

How Narrow is Aristotle's Contemplative Ideal?

MATTHEW D. WALKER

Yale-NUS College

In *Nicomachean Ethics* X.7–8, Aristotle defends a striking view about the good for human beings. According to Aristotle, the single happiest way of life is organized around philosophical contemplation. According to *the narrowness worry*, however, Aristotle's contemplative ideal is unduly Procrustean, restrictive, inflexible, and oblivious of human diversity. In this paper, I argue that Aristotle has resources for responding to the narrowness worry, and that his contemplative ideal can take due account of human diversity.

In *Nicomachean Ethics* (*EN*) X.7–8, Aristotle defends a striking view about the good for human beings. I call this view “Aristotle's contemplative ideal.” It consists of two claims: (1) that there exists one determinate happiest life for human beings, and (2) that this happiest life is the contemplative life, the *theorêtikos bios*, a whole way of life organized around the regular, leisured exercise of philosophical contemplation. In turn, by philosophical “contemplation,” or *theôria*, Aristotle means something like intellectual insight into, and scientific understanding of, the “most honorable” matters, viz., the first principles and causes of nature. Contemplation would consist, paradigmatically, in the exercise of the theoretical intellect according to its proper virtue of theoretical wisdom, and in actively comprehending the ultimate explanations of things.¹ For Aristotle, the contemplative life is happiest because it is organized around the properly highest end within a human life.² Contemplation exercises

¹ See *EN* VI.7, 1141a17–20; 1141b2–3; X.7, 1177a12–25; *Metaphysics* A.1, 981b27–29, 982a1–2; A.2, 982b9–10. Although I have benefitted from consulting other translations, translations in this paper, unless otherwise noted, are my own.

² Exclusive readings of Aristotle on happiness insist that contemplation, as the highest end within a human life, stands to be the sole constituent of happiness, whereas inclusive readings need hold only that contemplation stands to be the best and most final of the many singular goods that constitute happiness. On (plausible) inclusive readings, contemplation is a highest end relatively speaking (i.e., compared with other singular goods), not absolutely speaking (i.e., compared with happiness as a whole). See Walker (2011: 106–107).

our highest and most divine capacities (*EN* X.7, 1177a19–21; 1177b27–32); contemplation is the most continuous (1177a21–22), most pleasant (1177a25–26), most self-sufficient (1177a27–b1), most leisured (1177b4–25), and so, most “end-like” of activities in which we can engage (1177b1–2). The contemplative life is happier than the second-happiest life, a political life organized around the exercise of “the other virtue” (*EN* X.7, 1177b29; X.8, 1178a8–13). Since Aristotle holds that practical wisdom both (i) completes ethical virtue yet (ii) remains subordinate to theoretical wisdom (*EN* VI.12–13), I take it that Aristotle identifies the political life as organized around the exercise of practical wisdom, “the other virtue” of the authoritatively rational element of the human soul (*EN* VI.10, 1143b14–17).

Aristotle’s contemplative ideal, however, generates uneasiness. According to *the narrowness worry*, Aristotle’s ideal is unduly Procrustean, restrictive, inflexible, and oblivious of human diversity.³ Strong pluralists about happy lives, who deny that there is any one end at which all happy lives aim, raise a robust version of the narrowness worry. There are two ways to construe the strong pluralist’s denial. The first construal: although each happy life aims at a highest end, there is no one *particular* highest end at which each happy life must aim. Rather, different happy lives aim at different (and equally choiceworthy) highest ends. The second construal: the happy life need not aim at a highest end at all because any particular happy life can contain within itself *many unqualifiedly final* ends. On either construal of strong pluralism, Aristotle’s contemplative ideal is a non-starter. It fails to meet strong pluralist standards of flexibility. But Aristotle has reasons to reject those standards.

Against the first construal of strong pluralism, Aristotle can insist (i) that one can evaluate proposed candidates for the highest end within a human life on independent, rational grounds, and (ii) that one can favor contemplation over other candidates on those bases. In *EN* I.5, for instance, Aristotle argues that wealth, pleasure, or honor cannot be properly highest ends for human beings. Wealth cannot be a highest end, for wealth is an instrumental good that derives its choiceworthiness from higher ends (1096a5–10). Nor can pleasure be a highest end for human beings. For pleasure, as such, is fitting for non-rational animals (1095b19–22; cf. I.7, 1098a1–3), and it can be perfected by the addition of reason (cf. *EN* X.6, 1176b17–27). Finally, honor cannot be such an end, for honor is too “superficial”: it is dependent on others, and it leaves one’s happiness too much a hostage to fortune. People pursue honor for the sake of convincing themselves that

³ For general doubts that the philosophical life could be best for all people, see Hume, “The Sceptic,” 160; Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 246; Gray (1989: 257); Kupperman (1991: 134); Norton (1991: 6); Shusterman (1997: 61); Nehamas (1998: 2).

they are virtuous—a point that implies the superior finality of virtue (*EN* I.5, 1095b22–3).

Against the second construal of strong pluralism, Aristotle can deny that one can adopt multiple, unqualifiedly final ends and remain practically rational. Adopting such ends, Aristotle can argue, is self-undermining. One's actions for the sake of certain unqualifiedly final ends will be apt to conflict with one's actions for the sake of other unqualifiedly final ends. In advancing certain of one's paramount goals, then, one defeats and frustrates one's attaining other such goals. Accordingly, one's life promises to be deeply incoherent and unsatisfying. And insofar as one's multiple ultimate ends are final without qualification, one will be unable, in principle, rationally to adjudicate or resolve such conflicts. Under such circumstances, one's choices concerning the very structure of one's life (as organized around multiple unqualified final ends) will be ineluctably arbitrary. For such reasons, presumably, Aristotle thinks that it is "great folly" not to organize one's life around a single highest end (*Eudemian Ethics [EE] I.2, 1214b6–10*).⁴

One, of course, can challenge Aristotle's reasons for rejecting strong pluralism about happy lives. But what is important is that Aristotle *does* have arguments against such a view. And the narrowness worry about Aristotle's contemplative ideal need not presuppose strong pluralism. For Aristotle's contemplative ideal seems problematic even according to weaker *common-sense pluralist* standards. The common-sense pluralist grants (if only for the sake of argument) that the happiest way of life may very well fit some ideal pattern. But for any proposed pattern of the happiest life to be even remotely viable, the common-sense pluralist insists, such a pattern must be (i) only highly general; (ii) only moderately determinate; and (iii) open to a reasonable degree of plural specification, according to the varying needs,

⁴ See Cooper (1975: 95–96), J. Lear (1988: 160) and, especially, LeBar (2013: 47–52). (Nevertheless, LeBar [8In33] rejects Aristotle's contemplative ideal.) For further considerations against a plurality of unqualifiedly final ends, see Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I-III.5.

