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Alexander Lee Chen April 9, 2017

The Contemplative and Political Lives in Aristotle and Plato

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An abstract of
a thesis submitted to the Faculty of Emory College of Arts and Sciences
of Emory University in partial fulfillment
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Department of Classics

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Abstract

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Plato and Aristotle are often thought of as thinkers who privileged the contemplative life over and against that of the political one; indeed, it might often seem that political action is superfluous for these two thinkers, except as a means to secure the conditions of the contemplative life. I wish to argue, however, that political action is more important for Plato and Aristotle than is often thought. In Aristotle, political action provides a key component of human happiness that contemplation alone is unable to provide, whereas for Plato, in the happy life of the philosopher kings, political action and contemplation are indistinguishable and inextricable from one another.

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Acknowledgements

I would like to give thanks to my mother for bankrolling me these past few years with respect to my education and all the various activities that have fallen under that extensive penumbra.

I would like to thank my committee members for sticking with me through this project – for I know that I haven't always been the ideal case when it comes to communication and time management.

I would moreover like to thank: LYT, JLZ, EGBY, CMS, and BB for helping me to have become who I am.

And LCB for being the final inducement of my descent into the world.

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Introduction:

It may not be entirely appropriate to make use of a thesis – that is, a cold and ostensibly academic document – to tease out and work through the various personal insecurities and questions with which I have been beset. Accordingly, I have tried, and not without effort, to write the body of my thesis with as critical and as academic of a mind as I have been able to muster. To what extent I have been successful in that endeavor, it shall fall upon you judges to determine.

I had attempted to write my introduction to this thesis in a similarly detached vein, but after several aborted attempts and reattempts, I have found doing so to be an impossibility for me. At heart, this failure no doubt arises out of the fact that I would make for a very poor academic, in that I cannot help but relate every intellectual assessment of a theory or concept directly to the personal ideological matrix wherewith I confront and interact with the world – that is, to speak more clearly, I am simply unable to stand and interact with Aristotle's and Plato's work on the relationship between political and contemplative lives with the austere objectivity that scholarship so often seems to demand. As a result, any attempts on my part to write this introduction in such a detached and disinterested manner, treating of the interaction between politics and contemplation in relation to these two thinkers, were ultimately unsuccessful, because my previous attempts did not reach into the underlying reasons wherefore I have undertaken the project of writing this thesis in the first place.

At the end, since I have been frustrated so many times by my complete inability to justify and explain the overall bent of my thesis in relation to the greater body of scholarship surrounding Aristotle and Plato, I have resorted to an attempt to explain the overall argument of my thesis in relation to my personal and/or intellectual development over the past few years of

college. I do this, not so much because I am so full of myself that I believe that my intellectual development should be of particular interest to you judges, but rather because I am at a complete loss as to how else I ought to introduce the intent of my project in this thesis in a cogent and meaningful way.

When I entered Emory at 2013, I had been on the outside of the formal education system for almost two and a half years, since I had dropped out of high school back in the winter of 2010. I had spent the majority of my time between 2010 and 2013 engaged in the project of educating myself and engaging in contemplation of the truth so far as possible. That meant obtaining a "classical" education so much as I could – "learning for learning's sake" was an important value of mine throughout this period. I learned Latin and Greek to a fairly competent extent in this period, read hundreds of books, and engaged in study of mathematics to a relatively high level – at least, for a student whose main focus the past two years has been on the humanities.

In the midst of all this intellectual striving and contemplative inquiry, it had escaped me that I was desperately unhappy with the course that my life was taking, but as I had always been a rather melancholy child, I paid no heed to my unhappiness and attempted, so far as possible, to reason and trick it out of existence by pasturing myself on the wisdom of Aurelius and the jocundity of Aristophanes.

This trend largely continued throughout my first year at college and was one of the reasons why I so strongly and single-mindedly desired to go into academia. The world of human beings was, I had thought, that of the world of becoming, inferior in every respect to the world of being in which academics must move – a world freed from the petty politics, internecine

squabbles, and unfortunate emotions with which those who lived outside of the ivory tower would have to deal. I thought of the politicized world of society as one in which individuals fought and stepped over each other in pursuit of temporal happiness and fleeting fame, whereas the academic world was to exist solely in service of some disinterested striving after the truth.

Undoubtedly, I would have carried along in this unhappy course unabated, were it not for two rather random events in my life. In the first place, I decided, rather haphazardly, to write a research paper in the Fall Semester of 2014 on Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*. I chose this text for no other reason than that I was in the middle of my great period of philhellenism, in which I wanted everything I read and thought about to relate to the noble Greeks in some way. I had in all honesty never read anything of Nietzsche before this point, having been forewarned by a close friend of mine not to delve too deeply into his philosophy, on the grounds that Nietzsche was a terrifying seducer who possessed the uncanny ability to turn every value upside down. I pressed on regardless, however, fully expecting nothing more from Nietzsche than a cold and well-reasoned philological analysis and examination of the evolution of Greek tragedy.

What I got was something completely different. There are very few events in my life that divide it into a "before" and "after," but I would venture to guess that reading *The Birth of Tragedy* was one such an event. All the heady talk of the "primordial being," – *das Urwesen* – coupled with the great affirmation of life that Nietzsche breathed into the Greeks, began to topple with one great blow the structure and ideal of disinterested observation that I had thitherto cultivated. Slowly but surely, the beauty I had once attributed to *contemplation* was replaced with the joy of *life*; slowly but surely, I began to feel, if not yet happy, at least no longer profoundly and quiescently miserable. There was hope: hope that I could dissolve myself,

somehow, into the oceanic sentiment of the Dionysian, and become one with something greater! Dim and undefined though it was, there was hope at last!

The second rather random event in my life stemmed from my decision to begin learning German, also in the Fall Semester of 2014. I had originally decided to attempt obtaining a B.S. in Mathematics along with my B.A. in Classics, for which I had spent the Summer of 2014 at Berkeley, studying linear algebra, multivariable calculus, and differential equations. I quickly learned, however, that I had neither any particular inclination or facility with such subjects, and accordingly decided to focus on Classics with an intensity yet stronger: I began, therefore, to study German, initially for no other reason than that I thought it would prove a useful language to have in the academic study of Classics.

While studying German, I heard of the Vienna intensive program that the German Department here at Emory does in the summers, and I thought that it would be a good idea to sign up for that program in order to develop competency in German so far as possible, since studying Greek, Latin, and mathematics intensively at Berkeley the past three summers had been of such benefit to me. Thus I flew into that City of Dreams with the same mindset that had served me well in Berkeley the past three years – I came in with a suitcase full of books (specifically, all ten or so of Copleston's volumes on the history of philosophy and Rudin's famous book on real analysis), intending to devote all my time, even in Vienna, either to the study of German or to the study of philosophy or mathematics, the contemplative sciences *par excellence*.

What I got was, again, completely different from what I had expected. If Nietzsche was a foretaste of the way my thinking and orientation to the world was to change fundamentally, my experiences that summer (and the summer of 2016 – I loved Vienna so much that I decided to

return) put into practice the ideas with which Nietzsche had imbued me. In the course of that summer and the one following, I was all of a sudden brought down from the solitude of contemplating the world of being into the warm life of human becoming. Vienna unseated the stern and terrifying God of thought, and replaced it instead with the gentle Gods of laughter and tears, as I drank the heady draught of life, with which I was – and still am – intoxicated.

What I experienced those two summers remains far too great for words and transcends the narrow mold into which all intellection must fall! In a few scattered moments, the meaning of that phrase, "feeling is first," impressed itself indelibly upon my heart and brain, as I waltzed myself to sickness in the rain, committed sins, petty and great, knowingly and unknowingly, saw the face of God reflected in the eyes of one whom I had loved, fell to my knees in prayer, in the hopes that I could recapture that face amongst the stars, attempted to, and found, consolation in the arms and kind words of those who would grow near and dear to me… and so on. I read nothing of what I had planned to – but my life was not the less for not having done so; in fact, I had enriched it incommensurably by stepping down, for a few moments, from the stilly world of being into the world of becoming – from descending from the abstracted demands of thought into the midst of the "madding crowd's ignoble strife" – from ceasing for a while to attempt only to avoid pain as far as possible, by retreating in the sanctuary of logic and thought, in favor instead of attempting to embrace the pain and love with which we are all inevitably confronted, one way or another, when we choose to deal and engage with other people on their terms.

This thesis, then, builds upon and finalizes the slow ideological reorientation with which I have been occupied these past months and years. I have long since used the thought of Aristotle and Plato as stalwart defenders of the contemplative life over and against the political life. My

previous interpretations of their work laid most of the ideological groundwork upon which I justified my attempts at abnegating the exigencies of the world of becoming in favor of contemplating the world of being; in this new interpretation of their work, I shall, accordingly, be concerned rather with justifying a new line of development – one that shall allow me to relate authentically and sincerely to the people of the world, with neither illusion nor cynicism, such that I shall come to embrace them in spite of all their vagaries and defects and perhaps, before dying, even come in some small way to serve and better deeply the greater mass of men and women upon this earth.

Thus, there are two main, but closely interrelated goals, that I hope to accomplish in the body of this thesis. In the first place, I intend to demonstrate that Aristotle's and Plato's views with respect to the tension of the political and contemplative lives are more similar than is commonly believed. That is, I wish to demonstrate the way in which Aristotle and Plato *both* believe that the good and full human life is one in which one partakes of both the contemplative and political lives.

In the second place, however, I wish to show the subtle way in which the interaction between the political and contemplative lives differs for Aristotle and Plato in relation to the "good life." I will demonstrate that for Aristotle, politics and contemplation each contribute something valuable to the realization of the good life, by providing for the actualization of separate inherently valuable aspects of human life. On the other hand, for Plato, politics and contemplation are unified, in that the ideal contemplator, living in the ideal polis, will *a fortiori* engage in politics. To wit: in Aristotle, politics and contemplation are separate from each other and independently valuable, one may choose one or the other, and the good life would contain aspects of both. In Plato, politics and contemplation are unified in the ideal city, one may not

engage in one life without engaging in the other, and the good life thus constitutes nothing else but the unification of both such lives.

