

AN EXAMINATION OF “LIFE” IN ARISTOTLE
CONCERNING THE DISTINCTION
BETWEEN βίος (*BIOS*) AND ζωή (*ZOE*)

By

STEPHEN BAGWELL

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University of Saskatchewan
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110 Science Place
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, S7N 5C9
Canada

DEDICATION

*FOR MY CHILDREN;
MAY THEY ONE DAY BE "LOVERS OF WISDOM."*

ABSTRACT

In this study, I set out to determine whether the influential understanding of the distinction between *bios* and *zoe* in Greek philosophy, and in Aristotle in particular, that Hannah Arendt articulated in her work *The Human Condition* has a valid foundation in Aristotle's writings. The distinction entails the view that *zoe* refers to a biological and cyclical life while *bios* refers to a life which can form a biography, shaped by the unique capacities of humans for action and speech.¹ By a close reading of the Aristotelian texts that employ concepts referring to "life"—*On the Soul*, *Parva Naturalia*, *Nicomachean Ethics*, and *Politics*—I begin the enquiry by giving Aristotle's basic account of *bios* and *zoe*. This is then followed by a detailed account of *bios* because the basic account does not really bring anything new to light for *zoe*, while what this account tells us concerning *bios* is insufficient. In fact, it is really the interpretation of *bios*, rather than *zoe*, that is controversial and therefore deserves more attention. I argue that Arendt's account of the distinction between *bios* and *zoe* is found in Aristotle and that action and speech play a significant role in the activities of *bios*.

¹ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, [1958] 1998), 97.

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INTRODUCTION

It is evident to anyone who attempts to explain just what “life” means that it is a significant and complex term. Therefore, any serious investigation of life that can shed some light on even just one small aspect of its meaning or what it refers to is a worthwhile endeavor. I intend to pursue this investigation by way of a close reading of “life” in the texts of Aristotle. Given the importance of Aristotle’s thought in the formation of modern conceptuality any conclusions drawn from this study will be of value.

That “life” is such a complex term is highlighted by the fact that the Ancient Greeks, including Aristotle, used not just one but in fact two words that we translate as “life” and this fact provides a point to commence an inquiry into an account of what it means. The fact that they had two words for life might mean that there is no one objective or determinate thing “life” that the two words refer to but that they could refer to two different things. The two Ancient Greek words for “life” are **βίος** (*bios*) and **ζωή** (*zoe*).

Although scholars seem to have been aware of the distinction between *bios* and *zoe* in Aristotle for a long time, it had not been treated philosophically until very recently. And it was not a specialist in Greek philosophy who initiated work on this interesting topic. Rather, twentieth-century social and political theorist Hannah Arendt, in her book *The Human Condition*, was the first to devote sustained attention to the distinction. Since her pioneering work, however, the distinction has been picked up by many others, in particular, political thinkers, the most influential of whom is Giorgio Agamben. Although Arendt’s work has provided much material for further philosophical investigation, its background in Aristotle has not been carefully examined. Since practically every

contemporary discussion of *bios* and *zoe* is directly or indirectly indebted to Arendt,² it is important to find out whether her interpretation of Aristotle is supported by Aristotle's texts. The objective of this examination is therefore to verify whether Arendt's interpretation of the distinction between *bios* and *zoe* is indeed found in Aristotle and to determine if there is then a valid basis for the great amount of work which depends on it. Of course, even if Arendt's reading of Aristotle were not fully supported by Aristotle's texts, this would not thereby undermine its usefulness for philosophy. However, since Arendt and many of those who follow her in using what they take to be an Aristotelian distinction are working within a paradigm that takes the movement of thought in history to be highly significant, then the accuracy of readings that Arendt and thinkers working in her wake make of historical figures in philosophy is crucial. In other words, because Arendt is in fact interested in making both philosophical and historical claims, historical and textual support for her claims are meaningful.³

Because I will be focusing on Aristotle's specific philosophical usage of the terms *bios* and *zoe* it is worthwhile to first review the general usage of these terms in Ancient Greek. The Liddell and Scott Greek-English Lexicon provides the following definitions

² A search for "*bios* and *zoe*" in an online database makes recent journal articles' indebtedness to Arendt obvious. In many cases, they might reference Giorgio Agamben, but there is an obvious connection to Arendt in Agamben's work that will be made clear in short order. Moreover, the fact that the very validity of Arendt's interpretation of *bios* and *zoe* in Aristotle is disputed makes this examination all the more relevant. For these disputed points of view, see for example James Gordon Finlayson, "'Bare Life' and Politics in Agamben's Reading of Aristotle," *The Review of Politics* 72 (2010): 97-126, and also Hernán Borisonik and Fernando Beresñak, "Bíos y zoé: una discusión en torno a las practicas de dominación y a la política," *Astrolabio. Revista internacional de filosofía* 13 (2012): 82-90.

³ It seems in some ways that Agamben's arguments are more anchored in an approach to philosophy in history of philosophy than are those of Arendt. That is, Arendt can be seen as borrowing the distinction between *bios* and *zoe* from Aristotle and, as it were, applying it in modern context without necessarily making clear historical claims. Agamben, on the other hand, seems implicitly to claim that there is a real movement of thought in history, in particular in the history of thought.

of *bios* and *zoe*.⁴ *Bios* is “life, i.e. not animal life (ζωή) but *mode of life*” and also a “*manner of living* (mostly therefore of men . . . but also of animals)”; it also means “*lifetime*,” “*livelihood, means of living, to make one’s living off, to live by a thing*” and “*a life, biography*.” *Zoe* is “*living, i.e. one’s substance, property*” but also “*to get one’s living by*” and “*life, existence*” and a “*way of life*.”

Prima facie both terms are defined very similarly. However, the standard Greek English dictionary tells us that *bios* cannot refer to “animal life,” which is specifically referred to as *zoe*. *Bios* is, then, distinct from *zoe*, which refers to animal life. The lexicon explains further that *bios* is a “mode of life” and a “manner of living.” Although “mode of life” and “manner of living” are, according to further information provided in the lexicon’s entry, in reference to humans in particular, the same information suggests that animals, despite their direct reference to *zoe* in this definition, are not completely excluded from an understanding of *bios* after all. It is particularly interesting that it is only in the lexicon’s definition of *bios* that there is a link between animals and *zoe*; the lexicon’s definition of *zoe* makes no mention of animals.

The lexicon’s entry for *bios* does not end with the simple explanation of “life” nor even with “mode of life” and “manner of living” but goes on to gloss over the meaning with English terms such as “lifetime,” “livelihood,” “means of living,” all of which imply a method of leading and supporting the kind of life that is generally attributed to humans. The lexicon’s entry further includes “to make one’s living off” and “to live by a thing,” which imply the existence of something inferior to the individual since it supports the life of the individual. Finally, the lexicon’s entry for *bios* also includes “biography.”