On my interpretation of Aristotle's contemplative ideal, lower ends subordinate to contemplation may nevertheless significantly shape the lives of agents. Lest contemplation serve as a "dominant end" in an objectionable sense (i.e., as a maximand that fully determines which lower ends are to be pursued), it might seem that the choice of lower ends in the contemplative life will face similar problems of arbitrariness. (I thank Henry Richardson for pointing out this worry, and Bradford Cokelet for discussing it.) A complete reply to this worry would require fuller discussion. But briefly: (1) Any potential arbitrariness at the level of lower ends is less problematic than arbitrariness at the level of ultimate ends, which organize and regulate substantially greater parts of one's life. Cf. LeBar (2013: 48). (2) While contemplation as a highest end may not fully determine which lower ends to pursue, one's choice of such ends need not be capricious. One's choices for the sake of contemplation as a highest end can also take due (rational) consideration of one's personal circumstances and one's other ends.

talents, abilities, and predilections of differing individuals. Aristotle's contemplative ideal, however, seems too determinate and rigid to meet even these standards for adequacy. According to Fred D. Miller, Jr., for instance, Aristotle "assumes that one uniquely specifiable lifestyle will be superior to all others."⁵ Support for such a reading comes from Aristotle's remarks on the contemplative life's main alternative, the political life. Aristotle explicitly speaks of the lives of statesmen when he discusses the political life (e.g., at *EE* I.5, 1216a23–27). In such passages, Aristotle seems to construe the political life in sharply defined, vocational terms, as the life led by the statesman or political leader. Aristotle appears to have in mind a figure who legislates well concerning the good of his city and who performs great and noble deeds to attain that good. Offering a clear statement of such a reading, Donald Morrison describes Aristotle's conception of the political life as "a life of active political involvement," "a life dominated by the pursuit of political goals" and "a life of political ambition" of the sort led by Pericles or Disraeli.⁶

Other commentators share the assumptions that Aristotle seeks to identify a highly determinate and narrowly specified way of life as happiest. (1) According to David Bostock, "When Aristotle seeks for *the* good life (for man), he apparently thinks that the question is, or includes, the question of what occupation to follow."⁷ Aristotle thus goes on to restrict the main contenders for the happiest ways of life "just to the academic life and the political life."⁸ In doing so, Bostock contends, Aristotle is overly parochial: "all kinds of occupations" are worth considering as well, e.g., those of "an artist or a writer, a doctor or a lawyer, a designer of buildings or machinery or tableware, a singer or a footballer or an athlete, and so on and on without end."⁹ (2) Likewise, in defending the contemplative life as happiest, J. O. Urmson insists, "Aristotle has shown too much enthusiasm for his own profession." Urmson recognizes that one who pursues an academic vocation, like one who pursues the profession of brain surgery, can incorporate other goods into his life. Yet Urmson still believes that Aristotle recommends the contemplative life for one faced with the option of "choosing a career."¹⁰

⁵ Miller (1995: 244).

⁶ Morrison (2001: 236). For similar readings, according to which the political life is the life of a statesman or political leader, see Kraut (1989: 345–347) and G. R. Lear (2004: 179–181, 186). Cooper (2012: 95) presents such a view as well, though the remarks in Cooper (2010: 260n55) qualify matters.

⁷ Bostock (2000: 211).

⁸ Bostock (2000: 210).

⁹ Bostock (2000: 210).

¹⁰ Urmson (1988: 119). Lomasky (1987: 38) criticizes Aristotle on this score: "This idealization of one's own distinctive life situation as a norm for all men is not only myopic but also disreputable."

(3) In Martha C. Nussbaum's view, *EN X.7–8* presents an ideal attractive to "anyone who has been seriously devoted to the scholarly or contemplative life."¹¹ (4) Finally, Richard Kraut thinks that Aristotle identifies politics and philosophy as competitors *qua* "careers."¹²

In short, Aristotle appears to endorse an especially "thick," highly determinate, vocational model of the happiest life, a contemplative existence defined at the same level of specificity as the statesman's life. To be sure, life in the Aristotelian Lyceum was not closely analogous to life in a modern university.¹³ Hence, Aristotle need not hold that the life of a modern professor is happiest. Still, Aristotle appears to idealize a distinctively academic, or scholarly, or even quasi-monastic life whose pursuit would tightly constrain a wide range of important life choices. He sketches a pattern that would seem sharply to delimit one's pursuit of personal talents, abilities, and predilections.

In what follows, however, I challenge such a narrow construal of Aristotle's contemplative ideal. Aristotle's ideal, I argue, need not be an overly determinate and restrictive one. Instead, I contend that (i) Aristotle offers only a highly general, moderately determinate outline of the happiest life, and that (ii) this outline is open to a reasonable degree of plural specification, according to varying circumstances of diverse individuals. On my flexible reading, Aristotle's ideal can meet common-sense pluralist standards of adequacy. In making this claim, I am not defending the (mundane) point that one can lead the life of an academic (or statesman) in various ways. Instead, I argue more strongly that Aristotle's ideal can be instantiated by those from many different walks of life, in a wide variety of settings, and in a range of diverse careers. On my reading, there need be nothing odd about one's leading the contemplative life as, say, a touring professional singer.

Aristotle's case for his contemplative ideal depends on controversial claims about philosophical anthropology, ethical naturalism, natural teleology, and so forth. These claims raise many important questions that I bracket in this paper. Instead, I consider only the extent to which Aristotle's view can avoid the narrowness worry in particular. In Part I, I adduce a series of reasons for rejecting narrow construals of Aristotle's contemplative ideal. In Part II, I show how Aristotle's ideal is open to a reasonable degree of plural specification. In Part III, I respond to the worry that my reading stands in tension with Aristotle's own judgments about the goodness of various lives.

¹¹ Nussbaum (1986: 377).

¹² Kraut (1997: 62), in reference to *Politics* VII.2, 1324a32–33.

¹³ See, e.g., Natali ([1990] 2013: 70–71).

I. Aristotle's Contemplative Ideal As Moderately Determinate

I. Aristotle on Life-Activity, Lives, and the Various Modes of the Political Life. For the narrowness worry against Aristotle's contemplative ideal to gain traction, Aristotle has to construe the contemplative life in highly determinate or vocational terms. Aristotle's remarks on the lives of living organisms in other contexts, however, provide initial reason for thinking that a broader and more flexible interpretation of Aristotle's contemplative ideal is at least possible.

Consider, for instance, Aristotle's remarks on the lives of non-rational animals. On the one hand, Aristotle does identify a single mode of life-activity (or *zôê*) as proper to such animals. This mode of life-activity—the perceptive mode (*EN* I.7, 1098a2)—is a whole pattern of life-activity organized around, and guided by, the exercise of perception. On the other hand, as Aristotle's ethological investigations indicate, this common mode of life-activity can be realized in a variety of different ways, with different animal species pursuing it in diverse fashions, according to the ways in which they attain nourishment.¹⁴ Thus, some animals live on water, but others on land (*History of Animals* I.1, 487a15); some animals are stationary, but others are mobile (487b6); and while some animals are gregarious, others are solitary (487b35–488a1). So, while perceptive life-activity is the mode of life-activity that non-rational animals share and exercise, this mode of life-activity remains multiply realizable.¹⁵ And since Aristotle holds that the good for a non-rational animal (as for any living organism) somehow consists in the animal's exercising its life-activity (*EN* I.7, 1097b22–1098a4), he should also think that non-rational animals can exercise perceptive life-activity *well* in diverse ways, according to their species.