Part I: Aristotle and the Connection between the Contemplative and Political Lives

In Chapter Five of Book I of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle lays out three differing lives as commonly proposed candidates for the life of human happiness: the life of pleasure, the life of political activity, and the life of contemplation. As the life of pleasure is quite easily and often dismissed as a serious candidate for the life of human happiness, the central conflict over the happy life appears to be one between that of the contemplative and political lives.

Aristotle was, of course, a philosopher, and as a philosopher, it is not unexpected that he rates the value of the contemplative life in very high terms in Chapter Six of Book X of the *Ethics*:

"If happiness is activity in accordance with excellence, it is reasonable that it should be in accordance with the highest excellence; and this will be that of the best thing in us… the activity of this [best thing] in accordance with its proper excellence will be complete happiness. That this activity is contemplative we have already said."[1]

Near the end of this chapter, Aristotle concludes authoritatively, "for man, therefore, the life according to intellect is best and pleasantest, since intellect more than anything else *is* man. This life therefore is also the happiest."[2] Aristotle then proceeds in the next chapter to praise even further the life of contemplation, arguing that the contemplative life requires the fewest of external goods and that one who engages in such a life, insofar as he or she would be engaging in the most god-like of activities, would be most akin to God.

[1] EN 1177a11-19; All translations, unless otherwise stated, will be taken from W.D. Ross, rev. by J. O. Urmson
[2] EN 1178a6-8

At first blush, Aristotle's preference for the life of contemplation over the political life appears to be clear. But a few relatively common-sense considerations should be enough to persuade anybody that this preference is not nearly as direct as it may first seem. For, in the first place, if Aristotle truly believes that the political life for human beings is infinitely inferior in comparison to the life of contemplation, what would his purpose be in writing the *Nicomachean Ethics* in the first place, and why would the closing lines of the *Ethics* point directly forward to the *Politics*, in which he almost never makes mention of the life of contemplation at all?

Moreover: even if the life of contemplation were the best, pleasantest, and happiest life according to Aristotle, could we imagine him arguing that the contemplative but prodigal person would be as worthy as the contemplative person who also possesses the virtue of liberality – and likewise, with respect to the other virtues? To take this thought to a further extreme: if one's city were under attack, would Aristotle's vision of the best person escape from that city in order to pursue his or her contemplative in peace elsewhere, or would that person rather be called upon to exercise the virtue of courage in order to secure the city against its attackers, even if such action might result in death?

These two basic considerations should, from the outset, suggest that Aristotle's opinion as to the inherent praiseworthiness of the life of contemplation does not diminish the stature of the political life. One of Aristotle's great moral innovations, of which he is so fond of reminding his readers, is his viewpoint that the virtues are "means between extremes." I wish to suggest that Aristotle believes that the best human life would also be a sort of "mean between two extremes" – that is, that the best human life would be one that would exist as a mean between the life of contemplation and that of political activity. To engage disproportionately in only one or the other activity would, in essence, constitute a denial of what it means to be a human being.

In support of this argument, I will begin with a close reading of Aristotle's criteria and description of the nature of happiness with respect to what he lays out in Book I of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Next, I will proceed to examine his description of the contemplative life in Chapters Seven and Eight of Book X of the *Ethics*, and the extent to which it meets his criteria for the happy life. I will end with a demonstration that the criteria Aristotle affixes to the notion of happiness is better satisfied by a balance between the political and contemplative lives, rather than by any one of them taken in isolation.

Chapter 1: The Characteristics of Happiness According to Aristotle

1. Happiness as the Goal of Politics

The first criterion of happiness is raised in Chapter Four of Book I of the *Ethics*, and it reads as follows:

> "Let us resume our inquiry and state, in view of the fact that all knowledge and choice aims at some good, what it is that we say political science aims at and what is the highest of all goods achievable by action. Verbally there is very general agreement, for both the general run of men and people of superior refinement say that it is happiness…"[3]

This statement appears to imply that happiness is the ultimate goal of the political life and that, therefore, a somewhat careless reader might assume that Aristotle determines here that the political life is that which would alone lead to happiness. Two considerations ought to be brought up against this hasty assumption, however: In the first place, one could make the obvious argument that the fact that political science *aims at* (ἐφίεσθαι) some highest good does not necessarily mean that political science itself provides the optimal method for securing that good.

[3] EN 1095a14-17

In the second place, Aristotle makes note of the fact that political science aims at "the highest of all goods *achievable by action*" (τὸ πάντων ἀκρότατον τῶν *πρακτῶν* ἀγαθῶν), which at least opens up the possibility that perhaps there is another form of good, perhaps a θεωρητικὸν ἀγαθόν, which might be even "better" than all forms of πρακτὰ ἀγαθά.

Simply on the basis of this definition of happiness, Aristotle's conception of the role of politics could still be conceived of as a form of activity not inherently choice-worthy in its own right, but only considered useful insofar as the proper conduct of politics might lead to the formation of a state most suited to the peace and basic prosperity needed for the exercise of contemplation. So far, based on Aristotle's assertion, it seems that politics plays *some* sort of a role in securing a life of human happiness – but it still may serve simply as a subordinate art to something higher, such as the activity of contemplation.

2. The Self-Sufficiency of Happiness

Aristotle explains his second criterion for happiness in the first half of Chapter Seven of Book I of the *Ethics*; it reads as follows:

"Now such a thing happiness, above all else, is held to be [something which is always desirable in itself and never for the sake of something else]; for this [i.e. happiness] we choose always for itself and never for the sake of something else, but honour, pleasure, reason, and every excellence we choose indeed for themselves (for if nothing resulted from them we should still choose each of them), but we choose them also for the sake of happiness, judging that through them we shall be happy. Happiness, on the other hand, no one chooses for the sake of these, nor, in general, for anything other than itself."[4]

[4] EN 1097a35-b8

This passage has been a topic of much debate amongst commentators, who are generally split on the question of what Aristotle means when he speaks of those goods that we choose both for themselves and for the sake of happiness. The importance of this passage for our argument, however, lies in the fact that Aristotle appears to open the possibility that happiness may actually be a *composite* amalgamation of various goods, rather than something inherently good in itself – i.e., the happy/good life might not be a life that is dominated by and centered on the unmeasured pursuit of goods as honor, pleasure, reason, and so on, but rather on a harmonious balance, in which these "secondary" goods are pursued in accordance to some ratio.

Aristotle elaborates upon this property of happiness a little later on in the same chapter, and gives it the name of "sufficiency" [αὐταρκεία]:

> "The complete good" [which seems here to be interchangeable with happiness] is thought to be self-sufficient… the self-sufficient we now define as that which when isolated makes life desirable and lacking in nothing; and such we think happiness to be; and further we think it most desirable of all things, without being counted as one good among others—if it were so counted it would clearly be made more desirable by the addition of even the least of goods, for that which is added becomes an excess of goods, and of goods the greater is always more desirable."[5]

In these two passages, Aristotle concedes that honor, reason, etc. are still goods and, as such, that they are still inherently desirable. The high pedestal upon which he places happiness does not inherently diminish the goodness or desirability of these lesser goods, considered in relation to one another. Rather, all it does is demonstrate that happiness is a good so *qualitatively* different from the other, lesser goods, that anybody who is truly leading happy life would no longer seek out the secondary goods.

[5] EN 1097b7-21

The question that must now be answered is this: is happiness qualitatively different from the lesser goods (i.e. in that it is "complete"), insofar anybody who leads a happy life automatically no longer has need of the secondary goods, or is happiness "complete" in that the happy individual is already in possession of and exercises these secondary goods in the best manner – the same way, for instance, contemplation would be more "complete" than the pursuit of pleasure, because the activity of contemplation already includes pleasure in itself?[6] Later on, I shall demonstrate why the latter reading is stronger.

3. The Importance of External Goods.

Through Chapter Eight of Book I of the *Ethics*, Aristotle examines the inherent importance of *activity* in relation to the happy life – happiness, in contrast to what we moderns are wont to think, cannot be simply a psychological or internal state of mind. Rather, Aristotle is very emphatic that just as "in the Olympic Games it is not the most beautiful and the strongest that are crowned but those who compete," so too it can only be "those who act rightly [who] win the noble and good things in life." [7]

As a result, Aristotle is a realist when he comes to the role that external goods must play in the happy life: "for it is impossible, or not easy, to do noble acts without the proper equipment. In many actions we use friends and riches and political power as instruments."[8] Aristotle is unclear as to the exact level of friends, riches, or political power that one is required to possesses in order to perform such deeds – but this omission on his part does not concern us here. At base, what is crucial to take away from this chapter is the fact that Aristotle, to some

[6] C.f., for instance Chapter Five of Book X of EN, in which Aristotle implicates pleasure into the contemplative life.
[7] EN 1099a1-5
[8] EN 1099a33-35

extent, understands happiness as to some extent depending upon one's external possessions and conditions in the world. He is far from the situation of the later Stoics, who would hold that such things as "wealth, honor, political power, friends, and children all belong in their category of 'preferred indifferents,'" such that they would come to argue that "the things Aristotle calls 'external goods' are really [*n*]*ever* goods at all."[9]

4. An Activity of the Soul in Conformity with Excellence

"Human good turns out to be activity of soul in conformity with excellence, and if there are more than one excellence, in conformity with the best and most complete,"[10] writes Aristotle toward the end of Chapter Seven of Book I of the *Ethics*; he later returns to this definition in Chapter Thirteen of the same book, writing that "Since happiness is an activity of soul in accordance with complete excellence, we must consider the nature of excellence; for perhaps we shall thus see better the nature of happiness."[11]

This is Aristotle's most explicit *definition* of what happiness constitutes, and, rather infamously, it is also the definition of which he later makes use in Book X of the *Ethics* to argue that the contemplative life far better meets the criteria of the happy life, when he argues that, because the highest (or strongest - τὴν κρατίστην) excellence in human beings is that of contemplation, the happiest human life must therefore be contemplative.