⁴ See Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, [1843] 1968). These definitions may be found on pages 316 and 759 respectively.

In comparison, the lexicon's entry for *zoe* includes in its definition "substance" and "property," which implies a definition of life that gets at the very matter of the subject in question rather than the qualities of the life that might be led by the subject. Further, it includes "to get one's *living* by;" while this might seem very similar to a part of the definition provided for *bios*, it in fact implies a passiveness that the former term's definition does not, insofar as it uses the verb "to get" (to receive) rather than either of the verbs "to make" or "to live" which imply action. The lexicon's entry also includes "way of life" which seems a lot like the "mode of life" included in the entry for *bios*. We should recall that, although the mode of life refers mostly to humans, animals are not completely excluded, and as was noted above there is a direct connection between animals and *zoe*. Therefore, at the very least the inclusion of "way of life" in the definition for *zoe* need not present any contradiction. Finally, the definition provided for *zoe* includes the word "existence," which if anything takes the emphasis away from the "living" aspect of the term since it is possible to say that all things, living and non-living alike, *exist*.

Additionally, there are subtleties in the information of each of the definitions, which, at a rudimentary level, support the understanding that *bios* is more precisely aimed at humans while *zoe* is not. For example, it is interesting that the very first word Liddell and Scott give in the definition of *bios* is "life," while the very first word they give in the definition of *zoe* is "living." English speakers use the words "life" and "living" very differently due, at the most basic level, to grammatical structures. In English, the word "life" is a noun and is only ever used in this sense, but the word "living" is usually explained as a verb, a participle (sometimes used as an adjective), or a

gerund (used as a noun designating the activity of the verb) depending on the surrounding context. The context provided in the lexicon gives an understanding of “living” as a gerund by virtue of the fact that it is swiftly followed with an explanation of it being “one’s substance or property” suggesting that it is living matter, and that it is then further followed with “to get one’s living by.”

In English, “life” generally refers to the existence of something in its entirety, encompassing a variety of facets. The word “living” for all of its forms, however, is used most often in ways that are to be interpreted as it referring to something required for “life.” Consider the two examples from the lexicon which I have just given in the previous paragraph. The first refers to one’s physical makeup and the second refers to something that one uses for something else, which is in this case “life.” Therefore, the very fact that these distinct terms are prominent in each of the definitions shows that *bios* is aimed at human beings more than is *zoe* because we cannot imagine the life of human beings only consisting of its physical makeup and certain physical things (physical things because of the implication that the needs, whatever they are, are passively received). These definitions from the lexicon provide a suitable place to begin to broadly understand the distinction between *bios* and *zoe* and commence the investigation. Since the definitions of *bios* and *zoe* provided by Liddell and Scott are formulated on the basis of a wide variety of Greek works though, they can only tell us so much about Aristotle’s usage.

In *The Human Condition*, Arendt puts to work Aristotle’s distinction between *bios* and *zoe* in her analysis of the contemporary world of human activity. She shows how this distinction illuminates in particular the distinction between the concept of labor (with its

connection to life, *zoe*), and the concept of action (with its connection to life, *bios*) which (along with the concept of work) form the *vita activa* or the “conditions under which life on earth has been given to man.”⁵ The *vita activa* is itself distinguished from the *vita contemplativa* or the quiet of contemplative thinking.⁶ In the section “Labor and Life” Arendt states clearly her understanding of the Aristotelian distinction between *bios* and *zoe*. In this section she states that *zoe* relates to the “ever-recurrent cyclical movement of nature” which includes “the movement of the living organism, the human body not excluded.”⁷ This cyclical movement is “the metabolism which we share with all living organisms”—a laboring activity which “never comes to an end as long as life lasts; it is endlessly repetitive.”⁸ This connection between *zoe* and labor stands in marked contrast to her understanding of *bios*, which she explains is connected to action:

The word “life,” however, has an altogether different meaning if it is related to the world and meant to designate the time interval between birth and death. Limited by a beginning and an end, that is, by the two supreme events of appearance and disappearance within the world, it follows a strictly linear movement whose very motion nevertheless is driven by the motor of biological life which man shares with other living things and which forever retains the cyclical movement of nature. The chief characteristic of this specifically human life, whose appearance and disappearance constitute worldly events, is that it is itself always full of events which ultimately can be told as a story, establish a biography; it is of this life, *bios* as distinguished from mere *zōē*, that Aristotle said that it

⁵ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, [1958] 1998), 7.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 5. That Arendt distinguishes between the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa* becomes clear from what she says on page 17. She “doubt[s] not the validity of the experience underlying the *distinction* but rather the hierarchical order inherent in it from its inception” and also “that the enormous weight of contemplation in the traditional hierarchy has blurred the *distinctions* and articulations within the *vita activa* itself,” [emphasis added]. She is simply contending that a long-held hierarchically conceived distinction has resulted in hiding the articulations of the *vita activa* that she now seeks to clarify. Moreover, she “assume[s] that the age-old distinction between two ways of life, between a *vita contemplativa* and a *vita activa*, which we encounter in our tradition of philosophical and religious thought up to the threshold of the modern age, is valid, and that when we speak of contemplation and action we speak not only of certain human faculties but of two distinct ways of life.” See Hannah Arendt, “Labor, Work, Action” in *The Portable Hannah Arendt*, ed. Peter Baehr (New York: Penguin Putnam Inc., 2003), 167. If there was any doubt, this shows that she definitely draws upon and accepts the distinction.

⁷ *The Human Condition*, 96.

⁸ Labor, Work, Action, 170/171.

“somehow is a kind of *praxis*.” For action and speech, which as we saw before, belonged close together in the Greek understanding of politics, are indeed the two activities whose end result will always be a story with enough coherence to be told, no matter how accidental or haphazard the single events and their causation may appear to be.⁹

In this passage, Arendt introduces an understanding of life that has a specific beginning and a specific end. But it is not the endpoints with which she is concerned. Rather, she is interested in that which happens between those two points, and which is crucially tied to this world. Everything that happens between these two points, which is this “life,” follows a “strictly linear movement” but is “driven by the motor of biological life.” What is characteristic of biological life, Arendt says, is that it retains “the cyclical movement of nature.” This cyclical, biological life is once again, in her estimation, *zoe*, and life of the strictly linear movement is *bios*. In the linear movement of life there is the possibility for the manifestation of events which together create a story or “biography,” and it is this kind of life that is *bios*. Further, she states that this kind of life is uniquely human. According to Arendt, human life most broadly conceived has certain, unique elements, but it nevertheless shares elements with the life which she describes as “mere *zoe*” insofar as it still requires the biological motor of life shared with other living things.

