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# A Peripatetic Argument for the Intrinsic Goodness of Human Life: Alexander of Aphrodisias' *Ethical Problems I*

<https://doi.org/10.1515/apeiron-2020-0013>

**Abstract:** In this article I argue for the thesis that Alexander's main argument, in *Ethical Problems I*, is an attempt to block the implication drawn by the Stoics and other ancient philosophers from the double potential of use exhibited by human life, a life that can be either well or badly lived. Alexander wants to resist the thought that this double potential of use allows the Stoics to infer that human life, *in itself*, or *by its own nature*, is neither good nor bad (what I call the Indifference Implication). Furthermore, I shall argue that Alexander's main argument establishes that human life, despite exhibiting a double potential of use, is *by its own nature* or *intrinsically* good. Finally, given that this is not a conclusion that the Stoics are likely to accept, I shall also contend that the argument should be regarded as conducted for the most part *in foro interno*, as a way of persuading the Peripatetics themselves of the falsity of the Indifference Implication, precisely because of the risk that such an implication be derived from their own theoretical framework.

**Keywords:** human life, indifferents, intrinsic good, instrumental good, Stoics

## 1 Introduction

Alexander of Aphrodisias is a renowned exegete of Aristotle's works, but he is also known for defending various Aristotelian doctrines in a philosophical environment characterized by the intellectual rivalry among different philosophical schools, sometimes developing these doctrines in new directions or drawing unsuspected implications from them, and almost invariably adapting them to the intense philosophical debates that Peripatetics held with the Stoics during the Hellenistic period.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A good source for studying Alexander's contributions to philosophy is Sharples (2010).

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It is often not clear what was the purpose of these polemical writings against the Stoics, for they evidently were not intended to rebut living philosophers of the Stoic persuasion. The first essay of Alexander's *Ethical Problems*, entitled *Difficulties raised in reply to those who say that life is neither good nor bad*,<sup>2</sup> is representative of Alexandrian thought in this sense. Here, Alexander attempts to refute the Stoics' position concerning the neutral value of human life by means of an original elaboration of certain Aristotelian notions. The Stoics claim that human life is one of the "indifferents" (ἀδιάφορα), something that is neither good nor bad.

Before I turn to Alexander's main argument against this view, it is convenient to briefly say something about the Stoics' theory of the human good, both in order to dispel some initial doubts as well as to get a better sense of the polemical tenor underlying the essay. The main thesis of *Ethical Problems I* is that human life, rather than being an indifferent, is itself good. The disagreement with the Stoics did not arise, however, due to their failure to attribute positive value to human life – or some other value-properties practically equivalent to *goodness*. Even though the Stoics claimed that human life is one of the "indifferents", they also argued that life is a *preferred* indifferent. As it is made clear by the accounts offered by Cicero (*Fin.* III. 16–22) and Diogenes Laertius (D.L. VII. 85–87), they argued that all living creatures have an inborn, natural "affinity" (οἰκειώσις) for themselves and the preservation of their own life, which they immediately recognize as "belonging" to them (as οἰκεῖον) and "in accordance with nature" (κατὰ φύσιν). Alexander was well aware of this aspect of the Stoics' position. He devotes a lengthy treatise (*De An. Mantiss.* XVII) to a critical discussion of Hellenistic theories of οἰκειώσις, clearly describing the Stoics' view: "They say that the first familiar thing is *the living being to itself* [τὸ ζῶον αὐτῷ], for each living being is familiarized with itself as soon as it is born, and so too the human being" (150, 29–30.)

As with the rest of the so called "preferred indifferents" that living creatures progressively learn to recognize as naturally belonging to them, however, the Stoics explicitly refrained from ascribing goodness to human life, claiming instead that it has "positive value" (ἀξία), and that it is "selected" rather than "chosen". Only excellence is good and choiceworthy, for happiness consists in excellence alone. It is also fairly clear that Alexander was well aware of the Stoics' double system of valuation. In the final section of *Ethical Problems I* he adheres to the mainstream objection that such a system is inconsistent:

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<sup>2</sup> This is the title found in manuscript B2. Throughout this article I use Bruns' edition of the *Ethical Problems* in Bruns 1892, 117–63.

“How is it not inconsistent to say on the one hand that we have an affinity towards this [i.e. life] by nature and that we do everything for the sake of our preservation, and simultaneously to deny, on the other hand, that nature makes us have this affinity towards it [i.e. life] as a good?” (*P. Eth.* 119, 23–26).<sup>3</sup>

It is manifest, however, that the charge of inconsistency failed to do justice to the subtleties of the Stoic’s double system of valuation, which ascribed goodness and goodness-related properties only to what is constitutive of happiness, consistently allowing for a different set of values governing impulses and rational choice. This lack of appreciation for the complexity of the Stoic position makes it reasonable to suppose that the Inconsistency Argument was not in fact meant to convince Stoics themselves of the inadequacy of their own theory. This is also a feature of the essay’s main argument, as we shall see.