These general points follow for the distinctive life-activity of human beings, “a certain practical [mode of life-activity] of that [element of the soul] having reason” (*EN* I.7, 1098a3–4). As with the perceptive life-activity of non-rational animals, rational life-activity is itself manifest in, and exercised through, lives (*bioi*) that vary according to the sources of nourishment available in an environment. Given the diverse circumstances of human beings, Aristotle observes, “their lives differ much” (*Politics* I.8, 1256a30). For instance, human beings live nomadic, hunting, and agricultural lives. Such lives, in turn, can themselves be specified in multiple ways. Thus, different sorts of people lead the hunting life in different ways, e.g., from piracy, fishing, trapping birds, and capturing wild animals (1256a31–40).

¹⁴ See, e.g., *History of Animals* I.1, 487a11–12; VIII.1, 588b24–VIII.2, 590a18; *Politics* I.8, 1256a19–29.

¹⁵ As Nussbaum (1995: 128–129) argues, Aristotle typically uses life-activity (*zôê*) and life (*bios*) in similar ways, viz., as indicating whole ways of life. Cf. Natali (2001: 135).

To be clear, Aristotle is not saying in these passages that one can lead multiple lives at the same time. On the contrary, since the life one leads is an all-encompassing pattern of mutually supporting activity, Aristotle holds that one can lead only one life at one time.¹⁶ Yet Aristotle apparently does allow that the single life that one leads can be examined at various levels of analysis and specified at various degrees of precision. Thus, Aristotle does not suggest that a hunting life and a fishing life are two distinct and competing lives *between which* one must choose. Rather, he thinks that a fishing life *is* a (sharper specification of a) hunting life.

Moreover, Aristotle need not be saying in *Politics* I.8 that all of these realizations of the human mode of life-activity are equally good. But Aristotle recognizes there that the human mode of life-activity—rational life-activity—is such as to be realized in diverse ways. And he accounts for this diversity by reference to the varied circumstances of human beings. Given the diversity of human circumstances, it is therefore open to us to see whether the contemplative life is also realizable in diverse ways.

To make an initial case that the lives that Aristotle considers as contenders for happiest in the *Nicomachean Ethics* are also plurally specifiable, I now consider Aristotle's remarks on the political life. As just noted, Aristotle thinks that animals live a diversity of lives. In particular, at *History of Animals* I.1, 487b33–488a14, he distinguishes gregarious from solitary animals. Animals lead a gregarious life, however, in two different fashions, viz., in either political or scattered ways. The political life, here described as a life in which “something one and common comes to be the work of all” beings that pursue that life (488a7–8), itself can be led in two general fashions, viz., under a leader (e.g., by cranes and bees) or without rule (e.g., by ants). Here, the political life is, in David J. Depew's terms, “highly transgeneric,” open to various animals to pursue it in various ways.¹⁷ Call

¹⁶ Keyt (1989: 15–21) argues that the life (*bios*) one leads is an aspect of one's (whole) life: thus, he proposes that one leads the contemplative life when, and only when, one engages in contemplation. Keyt also argues that when Aristotle allows that animals can combine ways of life (at *Politics* I.8, 1256a40–b6), Aristotle means that animals can lead more than one way of life at one time. Nussbaum (1995: 115–116), Cooper (1999b: 229n14), and G. R. Lear (2004: 178) effectively criticize Keyt's reading. Cf. Natali (2001: 135–138). As Cooper points out, Aristotle denies that one can lead two different ways of life (*bioi*) at one time; rather, he holds that the one way of life (*bios*) that one leads can combine aspects of two different lives. That Aristotle construes a life (*bios*) as a *whole way* of life is also defended by Lennox (2010).

Keyt, however, also makes the reasonable claim (1989: 16) that a negatively defined life (i.e., the non-citizen's life) must be led in a certain positive way as well (i.e., as a philosopher's or artisan's life). I agree with Keyt on this point. But it is unclear that Aristotle thinks that one can thereby live more than one life at one time. Rather, Aristotle may simply think that one can examine a given life at greater or lesser degrees of analysis and specification.

¹⁷ Depew (1995: 166).

this wide and expansive sense of the political life the *ethological* sense. Aristotle's remarks on the bee's species-specific mode of the ethological sense of the political life are telling. While bees lead a species-characteristic political life in which they live well (as bees), Aristotle indicates that this *bios* is itself open to plural specification from bee to bee: "There is much diversity in their modes of work and life" (*History of Animals* IX.40, 623b25–26). The bee's species-characteristic political life is itself pursued in diverse ways by different bees.

Aristotle speaks of the political life in other senses, too. Somewhat narrower than the ethological sense of the political life is what I call the *civic* sense of the political life. In this moderately determinate sense, the political life is the life of a human being living with others in a city or *polis*.¹⁸ While one can realize the political life in a civic sense by pursuing the life of a statesman, one need not do so. On the contrary, one can realize the political life in the civic sense by regulating one's actions by practical wisdom while situated in the city. One can lead the political life in the civic sense, for instance, by pursuing the life of a private citizen who deliberates wisely, spends money generously, repays contractual debts justly, confronts dangers courageously, and eats, drinks, and has sex temperately. While more narrowly specified than the political life in the ethological sense, the political life in this civic sense remains less determinate and narrowly specified than the political life in yet another sense, i.e., the *narrow* or *vocational* sense, the life of the statesman discussed earlier.

We should not think that, for Aristotle, only the lives of statesmen or citizens (the political life in the vocational or civic senses, respectively) are "really" political ways of life, so that bees, cranes, and ants count as political animals in only a metaphorical sense. Instead, human beings and these other animals are *all* political in a rich and robust way. For the activities—and lives—of political animals are all organized around shared activity for the sake of a common good. Human beings, however, lead the (ethological mode of the) political life in a fuller, more extensive sense. They are "more political" than other political animals in virtue of (i) possessing capacities for reason, (ii) living and deliberating with other human beings within the city, and possibly even (iii) engaging in statesmanship. The political life in the moderately determinate civic sense, then, is a *specification* of the political life in the wide ethological sense.¹⁹ By extension, the political life in

¹⁸ See *EN* I.7, 1097b8–11; IX.9, 1169b16–22; *Politics* III.6, 1278b15–30.

¹⁹ On the narrower civic mode of the political life as an "intensification" and "specification" of the broader ethological or "zoological" mode, see, especially, Depew (1995: 156–157; 162–163n16). See also Kullmann (1991: 100–101); Mulgan (1974: 443–444; 1990: 196–197); and Cooper (2009: 360n6).

the narrow or vocational sense is a particular specification of the political life in the moderately determinate civic sense.