To a certain extent, then, Arendt’s view of the distinction between *bios* and *zoe* aligns with what we find in Liddell and Scott’s lexicon. For in the lexicon *bios* refers to the manner of living “mostly of men,” and further “lifetime” and “biography” are both given as well. Arendt also speaks of a “specifically human life,” and also of events that occur between birth and death which must necessarily occur over a “lifetime.” Further, she draws attention to the way in which these events form a story or “biography.” It is

⁹ *The Human Condition*, 97. In this passage, Arendt specifically references Aristotle’s *Politics* 1254a7 to support her interpretation.

therefore possible to draw a direct parallel between the language that Arendt actually uses and the definitions of *bios* and *zoe* in Liddell and Scott's lexicon. Moreover, even though her focus is not on *zoe* in this passage, because in the lexicon *zoe* is primarily associated with animal life and the phrase "to get one's living by" as well as "existence" more parallels can be drawn. Arendt's view that *zoe* is the biological motor of life and is shared with other living things besides humans aligns with the first fact clearly. As the biological motor of life is something which just carries on, it further aligns with the passiveness expressed in the phrase "to get one's living by" as it is something which is more or less going to be taken care of in itself. Finally, with regard to "existence," Arendt's use of "*mere zoe*" hints at a reduction in the value of this kind of life just as does the term "existence" insofar as it is relatable not only to living things but also non-living things. These parallels between Arendt's terminology and the definitions of *bios* and *zoe* in the lexicon are fairly general in their nature.

But Arendt's account goes beyond the sketch provided in the lexicon when she states that for Aristotle *bios* "somehow is a kind of *praxis*" which she in turn interprets as "action and speech." These two activities are characterized as involved in the kind of events falling between birth and death that are appropriate to a biography. It is really this point, which is specifically and explicitly taken from Aristotle, that marks the first modern philosophical foray into the distinction between *bios* and *zoe*, and its importance cannot therefore be overstated.

The Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, who was greatly influenced by Arendt, also develops the distinction between *bios* and *zoe* in his work *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. He writes:

The Greeks had no single term to express what we mean by the word “life.” They used two terms that, although traceable to a common etymological root, are semantically and morphologically distinct: *zoē*, which expressed the simple fact of living common to all living beings (animals, men, or gods), and *bios*, which indicated the form or way of living proper to an individual or a group. When Plato mentions three kinds of life in the *Philebus*, and when Aristotle distinguishes the contemplative life of the philosopher (*bios theōretikos*) from the life of pleasure (*bios apolaustikos*) and the political life (*bios politikos*) in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, neither philosopher would ever have used the term *zoē* (which in Greek, significantly enough, lacks a plural). This follows from the simple fact that what was at issue for both thinkers was not at all simple natural life but rather a qualified life, a particular way of life.¹⁰

Although there is no direct mention of Arendt in this passage, Agamben does in short order discuss her work, and so it is clear that even in this passage where he draws on Plato and Aristotle directly, that he also has Arendt’s reading of Aristotle in mind.¹¹

Agamben explains *zoe* (which, once again, according to the lexicon means firstly “living,” and which according to Arendt is biological life shared with other living things) as “living common to all living beings.” The parallels in all three cases are not limited to *zoe*, but persist in the understanding of *bios* as well. For, as has heretofore been described as the uniquely human life, *bios*, Agamben explains, is “the form or way of living proper to an individual or a group,” and further “a qualified life, a particular way of life.”

However, while Arendt clearly provides an account of *bios*, Agamben focuses on an attempt to show what *zoe* is not. He does so by referencing the particular ways of life elucidated by Aristotle but does not offer anything more than a general picture of *bios*. In a sense, it seems that Agamben relies on Arendt for a clear and concise picture of *bios*. This reaffirms the importance of the direct statement which Arendt declares is Aristotle’s view of *bios*.

¹⁰ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 1.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 3.

Both Arendt's and Agamben's works utilize a picture of *bios* and *zoe* that would agree with a general Ancient Greek view of *bios* and *zoe* as far as we can gather from the lexicon. But because Arendt's account is based on a specific reference to Aristotle, the importance of a close reading of Aristotle's texts should be evident. As any discussion of *bios* and *zoe* today is founded on the works of Arendt and Agamben, it is imperative that we verify that upon which their explanations is based in order to guarantee the legitimacy of the arguments stemming forth from this discussion. The question that therefore must ultimately be answered is whether Arendt's understanding of Aristotle's explanation of *bios*, as a kind of *praxis* or action and speech, is a correct and accurate interpretation of Aristotle.

As an exhaustive examination of the entirety of Aristotle's works is not possible in this context, I follow a main line of inquiry which is based on a close reading of passages in Aristotle's corpus which deal intensively with "life." These passages are drawn from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, *Politics*, *On the Soul*, and *Parva Naturalia* because these works are concerned primarily with human issues and it is human life with which we are most concerned in this investigation.

In Chapter One, I set out to establish a basic account of *bios* and *zoe* as Aristotle conceives the terms. It must be noted, however, that as closely as we might approach to a "definition," my attempt to get at the crux of the distinction between *bios* and *zoe* in Aristotle does not aim at an Aristotelian "definition of life."¹² However, as the objective is to give as accurate an account as possible, the passages I examine in this chapter have been chosen because they give some essential information about life, and this essential

¹² Indeed, if there were a succinct definition of life to be found in Aristotle it would likely be specifically laid out in a methodological manner like much of the rest of his work, and as it is the case that such a statement is not to be found, it is not my place to presume to know it.

information allows us to attach some meaning to each of the terms just as we have seen in the lexicon and in Arendt's writing.

In Chapter Two, with the basic account of a specifically Aristotelian understanding of the distinction between *bios* and *zoe* established, it becomes apparent that further verification and elaboration of *bios* is necessary. This is primarily because the method used in the first chapter to establish the difference between the terms *bios* and *zoe* (which focuses on the passages giving essential information about life) does not provide a satisfactory amount of information about *bios*. Crucially however, the information that is given about *bios* in the first chapter relies on the same passage from Aristotle's *Politics* to which Arendt refers in *The Human Condition*. It must be noted though that it is by virtue of my study of Aristotle and the method I use (following the passages with the most essential information) that leads me to include this passage—not a particular effort to follow in Arendt's footsteps. That is to say, I have included it based on its significance independent of the fact that Arendt recognized this decisive passage as being most relevant to an understanding of *bios*. Arendt however, interprets this text with an understanding of *praxis* as action and speech, that is, in a way not explicit in the passage itself and so this chapter aims to flesh out what Aristotle means by *bios*.

