached to theoretical activity considered as a way of life that brings almost divine pleasures and happiness than to the theories themselves” (Hadot 1983, 25; trans. 1995b, 60). This is presented as one of a series of examples to justify Hadot’s claim that “theory is never considered an end in itself; it is clearly and decidedly put in the service of practice” (*ibid.*).

in order to create a context in which both he and others could do so. In this sense, Hadot thinks he can show that Aristotle is no exception to his claim that in antiquity philosophy was widely understood as a way of life.

#### 4. A Contemplative Life

As we have seen, one central element in Hadot's account is his appeal to the idea of a contemplative life that Aristotle outlined in the final book of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Earlier, in the first book, Aristotle famously considered three ways of life as potential candidates for a good human life.<sup>25</sup> Seemingly dismissing a life devoted to pleasure out of hand, he focused attention on the other two, the political (πολιτικός) and the contemplative (θεωρητικός).<sup>26</sup> Introducing both of these, Aristotle deferred discussion of the contemplative life until later.<sup>27</sup> When he did return to it in the final book, he did so within the context of a discussion of happiness (εὐδαιμονία). Happiness, he says there, is an activity, something intrinsically good and so not for the sake of anything else (1176b1–6). It is also an activity that is in accord with virtue or excellence (ἀρετή), he says, adding that it makes sense to identify it with the highest human excellence. That will be the activity of the best thing in us. The best or highest thing in us, as human beings, is our intellect (νοῦς), and so the highest human excellence will be intellectual activity, i.e. contemplation.<sup>28</sup>

Aristotle goes on to give a number of reasons why this is the best sort of activity. Not only is it the activity of the best part of us—the activity that results from us fulfilling our function as rational animals—but the objects of contemplation, being “objects of reason” (γνωστά), are, he says, “the best of knowable objects” (1177a20–1). It is also the

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<sup>25</sup> See Arist., *Eth. Nic.* 1.5.1095b17–19; also *Eth. Eud.* 1.4.1215a34–5; 1.5.1216a27–9. For the former, I generally quote from the translation in Ross 1925.

<sup>26</sup> Thus Cooper 2012, 70–143, argues that Aristotle presents philosophy as *two* ways of life. In the later tradition these became known as the *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa*. For an early discussion of these two, although with reference to Plato rather than Aristotle, see Augustine, *De civ. D.* 8.4. Note also Lockwood 2014, 352, who challenges the claim that Aristotle completely dismissed the life of pleasure from consideration.

<sup>27</sup> See Arist., *Eth. Nic.* 1.5.1096a4–5. Walker 2018, 15–16, notes that while this is usually taken to be a reference to the later discussion in Book 10, it could equally be taken to refer to everything that is about to follow.

<sup>28</sup> See Aristotle, *Eth. Nic.* 10.7.1177a12–18. Aristotle hesitates about whether νοῦς is the highest thing in us, but no other plausible candidates emerge.

most pleasant and most self-sufficient of activities, one that is “loved for its own sake” (1177b1–2).

It is after this account of contemplative activity that Aristotle raises the objection that perhaps a life devoted to this sort of activity would be “too high” for humans.<sup>29</sup> A life devoted solely to this sort of activity would be almost inhuman, potentially neglecting our physical and social needs in favour of trying to live a life more suitable for a purely rational being, namely God. Indeed, according to Aristotle when the intellect (νοῦς) thinks about divine things, it becomes divine, just as the eye, when it sees red things, becomes red.<sup>30</sup> To engage in contemplative activity, then, is to transcend everyday human life and to become divine, at least for a moment. In response to the worry that this is an inappropriate goal for an embodied human being, Aristotle is fairly emphatic: “we must not follow those who advise us, being men, to think of human things, and, being mortal, of mortal things, but must, so far as we can, make ourselves immortal, and strain every nerve to live in accordance with the best in us” (1177b31–4). The highest form of activity, then, identified with perfect happiness (τελεία εὐδαιμονία), is contemplative activity (1178b7–8). This explains why God lives the most perfect life. As Aristotle puts it, “happiness extends, then, just so far as contemplation does” (1178b28–9).