In short, Aristotle's notions of life-activity and life are potentially broad, flexible, and open to plural specification. At least two senses of the political life (the ethological and civic senses) are sufficiently broad and flexible as to be led by non-statesmen. Indeed, as the bee example shows, members of the same species can lead the political life in the ethological sense in diverse ways. It remains for us, of course, to determine (i) which sense of the political life Aristotle identifies as the main competitor to the contemplative life that he identifies as happiest and (ii) whether Aristotle believes that this contemplative life is itself open to plural specification. Yet given Aristotle's usage of "life"-terms in other contexts, we have positive grounds for denying that the *only* sense of life that Aristotle accepts is a narrow or vocational one. Hence, we have defeasible reason for thinking that Aristotle's contemplative ideal can be construed in more flexible terms than initially seems to be the case.

2. *Aristotle on the Virtuous Civic Life as a Competitor to the Contemplative Life.* Despite certain passages apparently to the contrary, Aristotle ultimately does not identify the statesman's life (the political life in the narrow or vocational sense) as the main alternative to the contemplative life that he identifies as happiest. On the contrary, for Aristotle, this main alternative is a more *broadly political* life—a virtuous political life in the moderately determinate civic sense. Analogously, there is good reason to think that Aristotle identifies a correspondingly broad, moderately determinate contemplative life as happiest.

As I have just suggested, the political life in the narrow or vocational sense is best understood as a specification of the political life in the moderately determinate civic sense.²⁰ The statesman, in other words, leads a civic conception of the political life, but in a more visible, expansive way than other people (viz., practically virtuous private citizens). The statesman deliberates and exercises those practical virtues that require situatedness in a city for their performance; further, he exercises such virtues for the sake of governing that city. Still, it does not follow that only the statesman (and not the practically virtuous private citizen) "really" leads a political life in any sense relevant for happiness.²¹ The practically virtuous statesman's political life is

²⁰ Cf. Depew (1995: 163n16).

²¹ G. R. Lear (2004: 180–181, 186) holds that insofar as the statesman's actions are preeminent in size and beauty, they are thereby paradigms of virtue. But paradigmatically virtuous actions according to practical wisdom are actions that fully satisfy the mean, and private ethically virtuous actions may well do this. Hence, while some of the statesman's actions may be paradigms of virtue, it need not follow that all must be, nor that the political life in the statesman's narrow, vocational sense is teleologically prior to the virtuous political life in the civic sense.

perhaps “more” political, or political to a greater degree, than the life of the practically virtuous private citizen living in a city. Yet the life of the virtuous private citizen is, for all that, just as much a *civic political life*. Textual evidence strongly supports such a reading.

When Aristotle initially describes the political life in *EN* I.5 as a life thought to aim at honor, one might infer that he identifies the statesman’s life as the main alternative to the contemplative life. Other passages (discussed earlier) where Aristotle evidently discusses the statesman’s life seem to support this inference. Yet this inference would be mistaken, for Aristotle immediately goes on in *EN* I.5 to redescribe the political life as one of (practical) virtue (1095b29–1096a4).²² This redescription is significant. For a life of practical virtue—a life according to practical wisdom—is *not identical to*, and is, indeed, *less determinate than* a statesman’s life. Pursuing statesmanship is one—and only one—way of specifying such a practically virtuous life. Thus, when Aristotle thinks that we best understand the political life as a practically virtuous life, Aristotle need not construe the political life as one spent in the practice of statesmanship or in a political career. The civic political life led by a practically virtuous private citizen is just as much organized around, and regulated by, the exercise of practical wisdom as the statesman’s.

Aristotle repeats this pattern in *EN* X.7–8. On the one hand, when Aristotle argues in these chapters that contemplative lives are happiest, he explicitly compares them with the lives of statesmen.²³ Yet on the other hand, Aristotle indicates that the second-happiest life that he has in mind is broader than the statesman’s life. (1) At *EN* X.8, 1178a9 (cf. *EN* X.7, 1177b29), he identifies the second-happiest life in broad terms as “the life according to the other virtue,” and he goes on to explain that this life contains the virtuous activities not of a god, but of a human being in a political community. As Aristotle says, “just deeds and courageous deeds and the other deeds according to the virtues we perform with a view to others, in contracts and necessities and actions of all sorts, and in passions, observing closely what is fitting in each case; for all these matters appear to be human” (1178a10–14). By clarifying that the virtuous activities characteristic of the second-happiest life are those, preeminently, of a political animal sharing in life with others in a city, Aristotle suggests that the second-happiest life is a well-led political life in the moderately determinate civic sense, not necessarily in the narrow or vocational sense. (2) Aristotle goes on to characterize the virtuous activities performed in such a life, more technically, as those to-be-performed by embodied hylomorphic compounds with capacities for reason and passion (1178a14–22). Such a life, however, is

²² Aristotle offers the same redescription at *EE* I.4, 1215b3–4; I.5, 1216a19–21.

²³ See, e.g., *EN* X.7, 1177b4–15; X.8, 1178a27.

more broadly specified than the statesman's. It is, I take it, a more precise or scientific description of the political life in the civic sense. (3) That Aristotle construes this second-happiest life as a highly general ideal is manifest in his own reticence to offer a *more specific* account of the second-happiest life (and its respective form of happiness). "Let so much be said about it," Aristotle writes. "For to portray it exactly is a greater task than what is set before us" (1178a23–24). The statesman's life, then, does not seem to be Aristotle's real focus here.

Aristotle later denies that the various practical virtues can be exercised only in a narrowly or vocationally political life. On the contrary, Aristotle holds that one can fully exercise the practical virtues outside of the public sphere: "For self-sufficiency does not consist in superabundance, nor does action, but it is possible to perform noble deeds even while not ruling the earth and sea; for one can act according to virtue from moderate resources. And this is clear to see: private citizens seem not to perform decent actions less than potentates, but rather, more" (*EN* X.8, 1179a3–9).²⁴

In these remarks, Aristotle describes a virtuous life according to practical wisdom capable of being led by a private citizen, not only a statesman. In articulating the second-happiest life, then, Aristotle offers a moderately determinate civic construal of the political life. Therefore, when Aristotle identifies the contemplative life as happiest, there is good reason to think that Aristotle construes the contemplative life in similarly broad terms.

As I have admitted, at least *some* of Aristotle's remarks on the political life in the *Nicomachean Ethics* are best read as references to the statesman's life. If Aristotle sometimes speaks of the statesman's life when he speaks of the political life, however, that is because the statesman's life is at least one readily understood *specification* of the political life in the moderately determinate civic sense. And Aristotle perhaps thinks—reasonably—that reference to the statesman's life sometimes best enables his audience to grasp, in a rough and ready way, the main "political" alternative to the contemplative life that he endorses as happiest. Aristotle, however, need not hold that the statesman's life is the only viable specification of the political life, nor that the virtuous lives of non-statesmen are somehow not really political lives in the sense relevant for happiness (i.e., lives according to practical wisdom). For similar reasons, Aristotle on occasion may portray the contemplative life in a narrow fashion (as he does, e.g., in *EN* VI.7's introductory description of the *sophos*).

²⁴ On the strong continuities between virtuous private citizens and statesmen, see Cooper (2010: 260n55).