Very much of what one will be able to say about Aristotle's notion of the "good life" must therefore be found to hinge upon untangling this statement – that is, in answering the

[9] Roche (2014) p. 37
[10] EN 1098b16-18
[11] EN 1102a5-7

question: What "excellence" does Aristotle have in mind, when he speaks of that "complete" or "best" excellence, the exercise of which enables the happy or good life?

The clue, it seems, rests in Aristotle's clarification in Chapter Thirteen of Book I that "clearly the excellence we must study is human excellence; for the good we are seeking was human good and the happiness human happiness."[12] That is, in Aristotle's view, the subject-matter of his ethics does not consist of some abstract notion of "happiness" or of "the Good" considered separately from human activities and human affairs. Even if there existed some sort of a life that would be perfect for God (such as the life of contemplation would be), it does not necessarily follow for Aristotle that such a life would be the best for human beings.

Accordingly, when Aristotle speaks of the "best" or "most complete" excellence, one should keep in mind that he does not intend to speak of the absolutely best or most complete excellence, but rather that one which would be best for human beings, whatever that excellence may ultimately be determined to be.

5. The Doctrine of the Mean

Before we descend straight away into our examination of how Aristotle characterizes the contemplative and political lives, it will be helpful to review quickly his Doctrine of the Mean, since it is our intention to suggest that the happy life is, in effect, a mean between two extremes – viz., between the contemplative and political lives.

In brief, Aristotle makes the observation that there are three dispositions with respect to the excellences and lack thereof: "two of them vices, involving excess and deficiency and one… excellence, viz. the mean."[13] Thus, for instance, when one speaks of courage, one might speak of

[12] EN 1102a14-16
[13] EN 1108b12-13

one who possesses an excess thereof as *rash* and somebody who possesses a deficiency as *cowardly* – but only the one in possession of something between the rash and the cowardly could properly be called courageous. It is important to note, however, that Aristotle is not speaking of an *arithmetic* sort of a mean between two extremes. The analogy he gives to describe the mean is as follows: the number six is the mean between the extremes of ten and two, but it does not follow from this fact that if ten pounds of food is too much for somebody to eat, and two pounds too little, that one ought to eat nine pounds.[14] It must be kept in mind, therefore, that Aristotle always refers to that which is a mean *in relation to us*, and not with respect to some impersonal mathematical standard.

Disappointingly, Aristotle says little much more about the doctrine of the mean – indeed, he concedes that determining what the mean properly is "no doubt difficult, and especially in individual cases" – determining the mean properly thus falls not to theoretical wisdom but rather "the way in which the man of practical wisdom [ὁ φρόνιμος] would determine it."[15] The final notable point that Aristotle makes consists in this remark, that "he who aims at the intermediate must first depart from what is the more contrary to it."[16] That is, with respect to every set of virtues and vices, there exists one vice, to which one naturally predisposed to incline: e.g. cowardice comes more naturally than rashness. In these terms, Aristotle makes the very practical observation that since rashness is the vice more contrary to our natural instincts, it is less contrary to the mean, courage, than cowardice would be; thus, "since to hit the mean is hard in the extreme, we must as a second best… take the least of the evils" by swerving ourselves to the extreme to which it is harder to incline.[17]

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[14] EN 1106a31-34
[15] EN 1109b14; EN 1107a1-3
[16] EN 1109a30
[17] EN 1109a33-35

Chapter 2: The Contemplative Life

We have now sketched the criteria of the happy life as Aristotle conceives them: let us now move on to consider his portrayal of the contemplative life in Book X of the *Ethics*, and the extent to which such a life might meet the criteria for his idea of the happy life.

1. The Contemplative Life as a Goal for Political Action

Aristotle seems to say quite explicitly, in Chapter Seven of Book X, that political action is never undertaken for its own sake, but rather for the sake of something else, as one does not make war for the purpose of making war but rather for the sake of peace, just as one does not labor for the sake of laboring, but rather for the sake of obtaining peace.[18] In like manner, Aristotle notes that "the action of the statesman is also unleisurely, and… aims at… happiness, for him and his fellow citizens—a happiness different from political action, and evidently sought as being different."[19] At the very least, then, the contemplative life seems un-problematically to fit this criterion for happiness, in that it is the end, or at the very least, an end, after which political action strives.

2. The Contemplative Life and Self-Sufficiency

Is the contemplative life for Aristotle "self-sufficient" – that is, if we were to isolate it and consider it by itself, could one look upon contemplation as the sole good, the exercise of which alone would make life worth living? In the words of Aristotle himself, "the self-sufficiency that is spoken of must belong *most* [μάλιστ'] to the contemplative activity… the wise

[18] EN 1177b1-10
[19] EN 1177b12-14

man, even when by himself, can contemplate truth, and the better the wiser he is; he can perhaps do so better if he has fellow-workers, but still he is most self-sufficient."[20]

If we take Aristotle's previous definition of self-sufficiency seriously, that "the self-sufficient we… define as that which when isolated makes life desirable and lacking in nothing," it should be clear that the life of pure contemplation cannot fulfill this criterion. In the first place, it should be clear upon short reflection that a life composed merely of contemplation can be neither sustainable nor desirable – one does, after all, need at the very least to drink, eat and sleep, or else suffer from a very short life indeed.

But undoubtedly, nobody would make the argument that the contemplative life for human beings should be comprised solely of contemplation; instead, such proponents of the contemplative life might argue that the self-sufficiency of contemplation simply requires that everything we do in human life is subordinate to the life of contemplation. The defender of such a view could argue, for instance, that the pleasure a starving person might feel upon eating food is made understandable only to the extent that the consumption of that food allows the person to continue the activity of contemplation. That is, if indeed the contemplative activity were self-sufficient in the manner that Aristotle define self-sufficiency, one must somehow demonstrate that every other activity in human life obtains its meaningfulness, only to the extent that these "lesser" activities contribute directly to and encourage the exercise of contemplation.

This position is problematic, as the following thought experiment will serve to suggest. Let us assume that there exist two people A and B, who are as perfectly engaged in the activity of contemplation as much as possible. Let us then assume that person A is served gruel every day for dinner, whereas person B is served a whole slew of luxurious dishes. Somebody who holds

[20] EN 1177a25-30

that contemplation is a self-sufficient activity, which alone makes life desirable and lacking in nothing, would have to argue that the lives of both person A and person B are *absolutely equally desirable* – but it should be plain that this would be an untenable position to hold.

Aristotle himself seems to be well-aware of the contradictions that would have arisen if he had held that contemplation was by itself truly "self-sufficient," and not simply the "*most* self-sufficient" of human goods, as evidence by his declaration in Chapter Eight of Book X that "in a secondary degree the life in accordance with the other kind of excellence [viz. political or ethical, as opposed to contemplative] is happy; for the activities in accordance with this befit our human estate."[21] In so doing, Aristotle opens up the possibility that, insofar as we are human beings, the political life must form a crucial step stone on the view toward human happiness, for this following reason. If Aristotle were to take the activities of contemplation and political activity absolutely, it would be clear that contemplation is better than political activity, not merely in a quantitative, but also in a qualitative sense. For Aristotle, the gods do not perform acts of justice or of courage; indeed, it would be absurd of them to do so. Therefore, insofar as we attempt to apply any of these conditions to the gods, there would necessarily exist a qualitative difference between the good of contemplation and the good of political activity; indeed, this qualitative difference between those two goods would be functionally infinite, since by so much do the lives of gods outstrip the life of human beings.

With respect to the life of human beings, however, Aristotle is all too aware of the fact that, since we are not gods, we cannot live a life of pure contemplation: although he notes that "intellect more than anything else *is* man,"[22] he also remarks that "such a life [viz. of contemplation / the ceaseless exercise of intellect] would be too high for man; for it is not in so

[21] EN 1178a9-11
[22] EN 1178a9

far as he is man that he will live so, but in so far as something divine is present in him."[23] As a result, insofar as one is a human being "and lives with a number of people, [one] chooses to do excellent acts."[24]

The important point to be made is that Aristotle's high praise of contemplation can be understood only if we take it as something considered in itself, *sub specie dei*. As soon as we factor in the human perspective, however – as soon as we see things *sub specie hominis* by factoring in our distinctly composite nature – we see that contemplation cannot simply be good in a sense qualitatively distinct from political activity *for us*. The qualitative difference between contemplation and political activity for the gods derives from the nature of the gods – that they are pure activity and therefore simple, that they are able and do engage ceaselessly in the activity of contemplation, etc. But for human beings, this difference in the good of the contemplative as opposed to the political life must, in the end, turn out to be qualitative, because we are not all one substance or way of being – we are not all divine, nor completely animal. To the extent that we have divine intelligence within us, contemplation is a great good, and to the extent that we are political animals, political activity is a lesser, although no less important, good. To the extent, therefore, that we are human beings, in which both the divine and political nature must subsist, the happy life cannot simply be one or the other, but must somehow incorporate both in itself.

3. Contemplation and External Goods

At first blush, it would seem that the contemplative life would fail this test for the happy life out right. Aristotle, however, by some sleight of hand makes use of the ancient fact of obtaining happiness vis-à-vis one's economic/external situation: that either one must acquire vast

[23] EN 117b26-17
[24] EN 1178b7

quantities of goods so as to satisfy one's avarice, or else that one must do away with one's desire to such an extent that one becomes satisfied with what one already has.

And the contemplative life for Aristotle very much performs this latter task. Although the contemplative human being, must, of course, insofar as he or she is a human being "also need external prosperity," a person engaged in contemplation will nevertheless not "need many things or great things," primarily because the contemplative activity itself, in which such a person would mostly be engaged, does not require much in the way of external goods, but also because Aristotle recognizes that even without vast quantities of goods, one can still "do noble acts without ruling earth and sea."[25] As a result, somebody whose life engages primarily around contemplation would still satisfy Aristotle's third criterion for the happy life; for even if he or she might not have very much, this relative lack would be offset by the fact that he or she would also simply not *need* very much.