In the light of all this, it seems fairly clear that Aristotle sees contemplation (θεωρία) as the highest human activity and identifies it with happiness. A life devoted to contemplative activity will thus be the happiest life available to a human being. This, of course, will be the life of a philosopher. To be more precise, we might say that it will be the life of a metaphysician, who is concerned with understanding “objects of reason”.<sup>31</sup> But, as he has noted, it is also in a sense an inhuman life, one that aspires to divinity. No human being could live a purely contemplative life. In this sense, contemplative activity is something that humans can engage in from time to time, but not permanently. With that thought in mind, we might draw a distinction between, on the one hand, a life of

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<sup>29</sup> Arist., *Eth. Nic.* 10.7.1177b26–7: ὁ δὲ τοιοῦτος ἂν εἴη βίος κρείττων ἢ κατ’ ἀνθρώπων. I borrow Ross’s translation “too high” for κρείττων.

<sup>30</sup> For the claim that the eye (more correctly, the eye jelly) takes on the colours it perceives, see e.g. *De an.* 425b22–5 with Sorabji 1974, 72. This issue has generated significant discussion which is helpfully summarized in Caston 2005, 245–7. For the parallel between this and the activity of the intellect, see Burnyeat 2008, 20–22.

<sup>31</sup> Some commentators have challenged the claim that the subject matter might be this narrow; see e.g. Roochnik 2009, 81 and Cooper 2012, 138.

pure contemplative activity, which is reserved for God, and, on the other hand, a properly human life that nevertheless tries to devote as much time as possible to contemplation. Aristotle founded the Lyceum, Hadot suggested, in order to create a suitable environment for the latter. This human life primarily devoted to theoretical pursuits is contrasted with the political life of someone who prioritizes the affairs of the wider community.

A number of commentators have challenged the idea that there is a sharp division between the contemplative and political lives.<sup>32</sup> A long time ago, J. A. Stewart commented that “the θεωρητικὸς βίος is not a separate life coordinate with the πολιτικὸς βίος, but a spirit which penetrates and ennobles the latter” (1892, 443–44). He continued by adding that the image of Aristotle’s contemplative life as a complete withdrawal from everyday social activity was how the Neoplatonists read Aristotle, but “nothing could be more opposed than this to Aristotle’s view of life as social from beginning to end” (*ibid.*, 444). With this thought in mind, one could imagine someone accusing Hadot—the great scholar of Neoplatonism—of giving an overly Neoplatonic reading of Aristotle when he describes this contemplative activity as an almost religious experience. However, Hadot is by no means alone in stressing this religious dimension of Aristotle’s account.<sup>33</sup>

More recently, Walker and Reeve have both defended a view similar to Stewart’s. Walker has argued that we ought to see contemplation not as some separate, almost superhuman, way of life but rather as a thoroughly human activity that can guide all human action (2018, 1–4). By contemplating the divine, Walker argues, humans gain valuable insights into their own limitations, finitude, and mortality that can inform how best to live (*ibid.*, 181). The activity of νοῦς, then, is but one of a series of natural biological functions and as such a vital part of any good human life (88–90). Similarly, Reeve has argued that “the best political and contemplative lives are not so much two separate lives as distinct phases of the same life” (2012, 270). However, Aristotle himself seems fairly

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<sup>32</sup> There has been an ongoing debate in the scholarly literature between what are usually referred to as “dominant” and “inclusive” interpretations, prompted by Hardie 1965. The former sees Aristotle’s ideal life as predominantly a life of contemplation, while the latter sees it as one in which some contemplative activity is just one part (alongside, for example, active political participation). For a defence of the “dominant” interpretation, maintaining the distinction between the contemplative and political lives, see e.g. Lear 2004, 177–88. For a defence of the “inclusive” interpretation, see e.g. Ackrill 1980, along with Reeve 2012 and Walker 2018 noted below. For further reading on this topic see the essays in Destrée and Zingano 2014.