By contrast with the Inconsistency Argument, the main argument exploits the more fundamental Stoic claim that human life is, after all, *an indifferent* – a claim duly illustrated by the essay’s opening lines:

“If sailing well is good, and <sailing> badly is bad, sailing <itself> is neither good nor bad; and if living well is good, and <living> badly is bad, living <itself> is neither good nor bad.” (*P. Eth.* 118, 23–25)<sup>4</sup>

When the Stoics said that something *x* was an “indifferent”, they were referring among other things to a general feature of *x* as the sort of item that can be well or badly employed by an agent, and in particular, well employed by the virtuous agent and badly employed by the deficient agent. This provided a nice contrast with excellence, which does not exhibit a double potential of use. Thus understood, the axiological notion of indifference was not exclusively Stoic; it is also found in Plato’s Socratic dialogues, where items that can be well or badly employed are called “intermediate” (τὰ μεταξύ),<sup>5</sup> a term also used by Alexander in our text.<sup>6</sup> We also have evidence that the term was used by the Academics in the same, general sense.<sup>7</sup> Typical examples of “preferred” indifferent or intermediate items were bodily and mental dispositions such as health, strength and

<sup>3</sup> For a masterly discussion of the Stoic’s theory of *oikeiōsis* in relation to the Peripatetics, see G. Striker 1996/2.

<sup>4</sup> I have greatly benefited from Sharples excellent translation (Sharples 1990), but I have modified it to such an extent that I shall simply present these translations as my own, unless I indicate otherwise.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. *Gorgias* 467e–468a, *Euthydemus* 281d; *Meno* 87e–88d.

<sup>6</sup> Alexander uses τὰ μέσα (118, 26), and τὰ μεταξύ (119, 30; 35).

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Ethicists* 3. That *P. Eth.* One is exclusively concerned with the Stoic indifferent thesis is the dominant opinion (cf. Sharples 2002, 612; Madigan 1987; Inwood 2014, 109).

intelligence, and external means such as wealth or reputation. Life was traditionally included in these lists, for even if “preferred” it can be well employed by the virtuous agent, who could make of it an excellent life, or badly employed by the deficient agent, who could make of it a bad or deficient life.<sup>8</sup>

Hence, the *basic* characterization of these indifferent items, including life itself, was that any of them could be well or badly employed or, that any of them had a double potential of use. From this basic characterization, both the Stoics and Plato (and perhaps also some Academic philosophers) drew an important implication: if *x* can be well or badly employed, then *in itself*, or *by its own nature*, *x* is neither good nor bad: *in itself* or *by nature*, *x* is axiologically neutral. Whether these items are “intrinsically good by nature (καθ’ αὐτὰ πέφυκεν ἀγαθὰ)”, says Socrates in the *Euthydemus* (281d5), is out of the question. Let us call this the Indifference Implication.

In the rest of this article I argue for the thesis that Alexander’s main argument, in *Ethical Problems* I, is an attempt to block the Indifference Implication drawn by Plato and the Stoics from the double potential of use exhibited by human life. That is to say, Alexander wants to resist the thought that this double potential of use allows us to infer that human life, *in itself*, or *by its own nature*, is neither good nor bad. Furthermore, I shall argue that Alexander’s main argument establishes that human life, despite exhibiting a double potential of use, is *by its own nature* or *intrinsically* good.

As with the Inconsistency Argument, however, this is not a conclusion that Stoics are likely to accept – nor perhaps the Academics, whom I shall ignore. As we shall see, given the strong theoretical commitments of Alexander’s main argument and its remoteness from the Stoic system, it seems thoroughly implausible to regard such an argument as conducted *in foro externo* – as a way of persuading the Stoics of the falsity of the Indifference Implication. Rather, I shall contend, the argument should be regarded as conducted for the most part *in foro interno*, as a way of persuading the Peripatetics themselves of the falsity of the Indifference Implication, precisely because of the risk that such an implication be derived from their own theoretical framework.

## 2 Potentialities of Opposites

Human life does exhibit a double potential of use, just like many other intrinsically neutral items. In fact, the first step taken by Alexander is the claim that human life

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<sup>8</sup> For the Stoic claim that life is amongst the so called indifferents see L&S 58.A, SVF 3.124, L&S 58 D.

is a “potentiality of opposites” (δύναμις τῶν ἀντικειμένων). Alexander’s main point is that “it is not true that potentialities of opposites are themselves indifferent or intermediate” (118, 25–6).

By admitting at the very outset that human life is a potentiality of opposites, Alexander admits that it exhibits a sort of double potentiality of use, but he is also taking the first step to re-direct the discussion towards a metaphysical level, displacing it from the axiological level at which it had been traditionally conducted.

The metaphysical level at which Alexander’s main argument is carried out is of great importance. In contrast with the axiological notion of *indifference* or *intermediacy*, or the notion of *potency* employed by Peripatetic themselves (see Section 6 below), the notion of “potentiality of opposites” is not strictly axiological. The two kinds of potentialities of opposites that Alexander distinguishes in our text are the *activities* characteristic of a craft and the *natural processes* characteristic of living organisms. The activities characteristic of a craft are the exercises of an acquired productive capacity, a *technê*, such as sailing (τὸ πλεῖν, 118, 30) – the exercise of the craft of navigation – or sawing (τὸ πρίειν, 118, 31) – the exercise of the craft of carpentry. The natural processes characteristic of a living organism are those undergone by plants and animals, as part of what Alexander and Aristotle consider to be the realization of their natural forms; typically, the process of development and growth of these organisms and their parts, or of their natural capacities, referred to in the text by the notion of “becoming complete” (τέλειοι γενέσθαι, 119, 9).