After having established a relatively elaborate but still general account of *bios* according to Aristotle—an account which focuses on *bios* as activity—I will in Chapter Three, attempt to make it clearer what kind of specific activity or activities are implicit in *bios*. In other words, in this chapter it will finally be determined that Arendt's explanation of *bios* as action *and* speech is in fact that which Aristotle means. Hence, her reading can be an appropriate basis for inquiries into *bios* and *zoe* with relation to Aristotle. Further, I

will address what that means for the distinction between labor and action and also for the distinction between the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa*.

CHAPTER ONE – ARISTOTLE’S BASIC ACCOUNT OF *BIOS* AND *ZOE*

1.1

INTRODUCTION TO CHAPTER ONE

What follows is an examination of the concept of “life” in Aristotle, but it is crucial to point out from the beginning that I use the word “life” only because there is no more appropriate alternative in English to the words Aristotle used, *bios* and *zoe*. The subtle differences between respective meanings of the terms *bios* and *zoe* are confounded into the general and expansive notion of the English word “life.” The purpose of the investigation in this chapter is to determine how exactly Aristotle distinguishes between *bios* and *zoe* as accurately as is possible, and thereby shed some light on this complex concept.

The terms *bios* and *zoe* are scattered throughout Aristotle’s corpus. In the study of this chapter, however, I will focus on bringing to light the distinction by following a line of inquiry which focuses on passages from his *Nicomachean Ethics*, *Politics*, *On the Soul*, and *Parva Naturalia* since these works are most concerned with human life. In order to develop a basic account of *bios* and *zoe*, it is important to focus on the essential information. While there are innumerable instances of incidental mentions of “life” in passing, there are but very few places where Aristotle seems to approach anything like a statement concerning what “life” *is*. That is to say that the essential information is provided in a statement like $x=y$ where x is “life” and y is like a *definiens* provided for x . This is not to say that secondary or accidental information provided in relation to “life” is not important. In fact, in some ways such accidental information can be even more

important and revealing than Aristotle's more explicit approaches to the concept, especially for the continued examination of *bios* and *zoe* beyond this basic account. Nonetheless, those passages where Aristotle's thoughts on "life" have been distilled to their clearest meaning represent the most sensible point at which to commence the examination. Although in this chapter I am seeking the basic information to develop the most accurate explanation possible of *bios* and *zoe*, we cannot ascertain from these instances alone the meaning of "life" according to Aristotle. And once again I make no pretense to provide an Aristotelian definition of life per se.

It makes the most sense to briefly lay out an overview of these essential, Aristotelian statements regarding "life." Once we have a preliminary understanding, it will be easier to examine the more detailed and fuller context of each of these statements. In this way, it will be possible to examine the information in relation to *bios* and *zoe* and determine for example whether Arendt's understanding of the terms as described in the introduction above aligns with it. It is important to note that these essential statements are drawn from all four of Aristotle's works presently under consideration: *Nicomachean Ethics*, *Politics*, *On the Soul*, and *Parva Naturalia*. Because the basic account of the difference between *bios* and *zoe* which emerges draws on the breadth of these works we can be reasonably sure of its coherence.¹³

These are five passages that contain six essential statements in which Aristotle most explicitly discusses what he means by life:

- I. By "life (**ζωήν**) we mean self-nutrition and growth and decay" (*On the Soul* 412a13-14).

¹³ Because my knowledge of Ancient Greek is limited, I refer to two different translations of the texts, both of which are included for these essential passages in order to help verify the meanings therein.

- II. (Regarding Birth) “Generation is the initial participation, mediated by warm substance, in the nutritive soul, and life (**ζωή**) is the maintenance of this participation” (*On Youth, Old Age, Life and Death, and Respiration* 479a28-29).
- III. “Life (**ζῆν**) is defined in the case of animals by the power of perception, in that of man by the power of perception or thought” and also the statement that “life (**ζῆν**) is among the things that are good and pleasant in themselves” (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1170a15-20).
- IV. “Life (**ζωή**) is an activity” (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1175a11-12).
- V. “Life (**βίος**) is action and not production” (*Politics* 1254a7-8).¹⁴

These statements are taken from the passages that will be examined in full detail in short order. It is immediately clear that “life” does indeed maintain both a biological and biographical character. However, it is not obvious if it is *bios* or *zoe* that should be understood to represent each characteristic. Such evidence will only emerge by way of a detailed examination of the passages. Nor is it clear whether either of the characteristics even align with only one of the terms, or indeed if both characteristics are relatable to both terms. Additionally, these fragments suggest that “life” can only be talked about in relation to something. That is, even when there is a distinct effort to only discuss it abstractly, “life” is only meaningful in relation to something else. Furthermore, “life” is presented as having a number of capacities, upon which its active nature must be dependent. “Life” is also a thing good in and of itself. To sum up, based on this essential and very minimal information, one can say that “life” is a good and pleasant thing, made manifest in warm substances and which utilizes various capacities for varying activities.

¹⁴ All of these passages will be reiterated in full with the exact source of their translation.

The examination of the passages proceeds incrementally, taking each piece of information into account in the order it is presented and taking into consideration the Ancient Greek words for "life" in the same order of appearance alongside the meaning that is expressed by each of them in order to develop a complete picture of its implications for an understanding of *bios* and *zoe*.

1.2

PASSAGE (I) *ON THE SOUL*

The first of the above statements comes from a passage in *On the Soul*, Book II, Chapter 1:

Of natural bodies some have **life (ζωήν)** in them, others not; by **life (ζωήν)** we mean self-nutrition and growth and decay. It follows that every natural body which has **life (ζωήν)** in it is a substance in the sense of a composite. Now given that there are bodies of such and such a kind, viz. having **life (ζωήν)**, the soul cannot be a body; for the body is the subject or matter, not what is attributed to it. Hence the soul must be a substance in the sense of the form of a natural body having **life (ζωήν)** potentially within it.¹⁵ (412a13-21)

In this passage, Aristotle begins by explaining that natural bodies exist, insofar as some of these natural bodies have life in them and some of them do not have life in them. A natural body, by virtue of its being natural, cannot have been fabricated by humans.

