

# Human and Divine Lives in Book X of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*

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## *Abstract*

The paper analyses the dual form of striving for a good life underlying Aristotle's distinction between "human" and "divine" lives. The paper explores this theme with regard to the close connection between ethics and politics inherent in Aristotle's analyses, focusing primarily on the specific relationship between politics and philosophy outlined in this connection in Book X of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. The distinction between political and philosophical life is interpreted not as a definition of two different life contents we are to choose from, but as a definition of two attitudes or perspectives our lives can be approached from – either from the perspective of a variety of different types of actions performed in the social space, or with regard to the unifying element binding our life together reflexively in a coherent whole. Taking into account the relevant principles of Aristotelian anthropology, the paper demonstrates that philosophical contemplation thus conceived is already grounded in political life and it does not stand against it as an option of some "other" life released from socio-political ties. The proposed interpretation makes it possible to alleviate the tension in Aristotle's concept of political and philosophical life and thereby support a more coherent reading of the conclusion of the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

## *Key Words*

Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotelian Anthropology,  
Political Life, Philosophical Life, Good Life

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Aristotle's reflexion on the dual form of striving for a good life and his distinction between "human" and "divine" lives was one of his important

contributions to ethical discussion taking place in ancient Greece. In my paper I am going to deal with this subject with regard to the close connection between ethics and politics, focusing primarily on the specific relationship between politics and philosophy outlined in Book X of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*.

### 1. *The Two Best Lives*

Aristotle's distinction between "human" and "divine" lives in the last book of the *Nicomachean Ethics* appears in the context of the search for human happiness, i.e. a successful or happy life (*eudaimonia*), which frames the ethical exploration in this treatise<sup>1</sup>. The initial definition of happiness as "activity of soul exhibiting virtue" (*NE* 1098a 17) is also evoked in the concluding passages of Book X which are going to be the immediate subject of our exploration:

If happiness is activity in accordance with virtue (*energeia kat' aretên*), it is reasonable that it should be in accordance with the highest virtue; and this will be that of the best thing in us. Whether it be reason or something else that is this element which is thought to be our natural ruler and guide and to take thought of things noble and divine, whether it be itself also divine or only the most divine element in us, the activity of this in accordance with its proper virtue will be perfect happiness (*NE* 1177a 11-18)<sup>2</sup>.

Drawing on this definition, Aristotle goes on to present a more precise distinction between the relevant activities, distinguishing between the two kinds of life these activities represent: on the one hand there is "life according to reason" (*kata ton nûn bios*), hereafter called divine life, on the other hand there is "life according to the other virtues" (*kata tên allên*

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<sup>1</sup> For the conception of *eudaimonia*, see e.g. LEAR 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Quotations from the *Nicomachean Ethics* are taken from the translation by D. Ross (ARISTOTLE 2009). Quotations from the *Politics* are taken from the translation by H. Rackham (ARISTOTLE 1959).

*aretên*), hereafter called human life. The distinction between the two lives also implies a corresponding value hierarchy:

...that which is proper to each thing is by nature best and most pleasant for each thing; for man, therefore, the life according to reason is best and pleasantest, since reason more than anything else is man. This life therefore is also the happiest. But in a secondary degree the life in accordance with the other kind of virtue is happy (*NE* 1178a 6-10).

This distinction is further supported by a reference to the composite character of human nature, containing an emotional component as well as a rational one (*NE* 1178a 19-23). Therefore, the two types of life represent two types of happiness, and, in a way that is at first sight unexpected, they dualise Aristotle's answer to the question of a good life that the whole treatise revolves around.

Aristotle is intentionally brief in distinguishing the two kinds of happiness, and hence the closing passages of the *Nicomachean Ethics* understandably attract the attention of interpreters, especially for the following reasons: the whole *Nicomachean Ethics* is placed in the political context and it deals with issues of action within human community, i.e. within the *polis*. The opening passages explicitly emphasize the political grounding of ethics (*NE* I 2) and the political interest in ethical education (*NE* I 9; I 13). Similarly, its ending also supports this connection, referring in its last chapter to the legislative framework of ethical education (*NE* X 9), thereby creating a natural transition to a treatise on political matters, i.e. the *Politics*. Therefore, Aristotle's interest seems to be directed primarily towards the political sphere. His exploration is explicitly focused on the realm of *praxis*, i.e. it does not strive for a mere theoretical handling of a problem, but maps the space for action and turns to those who act in that space, actively entering political affairs (*NE*

1095a)<sup>3</sup>. This is the sphere in which Aristotle's addressees are to attest their qualities.