The notion of potentiality of opposites requires some interpretation. Why does Alexander call craft-*activities* and organic *processes* “potentialities of opposites”? Doubtless, Alexander’s answer is that craft-activities and organic processes, considered in the abstract, are indeed potentialities or dispositions that can be *well* or *ill* exercised. In other words, the opposites of such potentialities are the *good and bad exercise* of the corresponding goal-directed activities and processes – referred to in the text as “the better” (τὸ βέλτιον) and “the inferior” (τὸ χεῖρον) exercise of a potentiality (118, 27). When Alexander says that “living has in itself the potentiality for living both well and badly” [τὸ ζῆν δὴ ἔχον δύναμιν ἐν αὐτῷ τοῦ τε εὖ ζῆν καὶ τοῦ κακῶς, 119, 18–19], this is just another way of saying that the potentiality for living involves the potentiality for being exercised well or badly.

It would be useful to lay bare in advance some of the main assumptions of Alexander’s model of potentialities of opposites:

**Pot. 1.** Firstly, every potentiality has a goal that it strives to realise, an “aim” (σκοπός), that for the sake of which the potentiality exists or is generated in the first place (cf. 119, 4; 119, 7). This of course is the familiar teleological conception of potentialities that Alexander inherited from Aristotle.

- Pot. 2.** Secondly, we can distinguish between optimal conditions of the exercise of a potentiality, and infra-optimal conditions of exercise. When a potentiality is exercised under optimal conditions, its exercise or its result is by definition “the better” (τὸ βέλτιον); when exercised under infra-optimal conditions, it is by definition “the inferior” (τὸ χεῖρον) (cf. 118, 27–30).
- Pot. 3.** Thirdly, it is only *the exercise of a given potentiality under optimal conditions*, or the result of such an optimal exercise (at least when the result and the optimal exercise are different), that counts as the goal or aim towards which the potentiality in question, and its exercise, are oriented (cf. 119, 6–7, 17–19).

The primary instances of such potentialities of opposites are drawn from the domain of crafts, and by adducing such instances as primary evidence of the model, and then moving on the domain of natural potentialities, Alexander reveals his commitment to Aristotle’s assumption that the teleological structure of crafts provides helpful insights into the teleological structure of natural substances and the processes they undergo. For instance, when sailors fail to deliver the crew or the cargo safely to port, even though they have exercised the craft of navigation, they have sailed under infra-optimal conditions; either because they have navigated ineptly, or because certain external conditions, such as the weather-conditions, have been unfavourable. Alexander acknowledges the distinction between conditions that are external to the very exercise of the craft, such as the weather, and those that are internal to it, such as the craftsman’s failure *qua* craftsman (cf. ἀποτυχία, 118, 28). This distinction characterizes the so called “stochastic crafts”, such as sailing, in which the attainment of the *projected result* (τὸ προκειμενον τέλος, 119, 2) does not fully depend on the quality of its characteristic performance: regardless of how *well* you may pilot a vessel, a storm may prevent you from putting into port – the latter being the projected result of navigation. In *Ethical Problems 1* Alexander focuses (as in fact some later Stoics did) on the *internal aim* (the σκοπός) of the craft’s characteristic activity, which he identifies with the telic goal of craft-potentialities. The goal of sailing, he says, is to *sail well*. His view might well be that internal conditions are the ones relevant for evaluating the value of the craft itself, for they are the ones under the crafts’ control.<sup>9</sup> The distinction notwithstanding, the model still applies: when sailors have sailed under infra-optimal conditions, the bad exercise of their nautical

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<sup>9</sup> This is why Alexander says: “Indeed, all things of this sort [i.e. potentialities of opposites] that are brought about in accordance with craft are brought about for the sake of the better among the potential outcomes *that is within one’s reach to bring about* [ἐν αὐτῷ γενέσθαι]” (18, 28–30). Surprisingly enough, Sharples does not translate ἐν αὐτῷ γενέσθαι in 18, 29–30.

activity cannot be the goal of navigation, that for the sake of which the craft of navigation was invented.<sup>10</sup>

When potentialities of opposites are natural, the same teleological structure operates. Under optimal conditions a bird's natural potentiality to grow wings of a certain shape and length, a certain feather-structure, and so on, will be successfully exercised. Under less-than-optimal conditions, however – because of their diet, or an infection, or a virus, for instance – their wings or feathers can grow abnormally, unable to perform their usual functions; and yet, when wings and feathers end up crooked or deformed, this outcome is not the goal of the potentiality in question.<sup>11</sup>

We shall see next how these assumptions are at work in Alexander's main argument. They are enough to ground the suspicions about whether Stoics would accept an argument based on the metaphysical notion of potentialities of opposites, charged as it is with so many theoretical commitments. Even though there is some evidence that the Stoics used the concept of *δύναμις*, their use of this term seems to have been restricted to the powers of the soul.<sup>12</sup> The fact remains that the metaphysical notion of potentiality of opposites used by Alexander was completely foreign to the Stoic system, and it clearly reveals Alexander's intention of addressing Peripatetic readers, shifting the terms of the debate in order to better suit their theoretical assumptions.