4. The Contemplative Life and the Excellence of the Soul

As stated previously, Aristotle's argument for the primacy of the contemplative life most explicitly relies upon this criterion: that the contemplative activity is that which accords with the "highest excellence" within us.[26] But again, as Aristotle notes in Book I, "the excellence we must study is human excellence; for the good we were seeking was human good and the happiness human happiness."[27] If we are to take both of these criteria seriously, how might we reconcile them with one another?

[25] EN 1978b32-1179a5
[26] EN 1117a11 ff.
[27] EN 1021a14-17

On possibility is to argue simply that the highest excellence of human beings *is* itself human excellence, and therefore human happiness. Indeed, Aristotle himself seems to rely tacitly upon a weaker version of this assumption, when he argues:

> "That which is proper to each thing is by nature best and most pleasant for each thing; for man, therefore, the life according to intellect is best and pleasantest, since intellect more than anything else *is* man."[28]

It is clear, however, that Aristotle, in making this claim, does away with the possibility that the contemplative life might be the best life for human beings *overall*. Intellect is proper to human beings only "more than anything else," and, insofar as it is, one who engaged his or her life solely in practice of the activity of the intellect would to that extent be happiest amongst those others who centered their lives around pursuing other seeming or actual human goods, viz. such things as money, political activity, pleasure, etc. The consequence of Aristotle's argument that intellect is most proper to human beings thus only signifies that the contemplative life is the happiest of all other lives that direct their course with a view toward any, or even all of the other, human goods. Under this reading, however, one does not yet have sufficient ground to declare that the contemplative life should be seen as the absolutely happiest life for human beings.

So let us return to the question: what is human excellence? In order to answer this question, however, we must understand what exactly Aristotle thinks the human being is; only then will we be able to pronounce accurately on his vision of the happy life, and determine which life really would be happiest for us.

Chapter 3: The Political Animal and the Complete Human Life

[28] EN 1178a5-9

"Man is by nature a political animal," Aristotle famously declares, in Book I of the *Politics*, and "he who is unable to live in society, or who has no need because he is sufficient for himself, must be either a beast or a god."[29] On the face of it, these words lend credence to our argument that the best human life is the mixed life that partakes of both the contemplative and political lives. The argument we wish to make, however, is somewhat stronger, for we wish to argue that the political lives and the contemplative lives are each *choice-worthy in themselves*, and that living in accordance with both of these lives, insofar as they are valuable in themselves, constitutes the best human life.

If indeed Aristotle conceded the best human life were a life split between the contemplative and political lives, but if he then argued that the political life is necessary, only insofar as it creates the necessary conditions for the fulfillment of the contemplative life, his argument would be functionally equivalent to saying that the contemplative life is the best life overall. In this case, the political life *derives* its value from the contemplative life; it has no intrinsic value in itself.

Thus, in order to demonstrate the intrinsic value of the political life, I will be examining two aspects that the political life contributes toward the realization of the happy life; these aspects, it will be seen, would be missing to some extent in the contemplative life. The first of these aspects relates to Aristotle's idea of *practical wisdom* as an excellence of the soul. The second of these aspects relates to his idea of *friendship* as something that contributes to the *self-sufficiency* of life.

1. Practical Wisdom as Necessary in Itself

[29] Politics 1253a3; 1253a28-30

In Book VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle presents his theory of the different branches and types of human knowledge. Broadly speaking, I will argue that Aristotle's idea of complete human excellence requires the exercise of both *practical wisdom* [φρόνησις] and *wisdom* itself [σοφία], both of which must in some extent be choice-worthy in themselves.

Aristotle begins this Book by noting that, just as the human soul is divided into two parts – the rational and irrational parts – the rational component of the human soul is itself divided into two parts, "one by which we contemplate the kind of things whose principles cannot be otherwise, and one by which we contemplate variable things."[30]

He then defines practical wisdom as that which allows people to deliberate about "what is good and expedient for himself, not in some particular respect, e.g. about what sorts of thing conduce to health or to strength, but about what sorts of thing conduce to the good life in general"; as a result, practical wisdom is also the excellence, the possession of which makes one "good at managing households or states."[31] Practical wisdom is thus linked by Aristotle to the notion of ethical conduct and political activity.[32] In Aristotle's mind, practical wisdom cannot be a form of *knowledge* [ἐπιστήμη], insofar as practical wisdom, aims at particulars, and not at universals. More importantly, however, Aristotle argues that practical wisdom is opposed to *art* [τέχνη], because "while making [ποίησις – the activity of τέχνη] has an end other than itself, action [πράξις – the activity of practical wisdom] cannot; *for good action itself is its end* [emphasis mine]."[33] More importantly, Aristotle later argues that practical wisdom must be an excellence and not an art, because "in art he who errs willingly is preferable, but in practical

[30] EN 1139a4-7
[31] EN 1140a26-28; EN 1140b10-11
[32] See also Reeve (2006) "Practical wisdom is the same state of the soul as political science (*politikē*), so that what the former accomplishes in relation to the individual, the latter accomplishes in relation to the city (*polis*): ethics is politics for the individual; political science, ethics for the city or state" (p. 210)
[33] EN 1140b4-7

wisdom, as in the excellences he is the reverse."[34] Thus, Aristotle concludes that practical wisdom must be one of the excellences of the rational part of the human soul – namely, practical wisdom must be that by which we are able to contemplate variable thing.[35]

Wisdom forms the other excellence of the rational part of the human soul; Aristotle defines it as "comprehension combined with knowledge [νοῦς καὶ ἐπιστήμη] – knowledge of the highest objects which has received as it were its proper completion."[36] That is, wisdom would be the excellence that allows an individual to understand the first principles (through νοῦς) and what follows from these principles (through ἐπιστήμη). Wisdom, insofar as it deals with universals, is thus supposed to be a better form of knowledge than practical wisdom, since practical wisdom presents knowledge only to the benefit of *human beings*, whereas wisdom seems to present good knowledge absolutely. That is, as Aristotle argues, since human beings are not the highest beings in nature, as the movements and existence of the heavenly bodies show us, practical wisdom itself cannot be highest form of knowledge; rather, wisdom must outrank practical wisdom, insofar as it "is knowledge, combined with comprehension, of the things that are highest by nature."[37]

Such are the two excellences of the soul, as Aristotle defines them. At this juncture, two questions may reasonably be raised: in the first place, if all wisdom does is contemplate that which is "highest (and/or best) by nature" rather than that which is best for human beings, then what reason would one have for cultivating one's sense of wisdom? In the second place, if indeed Aristotle argues that wisdom is "higher" in some sense than practical wisdom, what might

[34] EN 1140b21-24
[35] EN 1140b23-30
[36] EN 1141a18-20
[37] EN 1141b2-4

the consequences of that claim be vis-à-vis the relationship between the contemplative and political lives?

Aristotle's initial answer to these two questions, throughout Chapters Twelve and Thirteen of Book VI of the *Ethics*, is straightforward. He begins with the argument that wisdom and practical wisdom must "in themselves… be worthy of choice because they are the excellences of the two parts of the soul respectively, even if neither of them produces anything."[38] Aristotle then defends wisdom as something useful with the following analogy: "not as the art of medicine produces health, however, but as health produces health; so does wisdom produce happiness."[39] His defense of the utility of practical wisdom is much more complex, but in brief, it revolves around his distinction of the differing roles of moral excellence [ἡ ἠθικὴ ἀρετή], practical wisdom itself, and cleverness [δεινότης]. For Aristotle, moral excellence seems to be that which ensures that one has the right end in mind, whereas cleverness is the faculty that ensures that one reaches one's end. Although Aristotle is ultimately not very clear as to the exact role that practical wisdom plays in conducing toward morally good action, it seems that practical wisdom must be a type of cleverness that is uniquely suited toward function in tandem with moral excellence, since cleverness without practical wisdom can be a bad quality, if this form of cleverness is useful at obtaining bad results.[40] Thus, as Aristotle himself describes it, "excellence makes the aim right, and practical wisdom [makes] the things leading to it [right]."[41]

If this were all that Aristotle had to say on the topic, the inherent value of practical wisdom as something important in its own right would undoubtedly be secured. In the first place, as an excellence of the soul, it would be inherently valuable, even if it produced nothing further

[38] EN 1144a1-3
[39] EN 1144a4-6
[40] EN 1144a12 ff.
[41] EN 1144a6-8

of value; in the second place, Aristotle argues that it does in fact produce something value, insofar as the exercise of practical wisdom is necessary in relation to morally justifiable action. Unfortunately, Aristotle complicates and seems to subordinate the value of practical wisdom to that of wisdom proper with his parting remarks in Book VI:

> "But again it [viz. practical wisdom] is not *supreme* over 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 [ἐκείνης {σοφία} οὗν ἕνεκα ἐπιτάττει, ἀλλ᾽ οὐκ ἐκείνῃ]. Further to maintain its supremacy would be like saying that the art of politics rules the gods because it issues orders about all the affairs of the state."[42]

If one were to take Aristotle's claim literally, that practical wisdom provides for the "coming into being" of wisdom, and that practical wisdom thus issues its orders for the sake of wisdom, one would come very close to Aristotle's contention in Chapter Seven of Book X of the *Ethics* that contemplation is better than political action, because the latter is unleisurely and aims at an end beyond itself, whereas the former does not.[43] In this reading, the value of practical wisdom would thus derive only from its ability to provide the necessary conditions in which to exercise wisdom.[44] Practical wisdom would no longer be worthy of choice in its own way, in the same way that wisdom would be, and Aristotle's analogy between the relationship of practical

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[42] EN 1145a7-11

[43] EN 1177b1 ff.

[44] This viewpoint, against which I am arguing, that the value of practical wisdom derives primarily from its instrumental use, is commonly held, and the interpretation of this analogy tends to fall along these lines. Reeve (2006), for instance, will argue that "The goal at which practical wisdom aims in designing a constitution… is leisure, then, and the leisured activities, such as contemplating in accordance with the virtue of theoretical wisdom, that are impossible without it… This explains why practical wisdom's relationship to theoretical wisdom is analogized to that between medicine and health… medicine prescribes for the sake of health, as practical wisdom for the sake of leisure and leisured activities" (pp. 211-212).
See also Ackrill's (1997) comments on this relation between practical wisdom and theoretical wisdom "To say this, that practical wisdom does not control *sophia* but makes it possible, is not to say that making it possible is the only thing that practical wisdom has to do" (197).

wisdom to that of medicine and health only further seems to reinforce the subordination of practical wisdom to wisdom itself.