<sup>33</sup> See, for instance, Defourny 1977; Burnyeat 2008. For a more recent discussion, see Walker 2018, 177–82.

emphatic in the *Politics* that he is operating with such a distinction, explicitly mentioning “two lives” (δύο βίοι):

Even those who agree in thinking that the life of excellence is the most desirable raise a question, whether the life of business and politics is or is not more desirable than one which is wholly independent of external goods, I mean than a contemplative life, which by some is maintained to be the only one worthy of a philosopher. For these two lives—the life of the philosopher and the life of the statesman—appear to have been preferred by those who have been most keen in the pursuit of excellence, both in our own and in other ages. Which is the better is a question of no small moment. (*Pol.* 7.2.1324a25–33, trans. Jowett, in Barnes 1984)

It seems fairly clear here that Aristotle is indeed thinking about two ways of life and he explicitly refers to a contemplative life (βίος θεωρητικός) and identifies it with the life of the philosopher (βίος τοῦ φιλοσόφου).<sup>34</sup>

A separate but highly relevant question concerns the motivation for wanting to live such a life. Why, according to Aristotle, might one want to do so? In particular, does one engage in the activity of contemplation for its own sake or for the sake of something else, such as happiness? In short, why would one want to live the life of a philosopher? Aristotle addressed this very question directly in his *Protrepticus*, which gave a whole series of arguments for why one ought to do philosophy. Although lost, a number of fragments survive, the most important of which are preserved in a work of the same name by Iamblichus.<sup>35</sup> In these fragments what we find are multiple arguments designed to persuade people that they ought to do philosophy. Some of these arguments might be described as dialectical, in so far as they seem to presuppose different assumptions about

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<sup>34</sup> One interesting response to this question of whether Aristotle proposed two distinct ways of life, or just one, can be found in Lawrence 1993, who argues that instead of thinking in terms of a choice between two alternatives, we ought to think of two responses to different sets of circumstances. In ideal circumstances one will always choose the activity of contemplation, but when circumstances are not ideal – which, for an embodied and social animal, is often – then activities guided by practical virtue will be next best thing.

<sup>35</sup> The first person to identify fragments of Aristotle’s *Protrepticus* in Iamblichus was Bywater (1869). The relevant material can be found in Rose 1886, 56–73, Walzer 1934, 21–65, and Ross 1955, 26–56. Note also Düring 1961. For a detailed and persuasive defence of the identification, see Hutchinson and Johnson 2005. Note also the earlier discussion in Jaeger 1948, 54–101. In what follows I quote from the translations contained in Hutchinson and Johnson 2005; the material is also translated in Ross 1952, along with evidence for the *Protrepticus* from other sources. For the text of Iamblichus’ *Protrepticus*, see the Budé edition in Des Places 1989.

what matters most, yet they all lead to the same conclusion, namely that one ought to do philosophy. The aim here was no doubt to try to convince as many people as possible, no matter what their underlying views might be.

The first type of argument that Aristotle uses states that philosophy delivers external benefits. It is useful, for instance, for law making and it will also lead to good ethical action. Thus he comments that “we should do philosophy if we are going to engage in politics correctly and conduct our own way of life in a beneficial way.”<sup>36</sup> The second type of argument that he uses also suggests a benefit derived from the activity of philosophy, namely happiness. Philosophy, he argues, is the only activity that makes life worth living. He says that “only philosophers will have a happy life” and that philosophy is “living perfectly well” or at least “the greatest cause of it.”<sup>37</sup>

The third type of argument insists on the value of doing philosophy for its own sake, regardless of any further benefit that one might gain. It is an activity valuable in itself and it is the highest activity that humans can undertake. It enables us to fulfil our function as rational beings and so there is a sense in which we only fully exist and are most completely alive when we do philosophy. As we have already seen, the highest form of philosophy is contemplation of the divine. In the *Protrepticus*, however, Aristotle explicitly says that the philosopher will spend their lives “looking at nature *and* the divine” (*my emphasis*).<sup>38</sup> This looks as if it potentially broadens out the focus of philosophical activity; we shall come back to this issue later.

The different types of argument in the *Protrepticus* are clearly aimed at different audiences. If someone thinks that the only reason to engage in an activity is for the further benefits they can gain, then Aristotle can offer them arguments as to why they ought to do philosophy. But taking the material as a whole, it is fairly clear that he does not share this view. Elsewhere he is critical of the idea that one ought to look for benefit in everything; some things are intrinsically valuable and done for their own sake.<sup>39</sup> Doing

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<sup>36</sup> Arist., *Protr.* fr. 4 Ross (Iambl., *Protr.* chap. 6), trans. Hutchinson and Johnson 2005, 269.

<sup>37</sup> Arist., *Protr.* fr. 15 Ross (Iambl., *Protr.* chap. 12), trans. Hutchinson and Johnson 2005, 278 (amended).