Taking into account that Aristotle's ethics is so obviously evolving on the platform of the *polis*, the ethical virtues Aristotle is dealing with can at the same time be called political virtues, and "life according to the other virtues" can be paraphrased as political life: "the activity of the practical virtues is exhibited in political or military affairs" (*NE* 1177b 6-7). On the other hand, "life according to reason" can be paraphrased as theoretical or contemplative life, i. e. philosophical life<sup>4</sup>.

The accentuation of theoretical life coming in Chapters 7 and 8 of Book X, where it is explicitly accredited supremacy over political life, may, however, seem surprising, disturbing or downright paradoxical within the whole of Aristotle's proceedings. Accordingly, interpreters are not unanimous on the reading of Book X, disagreeing on the issue of the mutual relationship between the two types of the "best lives" as well as the overall consistency of Aristotle's treatment of these motives. A number of authors emphasize the tensions within Aristotle's conception<sup>5</sup>, suggesting a whole range of interpretations to cope with these tensions<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> This orientation of the *Nicomachean Ethics* is emphasized e.g. by O'CONNOR 1999, 109: «Aristotle's primary addressee is a man driven by ambition, an ambition that manifests itself fundamentally if not ultimately in politics. Aristotle issues an invitation to virtue that is aimed specifically at such ambitious men».

<sup>4</sup> However, I do not think we can understand this term as *vita contemplativa*, either in the sense of the medieval concept of *contemplatio* or in the sense of the modern distinction *vita contemplativa* / *vita activa*.

<sup>5</sup> See for example URMSON 1995, NUSSBAUM 2001.

<sup>6</sup> A review of research on this issue is presented by GOTLIEB 2009. As far as Czech research is concerned, a recent study written by Stanislav Synek retains a certain tension in the relationship between the two lives: «it is not clear whether man is more an individual being whose highest and most meaningful realisation rests in self-sufficient contemplation (*theôria*) with minimal dependence on the life of the community, or whether man is more a "naturally" social being whose happiness depends on the

In my paper I am going to try and moderate the paradoxical impression of the concluding passages of the *Nicomachean Ethics* and to show that politics and contemplation in Aristotle's concept do not stand next to one another as two disparate activities but, on the contrary, are connected by a very specific relationship.

## 2. *The Choice of a Life?*

First of all, let us take a look at whether Aristotle's distinction between "life according to reason" (*kata ton nûn bios*) and "life according to the other virtues" (*kata tèn allên aretên*) should be understood as a distinction between two life alternatives inviting us to choose one of two ways of life, on the one hand offering a life devoted to activity within the *polis* exercising a wide range of ethical virtues, and on the other hand a life devoted to contemplation, remote from political affairs. These two "lives" are presented in Aristotle's work as serious candidates for a good life. Strictly speaking, there is one more candidate, i.e. the life dedicated to pleasure; that is, however, degraded in Aristotle's treatise to a position of a less-than-human life, "the life of cattle"<sup>7</sup>. Therefore, although Aristotle proceeds from the trichotomy of life alternatives commonly accepted in public opinion and including the life of pleasure, the political life and the

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happiness of others and therefore cannot be achieved without a "good" or "happy" company of other people. This indicates the limitations of the whole of Aristotle's concept: the impossibility of uniting human and divine perspectives, and hence the impossibility of satisfactorily answering the initial question what *practicable human happiness* really is» (SYNEK 2011, 239, translation is mine). Nevertheless, Synek immediately acknowledges certain dynamics this tension brings to Aristotle's concept of the realisation of human nature.

<sup>7</sup> As far as the value of pleasure in human life is concerned, let us refer to a more sophisticated analysis in Book VII and X of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, which shows that pleasure is not to be completely dismissed from human life and examines its appropriate role more comprehensively.

philosophical life (*NE* 1095b 15-19)<sup>8</sup>, in fact he works with the dichotomy of political and philosophical lives. Do the two members of this dichotomy, however, stand before us as objects of a life choice? Is it possible to choose one before the other?