Yet Aristotle need not thereby endorse the contemplative life exclusively in these narrow terms.²⁵

3. *Aristotle's Remarks on the Hedonistic Life.* Aristotle's remarks on the hedonistic life as another main contender for the happiest life provide further support for the thought that Aristotle seeks only to identify a moderately determinate way of life as happiest.

Aristotle presents the life of Sardanapallus as a model of the hedonistic life.²⁶ Therefore, Aristotle might seem to construe the hedonistic life only narrowly, viz., as the life led by a certain kind of monarchical voluptuary.²⁷ Yet there is reason to reject this thought. (i) Aristotle thinks that the many identify pleasure as the highest good and adopt the hedonistic life as best.²⁸ While the many may not all necessarily live the hedonistic life as freely as Sardanapallus, at least some of the many lead this life nonetheless. (ii) Various agents who take pleasure in a vast range of objects can pursue the hedonistic life in various ways.²⁹ (iii) In the absence of further textual evidence, we have no positive reason to think that Aristotle *must* intend the hedonistic life to be a highly determinate and narrowly specified ideal.

In light of Aristotle's remarks on the hedonistic life, which portray that life as open to a fair degree of plural specification, Aristotle should understand the contemplative life in similar, flexible terms. Aristotle's remarks on the hedonistic life as *another* alternative to the contemplative life offer independent evidence that Aristotle construes the contemplative life in only a highly general way.

4. *Aristotle's Actual Commitments.* Consider the claims to which Aristotle actually commits himself. These claims are: (i) that the happiest life will be organized around excellent contemplation as a highest end, and (ii) that the second-happiest life will be organized around the exercise of "the other virtue." That is all.

From these claims, it follows that contemplation is in some sense the highest end, or *telos*, of the happiest life. Such an end serves as an organizing aim of the happiest life. It regulates the other, subordinate goods within

²⁵ An opponent might insist that the political life is importantly disanalogous with the contemplative life. The former, the thought goes, aims at many goods and includes a multiplicity of virtues. The latter, by contrast, aims at only a single good and consists in the exercise of a single virtue. To be entirely clear, however, *both* the political life and the contemplative life aim at a single good as an ultimate end. For the contemplative life, this good is the exercise of theoretical wisdom; for the political life, it is the exercise of practical wisdom. Further, *both* lives, *qua* lives, pursue (at a subordinate level) many goods, and include the exercise of many virtues. (I thank an anonymous referee for this worry.)

²⁶ See *EN* I.5, 1095b22; *EE* I.5, 1216a16.

²⁷ Cf. *EN* X.6, 1176b16–18.

²⁸ See *EN* I.5, 1095b14–20; X.6, 1177a6–11; X.9, 1179b11–16.

²⁹ See *EN* X.4, 1175a12–17; X.5, 1176a3–24.

that life, delimiting “when, whether, and to what extent” other goods and activities should be pursued.³⁰ By analogy, and to use Aristotle’s own example of an end from *EN* I.2, the general’s orders regulate when, whether, and to what extent leather-workers and bridle-makers engage in their activities. Yet although the general regulates the activities (and workers) subordinate to him, the general need not thereby *micro-manage, fully determine, or interfere with* the activity of leather-workers and the bridle-makers. The general, after all, has his own work to perform. Likewise, the statesman regulates activity in the city through legislation. Yet the statesman need not—and cannot—*dictate* each and every activity performed in the city. Hence, the general’s orders, and the statesman’s choices and policies, still leave open what Susan Sauvé Meyer calls a “space of permissions” for how leather-workers and bridle-makers engage in their respective crafts, and for how citizens lead their lives.³¹

Aristotle must think that contemplation, *qua* highest end, constrains how one may pursue lower ends. In particular, Aristotle must hold that contemplation constrains one’s pursuing lower ends in ways that interfere with, or preclude, one’s regular, leisured contemplation during the course of one’s life as a whole. But contemplation, in serving this regulative role over one’s lower ends, nevertheless leaves it open for an agent to pursue a vast and varying range of lower ends other than contemplation.³² So, while Aristotle thinks that the life that contemplation regulates stands to be happiest, nothing about the status of contemplation as a highest end need determine the specific manner in which an agent may best pursue a life organized around contemplation. How an agent may best lead and actualize a contemplative life is a matter that stands within the “space of permissions” both opened (and constrained) by contemplation’s status as a highest end. Such a “space of permissions,” then, opens room for a plural specification of Aristotle’s contemplative ideal.

Against my reading, perhaps Aristotle identifies contemplation *qua telos* as more than a regulative constraint that delimits the pursuit of lower ends and gives general shape to a way of life. Perhaps Aristotle views contemplation, more boldly, as a maximand. Consider:

[A] But one should not, according to the recommendations, think human things because one is human, nor think mortal things because one is mortal, but, as far as possible, immortalize oneself and do everything with a

³⁰ To use the formulation of Meyer (2011: 51). On the regulative role of ends, see also Richardson (1992); White (1992: 12–15); Broadie (1991: 31–32).

³¹ Following Meyer (2011: 51–59). Her reading opposes that of G. R. Lear (2004), who argues that higher ends must *both* regulate lower ends *and* provide determinate normative guidance for how lower ends are pursued.

³² Meyer (2011: 59–65, esp. 63).

view to living according to the most excellent of the things in oneself; for even if it is small in bulk, much more does it surpass all things in power and value (*EN* X.7, 1177b32–1178a2).

[B] For to the gods, all of life is blessed, but to human beings, it is blessed as far as something like such activity is possible. But none of the other animals is happy, since in no way does it have a share of contemplation. Thus, as far as contemplation extends, so does happiness, and the more contemplating is possible for them, the more they are happy—not coincidentally, but according to the contemplation (*EN* X.8, 1178b25–31).

A requirement to maximize contemplation, however, would greatly restrict one's acceptable "space of permissions" for leading the contemplative life.³³

Passages [A] and [B] are often read in a maximizing way.³⁴ I concur, however, with other commentators who deny that Aristotle must construe ends as maximands.³⁵ Here, then, I argue only that [A] and [B] do not endorse a requirement to maximize the amount of contemplation within a life. [A] and [B], then, do not generate problems for my proposal.

Concerning [A]: Aristotle holds that one should commit oneself to immortalizing oneself as far as possible. And he recommends doing so by living according to the most excellent and divine of the soul's powers, i.e., the theoretical intellect. But to live according to the theoretical intellect is not equivalent to contemplating (though such living includes contemplating). It is, on the contrary, to lead a contemplative life, i.e., a life in which regular, leisured contemplation is authoritative as a highest end. So understood, [A] just amounts to an exhortation to take pains to lead a life ultimately organized around, and regulated by, contemplation, rather than a life ultimately organized around, and regulated by, the exercise of practical wisdom. [A] says nothing about maximizing the amount of contemplation *within* the contemplative life.

Concerning [B]: Gods lead the happiest possible life—a truly blessed life—by contemplating eternally. Contemplation is maximally possible for gods. A god, after all, is "thinking thinking thinking" (*Metaphysics* Λ.9, 1074b34035). Animals, by contrast, lack happiness because they cannot contemplate at all. Thus, Aristotle infers a link between the capacity to contemplate and the capacity for happiness. The extent to which a given form of life has the power for contemplation is the extent to which it is capable of happiness. So construed, Aristotle's claim is simply one about what distinguishes those beings capable of happiness from those incapable of

³³ I thank an anonymous referee for this worry.