Therefore, if we think of an example of a natural body that does not contain life we are

¹⁵ Aristotle, "On the Soul" in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, trans. J. A. Smith, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), I: 656. See also "But of natural bodies some have **life (ζωήν)** and some have not; by **life (ζωήν)** we mean the capacity for self-sustenance, growth, and decay. Every natural body, then, which possesses **life (ζωήν)** must be substance, and substance of the compound type. But since it is a body of a definite kind, viz., having **life (ζωήν)**, the body cannot be soul, for the body is not something predicated of a subject, but rather is itself to be regarded as a subject, i.e., as matter. So, the soul must be substance in the sense of being the form of a natural body, which potentially has **life (ζωήν)**." (412a) Aristotle, *On the Soul, Parva Naturalia, On Breath*, trans. W. S. Hett (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), 67/69.

likely to come up with something like a rock or a stone, and if we think of a natural body that does contain life the first things that might spring to mind could be a plant, an animal, or a human being. Modern science might convince us to also add to this list microorganisms, but for the time being since we are focusing on Aristotle’s conception, this would not be entirely appropriate. While the list of natural bodies with and without life might seem rudimentary it is affirmed by the explanation for life provided by Aristotle in the next statement. “Life” consists of three specific capacities: self-nutrition and growth and decay.¹⁶

I selected this passage since both translations of the text give us a statement in a $x=y$ fashion. We have here a quasi-definition. The first capacity of a natural body with “life,” that of self-nutrition or “self-sustenance” as it is expressed in the translation by Hett, refers to the natural body’s ability to feed itself, to take nutrition for itself. For plants that rely by far on the passive absorption of nutrients for their nourishment, self-nutrition is certainly an adeptly named capacity. This capacity though is no less applicable for animals and humans that are capable of finding nourishment on their own. The distinct difference between plants and animals (including humans), however, is the greater active capacity—capacity for locomotion—associated with the latter and which is interestingly more clearly seen in an understanding of self-sustenance than self-nutrition. The ability to actively go out and search for nourishment (but also procreate), as do animals, is for the most part not accessible to *flora*. In comparison to natural bodies with life, a natural body without life (like a rock or a stone) has no need for and does not seek

¹⁶ What should be considered, however, is that to this list of natural bodies Aristotle would have added “gods” because his intent is to give an account of the soul and how it might relate to these various beings. See *On the Soul* 402b5-9. However, I do not relate these capacities to “gods” as it is not entirely clear what connections can be made to them as Aristotle also does not treat them in any detail in this respect.

any nourishment. In this way, the first part of Aristotle's explanation of life affirms the distinction drawn between natural bodies with life and natural bodies without life.

The second capacity of life according to this passage, growth, refers to the natural body's ability to change in a way that lends itself to enhancement and not deterioration. Further, growth is dependent on the natural body's capacity for self-nourishment. Growth may exhibit itself alongside the capacity for self-nutrition but not without it. Plants may grow bigger and stronger and bear greater fruit. Animals as well may grow bigger and stronger and bear young. With regard to humans in particular, however, growth can refer to their physical growth, the elongation of the limbs of their bodies, the development of (more) hair and so forth, but it can also refer to intellectual and/or moral growth for instance. In the current context, however, it is likely that Aristotle was referring strictly to physical growth. Given the fact that he references not human beings precisely but rather speaks of natural bodies generally, it would seem the focus is on those attributes more appropriately associated with the full expanse of natural bodies with life. Unlike plants, animals, and humans, a stone does not experience any growth of this sort properly speaking. In this way, the second part of Aristotle's essential statement about life affirms the distinction drawn between natural bodies with life and natural bodies without life.

The final capacity of life offered in this explanation is decay. It refers to the natural body's end. It is not the very instant of arrival of the end, nor is it the period after its end to which it refers, but rather to a period of decline leading up to the end. This understanding is not without its problems though. This is because the term is often used nowadays in a sense such as to refer to the decay of organic matter. The composition of plants may very well consist of organic matter but animals and humans certainly have

something more to them. Thus, it is more likely to be said that animals and humans enter a period of decline rather than of decay (as very often happens in their old age). There is the question of when decay begins and takes over, so to speak, from the second capacity of life, growth. And yet, it is not possible to answer this question with the information at hand. In the end, how the passing of animals and particularly humans is referred to is not important at this time. When the period of decline begins is not important. What is important is that it is established that there is in fact a period of decline experienced by natural bodies with life. A stone does not experience decay of this fashion, and in this way the third part of Aristotle’s explanation of life affirms the distinction drawn between natural bodies with life and natural bodies without life.

At this point in the passage there are just two instances of the word “life” and they are translated from the Ancient Greek *zoe* (ζωή). Note that the discussion about life in these two instances is in relation to natural bodies and the capacities of self-nutrition, growth, and decay. But the passage does not simply tell us that life belongs to certain natural bodies with certain capacities. This examination clearly provides a more general account of *zoe*. Of foremost importance is the fact that Aristotle speaks of natural bodies generally and not about plants or animals or humans specifically. He then mentions capacities which can only be related back to these natural bodies with life at a simple level. That is to say, he shows that self-nutrition can be applied to the three kinds of natural bodies with life. Further, he shows that growth applies to the three kinds of natural bodies, life understood here primarily in a physical sense. Growth in any other sense (intellectual or moral) cannot be clearly related to all three types of natural bodies with life. Moreover, decay also applies to all three kinds of natural bodies with life.

Finally, these three capacities indicate a biological and cyclical understanding of life, not unlike that which Arendt associates with *zoe*, that is common to all natural bodies with life.

In the next line of the passage, Aristotle says that every natural body with life is a “substance in the sense of a composite.” This means that a natural body with life is a substance made up of multiple parts. But what are the multiple parts that form the substance with life? They are not simply made up of different kinds of matter. For a stone can obviously be made up of different kinds of matter; it need not be solid marble or limestone through and through, but regardless of such varying properties it has no more life than if it were simply quartz. Aristotle explains almost immediately what he thinks of the composition of natural bodies with life. For he states that because there are composite natural bodies that have life, the soul cannot be a body. In this lies the key to understanding the distinction between the composition of a stone and the composition of natural bodies with life. He continues, “the body is the subject or matter, not what is attributed to it.” By these two statements he means that the soul cannot be a body because a soul is, in fact, only attributed to a body, and a body cannot be attributed to another body. Imagine two natural bodies being mashed together and expecting another natural body to be the result. Rather, he concludes “the soul must be a substance in the sense of the form of a natural body having life potentially within it.” So instead of two natural bodies being mashed together, we should envision instead the soul as the substantial form of a natural body with life. It is what gives “life” to the natural body with life. This means that it is the soul that marks the distinction between the natural bodies with life and the natural bodies without life or the distinction between plants, animals, and humans on the

one hand and things like stones, on the other. The natural bodies with life are composite bodies because they are made up of multiple parts—of matter and of soul as form.

In the latter part of this passage, the word “life” appears three more times and shares a common root in the word *zoe*. As explained above, the first two references to life in this passage confirm a biological and cyclical understanding of life not unlike the view Arendt presents. These three occurrences, however, add new meaning insofar as they relate to natural bodies with life that are by definition composite and made up of not just matter but also a formal soul. That is, all natural bodies with life have a soul. To speak of all natural bodies with life as having a soul and in particular with reference to *zoe*, interestingly aligns with the account of *zoe* as substance or property provided by the Liddell and Scott lexicon.