<sup>38</sup> Arist., *Protr.* fr. 13 Ross (Iambl., *Protr.* chap. 10), trans. Hutchinson and Johnson 2005, 263: πρὸς τὴν φύσιν βλέπων ζῆν καὶ πρὸς τὸ θεῖον.

<sup>39</sup> See Arist., *Protr.* fr. 12 Ross (Iambl., *Protr.* chap. 9): “we don’t claim it is beneficial but that it is itself good, and it makes sense to choose it not for the sake of something else but for itself” (trans. Hutchinson and Johnson 2005, 261).

philosophy will indeed benefit its practitioner in a variety of ways—including enabling them to enjoy a happy life—but that is not the primary reason to do it. The principal reason is, one might say, more fundamental than that. To use a common Aristotelian example, eyes are for sake of seeing; that is their function. If someone had eyes but never opened them, the capacity of sight would never be used—the potentiality would never be actualized. In so far as their very existence *as* eyes is defined in terms of their function, there is a sense in which eyes that never get the opportunity to see fail to be eyes in the fullest sense.<sup>40</sup> The same applies to a human being who fails to use their capacity for reason. In order fully to be a human at all, one must do philosophy, Aristotle argues:

The function of the soul, either alone or most of all, is thinking and reasoning. Therefore it is now simple and easy for anyone to reach the conclusion that he who thinks correctly is more alive, and he who most attains truth lives most, and this is the one who is wise . . . . Thus we attribute living more to the one who is awake rather than to the one who is asleep, to the one who is wise more than to the one who is foolish.<sup>41</sup>

In the case of sight, being able to see obviously brings with it a wide range of practical benefits; it enables us to do many things. Aristotle comments that the same applies to philosophical contemplation—it can be practically beneficial in a variety of ways—but in both cases the benefits are merely welcome by-products.<sup>42</sup> Even if someone gained no practical benefit from seeing, they would still prefer to be able to see than not, and the same applies to contemplation.

Despite this focus on the intrinsic importance—indeed necessity—of philosophy as an activity, Aristotle also stresses that it is only through philosophy that it will be possible to live a happy life. At one point he comments that “living pleasantly and feeling true enjoyment belong only to philosophers, or to them most of all.”<sup>43</sup> So, the activity of philosophy is the key to living a good life and the philosopher’s way of life is the best there

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<sup>40</sup> This is, in effect, the claim that being is closely tied to actuality (ἐνέργεια), which Kosman 2013 has argued ought to be understood as activity. The being of anything is thus understood in terms of its defining activity (the exercise of a capacity): for eyes, this is seeing; for humans, it is thinking.

<sup>41</sup> Arist., *Protr.* fr. 14 Ross (Iambl., *Protr.* chap. 11), trans. Hutchinson and Johnson 2005, 266–67.

<sup>42</sup> See Arist., *Protr.* fr. 13 Ross (Iambl., *Protr.* chap. 10), Hutchinson and Johnson 2005, 263–64.

<sup>43</sup> Arist., *Protr.* fr. 14 Ross (Iambl., *Protr.* chap. 11), Hutchinson and Johnson 2005, 267.

is: “only philosophers will have a successful life.”<sup>44</sup> Yet, as we have seen, this benefit is not the principal reason to do it. Elsewhere, in one of the common books shared by the *Nicomachean* and *Eudemian Ethics* (see Arist., *Eth. Nic.* 6.12, which is also *Eth. Eud.* 5.12), Aristotle expresses this view with two seemingly contradictory statements. First he says that philosophical wisdom (σοφία) *does not* contemplate any of the things that make humans happy (1143b19–20), while later adding that such wisdom *does* produce happiness (1144a4–5). Yet we can now see how these two statements can be reconciled: philosophy is not primarily concerned with issues relating to how to live a happy life, but nevertheless the activity of philosophy will generate happiness or, to put it another way, the activity of philosophy ought simply to be identified with happiness.<sup>45</sup>

So, what is philosophy concerned with most of all? As we saw earlier, Aristotle presented contemplative activity in the *Nicomachean Ethics* as being concerned with divine things and “objects of reason,” these being the highest things we can think about.<sup>46</sup> In *Metaphysics* 6.1 he suggested both first principles and divine things as the highest objects of study. In the *Protrepticus* fragments, though, he seemed to put the study of nature on a par with the contemplation of divine things. Perhaps one way to reconcile these statements is to stress that the study of physics, in so far as it tries to understand the forms of changing particulars, is also primarily concerned with things grasped by the intellect.<sup>47</sup>