³⁴ See, e.g., Curzer (2012: 393).

³⁵ See Richardson (1992: 343); G. R. Lear (2004: 201; 203–204).

happiness. Aristotle's answer: contemplation. By itself, [B] does not prescribe maximizing contemplation.

True, in [B], Aristotle says that contemplating all the time is just how a god lives the happiest life. But Aristotle need not hold that the more a human being contemplates, the happier that human being will be. Therefore, he need not hold that human happiness requires maximizing the amount of contemplation in a human life. For human beings, unlike gods, have other needs and interests as human beings (*EN* X.8, 1178b33–35). Maximizing the amount of contemplation in a human life as such, to the extent that it requires human beings to neglect those other needs and interests, would be detrimental to human happiness. Among those needs and interests, it is reasonable to infer, are personal needs and interests—i.e., general human needs and interests as specified according to one's particular circumstances. In practice, then, Aristotle's ideal should leave open much room for personal variation and individual specification.

In fact, it is hard to see how Aristotle could insist that the happiest life could be something as determinate as an academic life, or some other narrowly drawn contemplative parallel to the statesman's life. At *EN* I.3—i.e., at the beginning of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, and only two chapters before he goes on to compare whole ways of life—Aristotle warns that we should not expect too much precision in practical matters. In medicine, so too in ethics, he insists that general statements and prescriptions about the good properly serve as mere outlines.³⁶ How such outlines should be best filled in will vary in particular cases, according to the distinct needs and circumstances of differing people. A certain regimen of diet and exercise, for instance, may be required for wrestlers. But the specifics of this outlined regimen will vary for the scrawny novice (on the one hand) and for beefy Milo (on the other) (*EN* II.6, 1106a29–8; cf. *Metaphysics* A.1, 981a12–24). Moreover, an individual possesses multiple ends, some of which can be quite urgent. Hence, even if certain goods have a special, superior place in a hierarchy of ends, particular circumstances can require a flexible response (cf. *EN* IX.2, 1165a12–16; 27–30).

In the abstract, then, it is unclear what career or occupation or precise way of being a contemplative will best conduce to any individual's leading a life fitting the general pattern that Aristotle recommends as happiest. For the sake of charity, we should avoid reading Aristotle as arguing for an overly determinate and inflexible conclusion.

³⁶ See *EN* I.3, 1094b11–1095a1; I.7, 1098a26–30; II.2, 1103b34–1104a5. On this basis, Mara (1989: 41) argues that Aristotle should not hold that there exists a single happiest life. By contrast, I argue only that Aristotle should not hold that there exists a single highly determinate and narrowly specified happiest life.

II. Aristotle's Contemplative Ideal as Plurally Specifiable

On these grounds, I contend that Aristotle has sufficient resources to respond to the narrowness worry. But to be entirely clear, I have not argued that Aristotle explicitly claims that his contemplative ideal is open to plural specification. Aristotle, after all, does not explicitly address narrowness worries. To explore Aristotle's resources for responding to the narrowness worry more fully, then, I say more about Aristotle's contemplative ideal and how it can be plurally specified in practice.³⁷

One can profitably understand Aristotle's conception of a contemplative life as roughly analogous to a *religious* life.³⁸ Pursuing a clerical or monastic vocation, for instance, may well be one natural way of expressing one's commitment to one's religious tradition and of leading a religious life. Yet pursuing a clerical or monastic vocation need not be the *only* way to live a religious life, or to be "truly" religious. On the contrary, insofar as a life is organized around and regulated by religious activity and ideals—activity and ideals that unify and shape that life—such a life is, by Aristotle's criteria, a fully religious life. And so, one can lead a religious life in diverse ways while pursuing multiple different vocations. These vocations may well be clerical and monastic; but they may also be literary, commercial, medical, and so forth. Of course, for the religious adherent, the path one chooses as an adherent of a religion will aim both to realize, and will be regulated by, the ideals of that religion. These commitments might well constrain one's choice of vocational path by ruling out certain options (e.g., assassin-for-hire). They will also inform and guide how one pursues the options one does choose. But one's religious commitments need not, by themselves, *determine* which vocation one should pursue, which talents one should cultivate, which abilities one should exercise, and precisely how one should do so.³⁹

Similarly, academics such as Aristotle (or Oxford dons?) may well lead contemplative lives in pursuing academic vocations. And a life organized around something like an academic career may well be a natural, or inviting, path for at least certain people who seek to pursue a contemplative life.

³⁷ On plural specification, see Nussbaum (1990: 235–236). On specifying vague ends, see Wiggins (1980: 228).

³⁸ For a similar point on different ways of living a religious life, see Hadot (2002: 275). Cooper (2012: 17–18) emphasizes that the philosophical life, unlike a religious way of life, is ultimately guided by reason, as opposed, e.g., to revelation.

³⁹ On the regulative role of religious ideals, cf. Meyer (2008: 58). For a Christian theological discussion of this issue, see Badcock (1998: 136). Of course, any claim that any particular religion (e.g., Christianity) is best for all people would face the *religious pluralist worry* that such a view is too parochial. The extent to which *this* worry is relevantly similar to the one that faces Aristotle's contemplative ideal is, however, a question that I do not explore.

Such a life might even be *especially* contemplative, containing more instances of contemplation than other specifications of the contemplative life. Yet a life that (a) is organized around contemplation and that (b) regularly exercises it would not necessarily be more of a contemplative life, nor necessarily happier than, another life that (a) was organized around regular contemplation, but that (b) contained fewer instances of contemplation, and that (c) granted wider latitude to other, subordinate ends choiceworthy for themselves.⁴⁰ For insofar as a life is organized around and regulated by regular, ongoing contemplation, then, by Aristotle's standards, it fully exemplifies what Aristotle identifies as the happiest life. Accordingly, the contemplative life need not be specified as an academic life. In the abstract, and to use some earlier examples, the contemplative life that Aristotle identifies as happiest could be specified *as* the life of a doctor or artist, architect or football player.⁴¹ Again, Aristotle does not say as much. But his core commitments, I take it, imply these points.

How, then, would one pursue the contemplative life as, say, a singer? In this specification of the contemplative life, as in any other, one would pursue multiple ends in one's life as choiceworthy both for their own sakes and for the sake of other ends. One might sing in a given concert, for instance, both for the sake of exercising one's craft (as an end in itself) and for the sake of earning a living while receiving the honor of critics. One might choose these latter ends, in turn, for the sake of other ends in one's life, e.g., for the long-term maintenance of one's singing career. Assuming that one's singing career possessed a relatively high degree of finality in one's life, such a career would organize and regulate large, and important, parts of one's life. Actively and committedly pursuing a singing career would make it possible for one truly to identify oneself *as* a singer.