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**10** As Alexander says somewhere else: “their failure to achieve their proposed end [τὴν ἀποτυχίαν αὐταῖς τοῦ προκειμένου] follows through error in the things that come about, *when they do not do so skilfully* [τεχνικῶς]” (*Quaest.* 61, 12–13). Alexander's view, in the *Questiones* and *Ethical Problems*, seems thus to imply that failure to achieve the *intended result* might also count against the quality of a given craft's characteristic performance, but only when such failure is the result of poor performance. It is also worth noticing Alexander's own position in the *Questiones* (*Quaest.* II 61–62, cf. *in Ar. Top.* 32.20–34.5), where he proposes that we consider the goal of a *craftsman* to be performing his function well, or doing everything in his power to achieve the intended result of the craft. By contrast, the goal of *the craft*, even of stochastic crafts, he regards as the projected result. For an important discussion about Alexander's the Stoics' view in this regard, see Striker 1996/1.

**11** When Alexander says in *De Fato*, for instance, that “not everything that has potential exercises it” (193, 23), he does not have in mind potentialities that remain inactive, but rather potentialities that, despite their being active, due to the presence of unfavourable conditions fail to achieve their proper ends: children don't make it until adulthood, and in general, things come to be “contrary to nature” that cannot survive for long, falling short of their proper constitution in various ways (cf. *Fat.* 193, 11–26). Furthermore, the fact that potentialities in the natural domain, and also in the domain of crafts, can be infra-optimally exercised, seems to be in turn just an empirically ascertainable fact pertaining to the natural order: it is just an empirically ascertainable fact that the causality in these domains is “for the most part” (*Fat.* 169, 29–31).

**12** Cf. Inwood (1985), 30–40. Inwood refers to Stobaeus, *Ecl.* 1.369; SVF 3.203; SVF 2.844; SVF 3112.

### 3 The Schematic Argument

As we have seen, Alexander wants to block the Indifference Implication drawn by Stoics and other philosophers from the double potential of use exhibited by human life in particular. In order to do this, Alexander devises the following, schematic argument:

**P1:** “potentialities exist primarily for the better things” (119, 11)

**P2:** “the judgement [ἡ κρίσις] of the underlying realities [τῶν ὑποκειμένων] is not based on the things that fall to some of them as a result of failure, but rather on the things for the sake of which they exist and come about primarily [προηγούμενως].”<sup>13</sup> (119, 2–4).<sup>14</sup>

**C1:** “every potentiality of this sort is good and valuable due to its having as its goal the better of the things of which it is a potentiality.” (118, 26–7)

P1 and P2 are general principles that apply to all potentialities of opposites. Let me call them the “Principle of Teleological Priority” and the “Principle of Evaluation” respectively.

The Principle of Teleological Priority (P1) states that potentialities exist only for the sake of their telic opposite, which is their exercise under optimal conditions, and therefore their *good exercise*, such as sailing or sawing well, or living well (the “good” opposite – τὸ βέλτιον, in Alexander’s terminology). As we have seen, Alexander evidently thinks that this premise un-controversially applies to the performances characteristic of a craft (cf. 118, 28 – 119, 1), and to natural processes, which are also potentialities of opposites because they can be carried out under optimal conditions, in which case their natural goal is attained, or carried out under infra-optimal conditions, in which case their natural goal is frustrated (cf. 119, 6–10).

Once we know which one of the opposite exercises has teleological priority over the other, it remains to be seen how this priority is relevant for the *evaluation* of the underlying potentiality. This is precisely the role of the second premise, the Principle of Evaluation. All that the principle says, however, is that the value of a potentiality of opposites is to be judged *on the basis of* (ἀπό + genitive) the value of the telic opposite, which we know is good. We may safely infer from this that the value of a potentiality of opposites is somehow *based on* the value of its good, telic

<sup>13</sup> For a useful analysis of this term in the Peripatetics, see Huby 1983.

<sup>14</sup> Also: “the judgement of intermediate things is based on the potentiality for what is better” (119, 30–1); “the judgement [ἡ κρίσις] of each thing is based on its primary aspect [ἀπὸ τῶν προηγούμενων] and that for which it exists” (119, 12–13).



opposite, or that it *derives from* it, in such a way as to render the potentiality *itself* good. As we shall see in Section 5, however, the way Alexander himself cashes out this value-derivation is problematic.

These two principles in P1 and P2 supply the premises of a general, schematic argument, the conclusion of which is that *potentialities of opposites are good*, that is to say, those powers and capacities that can be optimally or deficiently exercised, given their teleological structure and the way we should evaluate it, are in themselves good and choiceworthy, rather than indifferent. Alexander, of course, wants to say that *human life* is a potentiality of opposites, a potentiality of which the telic opposite (the goal) is living well, and that, as a result of the schematic argument, human life is good. To this conclusion I now turn.

## 4 Human Life Is Good

The argument continues as follows:

“so too if living, which has in itself the potentiality of both living well and <living> badly, is given to us by nature for the sake of living well (for it is not possible to attain the good life as soon as we are generated; for nothing in an incomplete condition is complete, but rather everything is incomplete at the very moment it is generated), it [living] will be valuable for the sake of the best among the things that have the potentiality to come about in us. For whereas what is best and the end is to live well, this [living well] cannot come to be apart from living <itself>.” (119, 17–23)

Here we find the premise that applies to human life:

**P4:** Human life is a potentiality of opposites, of which the telic (good) opposite is living well, and the non-telic (bad) opposite living badly.