On this matter let us first mention that the motif of the choice of a way of life is well known in classical tradition and it has been the subject of a number of literary treatments. One of the examples is Prodicus's allegory *Hercules at the Crossroads*, where the proposed alternatives one of which Hercules is to choose at the threshold of his adulthood are a comfortable life of pleasure and a life based on virtue, accompanied, however, by pain and striving (*Xenophon, Mem.* II 1, 21-34)<sup>9</sup>. The motif is also presented by Plato, who deals with the question of the choice of life in his dialogues *Gorgias*, *Apology of Socrates* or *Republic*. In the *Apology* he presents a distinction between two kinds of life aspiration: one of them is aimed at money, reputation and honour, and the other one is aimed at reason, truth and the cultivation of the soul (*Apol.* 29d-30b). In *Gorgias* the question in what way one should live is asked explicitly, and two life possibilities are suggested the requirements of which we have to consider with all due responsibility: on the one hand a life devoted to active involvement in political sphere, where actions are accompanied by honour and credit, on the other hand a life devoted to philosophy (*Gorg.* 500b-d). With peculiar gravity the motif of the life choice is incorporated in the concluding passage in Book X of the *Republic*. Here we encounter the soul of man on the threshold of a new birth facing the necessity of choosing not one of two alternatives, but one of a whole range of possible lives. This choice is irreversible and with all gravity it makes man once and for all responsible for who he is. (*Resp.* 617d-621b).

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<sup>8</sup> The idea of three ways of life corresponding to the threefold structure of the soul is also elaborated by Plato (*Resp.* 436a-441c, cf. *Resp.* 586a-e).

<sup>9</sup> The allegory was modelled on a passage from the *Works and Days* by Hesiod (Hesiod, *Op.* 287-292).

For further elaboration of our subject matter it should be noted in this place that Plato at the same time indicates the serious pitfalls of the precarious situation of the soul. The choice of a destiny may be carried out blindly and impetuously, which is characteristically demonstrated already in the case of the first chooser, who inconsiderately reaches for the life of a tyrant, not realising in time the horrible deeds accompanying that kind of life. It is very telling that the unfortunate choice is performed by the soul of a man who had lived his previous life decently, but – and this is crucial – it was a decency based only on habit, not on philosophical understanding (*aneu filosofias, Resp.* 619d 1)<sup>10</sup>.

Coming back to Aristotle, we may ask the question whether also Book X of the *Nicomachean Ethics* should be read in the light of the indicated text tradition. Are the two lives – political and philosophical – alternatives for the choice of the way of life? I think such a reading would be inaccurate, especially considering Aristotle's understanding of choice. Aristotle deals with the issue of choice (*prohairesis*) extensively in his ethical theory, but instead of the idea of absolute choice determining the whole of our existence he employs the idea of relative choice, i.e. preferential choice presupposing selection and preceding deliberation<sup>11</sup>. That is why in Book III of the *Nicomachean Ethics* he repeatedly emphasises that choice concerns the means, not the ends. Therefore, we choose the means or ways of certain actions, but not the end itself that we act for. However, the choice of a life would be a choice of an end. Unlike the Platonic vision saying that “the choice of a different life inevitably determined a different character” (*Resp.* 618b), Aristotle

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<sup>10</sup> It should be noted that under closer examination the position of Plato reveals a number of parallels and a deeper congruence with Aristotle. When Plato distinguishes sharply between different „lives“ in various passages of his dialogues, he prepares a ground for a deeper examination of the relationship between politics and philosophy, which prove to coincide in the person of a philosopher considered as a true politician. In this context see especially *Gorgias* 484c-521d, *Theaitetus* 173c-176b and *Republic* VI-VII.

<sup>11</sup> See NUSSBAUM 2001, 307 and nn.

assumes that it is particular ways of acting that are the objects of choice, and they are constitutive of human character (*NE* 1114a 9). That corresponds to his understanding of responsibility for the way of life we lead. In the Aristotelian perspective we are not “what we choose to be once and for all, but what we choose *to do* at each moment”<sup>12</sup>.