Our singer might grant his or her singing career a relatively high position in a hierarchy of ends. Yet such a singer may deny, as many have denied, that a career is properly the highest end within a human life. Such a singer might reasonably think that a singing career itself stands to be subordinated to, and regulated by, other ends within a life, including close friendships, practical rationality, ethical virtue, and leisure.⁴² Suppose, further, that our singer were convinced—either by Aristotle's arguments, or through personal experience—that regular, leisured contemplation was

⁴⁰ Cf. G. R. Lear (2004: 201).

⁴¹ Remarking on Socratic and Hellenistic conceptions of the philosophical life, Brown (2008: 82n11) observes, “[P]hilosophy is not the name of a particular career as opposed to other but the name of a way of life that one can achieve in any career or circumstance.”

⁴² On the last point, especially, see *Politics* VIII.3, 1337b30–35. Cf. Pieper ([1948] 1998, Essay I).

especially choiceworthy, and, by nature, worth pursuing as a highest end.⁴³ How would a contemplative singer, on my reading of Aristotle, pursue a singing career and other ends in light of a higher aim to contemplate regularly during the course of his or her life? Contemplation, I suggest, could serve the organizing and regulative functions of a highest end in at least three ways:

- (1) Contemplation could (though need not) be *instrumentally promoted* by the contemplative singer's full range of subordinate ends. These subordinate ends could (though need not) conduce to the contemplative singer's having resources and opportunities for the regular enjoyment of a certain life-shaping and life-defining leisure-activity, viz., contemplation. A singing career could support a contemplative life, and not merely as a "day job" in support of something like a second career.
- (2) Contemplation could *indirectly guide and inform* the contemplative singer's full range of subordinate ends. Insights that the contemplative singer gained through regular contemplation during the course of a life could broadly shape and direct that singer's way of pursuing a singing career, his or her choice of subordinate ends, etc. Like the insights gained through certain meditative practices, these insights would be highly general, concerning the nature of the cosmos, one's place in it, human nature and the human good, and the relative value of human projects. Such insights would guide and inform the contemplative singer's judgment at a dispositional level.⁴⁴
- (3) Primarily and for the most part, contemplation would *constrain and delimit* how the contemplative singer pursued other, subordinate ends. In ranking contemplation higher than these other ends, the contemplative singer would pursue these other ends on the condition that their pursuit were compatible with regular contemplation during the course of a life. In cases of conflict, the contemplative singer would modify his or her choice of subordinate ends. Exercising practical wisdom, however, the contemplative singer would identify ways of harmonizing these ends with the pursuit and

⁴³ If contemplation has the status as a highest end, it need not follow that one should either contemplate limitlessly or at any cost. See, e.g., Richardson (1992: 342–343) on the "self-limiting" nature of highest ends, and Meyer (2011: 61–62).

⁴⁴ For Aristotle's views on how contemplation can serve this guiding, informative function, see *Protrepticus* 10.

enjoyment of regular contemplation. A contemplative singer would organize his or her practical affairs (e.g., his or her singing practice, audition schedule, and concert performances) so as to reserve regular leisure time in which to contemplate.

I have briefly sketched one concrete specification of the contemplative life—a singer’s specification. Since individuals and their circumstances vary, it is hard to say more. Without too much effort, however, one can sketch how other specifications would look as well (including the lives of contemplative artists, doctors, architects, athletes, and so forth). Indeed, one can imagine *a vast range* of specifications of the contemplative life. Some contemplative lives would give a greater place to civic involvement; others would emphasize privacy. Some would be more artistically focused; others would be more scientifically oriented. Some would be more athletically focused; others would put a primacy on friendship. And so on. Yet different specifications could still meet the fairly general criteria that Aristotle’s contemplative ideal outlines.⁴⁵

At the same time, Aristotle’s contemplative ideal can retain its substantive content even if anyone, and not just full-time philosophers (in a narrow

⁴⁵ Griffin (1986: 57) considers a view like the one that I have presented. Granting the possibility of a moderately determinate and plurally specifiable model of the ideal life, Griffin writes, “We can say that this single ideal may manifest itself in lives that outwardly look quite different (butcher, baker, philosopher etc.); all that we have to insist on is that, to the extent that the ideal is really manifested in them, they will all be, on a higher level of generality, the same sort of life.” Griffin, however, objects to Aristotle’s contemplative ideal: “It pictures human flourishing as a God-like review of eternal truths as they march in orderly formulation before the mind. This passive, narrow, austere, even rather boring activity would not go far towards making life valuable or giving it substance. There are many other activities that are also valuable in themselves: enjoying oneself, accomplishing things, deep personal relations. And it is not that one of them is the single peak either; no one of them on its own would do. Only a quite relentless, unobtrusive application of a teleological conception of existence could yield such an unlikely result” (1986: 57–58).

Griffin’s objection raises important issues about the controversial teleological assumptions underlying Aristotle’s contemplative ideal—matters outside the scope of this paper. Still, as stated, Griffin’s objection invites the following response. (1) Although Aristotle thinks that contemplation is the highest end in a human life, and although Aristotle thinks that the contemplative life is the (one) happiest life for human beings, he need not—and does not—hold that contemplation is the *only* activity in a human life choice-worthy for its own sake. (See, e.g., *EN* I.7, 1097a34–b5.) (2) Aristotle has reasons for thinking that contemplation is actually the most active of activities (*Politics* VII.3, 1325b16–21). (3) Griffin’s picture of contemplation as consisting in the beholding of a quasi-military procession of truths is uncharitable. Although Aristotle does not say as much as he could to clarify what contemplation consists in, more charitable metaphors are available. For instance, Aristotle likens contemplation to the kind of beholding that we enjoy as spectators of theater and athletics (*Protrepticus* 9, 53.15–54.5/B44). Another—possible—fragment (Plutarch, *On Tranquillity*, XX, 477c–e) compares the enjoyment of contemplating the order of the cosmos to the enjoyment of a festival.

or vocational sense), can pursue it. For my reading of Aristotle's contemplative ideal does not hold that all those who contemplate lead contemplative lives. Leading a contemplative life in Aristotle's sense is not reducible to fitting some contemplation into one's life, or simply to "being thoughtful." Only those who pursue contemplation as a highest end lead a contemplative life by Aristotle's standards. On my reading, however, the set of such people, and the ways in which they pursue the contemplative life, need not be as restricted as most readings have assumed.⁴⁶

III. Would Aristotle Agree?

In this concluding section, I consider an objection. My proposal for how Aristotle can respond to the narrowness worry faces the charge that it presents an overly liberal Aristotle. Aristotle, after all, is fairly dismissive of several vocations. He explicitly denies that artisans, merchants, farmers, fishermen, miners, and lumberjacks should be citizens (and proper constituent parts) of the best city (*Politics* VII.9, 1329a34–39). He would presumably hold singers, tableware designers, and football players in similarly low regard. He apparently thinks that such people are unsuited for, and cannot lead, the happiest life:

[C] [T]he citizens [of the best city] should live neither a servile worker's or merchant's life (for such a life is low-born and contrary to virtue); nor should those going to be citizens be farmers (for leisure is necessary both with a view to the generation of virtue and with a view to political actions) (*Politics* VII.9, 1328b39–1329a2).