**C2:** Human life is good (through P3 and P4)

This of course is my own reconstruction of an argument that is obscurely presented and scattered throughout the text in a disorderly fashion. In premise 4 Alexander applies the Principle of Teleological Priority to the case of human life, to the process of living peculiar to a human organism. According to my interpretation, the process of living is a potentiality of opposites because it can be exercised under optimal conditions or under infra-optimal conditions, and only the former exercise is to be identified with its goal. Still, this premise poses important questions for the argument, for the following reason.

There seems to be a significant difference between the natural potentialities Alexander mentions – the “things that come about according to nature” (119, 5) – and

human life. For the *good life* for human beings, which is alleged to be the *goal* of human life and assumed to be identical to its natural completion, is not obviously attained through a *natural* process, in the way the natural goals of natural potentialities are. The oak attains its completed natural form through a natural process of development because, at any stage of that process, it can be truly said of the oak that it will *necessarily* attain its complete natural form by its own means unless something external prevents it (cf. *Met.* 1049b5-10). In a similar fashion, human beings develop their senses, grow hair and teeth, etc., by natural, necessary processes. Furthermore, these paradigmatically natural processes typically occur for the most part and are thus generally observed in nature. The reason why these features are not pertinent to the attainment of good life is that, as both Aristotle and Alexander admit, the good human life is primarily constituted by ethical and practical excellence in general,<sup>15</sup> and practical excellence requires habituation and instruction, both significantly differing from paradigmatically natural processes. After all, “we do not see everyone or even the majority possessing the excellences, this being a sign of the things that come to be in accordance with nature” (*Fat.* 198, 19–20),<sup>16</sup> nor do we, on the other hand, acquire our natural capacities and qualities by frequent practice that depends on us and our own effort, as we do when we get habituated into practical excellence (cf. *Fat.* 199, 1–4).

When Alexander discusses such differences between the acquisition of excellence (and to this extent, of the good life) and the unimpeded, necessary and regularly observed development of paradigmatically natural capacities and qualities (in *De Fato* XXVII and *Ethical Problems* XXIX), he understandably says that the human excellences are “not natural” (*Fat.* 199, 3; *P. Eth.* 161, 22). So, in *what sense* is the good life, constituted as it is by human excellence, the *goal* of human life, conceived as a natural potentiality? Alexander’s answer is that right practical habituation and instruction *complete* a natural rational *fitness* already present in us by nature, and this may be enough to count the attainment of rational excellence and the resulting good of human life as a natural process in the *relevant* sense of “natural” (i.e. completion of a natural form not present from the start).<sup>17</sup> As Alexander claims, “excellence is the completion and culmination of the proper

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<sup>15</sup> Alexander’s interpretation of Aristotle in this regard is that *both* moral excellence as well as intrinsically rational excellence (both deliberative and theoretical) are constitutive parts of the good life (see *P. Eth.* 25, along with Sharples 2010, 69 n. 238).

<sup>16</sup> All translations from *De Fato* are Sharples’, sometimes slightly modified.

<sup>17</sup> Notice also that Aspasius (*in Ar. Eth.* 38, 10–22) distinguishes four senses of ‘being natural’. For our purposes, the relevant one is the fourth one: *F* is ‘by nature’ in *x*, if *F* “is that for which *x* is more receptive <than its opposite> and towards which *x* has, because of its nature, more inclination <than it has towards its opposite>”. According to Aspasius, precisely in this sense excellence is natural.

nature of each thing” (*Fat.* 198, 1), and the process of habituation is the way in which we add what our incomplete nature necessarily lacks.

Alexander’s point, therefore, seems to be that through right practical habituation and instruction leading to human excellence, our proper nature, initially incomplete, is finally completed. Accordingly, if this is meant to support the claim that “living is given to us by nature for the sake of living well”, then the potentiality already present in human life at its initial stages must be conceived as a *potentiality oriented towards the acquisition of (rational) excellence*. That this is indeed Alexander’s notion of the potentiality involved in human life, is confirmed in the last section of our text (*P. Eth.* 119, 30 – 120, 2), where this potentiality is referred to as a sort of receptive fitness naturally present in human beings for receiving (rational) excellence, which is adduced here as a reason for judging the human being better than all other living creatures: “this is because none of the others is fit for receiving excellence [ἀρετῆς δεκτικόν]” (*P. Eth.* 119, 32).<sup>18</sup>

It should be admitted that the Stoics would not necessarily have disagreed with Alexander on this particular point.<sup>19</sup> Even if they had acknowledged some sort of natural receptive fitness for excellence, however, the Stoics would have classed it as one of the “preferred indifferents”; since they only attributed goodness to excellence itself.

## 5 The Instrumentality Problem

We have seen how Alexander’s main argument tries to establish that human life is good and choiceworthy, despite its being a potentiality of opposites. A serious question remains concerning this argument’s plausibility. We saw in Section 3 that, according to the Principle of Evaluation, the value of a potentiality of opposites is somehow *based on* the value of its good, telic opposite, or that it *derives from* it, in such a way as to render the potentiality *itself* good. The way Alexander cashes out this idea, however, is problematic.