### 3. *Distinguishing Life Perspectives*

Having clarified this, we can proceed to considering the value of the two ways of life and asking about the criteria we use when distinguishing between them. Let us begin with Aristotle’s question (*NE* 1178a 34-35) whether intention, or, more precisely, deliberate choice (*prohairesis*), is more important for virtue than actions (*praxeis*). Aristotle himself answers this question by a repeated reference to the idea that what determines the nature of ethical conduct is, above all, deliberate choice: “it is thought to be most closely bound up with virtue, and to discriminate characters better than actions do” (*NE* 1111b 5; cf. 1112 a2-3). This conviction corresponds to the distinction between the external and internal character of action, and Aristotle demonstrates it in several places, e.g. by his reminder that it is not enough to perform just *actions*, but it is necessary to perform these actions *as a just man*, i. e. as one who decides and acts with regard to the principles of ethical conduct (*NE* 1105a 30-1105b 9; cf. *NE* 1144a 13-21). Conditions of ethically valuable action are specified in the following way:

...if the acts that are in accordance with the virtues have themselves a certain character it does not follow that they are done justly or temperately. The agent also must be in a certain condition when he does them; in the first place he must have knowledge, secondly he must choose the acts, and choose them for their own sakes, and thirdly his action must proceed from a firm and unchangeable character (*NE* 1105a 28-34).

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<sup>12</sup> AUBENQUE 1963, 152.



At the same time, the nature of ethical conduct is based on practical wisdom, *phronêsis*, i.e. the ability to discover in the changeable constellations of our lives the optimal way of responding to the challenges of the situations we find ourselves in. The structure of conduct then involves a cooperation of the ability to find appropriate ways of behaviour with the ability to orientate these ways towards the overall course of our life: virtue is responsible for aiming at the correct goal, and practical wisdom then in the light of this goal chooses the correct means leading to it (*NE* 1144a 8-9)<sup>13</sup>. It should be noted that what we mean by “means” here are particular ways of acting which in particular situations in specific ways fulfil our idea of how we should act to make our life successful.

The distinction between a deliberate choice and an act enables Aristotle to outline the nature of ethical conduct more sharply and contrast it with activities having the character of *technê* rather than *praxis*. While the result of *technê* is assessed on the basis of a certain task having been performed, ethical conduct is assessed not only according to the external appearance of the act in question, but mainly according to what inner disposition is enacted in the actual choices of the agent.

As Aristotle comes back to these constituents of virtue in Book X, asking once again what the role of deliberate choice is and what that of the action itself, the question posed in this way can be an important clue for grasping the relationship between philosophical and political lives, because different answers to it open up different perspectives regarding this relationship. From the perspective of actions political and philosophical lives are different in their contents, are different in the nature of the activities performed. The difference between the two ways of life would, from this perspective, lie in the difference between their actual contents.

However, the external appearance of an action, as we have seen, is not the only criterion. Activities can be evaluated not only in terms of *what*

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<sup>13</sup> On this issue, cf. MOSS 2011.

we do, but also in terms of what principles we are following while performing them, i.e. *what* we act *for*. Introducing the perspective of purposes and aims then also makes it possible to form a different structure of the relationship between political and philosophical lives. The difference will not consist in the different contents but in the overall orientation of life.

Political life could be characterized as life aimed at a wide range of particular ethical virtues set in the framework of social coexistence. Philosophical life, i.e. life lived from the position of *theôria*, would, in contrast, offer a higher measure of integration of individual activities in the whole of life, relating these activities to the unity of a single happy life<sup>14</sup>.

I think this distinction may help us achieve a less tense interpretation of Aristotle's understanding of the relationship between political and philosophical lives, offering the conception of politics and philosophy as two attitudes or perspectives our lives can be approached from – once from the perspective of a multitude of various types of action performed in the social space, once with regard to the unifying element binding our life together reflexively in a coherent whole.

What appears on the outside as the same life can therefore be lived either philosophically or politically, depending on the understanding of the agent. The difference between political and philosophical life would then be based not on different contents of the lives in question but on different perspectives from which a person views his or her actions. Therefore, it is not a distinction between two different types of life, but rather a distinction

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<sup>14</sup> «In the political life, the dominant attention and value remains with the individual virtuous actions. The contemplative life places attention and value on the single happy life made up of these parts. When many good actions are fully integrated into one happy life, then one is living theoretically...» (GARVER 2006, 196).

between two ways of approaching one's life coexisting in a particular life of an individual<sup>15</sup>.