1.3

PASSAGE (II) *ON YOUTH, OLD AGE, LIFE AND DEATH, AND RESPIRATION*

The second statement is drawn from Chapter 24 (18) of Aristotle’s “On Youth, Old Age, Life and Death, and Respiration,” a work found in the *Parva Naturalia*:

Generation is the initial participation, mediated by warm substance, in the nutritive soul, and **life (ζωή)** is the maintenance of this participation. Youth is the period of the growth of the primary organ of refrigeration, old age of its decay, while intervening time is the prime of **life**. A violent death or dissolution consists in the extinction or exhaustion of the vital heat (for either of these may cause dissolution), while natural death is the exhaustion of the heat owing to lapse of time, and occurring at the end of **life**. In plants this is to wither, in animals to die. Death, in old age, is the exhaustion due to inability on the part of the organ, owing to old age, to produce refrigeration. This then is our account of generation and **life**

(ζωή) and death, and the reason for their occurrence in animals.¹⁷
(479a28-479b7)

Unlike the passage from *On the Soul* 412a13-21 (section 1.2), which presented only minimal differences between the English translations, there are significant differences in the English translations of this passage that must be taken into account since they necessarily affect the understanding of life. The first line of the Ross translation of the passage reads, "Generation is the initial participation, mediated by warm substance, in the nutritive soul, and life is the maintenance of this participation." Generation means creation, though not necessarily by something in particular. Given that this is a discussion of life, and since it is described as the initial participation, it would make sense to perhaps phrase generation as birth, as indeed is done in the Hett translation. But, similarly to the examination of decay in *On the Soul* 412a13-21 (section 1.2), the wording presents us with a different meaning. For birth seems more appropriate when talking about animals and humans than when talking about trees and flowers, while generation seems more appropriate of *flora* in a way that it does not for animals and humans. Birth implies a sort of nurturing and attentive affection that is lost in using the term "generation," which might be used to refer to the coming-into-being of anything that has a beginning. Hence, the Ross translation, by adopting the use of the term generation over birth (the Ancient

¹⁷ Aristotle, "On Youth, Old Age, Life and Death, and Respiration" in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, trans. G. R. T. Ross, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 1: 761. See also "Birth is the first participation (in a warm medium) in the nutritive soul, and **life (ζωή)** is the continuance of this. Youth is the growth of the primary refrigerative organ, and old age is its destruction, the prime of **life** being between the two. Violent death or destruction is the extinction or waning of the heat (for destruction may occur from either of these causes), but natural death is the decay of the same due to lapse of time, and to its having reached its appointed **end**. In plants this is called withering, in animals (**ζώοις**) death. Death in old age is the decay of the organ owing to its inability to cause refrigeration because of old age. Thus we have now defined birth and **life (ζωή)** and death, and explained why they occur among **living (ζώοις)** creatures."¹⁷ (479a/479b) Aristotle, *On the Soul, Parva Naturalia, On Breath*, trans. W. S. Hett (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), 475.

Greek here is **ΥΈΝΕΘΙΣ**), hints at again a discussion of life in the most broadly applicable way, relatable to all three of the main kinds of natural bodies with life.

According to Aristotle, generation does not simply occur in and of itself. It is mediated by warm substance. By warm substance one might think that Aristotle is referring to the natural body itself, because, of course, for humans and many animals, the idea of warm substance can be taken quite literally since their bodies are often of a warmer temperature than what their surrounding environment presents. However, there is a common term, warm blooded, which is applied to humans and other mammals. And it is the heart which is most closely associated with blood. The heart is precisely the warm substance to which Aristotle here refers.¹⁸

In *On the Soul* 412a13-21(section 1.2), life was explained in terms of the natural body with soul. And, indeed this view is maintained. In this second passage, Aristotle mentions a nutritive soul. There are, in fact, three kinds of soul according to Aristotle: the aforementioned nutritive soul, the sensitive soul, and the rational soul.¹⁹ These three kinds of soul generally align with the three kinds of natural bodies that have been figuring in our discussion. That is to say, to plants belongs the nutritive soul, to animals the sensitive soul, and to humans the rational soul. The “higher” up the chain the natural body with life, the more kinds of soul to which the natural body relates. So, animals partake of the first two kinds of soul, and humans partake of all three kinds of soul. Of course, at this point a discrepancy might be noted because Aristotle is referring to the

¹⁸ Moreover, according to Aristotle, the heart is where some of the functions are to be found that we now instead properly attribute to the brain (i.e. sensation)—a view which emphasizes the heart’s importance for the explanation of life given here. For instances of where Aristotle makes these incorrect claims about the heart, see Charles G. Gross, “Aristotle on the Brain,” *The Neuroscientist* 1, no. 4 (1995): 247. With this though, I must be clear, I am only emphasizing the priority of the heart, and thus its significance for life according to Aristotle.

¹⁹ See *On the Soul* 413b and 415a1-12.

nutritive soul and yet is talking about a heart (a warm substance) that would normally not be associated with plants. He explains that the organ to which he refers in plants is the "intermediate between the root and the stem."²⁰ It is therefore the soul acting through the mediating substance which gives the initial "participation."

Having concluded this segment of the passage by stating "life is the maintenance of this participation," Aristotle still must explain what is this participation. "Participation" must be reflected in the unification of both natural warm body and, in this instance, nutritive soul. Generation is described as the initial moment of participation in these two things. A moment does not make for much participation though, and it is the activity of maintaining this participation that is life. That which is done to maintain the unification of body and soul is life. Life is not simply a part of a unified body and soul, though a unified body and soul are required for life. Recall in *On the Soul* 412a13-21 (section 1.2) where self-nutrition was given as part of the explanation of life. Self-nutrition can be clearly seen to be an activity required for the maintenance of a unified body and soul and thus illustrates a connection and continuity between each of these first two passages' explanations of life.