In response to this problem, it will be helpful to remind ourselves of Aristotle's characterization of the secondary goods in Chapter Seven of Book I of the *Ethics*, viz. those goods such as "honour, pleasure, reason, and every excellence" that "we choose indeed for themselves (for if nothing resulted from them we should still choose each of them)," but that we also choose for the sake of happiness."[45] Thus, even if practical wisdom were subordinate to wisdom, it would *still* be choice-worthy in itself, insofar as the exercise of practical wisdom, as involving political activity, would inevitably lead to the attainment of honor.

Moreover, one ought to keep in mind that Aristotle, in the problematic passage at the end of Book VI, does not necessarily argue that practical wisdom is wholly subordinate to wisdom. His argument that practical wisdom issues its orders for the sake of wisdom does not imply that every action undertaken by practical wisdom *necessarily* is undertaken for the sake of wisdom. Rather, it simply denotes that every action that practical wisdom orders *in relation to* wisdom must be an action taken for the sake of wisdom, rather than one that is undertaken *by means of* wisdom; that is, practical wisdom and wisdom can operate independently from one another, but when they do interact, practical wisdom must be used for the benefit of wisdom, and not the other way around.[46]

But what about the analogy with respect to the relationship between practical wisdom and wisdom, and that of medicine and health? The simplest course, following from what was just

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[45] EN 1097b2-7

[46] It makes perfect sense, however, for practical wisdom and wisdom itself to exist apart from one another – a person such as Pericles may possess practical wisdom without necessarily possessing wisdom itself, and conversely, people such as Anaxagoras and Thales may be very wise, without possessing much practical wisdom. (C.f. EN 1140b8-10; EN 1141b4-7)

argued above, would be to assert that this analogy would only hold true in such cases where wisdom and practical wisdom are interacting in some way. Even if we were to assume, however, that Aristotle means for the analogy to hold vis-à-vis practical wisdom and wisdom *in all cases*, the analogy would still, in fact, not be entirely accurate. The knowledge of medicine is that of an art (τέχνη), and not one of practical wisdom. Accordingly, insofar as it is an art, it is concerned with *making* the state of health – the inducement of this state is its end, for it has no end in itself. As previously stated, however, there is a clear difference for Aristotle between *making* and *doing*. This difference consists in the fact that making has an end in something itself, whereas action has an end in itself; good action is itself is own end.[47] Therefore, this analogy that likens practical wisdom to the art of medicine cannot strictly hold, because practical wisdom to some extent has an end in itself, whereas medicine cannot.

We have demonstrated that practical wisdom and wisdom proper (as representatives of the political and contemplative lives) are both choice-worthy in themselves, and that, as independent excellences of the rational part of the human soul, neither is necessarily subordinate to the other; the exercise of both is required in order to attain complete human excellence. Let us now move on to Aristotle's treatment of friendship in Books XIII and IX and examine how friendship, as a political activity, would be necessary in fulfilling the requirement that the happy life be self-sufficient.

2. Friendship and Self-Sufficiency

In order to demonstrate that the political life and the contemplative life taken together would fulfill Aristotle's criterion of self-sufficiency with respect to friendship, there are two

[47] EN 1140b7

things that must be done. In the first place, it must be demonstrated that friendship forms a key component of the self-sufficient life. In the second place, it must explained why it is that political activity conduces to friendship.

In Chapter Nine of Book IX of the *Ethics*, Aristotle responds directly to the first consideration and indirectly to the second. He begins by affirming that people do in fact need friends if they should wish to lead a happy life: in response to the objection that those who are self-sufficient have no need of other people, since they have all good things already, Aristotle simply responds that the possession of friends is inherently necessary to the happy life, insofar as friends "are thought the greatest of external goods."[48] Since, as Aristotle affirms in this chapter, "man is a political creature… whose nature is to live with others… even the happy man lives with others; for he has the things that are by nature good."[49] An individual, insofar as he or she is good, therefore also finds himself/herself in need of good friends as a crucial component of the happy life.

It is a rather trickier question to ask why it is that the political life is one uniquely suited toward friendship, as opposed to the contemplative life. After all, one could quite easily make the objection that such paragons of contemplation as Socrates possessed friends while simultaneously disclaiming any involvement in public affairs, as he does in the *Apology*. Why, therefore, would the political life be considered conducive to friendship? Does Socrates not present an adequate example of how one could lead the contemplative life, while still retaining possession of friends?

In response to the particular example of Socrates, one should first remind oneself of the fact that, in spite of the wonted Socratic irony on full display at the *Apology*, that Socrates' life,

[48] EN 1169b10
[49] EN 1169b18-19

especially in the early dialogues, is to a large extent *political*. As Socrates himself relates in the *Crito*, he could have easily gone into self-exile even before the beginning of the trial, had he so wished, and continued on a life of contemplation. His decision to take a stand at the court and participate in the legal processes of his city in order to critique them thus comes through as a distinctly political act. In addition, his activities earlier in life, such as defying the Thirty Tyrants' order to arrest Leon of Salamis and his involvement in a battle, in which he saved the life of Alcibiades, testify to the extent of his participation in the political as well as the contemplative life. Thus, not even the examples of Socrates, perhaps the contemplator *par excellence*, can provide a counter-example to the claim that friendship requires to some extent participation in the political life.

But what would the positive reason be as to why friendship requires some participation in the political life? Aristotle hints at the reason why, in his argument that the happy life requires good friends, "for a good man *qua* good delights in excellent actions," both of himself and of his friends, and, as it has been just demonstrated, the notion of "excellence" must encompass both practical wisdom and wisdom itself, i.e. excellence cannot consist in the exercise of contemplation alone.[50] In order to develop the excellences governed by practical wisdom, Aristotle notes that one must *practice* these excellences: "by doing the acts that we do in our transactions with other men we become just or unjust, and by doing the acts that we do in the presence of danger, and being habituated to feel fear or confidence, we become brave or cowardly."[51] It is not enough simply to *know* what is just or temperate or brave; one must, rather,

[50] EN 1170a7

[51] EN 110312-17 C.f. also EN 1103a14ff "Excellence, then, being of two kinds, intellectual and moral, intellectual excellence in the main owes both its birth and its growth to teaching (for which reason it requires experience and time), while moral excellence comes about as a result of habit, whence also its name is one that is formed by a slight variation from the word for 'habit'. From this it is also plain that none of the moral excellences arises in us by nature; for nothing that exists by nature can form a habit contrary to its nature."

practice such actions to such an extent that justice, temperance, bravery, etc. become part of one's character.[52] Otherwise, Aristotle warns, those who engage solely in moral theorizing and philosophizing, without leaping into the crucible of action, will behave "somewhat like patients who listen attentively to their doctors [without doing any] of the things they are ordered to do."[53]

If indeed, then, it is necessary that the happy life requires friends, and, in particular, if the happy life requires good friends in possession of complete excellence (both contemplative and political), it is clear that that the happy person would also need to be in possession of complete excellence, since only a good person is able to be a friend of another good person. The possession of complete excellence in the political sense, however, requires that one be in possession of "general justice" – what Aristotle terms "complete excellence—not absolutely, but in relation to others."[54] And although Aristotle's discourse on the nature of "general justice" is unfortunately extremely brief and highly controversial, what remains clear is the fact that this form of "general justice," must, at its heart, be a form of *political* justice. General justice comes into being through the laws enacted by the legislative art in such a manner that tends "to produce and preserve happiness and its components for the political society."[55] Insofar, then, as general justice looks beyond the happiness of a single individual but rather toward the happiness of the greater good, it encompasses "complete excellence," because "he who possesses it can exercise his excellence towards others too and not merely by himself; for many men can exercise excellence in their own affairs, but not in their relations to excellence."[56] A courageous or

[52] EN 1105b5-12
[53] EN 1105b12-16
[54] EN 1129b27-28. See also Ernest Weinrib (1987) on this topic: "Aristotle recognized that the intelligibility of justice stands apart from that of the dispositional virtues and vices. Its reference is not internal but external, not the perfection of moral being but the terms of one's impingement upon others. Justice is other-directed, and one cannot be unjust toward oneself in any but a metaphorical sense."
[55] EN 1129b12-19
[56] EN 1129b30-34

temperate individual may be able to act courageously or temperately for his or her own gain, whatever that might be, but a person in possession of general excellence would perform courageous and temperate acts for the *greater good of the political community*, whereby that person would be most properly in possession of excellence.

The actualization of "complete excellence," therefore requires that one practice general justice – that is, that one possesses the capacity not only to direct the excellences in relation to oneself but also to other people within the political community; therefore, one must engage one's excellences in the political life as well in order to come into engagement of "political excellence."

Thus, the argument for the inherent desirability of participation in the political life runs as follows: In the first place, it is necessary for the happy individual to have friends. Now, the best form of friendship is that which is built, not on mere pleasure or utility, but rather on mutual good character and the pleasure that results from contemplating such character; this form of friendship, however, requires that both friends be good. But in order to become good, one must be able to exercise that form of justice, "general justice," that allows one to be able to exercise the other virtues, not only for one's own benefit, but only for the benefit of other people. The acquisition and exercise of "general justice" can thus only take place by virtue of participation in a *political* community, for while one can train oneself to be temperate, courageous, etc., for one's own benefit, it is only when one has learned to be temperate, courageous, and so on for the sake of others, that one comes to possesses general justice, and thus obtain complete excellence. Since, then, the happy life requires good friends, and since good friends must be good people, and since good people are only truly good if they exercise general justice, which can only come to be in the political life, it is clear that it must follow from this chain of reasoning that the happy

and good life must, in addition to contemplation, involve some sort of political activity, chosen for its own and proper excellence.

Conclusion: The Mixed Life of Contemplation and Politics

It should thus be clear from the preceding arguments that happiness, for Aristotle, consists not in sole exercise of contemplation or in the unceasing pursuit of political activity, but rather in the mixed life, which participates to some extent of both.