Distinguishing the two elements coexisting in one life<sup>16</sup> well corresponds to Aristotle's reflections on a happy life, i.e. *eudaimonia*. Formal characteristics of *eudaimonia* include "perfection" and "self-sufficiency": "Happiness, then, is something final and self-sufficient, and is the end of action" (*NE* 1097b 20-21). That suggests the question: in what sense can our life be as perfect and complete as to manifest the quality of *eudaimonia*? This perfection or completeness can be understood in terms of time, which is a possibility that Aristotle explores in the first book of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, where he, however, at the same time highlights the obvious paradoxes the time perspective necessarily results in: we could not call anyone a happy man until his death, when he finally escapes any possible twists of fate; nevertheless, even after his death he can be troubled by unfortunate events befalling his offspring, etc. Therefore, it is more appropriate to relate *eudaimonia* to a different type of holistic understanding of life.

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<sup>15</sup> «Note that on the interpretation of 10.6-8 as giving an outline of happiness, we do not take the phrases 'a life lived according to the mind' (or philosophical wisdom) (1177b30) or 'a life lived according to the other virtues' (1177a21) to mean separate ways of life, or possible bibliographies, but rather ways of carrying on with life, which coexist in the life of one individual» (PAKALUK 2005, 327). Pakaluk immediately goes on to explain how he imagines this coexistence: «Aristotle when lecturing in philosophy is living 'life according to the mind', and when he is writing his will, and exercising administrative virtue and justice, he is living 'life according to the other virtues'. Those phrases should be taken to indicate types of activity» (PAKALUK 2005, 327). For an opposite view arguing that «the theoretical life and the 'life in accordance with the other virtue' (1178a 6-9) are competing alternatives, and not two aspects of the same life», see LEAR 2004, 177 and nn.

<sup>16</sup> In this sense, a man applying ethical virtue and a man devoting himself to contemplation «are not two different persons; rather, it is one and the same person on different levels of excellence» (AUBENQUE 2003, 98).

Again, we can begin with the distinction between *techné* as instrumental activity aiming to an external result, and *praxis* as activity performed with a consciousness of the purpose and a full awareness of the activity itself, with the purpose being not the external “product” but the activity itself.

We realise that our life is never fully completed in the form of a perfect actualisation lying in front of us as a completed “product”. We are on the way to this actualisation and in this sense our life is more an aiming, not a fulfilment. In spite of that, we may be able to view our life as a whole. This complete view can be best achieved in certain self-reflexive acts allowing us a sort of an intellectual insight in what we are doing<sup>17</sup>. It is this self-reflection accompanied by self-awareness that brings the necessary stability and unity to our life:

The attribute in question [i.e. permanence], then, will belong to the happy man, and he will be happy throughout his life; for always, or by preference to everything else, he will do and contemplate what is excellent (*praxeî kai theôrêsei ta kat' aretên*)... (NE 1100b 18-20)<sup>18</sup>.

The quoted formulation explicitly underlines the connection between *praxis* and *theôria*, and Aristotle further elaborates this connection in

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<sup>17</sup> «...if he who sees perceives that he sees, and he who hears, that he hears, and he who walks, that he walks, and in the case of all other activities similarly there is something which perceives that we are active, so that if we perceive, we perceive that we perceive, and if we think, that we think; and if to perceive that we perceive or think is to perceive that we exist (for existence was defined as perceiving or thinking)...» (NE 1170a 29-b 1).

<sup>18</sup> Cf. NE 1152a 15-17. Referring to the nature of ethical virtues, M. Pakaluk says: «their being goals somehow involves our being able to reflect upon or *see* them with reasonable satisfaction; this is not philosophical contemplation strictly, but some kind of intellectual perception, presumably of the *kalon*, namely what is admirable and attractive in action. It must be Aristotle's view ultimately that to carry out a fitting action is somehow to *see* that it is fitting, and that our seeing that it is so is the best part of the action, and that there is no point to life beyond *seeing* in this way» (PAKALUK 2005, 328). Cf. RORTY 1978, 346.