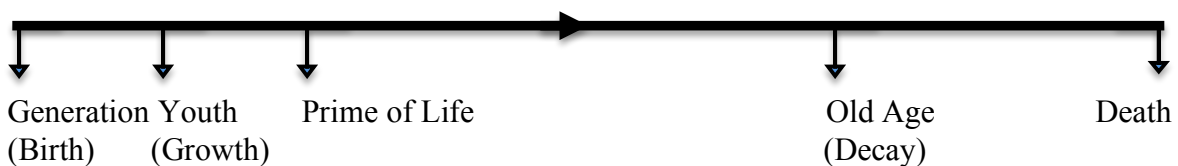
In the first part of this passage there is but one mention of life, the Ancient Greek term being *zoe*. The other terms in this passage provide valuable indications concerning how we should understand *zoe*. Despite the respective connotations associated with each "generation" and "birth" that are examined above, both terms are applicable to the range of natural bodies with life. The "warm substance" (or "warm medium" as is used in the Hett translation) as well as the nutritive soul, are also applicable to the range of natural bodies with life. The maintenance of participation, shown to be an activity, is

²⁰ See *On Youth, Old Age, Life and Death, and Respiration* 478b35.

nevertheless an activity for which all natural bodies with life have the capacity; that is to say, plants, animals, and humans all have the ability to find nourishment. The context of this passage suggests that Aristotle is working with a broad understanding of *zoe*, one that covers the range of natural bodies with life and a wide range of activities relating to those bodies.

In what is something of a parallel to the discussion of growth and decay in the *On the Soul* 412a13-21 (section 1.2), Aristotle proceeds in this passage with a discussion of youth and old age. “Youth,” he describes as the “period of the growth of the primary organ of refrigeration,” and old age as the period of the decay of this organ of refrigeration. While initially sounding very foreign, the organ of refrigeration is as familiar as the heart or warm substance. It is the lungs. It is because of the lungs’ ability to cool (insofar as they make up the breathing apparatus) that the body is able to maintain an appropriate level of warmth: one that is neither too hot nor too cold. So, youth is the period of growth of the lungs, and old age the period of decay of the lungs, and the prime of life is the period between these two points. The following diagram illustrates the normal procession of life according to what we have just examined. However, it is of course possible that life can be interrupted at any moment by accidental death.

Figure 1.



As we discussed in the examination of the passage in *On the Soul* 412a13-21 (section 1.2), it is not normally our way to refer to life as decaying; rather, the body after death is more likely to be referred to as decaying. However, it is much easier to refer to the natural body as decaying even in life if broken down to its parts. As such, the lungs can easily be imagined as breaking down in old age, as can really any other part. Of course, just as death can occur at any moment, it is not impossible to envision a breakdown of certain body parts prior to what would normally be recognized as the period of old age. Then the period of old age would have to be considered as blending in with the prime of life, as should also the period of growth. It is not the case that these moments can be pointed to definitively in organic life as they can on the chart above.

The reference to the prime of life, and thus the use of the word "life," in this line would normally need to be closely examined. In this case though there is no direct connection to any Ancient Greek term for life. It must be then that the Ancient Greek text references the "prime" in such a way that the rest of the information can and must be related back to the closest reference of life for a full understanding of "prime." The nearest reference is the first one discussed in this passage (*zoe*). This means that the discussion of lungs and youth and decay can be dealt with in a manner similar to the heart, generation and nutritive soul. That is to say, the text may be regarded as continuing to elaborate a broad account of life.

Aristotle goes on to explain the difference between violent death and death by natural causes. The former, he states, is due to the extinction or exhaustion of the vital heat (which is that warmth produced by the heart) while the latter is due to a lapse in time. The latter cause is, however, still because of the exhaustion of heat, the difference

lying simply in the decaying organ’s disappearing ability to “refrigerate” rather than a sudden interruption of its process. The former type of death must be sudden, if it is to be understood as very different from one that is dragged out over a longer period of time. His recognition of these two basic manners of passing on indicates that he too probably recognized that the periods of life (that is, growth, prime, and decay and so forth) that he describes are not black and white in their beginnings and endings. Further, it is interesting to note that he continues by explaining that while in animals the lapse of vital heat results in their death, in plants, it results in what he terms withering. His use of different terms in this instance hearkens to the discussions above regarding “decay” and also “generation versus birth.”

In this section of this passage there is another reference to life that is found in the Ross translation but not in the Hett translation. Life is referred to as just “the end” in Hett’s translation. But in this section of the passage we have the same problem as with the previous reference to life; the translators have had to provide the term life, where it is not explicit in the Greek text. We must read the discourse on life here by going back to the closest antecedent Ancient Greek word for life in the passage. The fact that the word life appears in one translation but not the other does not undermine my interpretation. Rather the difference in translations is nothing more than a matter of different solutions to rendering the Greek in English. So once again the Greek word at the bottom of this passage is of course *zoe*. Moreover, that it is an understanding of *zoe* that is presented throughout the whole of this passage is affirmed by the final line of the passage, which

includes a direct reference to life that is also traceable to the Ancient Greek, *zoe*.²¹ Whether it is the discussion of hearts and lungs or that of the stages of life similar to that of *On the Soul* 412a13-21 (section 1.2), what is apparent is that Aristotle is again giving a very biological presentation of *zoe*, affirming once again what Arendt asserts concerning *zoe* in her work. And, because it has these biological ties, at the very least the explanation can again be connected to that notion expressed in the lexicon’s definition of *zoe* insofar as it is getting at one’s substance and property.

1.4

PASSAGE (III) *NICOMACHEAN ETHICS*

The third and fourth essential statements of Passage III that was provided in the brief, initial overview of life in Introduction 1.1 come from Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book IX, Chapter 9:

Now **life (ζῆν)** is defined in the case of animals by the power of perception, in that of man by the power of perception or thought; and a power is referred to the corresponding activity, which is the essential thing; therefore **life (ζῆν)** seems to be essentially perceiving or thinking. And **life (ζῆν)** is among the things that are good and pleasant in themselves . . .²² (1170a15-20)

²¹ There are two instances of the Ancient Greek word ζῶοις presented in this passage which comes the root word of ζωή, *zoe*, also, but their interpretation in this passage, depending on the translation, refers to living creatures or else simply animals, but not “life.” They cannot be therefore the reasons for the translation’s use of “life” multiple times without a direct parallel in the Ancient Greek. It is for this reason that they are not further referred to in the examination of this passage.

²² Aristotle, “Nicomachean Ethics” in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, trans. W. D. Ross and J. O. Urmson, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 2: 1849-1850. See also “And **life (ζῆν)** is defined, in the case of animals (ζῶοις), by the capacity for sensation; in the case of man, by the capacity for sensation and thought. But a capacity is referred to its activity, and in this its full reality consists. It appears therefore that **life (ζῆν)** in the full sense is sensation or thought. But **life (ζῆν)** is a thing good and pleasant in itself . . .” (1170a) Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 561/563.

The first impression gives a notably different sense of direction in terms of the character of life, compared to what we have seen so far in the passages of *On the Soul* 412a13-21 (section 1.2) and *Parva Naturalia* 479a28-479b7 (section 1.3) of this examination. The life of animals is defined by the power of perception. In the Rackham translation, it is defined as the capacity for sensation. The Greek does not have separate terms for sensation and perception; the Greek term *aisthesis* is translated with reference to its context. The life of man, in contrast to the life of animals, states Aristotle, is defined not only by the power of perception (or sensation) but also by the power of thought.