Aristotle himself gives us a fuller explanation of the relative standing of these two areas of study in *Parts of Animals* (1.5.644b22–645a23) and in the process addresses our other question regarding how this activity relates to happiness. There he says that natural things fall into two kinds, i) ungenerated and eternal, and ii) those subject to generation and decay. While the former are superior, they are harder for us to know. By contrast, things in the changing natural world, such as plants and animals, are close to hand and readily accessible to our senses. Thus Aristotle concludes that the study and contemplation of both types of entity are equally valuable. The pleasure we gain from contemplating divine things is greater, but limited in quantity; what we gain from the study of the natural

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<sup>44</sup> Arist., *Protr.* fr. 15 Ross (Iambl., *Protr.* chap. 12), Hutchinson and Johnson 2005, 278.

<sup>45</sup> On this see Güremen 2020, 588: “happiness should not be viewed as the *product* of philosophy as active wisdom. Philosophy in this sense *is* happiness.”

<sup>46</sup> See Arist., *Eth. Nic.* 10.7; note also *Eth. Eud.* 8.3.1249b16–21.

<sup>47</sup> So Ross 1923, 234: “physics is the study of the non-contingent element in contingent events”; Rorty 1980, 379: “it is also possible to contemplate the unchanging form of what does change.”



world may be slightly lesser in some ways, but we can engage in this more often and in far greater depth. So, formally, metaphysics is superior to physics but, practically, physics offers greater opportunities for philosophical contemplation. For different reasons, then, the two are equally valuable areas of study. Aristotle goes on to stress the immense pleasure that can come from the study of nature, especially the study of animals (645a7–10). This pleasure comes from gaining an understanding of the causes of things. All natural things, even the superficially ugly, are marvellous, he says (645a16–17). Here we perhaps get a glimpse into Aristotle’s own psychology and the pleasure that he derived from studying animals. Yet it is equally clear that this pleasure was not the prime motivation; he was motivated simply by a desire to understand.

At the same time, however, Aristotle has argued elsewhere that the highest good at which all human activity ultimately aims is happiness (1095a14–20). In a discussion of different types of persuasive writing in the *Rhetoric* he comments that “all advice to do things or not to do them is concerned with happiness and with the things that make for or against it; whatever creates or increases happiness or some part of happiness, we ought to do; whatever destroys or hampers happiness, or gives rise to its opposite, we ought not to do” (1360b9–14). With this in mind, we should expect the *Protrepticus*—a piece of persuasive writing urging people to do philosophy—to be in some way concerned with happiness. As we have seen, it certainly is. That it will make one happy is one of the reasons that Aristotle gives as to why one ought to do philosophy. To someone looking for happiness—someone looking for guidance in how to live well—his response is unambiguously that philosophy is the answer. One could construct an argument along the following lines: all humans desire happiness; only the activity of philosophy delivers happiness; therefore, all humans should pursue philosophy. But this does not involve the claim that philosophy is directed towards happiness, only that it delivers it. It is directed towards understanding the natural world, broadly conceived. In an appropriately Aristotelian way, the issue is ultimately one of determining the τέλος of philosophy, its goal or purpose. On this point, Hadot was himself quite clear, commenting that Aristotle’s image of a life of intellectual inquiry “does not seek any result other than itself, and is therefore loved for itself. It is its own goal and its own reward” (1995a 126; trans. 2002, 79).