Book IX, determining as appropriate objects of *theôria* not only our own actions, but even more so the actions of our friends in whom we see ourselves, so to speak<sup>19</sup>:

If happiness lies in living and being active, and the good man's activity is virtuous and pleasant in itself, as we have said at the outset, and a thing's being one's own is one of the attributes that make it pleasant, and we can contemplate our neighbours better than ourselves and their actions better than our own, and if the actions of virtuous men who are their friends are pleasant to good men (since these have both the attributes that are naturally pleasant) — if this be so, the supremely happy man will need friends of this sort, since his purpose is to contemplate worthy actions and actions that are his own, and the actions of a good man who is his friend have both these qualities (*NE* 1169b 30-1170a 4)<sup>20</sup>.

If the range of objects of contemplation is conceived in this way, it may also suggest a clue for a better understanding of the meaning of *theôria*, described in Book X as the highest and most divine activity.

We know that divine life consists in contemplating oneself. Which human activity would then be the most divine? It might be the contemplation of the divine, meaning we would try as much as we could to contemplate the same that god is contemplating. This concept of

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<sup>19</sup> For a broader context, see *NE* 1169b 14-1170a 5. On the political character of friendship, cf. GARVER 2006, 141.

<sup>20</sup> The role of friendship in connection with the awareness of oneself is further elaborated in the passage following the extract quoted in Note 17: «...if perceiving that one lives is in itself one of the things that are pleasant (for life is by nature good, and to perceive what is good present in oneself is pleasant); and if life is desirable, and particularly so for good men, because to them existence is good and pleasant (for they are pleased at the consciousness of the presence in them of what is in itself good); and if as the virtuous man is to himself, he is to his friend also (for his friend is another self) — if all this be true, as his own being is desirable for each man, so, or almost so, is that of his friend. Now his being was seen to be desirable because he perceived his own goodness, and such perception is pleasant in itself. He must, therefore, perceive the existence of his friend together with his own, and this will be realized in their living together and sharing in discussion and thought...» (*NE* 1170b 1-12).

*theôria* would best correspond to Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, and the value of theoretical activity would in this case be derived from the value of its object<sup>21</sup>. However, if we place the emphasis on the reflexive aspect of *theôria* that we register in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, contemplating our own activities may be seen as the most divine activity approximating what god is doing: like god viewing himself, we would be viewing our own activity. Only in this sense what is divine could at the same time be what is most proper to us.

Therefore, I think a plausible interpretation should connect both of the two steps mentioned before: broaden the field of contemplation to include a wider range of possible objects<sup>22</sup>, and at the same time revise the understanding of Aristotle's concept of *homoïôsis theôi*, i. e. the concept of the imitation of the divine which is an important fundament of Aristotle's ethical thinking. The perspective of the *Nicomachean Ethics* shows that this imitation does not have to be a strict imitation of divine activity in a purely intelligible sphere in which god as pure reason relates to the most valuable objects of thinking, but it can be an imitation of the very reflexivity *theôria* is connected to in the context of the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

#### 4. Phronêsis and Theôria

Contemplation conceived in this way, then, does not need to be put against political life as some "other", apolitical life. This is also intimated by Aristotle's polemics with the opinion that philosophy means retreating

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<sup>21</sup> *Theôria*, in the broadest sense of "seeing" or "viewing", denotes perfect knowledge related to necessary and unchangeable objects.

<sup>22</sup> A certain flexibility is suggested by Aristotle himself in the closing passage of Chapter 8 in Book X, where he says that "happiness is some form of contemplation" (*theôria tis*). Hence it seems he does not mean the strictly conceived *theôria* of the *Metaphysics*.

from active life to seclusion and inactivity, implied in Book VII of the *Politics*<sup>23</sup>. Here is what Aristotle is saying on this:

But the active life is not necessarily active in relation to other men, as some people think, nor are only those processes of thought active that are pursued for the sake of the objects that result from action, but far more those speculations and thoughts that have their end in themselves and are pursued for their own sake (*Pol.* 1325b 18-22).