[D] [O]ne is not able to pursue the actions of virtue living a servile worker's or laborer's life (*Politics* III.5, 1278a20–21).

[E] Lives are distinguished, and some do not claim such happiness, {but are pursued for the sake of necessity}, such as those regarding the vulgar arts and regarding money-making and the servile occupations. (And I call "vulgar" those arts carried out only with a view to reputation, "servile" the sedentary and mercenary occupations, and "money-making" those with a view to purchases and retail sales) (*EE* I.4, 1215a25–32).

For Aristotle, vulgar arts, "servile" occupations, and commercial activity are either (i) positively base or (ii) significantly un leisured. Hence, for Aristotle,

⁴⁶ I have focused only on certain ways that Aristotle's contemplative ideal is open to plural specification. Aristotle's ideal seems open, in principle, to plural specification in other ways as well, including cultural and traditional ones. For how contemplation might be specified in a Confucian context, for instance, see Chang (1957: 253–256); Clark (1975: 212–216); Sim (2007: 211–212). Van Norden (2007: 354–359), however, argues that Confucians have good reason to reject contemplation as a highest good.

if one hopes to exercise and enjoy virtue and noble leisure—including contemplation—one should not spend one’s life in such activities. Given Aristotle’s stringent standards, it may appear, a moderately determinate reading of his contemplative ideal squares badly with Aristotle’s own commitments. Aristotle would apparently deny that one can specify the contemplative life in the ways that I have suggested.

In response to Aristotle, we moderns may—or may not—take issue with Aristotle’s particular judgments about the lives that he dismisses. Consider lives spent in commerce. One might defend Aristotle’s judgments by attempting to show that commerce and wage-earning activity inevitably (i) confuse means and ends, and (ii) corrupt the pursuit of other practices. Thus, one might argue, an agent who pursues medicine for a wage is apt to lose a commitment to the art of medicine when the pursuit of that art is subordinated to wealth-accumulation.⁴⁷ Yet, against such a verdict, one might insist such worries are overblown, and that commerce actually allows for the exercise of virtue.⁴⁸

Or consider lives spent in agriculture (and the lives of those in “menial” occupations). One might defend Aristotle’s judgments by arguing that such lives must be arduous and badly conducive to leisured contemplation. But again, one might criticize Aristotle by arguing that, in economic and technological circumstances different from those of ancient Athens, farming (and other “menial” occupations) can be pursued consistently with such leisure. In making the latter case, one can point out the following: (1) Aristotle himself allows that contemplation need not absorb exceptional resources of time: while the virtuous exercise of the theoretical intellect is the most choiceworthy of human activities, he admits that it will be “small in bulk” (*EN X.7*, 1178a1–2).⁴⁹ (2) In many vocations, one can arrange one’s day so as to provide opportunities for contemplation. Thus, the Aristotelian author of the *Economics* recommends that one awake before the morning hours, for doing so is “useful with a view to health and household management

⁴⁷ For a spirited defense of Aristotle’s dim view of commerce, see Meikle (1996).

⁴⁸ The American founder John Adams, for instance, defends the potential virtue of merchants and farmers, and criticizes Aristotle’s arguments for refusing them citizenship. For useful discussion, see Miller (1997). Miller (1995: 244–245) criticizes Aristotle’s views of merchants and farmers. See also Bragues (2006). For a contemporary argument that certain manual trades, such as motorcycle repair, allow for an independent mode of life conducive to living well, see Crawford (2009). To the extent such independence conduces to one’s leading a contemplative life, it seems entirely possible in principle for one to pursue the contemplative life as, say, a motorcycle repair-person. Of course, to say this is not to say that the contemplative mechanic must contemplate *while* repairing motors, though I see no reason why contemplation could not inform the contemplative mechanic’s practice. (Cf. *Protrepticus* 10 on how scientific understanding informs other practices.)

⁴⁹ Following Broadie (1991: 427).

and philosophy” (I.6, 1345a16–17).⁵⁰ So, even if one pursues the career of, e.g., a clothing designer or mechanic, one need not be utterly incapable of finding time to devote to regular contemplation. (3) At least some “menial” occupations (e.g., truck-driving and life-guarding) may provide unexpected opportunities for liberal study and contemplation on account of their fluid structure.⁵¹

As they stand, I find Aristotle’s particular judgments about commercial, farming, and “menial” lives implausible. Aristotle too quickly rejects many potentially worthy and viable specifications of the good life. For reasons of space, however, I do not adjudicate these disputes about Aristotle’s idiosyncratic judgments about particular vocations. Nor ultimately must I. For nothing about my reading of Aristotle’s contemplative ideal hangs on these matters. That is because Aristotle’s dismissals of the lives of merchants and farmers are, in principle, wholly consistent with common-sense pluralism about happy lives. According to common-sense pluralism, after all, any ideal pattern of the happiest life should be general and open-ended enough to be open to a wide range of diverse specifications. Common-sense pluralism need not identify every way of life as happy.

One who raises the narrowness worry against Aristotle presumably agrees that many lives will fail to be good, and hence, are worth avoiding. Thus, such a skeptic can accept that, for anyone fortunate enough to have the choice, one should (*prima facie*) avoid working in subprime mortgage sales. Or in cigarette or heroin manufacturing and distribution. Or in talent scouting for aspiring entry-level pornographic film stars. Or in migrant farm labor on sugar plantations. Or in many other fields. It might be possible in principle (or in some possible world) to live well while pursuing some of these occupations (given sharply different circumstances obtaining there). Yet these occupations are apt to impede one’s happiness in *this* world. Given their current practice, they require one to enter a work environment teeming with ethical risks, or else to subject oneself to debilitating, exploitative, physically risky labor. If it is open for the common-sense pluralist to reject certain conceptions of the happiest life, however, it is also open to Aristotle.

⁵⁰ In Plato, *Laws* XII.951d and 961b, the Athenian stranger holds that the Nocturnal Council should meet near dawn, for this is when people are least interrupted by other business.

⁵¹ Consider, e.g., the popularity of online university courses on Heidegger among cross-country truck drivers (on which, see Quinn [2007]). The Aristotelian author of the *Economics* shows respect for the agricultural life and the independent character it can cultivate: “[I]t conduces greatly to bravery; for it does not make men’s bodies unserviceable, as do the illiberal arts, but it renders them able to lead an open-air life and work hard; furthermore it makes them adventurous against the foe, for husbandmen are the only citizens whose property lies outside the fortifications” (I.2, 1343b2–6, ROT).

Suppose, conversely, that we reject some of Aristotle's own judgments about commerce and agriculture, and that we expand the range of viable specifications of the happiest life beyond the limits that Aristotle himself accepts. Suppose, in particular, that we include commercial and agricultural specifications of the contemplative life, as well as other specifications of the sort that Aristotle's critics mention. In doing so, we do not thereby turn Aristotle's view into one responsive to human diversity for the first time. Instead, we show that Aristotle's contemplative ideal is open to a *greater degree* of plural specification, and that it is even *more flexible*, than both Aristotle and his contemporary commentators appear to have recognized.⁵²

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