Alexander indicates in our text that the potentiality itself derives its goodness from the goodness of the telic opposite due to *the causal connection* that it

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<sup>18</sup> The same potentiality is invariably described by Alexander in other texts as “the potentiality to receive [ἡ μὲν τοῦ δέξασθαι δύναμις]” excellence (*P. Eth.* 161, 20) belonging to the human being by nature, and as “a potentiality and fitness for receiving [δύναμιν τεκαὶ ἐπιτηδειότητα δεκτικὴν]” excellence that the human being has got from nature (*Fat.* 198, 5).

<sup>19</sup> After all the Stoics did say, according to one of our sources, that human beings “have from nature inclinations to find out what is appropriate” and to act moderately, justly, etc. (*Stob.* II. 62.9-12, Wachsmuth).

presumably has with the latter. In particular, the potentiality itself is a *necessary causal condition* for the attainment of its telic opposite:

“and for this reason sailing is valuable for the first <craft> and sawing for the second, because without these <activities> [χωρίς τούτων] it is not possible for these <crafts> to reach the end that they propose” (119, 1–2).

*Without* sailing or sawing it is simply not possible for the craft of navigation or carpentry to sail well or to saw well, nor to attain the projected ends of these crafts. Alexander also claims that *without* living it is not possible to live well:

“this [i.e. living well] cannot come to be apart from living [χωρίς τοῦ ζῆν]” (119, 22–3).

Let us register this assumption in the following way:

**Pot. 4.** The *mere* potentiality of opposites itself is a necessary condition for its own exercise under either optimal or infra-optimal conditions.

Alexander’s thought here is based on the ordinary observation that if you were not capable of sawing or living in the first place, you would not be capable of sawing well or living well, but not the other way around (cf. *Met.* IX 2. 1046b24–28). This assumption is problematic for Alexander, because it also applies to the exercise of a potentiality under infra-optimal conditions. If you were not capable of sawing or of living in the first place, you would not be capable of sawing badly or living badly either. As Aristotle himself argued: “without breathing or being awake or participating in movement we could not possess any good or any evil at all” (*EE* 1214b20–22). Alexander himself is well aware of this duplicity of potentialities as necessary conditions for *both* opposites, for he argues that, at least in the case of craft-activities and organic processes: “it is impossible for something to have the potentiality for something *x* if it is not also potentially the opposite of *x*” (119, 10).

It is not easy to explain the intuition behind Pot. 4 in more rigorous terms. Perhaps Alexander is assuming that the mere potentiality itself should be defined in terms of *minimal conditions* of realization, so that in order for something to count as “sawing”, for instance, there must be certain minimal conditions defining the corresponding capacity that must be fulfilled. If this is so, then talk of “infra-optimal conditions” and “optimal conditions” would assume conditions of exercise that are in some sense *additional* to the minimal ones. In order to saw well or badly I need to fulfil certain conditions that are additional to the minimal ones that render my activity one of sawing or sailing in the first place.

Alexander surely thought that, even if a mere potentiality of opposites is also a necessary condition of its “bad outcome” consisting in its exercise under infra-optimal conditions, the Principle of Evaluation comes to the rescue, and declares

that such an exercise under infra-optimal conditions cannot provide the basis for evaluating the mere potentiality itself, because it is not its goal. The problem confronting this strategy, however, is that if mere potentialities of opposites are *necessary conditions* for the realization of their telic opposites under optimal conditions, we cannot but admit that the goodness they derive from the goodness of their telic opposite is purely *instrumental*. In Peripatetic terminology, merely sawing or sailing, merely growing wings or merely living, are activities that are “to be chosen on account of something else” (δι’ ἕτερον αἰρετόν). In our text, Alexander signals this instrumental value of potentialities of opposites by the expression “valuable for the sake of  $\chi$  (αἰρετόν + genitive + χάριν)”. The contrast here, of course, is with what is to be chosen “on account of itself (δι’ αὐτὸ αἰρετόν)” or in a final way – which is the telic exercise, the goal of these activities and processes.

Accordingly, Alexander’s strategy for blocking the Indifference Implication seems to land us on a similar implication, only this time one that is internally derived from his own theoretical framework. If mere potentialities of opposites, and human life in particular, are themselves necessary conditions for the attainment of their telic opposite, their value seems to be purely instrumental: they are also necessary conditions for the failed, bad opposite. Even though the Principle of Evaluation tells us that potentialities of opposites should be judged on the basis of the goodness of their telic opposite, their *instrumental* value seems to preclude Alexander from applying such a Principle in such a way as to conclude that human life is *non-instrumentally good* – or at least, not merely instrumentally good. Something seems to be lacking in Alexander’s strategy. Let us call this the “Instrumentality Problem”. The Instrumentality Problem, I shall suggest, is an *internal* problem deriving from Alexander’s own theoretical framework.

## 6 The Intrinsic Value of Human Life

Alexander introduces an original but intriguing element at this juncture of the argument that contributes to solving the Instrumentality Problem. He suggests that the value of potentialities of opposites is not *just* instrumental; it also belongs to each of them “by its own nature”:

“if walking was valuable, so too having the potentiality for walking would be *by its own nature* [τῆ ἑαυτοῦ φύσει] valuable” (19, 15-16).