What is crucial here is the emphasis on activity, which can be internal as well as external in character. Taking into account this statement, we can go on to define more precisely the relationship between theoretical and political activity. Instead of making a sharp distinction between contemplative and political life we can say that contemplation completes political life and it is itself already grounded in political life: the political nature of man expressed by the term *zôon politikon* is grounded in the ability of speech and thinking, represented in the formula *zôon logon echon* (*Pol.* 1253a 10-18). Both of these terms underline the political character of friendship which makes our self-reflection and realising our own goodness possible through the reflection of the actions of another person, “another self” with whom we are “living together and sharing in discussion and thought” (*NE* 1170b 11-12). Both of these terms together demonstrate to what extent human rationality is connected to the political nature of man. Also, it is the space of the *polis* where this rationality is primarily manifested. A wide range of human activities require *phronêsis* which is necessary to a good life because it constitutes the rational structure of ethical virtue (*NE* 1178a 10-19).

As the ability to relate to both the general and the particular enabling us to find particular ways of applying ethical virtue in the light of general

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<sup>23</sup> A typical exponent of the conviction about the antagonism of politics and philosophy and a proponent of the thesis about the inactive, and in that sense “unmanly”, nature of philosophy is Callicles from Plato’s dialogue *Gorgias* (*Gorg.* 485c-486d).

principles, *phronêsis* is an important bridge between practical and theoretical reason. In this sense, it also prepares the ground for the development of *theôria*:

[Practical wisdom] is not supreme over philosophic wisdom, i.e. over the superior part of us, any more than the art of medicine is over health; for it does not use it but provides for its coming into being; it issues orders, then, for its sake, but not to it (*NE* 1145a 6-9).

In what sense, then, is *theôria* dependent on the ability of ethical action within the *polis*? Only those endowed with *phronêsis* can judge the relative value of human activities, but above all they understand the activities performed for their own sake; therefore, they can see the difference between activities having the character of *energeia* and activities having the character of *kinêsis*<sup>24</sup>, and from this perspective they also view ethical action. Activity construed on the model of *kinêsis* has the nature of instrumental activity and its goal lies outside the activity itself<sup>25</sup>. By contrast, activity construed on the model of *energeia* is itself its own goal, and it is exactly this kind of activity that ethical action is, at least in its pure form.

Here we can distinguish between simple virtue, which is necessary to a good life and is accompanied by desirable elements such as honour, power or social status, and nobility, which values virtue for its own sake, i.e. for its intrinsic value<sup>26</sup>. This is the course of the subtle analyses of the nature of virtue in which Aristotle distinguishes more finely between ethically and politically motivated virtue; an example of this is his analysis of courage in Book III of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, where he says that political courage of a citizen-soldier is most like courage, but it is not pure courage, inasmuch as it is motivated by secondary principles in the form

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<sup>24</sup> This distinction is suggested in the *Metaphysics* (*Met.* 1048b).

<sup>25</sup> Cf. the distinction between virtue and cleverness (*deinotês*) in *NE* 1144a.

<sup>26</sup> See BROADIE 2005, 98. Cf. *Eth. Eud.* 1248b-1249b.



of public appreciation or mere obedience of the law<sup>27</sup>. The principal expression of this point is the note that virtue is not only *kata ton orthon logon*, but *meta tû orthû logû*: “it is not merely the state in accordance with correct reason, but the state that implies the presence of correct reason, that is virtue“ (*NE* 1144b 24-26).

The shift between the two positions, between politically and ethically motivated virtues, is the result of ethical development. In the course of this development a range of particular actions filling the political space can be perceived not as a simple sum of activities constituting a good life, but it can be elevated to viewing the intrinsic value of virtue and related to the unifying perspective of a happy life as a whole, conceived also in the sense of *energeia*. A man endowed with *phronêsis* already has all the prerequisites for that.

Further, it follows from the nature of the human being that a higher measure of unity is given by a higher measure of integration of diverse components<sup>28</sup>. Therefore, the unity of human life does not rest in performing the same activity all the time: “...if the nature of anything were simple, the same action would always be most pleasant to it.” (*NE* 1154b 25-26). But that is not the case with human beings. The composite human nature finds its unity in a higher measure of integration connecting diverse activities<sup>29</sup>. The same point that is applied on the level of political life can thus be transferred to the level of individual life: there, too, unity is conceived as integration of plurality and diversity.