To put the matter in another way: the life that exists between the contemplative and political lives can in some way be understood as a *mean between two extremes*. Just as Aristotle makes use of his doctrine of the mean to understand the nature of excellence, I would venture the speculative conclusion that the same analogy implicitly holds with respect to the balance between the political and contemplative lives. One who only engages in political action would live a life in implicit denial of νοῦς, that highest part of human life; on the other hand, one who engaged solely in the stilly act of contemplation would live a life in implicit denial of human nature itself, refusing, as he or she would, to engage in the everyday worries and concerns of human action, in favor of solely of the cultivation of useless [ἄχρηστα] theoretical wisdom.[57] The mean between these two extremes, as the life that engages in both activity, would most fully actualize human potential: it would cultivate practical and theoretical wisdom, secure the attainment and enjoyment of good friends, and cultivate excellence entire, insofar as it would necessarily engage in such prosocial behavior in the assistance of one's fellow man and woman – that is, in the exercise of general justice.

[57] EN 1141b1ff

Part II: Plato and the Unity of Politics and Contemplation[58]

In the *Republic*, Plato, even more than Aristotle, appears to come down on the side of the life of contemplation over the life of politics. One readily obtains the impression, upon reading the *Republic*, that the happiest individual would be one who spends all of his or her days in quiet contemplation, far from the ignoble strife to be found in the political arena. Indeed, the ground of this impression of Plato's disdain for politics is not hard to find, and it centers around the idea that, as the ruler looks to the benefit and advantage of somebody other than himself or herself, the only thing that could compel somebody to rule would be "to be ruled by someone worse than oneself."[59] Nothing else – neither wages nor honor – could serve as a positive inducement for a good person to rule; rather, it seems that the good individual enters the political life only in order to prevent the possibility that he or she may be subject to the misrule of those who would be less wise. As such, even though Plato, throughout the *Republic*, admits of the inherent *necessity* of the political life, it does not appear to be something inherently valuable, the way it is in Aristotle. The political life does not open up a unique path to the goal of human happiness, so much as it is a burden to be shouldered that detracts from it.

In this chapter, however, I wish to argue against this reading of Plato's *Republic*, and attempt to demonstrate that Plato is somewhat more enthusiastic about the political life than might at first appear. In order to demonstrate that this is the case, I will be subdividing this chapter into the following two sections.

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[58] In an effort to avoid needless over-complication regarding the question of the relationship between Plato and Socrates, I will be operating off of the assumption that Socrates "speaks for" Plato in the *Republic*. I will attempt to express this assumption as much as possible, without seeming over-awkward, by writing phrases such as "Plato has Socrates say in –" or other variations thereof.

[59] The Republic 347c; All translations, unless otherwise stated, by John M. Cooper

In the first section, I will essentially be giving some context for Plato's thoughts vis-à-vis contemplation and politics. I will be setting the stage for my second section, by briefly examining Plato's seeming hostility to politics through the ship of the state metaphor, and by explaining the allegory of the cave and that of the divided line in Books VI and VII.

In the second section and much longer section, my chief concern will be that of examining how Plato resolves the apparent tension between the political and contemplative lives. I will argue that it is education that is central to the resolution of this tension: for, in the first place, education in contemplative activity prepares one for political activity, rather than turning one away from it. And, in the second place, the education of the future philosopher king in the ideal polis creates an ethical obligation for the philosopher king to return to the polis and rule it; thus, in the ideal city, the polis' role in education ensures that it would be impossible for one to engage in contemplation without also engaging in the political life of that city.

Chapter 1: Setting the Stage

Section 1: Plato's Disdain for Politics

We must attempt to understand why it is that Plato argues that the philosopher would only grudgingly enter the political arena. In order to do that much, however, we must first examine what Plato has in mind when he speaks of political action as it manifested (manifests) in states, since the disdain that the contemplative individual would have for politics seems to be predicated upon the rejection of this improper mode of doing politics.

Broadly speaking, the most important passage in which Plato's disdain for the commonly-accepted method of doing politics, and out of which the strife between politics and contemplation arises, would be that of the simile of the Ship of the State, of which Socrates

makes use in Book VI, in response to Adeimantus' question as to why so many philosophers turn out to be useless to their cities. This simile runs roughly as follows:

Let us imagine that there is a ship, the owner of which is strong but neither particularly intelligent nor perceptive. This owner is crowded by the sailors, each of which proclaims that he is uniquely suited to navigate the ship, despite not at all having studied the art of navigation. Somebody who has studied navigation, whom Plato has Socrates refer to as the "true captain," would be maligned and contemned by the sailors whenever they speak of him to the ship owner. They would make such arguments that the true captain is nothing but a star-gazer, but, in making such arguments, they would completely ignore the fact that some knowledge of the heavens is necessary in order to navigate the ship well. Moreover, these sailors, in their constant bids and struggles to navigate the ship, would define completely falsely the very notion of the art of navigation; on such a disorderly ship, navigation would no longer be seen as the art of navigating the ship, but rather as that of persuading or compelling the ship-owner to allow one to take control of navigating the ship, regardless of how well-suited one might actually be for that task.

The relationship between this simile and that of a city should be clear: the ship is the polis itself, the ship-owner represents the people, the sailors represent those who would commonly be referred to as "politicians," and the navigator – the true captain – would represent the true philosopher. In such a state of affairs, therefore, it should be only natural that the true captain not involve himself in politics, for the same reason that it would be natural "for the sick person, rich or poor, to knock at the doctor's door, and for anyone who needs to be ruled to knock at the door of the one who can rule him."[60]

[60] The Republic 489c

This simile is thus suggestive of the reason why the philosopher, as affairs currently stand, must absent himself or herself from politics: it is because the current definition of politics revolves around persuading the people to allow oneself to rule rather than concerning itself with whether or not one is able to rule well or not. As a result, the best that the philosopher – the true navigator of the ship of the state – can do, is simply to escape so far as possible from the internecine struggles that arise from the sailors' desires to rule, in order at least to lead as blessed of a private life as possible. As Plato has Socrates comment more explicitly, in the corrupt city, "the philosopher—seeing others filled with lawlessness—is satisfied if he can somehow lead his present life free from injustice and impious acts and depart from it with good hope, blameless and content," leading a quiet life and doing their own work.[61] Therefore, it is not the case that the philosopher would be adverse to the political life (the life of rule) *per se*, just as the true navigator would not *per se* disdain the true art of navigation. Rather, Plato seems to be suggesting that the political life *as it is currently defined*, is not really truly political. The current iteration of the political life is instead centered around obtaining the power to govern the *polis*, rather than around the actual governance and care-taking of the *polis* itself.

Section 2: The Allegory of the Cave and the Analogy of the Divided Line

There will be clear instances where Plato appears, in spite of everything, to have Socrates speak out strongly in favor of pure contemplation to the detriment of politics {find citations.} At the same time, it is somewhat ironic that Plato *politicizes* by instrumentalizing the activity of contemplation. That is, contemplation is something that is good *in itself*, as there must be something intrinsically good about contemplating the form of the Good, but additionally, the

[61] The Republic 496d

knowledge and activity of contemplation contains within it a practical end, in that it alone prepares individuals for a political life in which they bring other individuals to contemplation of the form of the good. The practicality and social aspect inherent in Plato's idea of contemplation is best displayed in the relationship between the Analogy of the Divided Line in Book VI and the Allegory of the Cave in Book VII, and the conclusions that Plato has Socrates draw from the implications of these analogies in relation to the role of the philosopher kings in the ideal city.

The analogy of the divided line begins with Socrates' discourse concerning the relation between truth/knowledge and the form of the good. According to Socrates' exposition, the relationship between the soul, truth, and the form of the good is best explained in terms of an analogy to the faculty of sight, in which the soul would stand in for the eyes, truth for the visible objects, and the form of the good for the sun.[62] Just as the sun provides the light that allows the eyes to behold the field of visible things, the form of the good illuminates the field of truth and knowable things. Just as the sun is a possible object for sight, the good is itself a possible object of knowledge, but it also exists qualitatively above the truth – as Socrates describes it , it is literally even "beyond being."[63]

Socrates then asks his interlocutors to imagine a line, divided into two unequal sections, which themselves are then further subdivided into two unequal sections. The lower two sections of this line would correspond to the visible objects of the world; the lowest section corresponds to shadows and images of things, whereas the second lowest would correspond to the originals. For instance, a reflection of a bed would fall under the lowest section of the line, whereas the bed itself would fall under the second lowest section.

[62] The Republic 508b ff.
[63] The Republic 509c

The two higher sections of the lines correspond to intelligible objects. The second highest section of the line corresponds to such objects that are grasped by geometry and the related sciences – namely, those sciences in the exploration of which "the soul is forced to use hypotheses in the investigation of [them], not travelling up to a first principle, since it cannot reach beyond its hypotheses, but using as images those very things of which images were made in the section below [i.e. in the visible sections.]"[64] That is, since these such sciences require that they posit for themselves hypotheses in the visible world in order to become comprehensible, they can never move past their hypotheses in order to grasp true first principles. That capacity falls rather to the science of dialectic, to which the objects in the highest section of the divided line corresponds, which Socrates describes as the science that does not consider "hypotheses as first principles but truly as hypotheses—but as stepping stones to take off from, enabling it to reach the unhypothetical first principle of everything."[65]

Following this expostulation, Plato immediately has Socrates expound upon the Allegory of the Cave, which must be read in light of the Divided Line.[66] In this allegory, Socrates asks his interlocutors to imagine that a group of human beings, fettered and shackled in such a way that they are unable to look at anything else except for a screen in front of them. Behind these individuals exist a fire to provide light and some puppeteers, who broadcast their images upon the wall in front of these human beings. It would be quite reasonable, Socrates asserts, that the people in the cave would mistake the shadows of the puppets for reality in such a situation and believe that nothing else of import existed.

[64] The Republic 511a
[65] The Republic 511b
[66] The Republic 514a ff.