This is also suggested by Alexander’s use of the term ὑποκείμενα, “underlying realities”, to refer to potentialities of opposites in P2. This term seems to capture the fact that their value is the sort of permanent feature that is not altered by the actual use made of them by an agent, whether good or bad (cf. *Mant.* 160, 6–14; 161, 13).

This evidence suggests, in turn, that human life, despite being instrumentally good, is *also* good by its own nature. How is this possible?

Besides the familiar taxonomy of goods as instrumental (“on account of something else”) and final (“on account of itself”), Alexander, in his commentary on Aristotle’s *Topics* introduces yet another taxonomy of goods (*in Ar. Top.* 229, 2-231, 15). He distinguishes between items that are valuable “in themselves” or “intrinsically” (καθ’ αὐτό) – also “by their own nature” – and items that are valuable “incidentally” (κατὰ συμβεβηκός).<sup>20</sup> The latter taxonomy is grounded in the distinction between essential properties and incidental properties of an object. Alexander defines “valuable in itself” as “that which is valuable because of its proper nature and presence [διὰ τὴν οἰκείαν φύσιν τε καὶ παρουσίαν]” (*in Ar. Top.* 229, 20-1). Roughly speaking, something has *intrinsic* value if its value is due to its essential properties, whereas something has incidental value if its value is due to its incidental or accidental properties – properties that do not derive from its own nature but rather from its particular circumstances.

The manner in which this distinction between intrinsic and incidental goods is formulated, allows Alexander to make a claim that would otherwise sound paradoxical, namely, that there are things in the world that have both instrumental value and at the same time intrinsic value. This, I contend, is precisely what is going on in the case of potentialities of opposites; they are instrumentally good, that is, they are not good in the way end-like items are, but rather by reference to the good outcome toward which they are oriented as necessary conditions; and yet they are intrinsically choiceworthy and good, due to their essential properties.

The clearest way in which Alexander develops this interesting idea is by applying it to what Peripatetics called “potencies”, using the same term, δυνάμεις, but this time to denote an axiological category roughly corresponding to what the Stoics and Plato called “indifferents” or “intermediates” (such as strength, wealth or reputation). Peripatetic axiological potencies are also necessary conditions for their good or bad use.<sup>21</sup> As such, their goodness is always instrumental, that is,

<sup>20</sup> Cf. also Aspasius *in Ar. Eth.* 97, 4–17.

<sup>21</sup> As Aristotle had already indicated, “it is impossible, or not easy, to perform fine actions if one is without resources” (*EN* 1099a32-3). Indeed, in one of his classifications Arius Didymus classifies potencies, along with life, amongst the ‘necessary goods’ (*Stob.* 128.26-129.17, Wachsmuth). As such, potencies are also called ‘instruments’. As Alexander says, “an instrument is that through which something comes about, either *only through it or best through it*” (*P. Eth.* 123, 9–10). By contrast, what Alexander and the Peripatetics dubbed ‘auxiliary goods’, such as doing exercise for the sake of getting healthy, even though they have instrumental value, are not *instruments* at least partly because they are dispensable. I can obtain health, or good enough health, either by natural means, or through medical treatment (cf. *In Ar. Top.* 242, 5–8; Aspasius *in Ar. Eth.* 32, 10–19; Arius Didymus *in Stob.* 134, 20–135, 10, Wachsmuth).

valuable *on account of something else* (δι' ἕτερον αἰρετόν), because “the reference for choosing them is to something else: of wealth it is to its use, and of strength it is to doing what one proposes to oneself without impediment” (in *Ar. Top.* 142, 15–17).<sup>22</sup>

Peripatetics argued that from the fact that potencies can be well or badly employed, we cannot infer that, *in themselves* or *by their own nature* potencies are neither good nor bad. The reason for this, according to Alexander and other Peripatetics,<sup>23</sup> is that (i) the value of potencies must be judged exclusively on the basis of the employment made of them by the virtuous agent (the good employment made of strength by the courageous agent, for instance, or of wealth by the liberal agent), and *further*, (ii) this good use is somehow inscribed in the nature of these items. They are both instrumentally and intrinsically good.

For instance, Alexander argues that the notion of intrinsic goodness can perfectly apply to potencies such as wealth. Wealth “is choiceworthy in itself, because it is by its own nature an instrument for noble activities [τῆ αὐτοῦ φύσει ὄργανόν ἐστιν ἐνεργειῶν καλῶν] – even though it is not choiceworthy on account of itself, because every instrument is desirable on account of something else” (in *Ar. Top.* 231, 6–8). The relevant contrast here, for the Peripatetics, is with privative items such as death, sickness, and poverty (the opposites of life, health and wealth), which are said to be instrumentally good, but only *incidentally* so (κατὰ συμβεβηκός) (cf. in *Ar. Top.* 231, 10–15; cf. Aspasius in *Ar. Eth.* 97, 4–17).