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<sup>27</sup> Here we can also follow up with a reference to the distinction between habitual and reflected virtue which is a part of the Socratic-Platonic heritage and was suggested above by the reference to the eschatological myth in Book X of the *Republic*.

<sup>28</sup> Let us remember Aristotle's analyses of unity in the *Metaphysics*, where the unity of a heap is confronted with a higher unity of an integrated whole (*Met.* 1052a).

<sup>29</sup> This should also be the disposition of the *phronimos*: he is the one who knows that isolated actions without coherence and continuity do not establish a good life (see *NE* 1105a 30-34).

Hence, it is necessary to add one more note to the above mentioned principles of Aristotelian anthropology: “man is not the best thing in the world” (*NE* 1141a 21-23). His human, social activities, although they achieve their own perfection, still, as to their value, come second<sup>30</sup>. However, they form the necessary condition for the integrating theoretical insight into these activities. The contemplative life, therefore, does not release itself from social ties, as Aristotle explicitly emphasises by repeated references to social life being necessary to happiness (*NE* 1169b 14-1170a 5; cf. 1157b 20-22; 1099b 4). Hence, the self-sufficiency of a happy life is not supposed to mean a solitary life:

...by self-sufficient we do not mean that which is sufficient for a man by himself, for one who lives a solitary life, but also for parents, children, wife, and in general for his friends and fellow citizens, since man is born for citizenship (*NE* 1097b 8-12).

Therefore, I think that on the basis of the proposed evidence it is possible to alleviate the tension in Aristotle's concept of political and philosophical life, thus supporting a more coherent reading of the conclusion of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. It turns out that both of the two ways of life, or, rather, both of the two life perspectives, do not stand next to one another as objects of alternative choice, but they are connected by a more fundamental relationship. The unifying element of Aristotle's conception is the element of activity, the actively lived life. The conception of life as *energeia* is suggested by the argumentation as early as in Chapter 7 of Book I, where Aristotle is looking for the *ergon* of man,

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<sup>30</sup> Why living a life based on *phronêsis* is not enough? Here is what A. Rorty has to say on the subject: «Theoria can complete and perfect the practical life, making it not only self-justified but self-contained because its grounds are contained within it» (RORTY 1978, 350).

i. e. a specific activity appropriate to man as man<sup>31</sup>. Aristotle at the same time demonstrates that this active, en-ergetic charge is present not only in political involvement, but also, in an even greater measure, in theoretical activity.

The proposed analysis is also in harmony with the Aristotelian conception of ethical improvement, i. e. the conception of education on the principle of gradual progress. The space for education is, first and foremost, the *polis*. Again, let us point out that ethical virtues are above all political virtues, because self-rule, i. e. the state of man understanding oneself as an agent and choosing acts for their own sake, develops through submission to political rule<sup>32</sup>. In relation to reason it means that a man learns to obey his own reason by first listening to and obeying someone else's reason – as a child the reason of the adults, as an adult most of all the reason of the law<sup>33</sup>. What is at first merely potentially reasonable conduct may thus through habituation and subsequent reflection become fully reasonable conduct which the agent understands as good and beautiful.

Habituation is an important stage of ethical development; however, it is not its final stage<sup>34</sup>. Aristotle's analyses allow for gradual improvement with a better understanding of ethical motivation playing the key role, and this understanding comes from rational reflection. It is this understanding that opens the path to the above explored realisation of one's own life as *energeia*. Therefore, the essential grounding of *theôria* in the space of political life which the proposed interpretation tried to follow valorises

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<sup>31</sup> The counterpart to the active conduct of life is inactivity comparable to the passivity of a sleeping person, which is an image Aristotle uses repeatedly to underline his distinction (*NE* 1095b 32-1096a 2; 1098b 32-1099a 6; 1178b 19-20).

<sup>32</sup> GARVER 2006, 130. Conversely, individual vices make political participation impossible because through them people become too slave-like or too despotic, and hence they cannot take part in the political alternation of ruling and being ruled.

<sup>33</sup> The law is "wisdom without desire", as Aristotle puts it in the *Politics* (*Pol.* 1287a 33).

<sup>34</sup> Cf. NUSSBAUM 2001, 285-287.

Aristotle's central thesis of the political embedding of human life, as well as his thesis of the existence of the *polis* "for the good life" (*Pol.* 1252b 30).

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