Socrates then asks his interlocutors to imagine one of the individuals freed from his shackles and bonds and forced to ascend to higher and higher truths. In the beginning, this individual would examine the puppets themselves, instead of merely beholding the shadows that they had cast upon the wall; then, he would be dragged by force up out of the cave, into the light of the sun. At first, this newly freed prisoner would have trouble seeing the objects in daylight, but gradually, his eyes would adjust, and he would eventually come to behold visible objects, and end in contemplation even of the sun itself. According to Socrates, the allegory of the cave elaborates upon the analogy of the divided line: in the allegory, the shadows cast upon the walls represent images upon the divided line, the puppets represent the things themselves, the visible world represents the objects of knowledge seized by such sciences as geometry, and the sun stands in for the form of the good – that which is reached by dialectic alone.

But what relevance does the analogy of the divided line and the allegory of the cave have in relation to the role of the contemplative and political lives for Plato? To answer this question, we must understand how Plato has Socrates resolve the apparent tension between the political and contemplative lives by making use of the analogy of the divided line and the allegory of the cave to resolve this dichotomy into something that I shall call the *educative* life. This educative life synthesizes the political and contemplative lives in two ways: in the first place, it instrumentalizes the activity of contemplation for the philosopher kings, in regulating how they are to be brought up and prepared for political activity. More importantly, the educative life *unifies* the political and contemplative life, insofar as it demonstrates to the philosopher how the nature of justice requires that he or she engage in the political life.

Chapter 2: The Educative Life

Section 1: The Instrumentality of Contemplation

In order better to understand what is meant when I speak of Plato's attempt to *instrumentalize* contemplation, it will be helpful to recall briefly how Aristotle characterizes contemplation. For Aristotle, contemplation is "useless" – that is, it has no end *outside of itself* – but it is also an activity that possesses entelechy – that is, it is an activity that is inherently useful *in itself*.

For Plato, however, although contemplation does appear to be something inherently worthwhile, it is useful also for some further end: namely, in guiding and determining the training that the philosopher kings are to receive, insofar as contemplation would allow for the philosopher king to look beyond the imperfect world of becoming, in order to discover what is actually good. The instrumental importance of contemplation for Plato is best seen in Socrates' argument that the best educational course for the guardians consists in four subjects: the study of arithmetic, planar geometry, solid geometry, and, finally, astronomy.[67] These subjects, Socrates emphasizes, are not to be studied for the potential practical utility that they have in affecting the world, but rather for their use "in turning the soul around, away from becoming and towards truth and being."[68] The use of these subjects for the philosopher king thus does not lie solely in their practical application to the world – e.g. the usefulness of geometry to architecture, or that of astronomy to agriculture – but rather because insofar as they turn "the soul towards truth and produces philosophic thought by directing upwards what we now wrongly direct downwards."[69]

Beyond the value intrinsic to the contemplation of the form of the good, this form of contemplative education also uniquely prepares the philosopher for political action. In the

[67] The Republic 522a ff.
[68] The Republic 525c
[69] The Republic 527b

normal city, the politician, who dwells in the cave and deals merely with the visible world, possesses no sure account of the good, and therefore is uncertain how to actualize it into the world. Certainly, at times, he or she might stumble upon an image of the good, but he obtains this image only "through opinion, not knowledge, for he [or she] is dreaming and asleep throughout his [or her] present life."[70] As a result, such a politician can in no way reliably perform good actions for his or her city on account of ignorance as to what the good actually is; to borrow Plato's analogy between the nature of sight and the nature of wisdom, such a politician would be like somebody who would stumble in the dark and occasionally find his or her way through sheer luck and chance. The politician of the ideal city, however, would have had the eye of the soul, as it were, developed by constant exposure to arithmetic, planar and solid geometry, and astronomy. These subjects would eventually conduct the soul of the future ruler to the science of dialectic, whereby such a ruler would come to know things as they actually are – as they exist in the world of being. In coming to know such concepts, as, for instance, the form of the good, this ruler, educated by contemplation, would be uniquely suited to lead the city. The instrumental value of contemplation in relation to the political life thus becomes apparent: in training the future ruler to understand clearly the static world of being wherein the forms reside, such a ruler would be better suited to perform good, just, or beautiful acts in the world wherein the political community must exist.

Section 2: The Descent into the Cave

We must now ask ourselves, however, why it is exactly that the philosopher would possibly agree to rule, even in this ideal city: for Plato has Socrates emphatically declare on

[70] The Republic 534c

several occasions that the true philosopher would want, so far as possible, to have nothing to do with politics – after all, why would one who has broken out of the cave ever wish to descend back into it and rule those living in its darkness? What, then, impels the philosopher, in the ideal city, to engage in political action? What, indeed, makes the political and contemplative lives even *inseparable* in this city?

To answer this question, we must briefly review Plato's tripartite division of the soul, and their analogues in terms of the three classes [γένη] of the city, and the distribution of the four virtues of wisdom, courage, moderation, and temperance throughout these divisions.

Plato has Socrates divide the individual soul into the appetitive [ἐπιθυμητικόν], spirited [θυμοειδές], and rational [λογιστικὸν] components, which correspond in the city to the money-making [χρηματιστικόν], auxiliary [ἐπικουρητικόν], and the deliberative [βουλευτικόν] classes.[71] As Socrates then notes, these three divisions of the individual soul and the city do not correspond only in a metaphorical manner; rather, it must follow that "the individual is wise in the same way and in the same part of himself as the city… courageous in the same way and in the same part of himself as the city," and so on with respect to moderation and justice as well.[72] Since, as Socrates argues, that city is best in which each part of it does its proper work and not the work of the others (insofar as Socrates argues that two people who farm half of the time and act as soldiers the other half will be less effective than one who devotes his/her life to farming and another who devotes his/her life to warfare), we will best be able to determine to which divisions of the soul or city the various virtues are to be found, by determining what the function of each division is.[73]

[71] The Republic 440e ff.
[72] The Republic 441c-d
[73] The Republic 441d

The divisions to which the virtues of wisdom, courage, and moderation are easily discovered. Wisdom is the virtue proper to the rational part of the soul and the deliberative class of the city, courage is proper to the spirited part and the auxiliaries of the city, and moderation is proper to each part of the soul and each class of the city, insofar as it results in consensus amongst these various parts/classes as to who ought to rule and who ought to be ruled.[74] Justice is somewhat more difficult to find, but ultimately, Socrates finds that justice is that which ensures that "every child, woman, slave, freeman, craftsman, ruler, and ruled each does his own work and doesn't meddle with what is other people's" – in effect, justice in the city is that which ensures that everybody attends to his or her own work "τὸ τὰ αὐτοῦ πράττειν."[75]

Now, in the just city, as in the just soul, it is the work and function of wisdom to rule. If the philosopher, born and raised in the ideal city, were thus to abandon the city in favor of contemplation, he or she would no longer be carrying out his or her proper function – in effect, he or she would be committing a great injustice against the city. For the philosopher in this ideal city to abstain from politics would be as great an injustice as if a farmer were to attempt to become an auxiliary, or an auxiliary were to attempt to become a ruler. And presumably, since the philosopher would not wish to commit an injustice against the city, insofar as he or she would recognize injustice as one of the greatest of all ills, he or she would be compelled by the very nature of justice itself to descend into the cave and rule, so as to fulfill his or her proper function to the city, as wisdom fulfills its proper function in the soul. And Socrates confirms this line of reasoning at the end of Book IX when, in response to Glaucon's naïve assumption that the philosopher would still be unwilling to take part in politics, Socrates emphatically declares,

[74] The Republic 427b-433e
[75] The Republic 433b-c

"Yes, by the dog, he certainly will, at least in his own kind of city. But he may not be willing to do so in his fatherland, unless some divine good luck chances to be his."[76]

Some commentators, however, would dispute the idea that the Platonic idea of justice would induce within the guardians the desire to rule. Hatzistavrou, for instance, distinguishes between two different forms of justice in the Republic – that of "ordinary" / "vulgar" justice and Platonic justice. The former type of justice is relevant to one's behavior in relation to other agents within a city or community, whereas Platonic justice, he writes, is that which "applies to the agent's inner state of psychic harmony."[77] Hatzistavrou bases his interpretation of Platonic justice on a passage in Book IV, wherein Plato notes:

> "[Justice] isn't concerned with someone's doing his own externally, but with what is inside him, with what is truly himself and his own. One who is just does not allow any part of himself to do the work of another part or allow the various classes within him to meddle with each other. He regulates well what is really his own and rules himself… And when he does anything… he believes that the action is just and fine that preserves this inner harmony and helps achieve it, and calls it so, and regards as wisdom the knowledge that oversees such actions."[78]

Hatzistavrou then brings up the possibility that it would be possibly for a philosopher king to be just in this Platonic sense of the term, while remaining vulgarly unjust, for a philosopher could simply refuse to descend into the cave and turn its inhabitants toward the light

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[76] The Republic 592a; I cannot understand the reason why some commentators read the phrase, "his own city," as signifying the individual soul, and not that of the ideal city. According to Weiss' (2012) interpretation, a man "whose overarching concern is to preserve his soul's internal accord" would not even "care for the city Glaucon and Socrates have been founding in speech; Glaucon is wrong to think that it is this city that Socrates intends by the phrase 'in his own city.' On the contrary, the man whose eye is trained on his soul will at best find a pattern in heaven in accordance with which to found *himself*" (205-206). According to the argument I am advancing, however, this dichotomy properly does not exist: those who are best at securing their soul's internal accord – i.e. their sense of psychic harmony – are necessarily those who preserve the accord of the ideal city. Striving for external harmony does not impinge upon the struggle for internal harmony.

[77] Hatzistavrou (2006) p. 97

[78] The Republic 443c-e

above, opting instead to maintain his or her inner psychic harmony in contemplation of the forms.

In my mind, this distinction between Platonic justice and ordinary justice is exaggerated. In order to argue why the Platonically just guardian of the city must also be ordinarily just, let us return to Plato's theory of the tripartite soul and look to the role of wisdom therein. Since Plato does not distinguish between practical and theoretical wisdom the way Aristotle does, it would not be too much of a stretch to argue that both are to be found in the rational [λογιστικὸν] part of the soul. That is, the rational part of Plato's soul is not only to engage in contemplation, but also in the day-to-day calculations that maintain and rule over the appetites and spirited part of the soul.