The point I wish to stress here, to sum up, is that the same position that Peripatetics defended concerning the value of these intermediate items they preferred to call “potencies”, is also defended by Alexander, in an original fashion, with regard to metaphysical potentialities of opposites, including human life itself. If I am right, Alexander’s strategy for blocking the Indifference Implication is only completed once we understand that mere potentialities of opposites, such as craft-potentialities or the ones involved in natural processes, despite being necessary conditions for their telic opposite and thus instrumentally good, are also intrinsically or “by their own nature” good. The proper end of a potentiality of opposites is indeed an *essential property* of the potentiality itself, for it is part of the potentiality’s *nature* to be for the sake of *it*. In other words:

<sup>22</sup> I disagree with Tuozzo 1995, who argues that for all Peripatetics, including Alexander himself, potencies are the sort of things that can be valuable *on account of themselves*. At some points, it is true, Alexander pays lip service to this Peripatetic ‘doctrine’ (for instance, in *Ar. Top.* 229, 1–7). For the most part, however, Alexander disagrees: in *Ar. Top.* 231, 5–8; 242, 14–18; 243, 4–9; *P. Eth.* 123, 9–16.

<sup>23</sup> Pseudo-Aristotle *MM* 1183b27-32; Aspasius in *Ar. Eth.* 32, 11-15; 97.4-17; Arius Didymus in *Stob.* 135.1-10 (Wachsmuth); Alexander in *Ar. Top.* 4, 33–34; 243, 4–9; 263, 26 – 264, 1; *P. Eth.* 123, 9–16; 137, 22; *Mant.* 160, 1 – 21. Cf. *EE* 1248b26-37; *EN* 1099b28, 1148a23-8, 1170a13-22.

**Pot. 5.** It is the optimal conditions of exercise, rather than its infra-optimal conditions, that define the nature of the potentiality in question.

I take it that this is the point of Alexander's claims to the effect that craft-activities such as sailing and sawing were *invented by the corresponding crafts*, the arts of navigation and carpentry, for the sake of their telic opposites, sailing well and sawing well (118, 30–119, 1). Crafts have one particular result that they propose to themselves (cf. τὸ προκειμένον τέλος, 119, 2), such as building furniture well, arriving safely into port, and so on. This proposed end is what *defines* the corresponding craft and the rules and practices peculiar to it, that is to say, rules and practices devised for its attainment. As such, Alexander can claim that craft capacities can only have as their *intrinsic aim* good performance, despite their being necessary conditions for bad performance also. Without good performance it is not possible to attain the end proposed by the craft, at least in as far as this end depends on the craft's activity: "without these <activities> it is not possible for these <crafts> to reach the end that they propose" (119, 1–2).

That being oriented toward the telic opposite is also an essential property of the natural potentialities of opposites, is also clearly signalled by Alexander's claim that, in their case, "the aim is by nature [τῇ φύσει] the better of both potential outcomes, and it is for the sake of this <aim> that nature provides it [i.e. the potentiality]." (119, 6–7). In this case, the end of natural active potentialities of opposites, such as life, is the "proper completeness" of the natural substance to which they belong. Given that this end is gradually attained by a natural substance as it grows and develops, it can be hindered by a number of factors, and such a development could end up in failure. In this regard, natural potentialities of opposites are also necessary conditions for such a failure. Nevertheless, given that *nature* has provided these potentialities for the sake of proper completeness,<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> This language of 'providing' strongly suggests that the argument about the teleological priority of one of the potential outcomes in the natural realm is ultimately grounded in the analogy with crafts, for surely, the parallel here invoked is with the case of crafts that have 'devised' or 'invented' their characteristic activities. We are thus naturally led to think of nature as a Platonic demiurge, a purposeful rational craftsman organizing the world of nature and its active potentialities with a view to what is best – an interpretation that seems confirmed by passages like *Quaest.* 163, 25–30, where Alexander explicitly identifies nature with "a sort of divine craft". It is important to note, however, that it is perfectly possible to resist the analogical interpretation. As James G. Lennox has shown, even though Aristotle in his biological works refers to nature as something that 'constructs', 'devises', 'provides', etc., in order to achieve a certain outcome, these verbs denoting purposeful activity are metaphorical, and "the nature referred to as agent is simply an animal's formal nature" (Lennox 2001, 184).



Alexander can claim that being oriented toward this good opposite is an essential property of them.

## 7 Conclusion

As a result of this notion of intrinsic goodness, Alexander can now solve the Instrumentality Problem: even though potentialities of opposites are necessary conditions for the attainment of their good end and thus instrumentally valuable, they can still be correctly judged as intrinsically good on the basis of their good telic exercise, because it is part of their *nature* to be for the sake of it.

As I have argued, the Stoics would not be particularly impressed by Alexander's argument because it is derived from premises thoroughly foreign to their philosophical system. If what I have argued in the previous sections is roughly correct, however, there are reasons to think that Alexander's argument is mainly conducted *in foro interno*. There is an internal obstacle, the Instrumentality Problem, preventing his argument from successfully blocking the Indifference Implication.

As we have seen, Aristotle himself had suggested that the value of human life is derived from its being a necessary condition for the enjoyment of any good, *and* the suffering of any evil, rendering life an indifferent-like item (cf. *EE* 1214b20-22). It was Aristotle himself who also claims that life is "among the things intrinsically good and pleasant" (*EN* 1170a22). If I am right, Alexander employed an original notion of intrinsic goodness to make sense of these two apparently incompatible claims.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> I am indebted to Colin Guthrie King for suggesting the distinction between *in foro externo* and *in foro interno*, and to an anonymous referee for *Apeiron* for his/her helpful suggestions.

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