## 5. Conclusions

It is now time to come back to assess Hadot's claim that Aristotle understood philosophy as a way of life. It is certainly clear that Aristotle understood philosophy as an activity, something that one does. It is also clear that Aristotle sees this activity as a vital part of any human life. Indeed, at one point in the *Protrepticus* fragments he argues that, given that much of human life can be difficult and miserable, philosophy is the *only* thing that can make it bearable. We ought, he concludes, "either to do philosophy or say goodbye to life and depart from this world, since all of the other things anyway seem to be a lot of nonsense and foolishness."<sup>48</sup> However, there is little to suggest that Aristotle ever presented philosophy as such as a practical guide to how to live well or that his principal motivation in doing this activity was in order to transform his life for the better. So, whether Aristotle fits within Hadot's framework all depends on precisely how Hadot understood the phrase "philosophy as a way of life." The most common way in which Hadot tries to explain it is by drawing a contrast between philosophical discourse, on the one hand, and a way of life, on the other.<sup>49</sup> Philosophy, he argues, ought to be identified with the latter, a way of living, rather than a body of theoretical writing. Echoing remarks by Socrates, Seneca, and Nietzsche, Hadot insists that philosophy ought not to be reduced to the mere critique of words by other words.<sup>50</sup> What matters is not what one says but what one does. This idea was forcefully expressed by the Stoic Epictetus when he challenged his students for not acting in accordance with their professed doctrines, merely mouthing the words of the Stoics but not acting in agreement with them (*Epict. diss.* 2.19.20–25). As it happens, Aristotle had already expressed a very similar view. It is, he commented, only by performing virtuous acts that someone can become virtuous. However,

Most people do not do these, but take refuge in theory (λόγος) and think they are being philosophers and will become good in this way, behaving somewhat like patients who

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<sup>48</sup> Arist., *Protr.* fr. 10c Ross (Iambl., *Protr.* chap. 8), trans. Hutchinson and Johnson 2005, 256.

<sup>49</sup> See e.g. Hadot 1995b, 266–8, taking inspiration from the Stoics (Diog. Laert. 7.39) and discussed at greater length in Hadot 1991b; also Hadot 2020, 75.

<sup>50</sup> For Socrates, see Xen., *Mem.* 4.4.10; for Seneca, *Ep.* 20.2; for Nietzsche, *Schopenhauer as Educator* 3 (cited in Sellars 2009, 3).

listen attentively to their doctors, but do none of the things they are ordered to do. As the latter will not be made well in body by such a course of treatment, the former will not be made well in soul by such a course of philosophy. (*Eth. Nic.* 2.4.1105b12–18)

This looks to be a clear affirmation of precisely the distinction that Hadot draws between philosophical discourse and philosophy as a way of life. It also makes use of the medical analogy common in ancient accounts of philosophy as a transformative practice from Socrates onwards.<sup>51</sup> It appears in the context of a discussion of the importance of habituation in ethical development and Aristotle's attention to habituation might be taken to share something in common with Hadot's interest in what he called "spiritual exercises."<sup>52</sup> While this remark is concerned with ethical development, rather than philosophy as such, we have already seen that Aristotle presents all philosophy as an activity, a practice, something that one does rather than merely talk about.

Indeed, another key feature in Hadot's account of ancient philosophy is the claim that it was first and foremost a practice. He is quite insistent in a number of places that "theory is never considered an end in itself; it is clearly and decidedly put in the service of practice" (1983, 25; trans. 1995b, 60). At first glance this might seem to be in conflict with Aristotle's claim that theoretical knowledge is an end in itself, not pursued for the sake of anything else, but it all depends on how one understands "practice". Aristotle would surely deny that theoretical knowledge ought to be pursued for the sake of some further practical end, but, as we have seen, he also understands philosophy itself as an activity, the actualizing of our potential as rational beings. In this sense, philosophy is *always* a practice. Indeed, in the *Politics* Aristotle is insistent that even a quiet life devoted to contemplation ought to be seen as an active one, commenting that "nor are those ideas only to be regarded as practical which are pursued for the sake of practical results, but much more the thoughts and contemplations which are independent and complete in themselves" (1325b17–21). This is contemplation as practice. When understood in this way, it looks

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<sup>51</sup> Compare with Cic., *Tusc.* 3.6. It is worth noting that here Cicero refers to his (lost) *Hortensius* for a fuller discussion, a work that a number of ancient sources tell us was based on Aristotle's *Protrepticus* (see the testimonia in Ross 1955, 26).

<sup>52</sup> See esp. Arist., *Eth. Nic.* 2.1. On Hadot's account of "spiritual exercises," see 1995b, 81–125. For some reservations about the use of the term "spiritual," see Cooper 2012, 402. Aristotle does not mention any specific practices or training techniques, instead simply stressing the importance of learning by doing: "men become builders by building . . . ; so too we become just by doing just acts" (1103a33–b1).

as if Aristotle in fact fits surprisingly well into Hadot's account of ancient philosophy as a way of life. In order for this to be the case, though, one must understand the idea of philosophy as a way of life as something broader than just guidance for how to live well.

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