The same idea, I would argue, holds for the philosophers: they obtain psychic harmony by ruling as well as contemplating, for just as the rational part of the soul is that which allows us to contemplate abstract concepts, as well as apply our knowledge to practical calculation in the world, so too it would, by nature, be the role of philosopher kings to be both philosophers and kings (hence the name).[79] They thus can only reach their internal psychic harmony by fulfilling this dual role. Anybody else may be rightly called just if they maintain their internal psychic harmony, by ensuring that their appetitive and spirited parts of the soul agree to be subject to the rational part. For the philosopher kings, however, their surfeit of wisdom requires them not only to retreat into themselves and contemplate the forms but also to extrovert that wisdom and use it in the service of others. Now, it is true that these philosopher kings must be *internally* just – that is, they must be in possession of "Platonic" justice – before they can be "ordinarily" just in their dealings with others; for "*wisdom* [emphasis mine] [is] the knowledge that oversees such

[79] Moreover, as Parry (1996) notes, "Socrates says that this arrangement [i.e. the arrangement predicated upon internal justice] of the parts of the soul is the source of our treating others justly" (95).

[Platonically just] actions."[80] But this "Platonic" justice is useful only insofar as it trains the philosopher kings to develop wisdom within themselves, of which they then must make use in order to rule the city.

To put things in another way: let us set aside, for a moment, this distinction between Platonic and "ordinary" justice, and speak of them, at least *ex hypothesi*, as though they referred to the same concept. If we were to engage in this experiment, we would come to the following reasonable, albeit admittedly speculative, conclusion: that internal justice is more properly justice, because it is that which allows one to be just in external affairs. This conclusion should not, at the very least, offend against our common sense: for we are more disposed, for instance, to think that one who performs just deeds, on account of the strength of his/her wisdom to be acting *more justly* than one who performs just deeds, on account of fear of possible external sanctions if one should be discovered to be acting unjustly. That is, Plato's "internalization" of justice makes sense, because external ("ordinary") justice *follows from* internal ("Platonic") justice – for if, as Plato defines it, "Platonic" justice is that state of psychic harmony which results from one subjecting one's own appetitive and spirited parts of the soul to one's rational part, and if justice in the individual is the same as justice in the city, it would follow that the just individual in the ideal city would also subject himself/herself to the guidance of those whose souls were wiser than he/she – if indeed it is wiser to be ruled by those who are wiser than oneself.

But one might ask, as a last resort: even if one were to grant that the philosopher, insofar as he or she is a part of the *polis*, must fulfill his or her function to that *polis* by engaging in politics: what would happen if the philosopher were simply to refuse to be a part of his or her

[80] The Republic 443e

polis at all, i.e. what if the philosopher were to say, as the later Stoics would, "κοσμοπολίτης εἰμί" – I am a citizen of the world? Would it then be unjust for him or her to abstain from political action and to refuse to rule in the city?

In response to this objection, we must keep in mind that Plato's unity of politics and contemplation only functions in his ideal city. For, as we have noted above, in the corrupt city – the city in which the sailors, and not the navigators rule – the most a philosopher can hope for is to lead a quiet life, away from the public sphere. Accordingly, any philosopher who arises in such a corrupt city is one who has "grown there spontaneously, against the will of the constitution. And what grows of its own accord and owes no debt for its upbringing has justice on its side when it isn't keen to pay anyone for that upbringing."[81] In the ideal city, however, the influence of the city upon burgeoning philosophers is felt even before birth, as the city determines legislates who is to have children with whom, and how those children are most properly to be raised and educated. Accordingly, in this ideal city, the philosopher, who owes his or her education, childhood, life, and upbringing to the city, is, by birth, already a participant in the life of the polis and has a duty to it.

In the unjust city, where one comes to be a wise philosopher in spite of the city, one has no duty to use one's wisdom in the betterment or service of it; to return to the analogy of the cave, if one manages to break one's own fetters and claw one's way out into the sunlight, one ought not be beholden to one's fellow prisoners. In the ideal city, however, the structures of the city itself have been set up in such a way so as to raise and educate these philosopher-kings; accordingly, the philosopher cannot deny either the *polis* or the political life in favor of contemplation without committing an injustice to the city and rendering himself or herself unjust

[81] The Republic 520b

as a result.[82] When one's fellow prisoners all agree to follow those who manage to break out of the cave and contemplate the world above, and when these selfsame prisoners do not hinder the way out of the cave, but rather even assist the philosopher on his or her task (the money-making classes by producing the necessities for the city, and the auxiliaries by defending the city against dangers), then it is only just that the philosopher descends again into the cave – that he or she make use of wisdom to lead and guide those who toil in obscurity, away from the light of the sun.

Conclusion: The Unity of Politics and Contemplation in Education

We have thus come to see that for Plato, the best life is, in effect, a unity of the political and contemplative lives. I have termed this unity of the two lives the *educative* life, insofar as the Platonic philosopher must be educated in such a way as to use contemplation as a guide in political action, and insofar as the education of the philosopher by the ideal polis necessarily binds the philosopher to use his or her wisdom in the service of the city.

Thus, although contemplation for Plato is something that is inherently pleasurable and worthwhile in itself, it also possesses an instrumental value in determining the proper course of political action. Moreover, the nature of justice in the ideal city demands of the philosopher that he or she abstain from time to time from contemplation, so as to descend into the city and rule its citizens or else run the risk of committing injustices. The harmony of these two lives is thus the way one becomes most truly happy – both by being just and by participating in the inherently fulfilling activity of contemplation.

[82] The Republic 520b-d

Yet we must keep in mind that this happiest life is possible only in the ideal city, in which each class of individuals perform its proper functions. In the corrupt city, where people clamor and fight for what they mistakenly believe to be the privilege of power, the most the philosopher can do is to retreat from the city and lead the private life of contemplation.

Concluding Unscientific Postscript:

My sole intention in writing this thesis has thus been to point out the way in which Plato and Aristotle, contemplative thinkers though they may be, were nevertheless very aware of the role that political activity needs to play in securing a life of human happiness. If I have been at any way successful in demonstrating this idea, then I shall consider myself to have succeeded in my task.

On a more general note, there are, I suppose, two major dangers to which we are suspect, whenever we engage in the political thought of such thinkers as Plato and Aristotle.

In the first place, we are liable to forget the enormous span of time that separates us from them: for indeed, what a wonderful invention is writing, that it should allow us such immediate access to the inner joys and anxieties of those long since dead! But indeed, we are danger of forgetting that we are living in – to paraphrase Woolf – this late age of the world that has bred in us all a well of sorrow and tears – that the past century alone has seen what is perhaps the greatest callousness to life ever known in the history of humankind. With each increasing generation, it seems that the stakes of political activity continually rise and the state of the world becomes increasingly perilous, but Plato and Aristotle remain the same: in considering this fact, one cannot help but recall Socrates' criticism of writing in the *Phaedrus.*

In the second place, it may very well be the case that overmuch study has a corrupting influence on the brain: that, to borrow from Aristotle, there must be a mean between too much thought, and too little. To take Plato and Aristotle too seriously might force us into the extreme of thinking too much and doing too little – for, even if I have been successful in demonstrating the extent to which politics is important in Plato and Aristotle's works, it would still not be beyond the bound of reasonableness to declare that these two thinkers are nevertheless *intellectuals*, that they are, in a very real sense, more contemplative than many of the movers and shakers that have found their way on the world's stage. Undoubtedly, what Hamlet said about the pale cast of thought holds as true as it does now as it did then, in rotten Denmark: at some point, it will be necessary to act, to leave off from overmuch debate in politics in favor instead of engagement itself. "*S'il faut penser, c'est pour agir*."

But the cycle recurs. How act? How know the right, the good, the proper course of events, whither they should be directed, how they should be guided – until, of course, it is too late, and then "πάθει μάθος" is our cry! How seldom it is that we know the proper course of action in our own lives; how often it is that we must come to invent and reinvent ourselves: and then only consider that, since all human endeavor relies upon human cooperation, how often it must be that, if we are to do the right thing, we must convince others a hundred and then a thousand times to invent and reinvent themselves, too, in an unrelenting attempt to instantiate the Good upon earth!

And even if one were to act: how small is the good we manage to do – how quickly it is washed away in the tide of selfishness that surrounds us! A good person is nothing in the face of the world, but the evil person, if properly placed, can so quickly destroy everything and everybody. The Good will triumph only when it is numerous, whereas evil triumphs, *if it exists*

at all; herein, the situation of the city is like that of the individual: for just as a corrupt leadership, however small, will corrupt a nation, so too do all of one's good works and deeds fall and come to naught, if one ever commits even once, with malice aforethought, an evil and thoughtless deed.

In this state of the world, who would not want to do as Plato did, and have his Socrates say that it matters not whether the ideal city exists in the world? Who would not want to live the life that Aristotle attributes to the unmoved mover, one in which we engage in quiet thought of thought, in "νόησις νοήσεως"?

But their own actions bespeak of the fact that, for all their adulation and praise of contemplation, Plato and Aristotle lived very much in the world, and not beyond it. Why else would Plato go down to Sicily to teach a tyrant? Why else would Aristotle agree to take Alexander as a student? These were politic men, indeed, who knew that in some way they had to engage with the world: whether the world is better off, however, for their having done what they did, *it is nevertheless too early to tell. Perhaps it will always be too early to tell.*

For we shall never reach that Archimedean point of knowledge – neither through the abstracted universality of philosophy, nor through the exigent contingency of history – upon which we might stand and look back and see in one blinding moment the justification of the entire train of events as they unraveled into the world. The eye of thought sees far but never far enough: the onus, therefore, must eventually fall upon us to cease from thought and begin instead to act – to enrich the lives of others, through whatever wealth that our intelligence, education, or wisdom might have illumined within our souls.

So when begin, you ask? Ah – but who *knows*!

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