On the face of it, there is nothing radical about this statement. Clearly the power of perception (or sensation) refers to an animal’s senses; that is, taste, hearing, sight, smell, and touch. These senses are essential for life in living beings that have locomotion. One can easily imagine how difficult it would be for animals just to find sustenance without the senses. The senses then play a role in defining the life of humans, but not all on their own as Aristotle also includes thought. Thought quite clearly refers to the mental and rational capacity, which goes beyond the five senses.

In fact, the passage asserts more precisely that it is perception *or* thought that defines human life, and this presents a few problems. The first question is whether Aristotle is equating the power of perception and the power of thought, the answer to which is no. This comes down to whether the “or” from the passage is inclusive or exclusive. That is to say, whether it is perception alone that may define human life or thought alone that may define human life, or whether it is a combination of both perception and thought that define human life where the “or” simply reflects a connection between the senses and thought. The strongest interpretation lies with the third option,

supported in part by the actual use of "and" rather than "or" in the Rackham translation. The Greek word is *kai* which usually means "and" but can also mean "or."

If we read the *kai* as an exclusive "or," then in the first instance the text suggests that both animal life and human life are one and the same and though it is certainly possible to refer to a human as an animal, the point is that a particularly human quality would be lacking in an individual thus defined. Further, it implies an equivocation of the terms which is simply not possible as the power of thought cannot be identical to the five senses. Such an identification would do away entirely with the power of thought. In the second instance the text suggests that human life can exist without the senses, without the power of perception; but in the same way a human life lacking the power of thought might be reduced such that it is in fact not human life, human life without the senses adopts an otherworldly character, losing once again something decidedly human. If, however, the *kai* is read as inclusive, it is both of these traits that together make up that which is properly human. This means that humans, compared to other animals, have a life of a higher order which aligns, of course, with the long-held conception and also with the kinds of soul that we saw distinguished above in *Parva Naturalia* 479a28-479b7 (section 1.3). The sensitive soul and the rational soul relate respectively to the power of perception (sensation) and the power of thought. Aristotle is saying a human must therefore exhibit some power of thought, whether little or great, in order to be considered a human possessing life.²³

²³ It must be noted that the use of the word "define" in this discussion does not imply any ultimate definition of life per se and is only used for consistency with the translations. Otherwise, this discussion would be significantly shorter if this information were to be all that would be needed to make such a declaration.

The reference to life in this first part of this passage can be tied directly to the Ancient Greek verb ζῆν “to live” which comes from the same root as the word *zoe*. While the instances of the word “life” in *On the Soul* 412a13-21 (section 1.2) and *Parva Naturalia* 479a28-479b7 (section 1.3) were also *zoe*, the context was largely biological. In this passage, Aristotle is dealing with specifics about animals and humans. There is nothing like the broad discussion of self-nutrition here. The passage instead focuses on those characteristics that are used to identify animal life and human life. It must be noted that the examination in the previous sections above did not exclude the reference of *zoe* to animal life and human life even if it was not made explicit. For in *On the Soul* 412a13-21 (section 1.2) they were both taken into consideration as natural bodies with life, and in the *Parva Naturalia* 479a28-479b7 (section 1.3) there is quite plainly a discussion of animals, but it is only now that a relationship between *zoe* and human life is expressly declared in one of these passages.

The second part of this passage is initially more confusing than the first. Aristotle states, “A power is referred to the corresponding activity, which is the essential thing.” A power as we know refers to, in this instance, the power of perception or the power of thought. Aristotle is saying that each of these powers has a corresponding activity. This is not difficult to imagine, because the actual implementation of our senses or our thinking ability would constitute an activity. These activities then, the implementation of our senses and also of our thinking ability, constitute the essential thing. The activities are essential because it is truly these activities that define the life of animals and of humans, not simply the static possession of the senses or of the rational faculty. It is for this reason that the Rackham translation states that it is in the activity that the full reality of these

capacities consists, because they only really exist when they are being fully utilized. This is the fullest explanation of animal life and of human life yet given and is affirmed by the next line that states "life seems to be essentially perceiving or thinking." The word for life is, like the previous one, the verb ζῆν. The information contained in this part of the passage reinforces that which was elicited above from the first part, which is to say that there is a connection between *zoe* and both animal life and human life.

This passage is also important because it provides a distinctly different explanation of life from the one that has just been extracted. In addition to pointing out the necessity of activities for animals and humans possessing life, Aristotle states, "Life is among the things that are good and pleasant in themselves." I believe that this statement is fairly self-explanatory and must be taken at face value. Basically, Aristotle is saying that this must truly be the case because all people desire life.²⁴ And, because of the account of life which preceded immediately, Aristotle must almost certainly have in mind that the activities of perceiving and thinking are therefore good and pleasant insofar as they are necessary for life. It is not, however, unreasonable to take into account the other aspects of life that we have discovered in the examination of *On the Soul* 412a13-21 (section 1.2) and *Parva Naturalia* 479a28-479b7 (section 1.3) and also things which have yet to be examined. Thus, this life, which belongs to those things good and pleasant in and of themselves, should include at the very least, in addition to the activities of

²⁴ See *Nicomachean Ethics* 1170a25-26. In this passage, Aristotle is saying that life is a thing good and pleasant in itself. I am not attempting to argue this point or question whether it really is for all people or not as this does not help our comprehension of his understanding of life.

perceiving and thinking, the capacities for self-nutrition, growth, decay and the maintenance of soul and body.²⁵

It is important to note that life, being numbered among those things good and pleasant in and of themselves, according to which we can say life is good, is a very different thing from stating that what we have so far ascertained to be an explanation of life from these first three passages is, in fact, that which constitutes the good life. Life, as it has heretofore been explained, is good but it is not necessarily to be understood as Aristotle’s view of *the* good life (this is most evident since Aristotle refers to the good life on numerous occasions in his works, but has not yet given any specific indication as to the good life in these passages that have already been examined).²⁶

What is notable about this discussion of life as a good is that it contains a direct reference to the Ancient Greek word ζῆν, which is the same word from which the other references to life in the passage come and which therefore takes its root in *zoe*. As illustrated above, this passage presents the first instance of what appears to solely be a characterization of life as it refers to animals and humans. There is no mention of plants as possessing the power of perception and the power of thought. Nor is there any mention of the life of *flora* as being one that numbers among those things good and pleasant, though it cannot be ruled out completely if we are prepared to include the other aspects shared by all natural bodies with life. What is truly significant though is that the mention of life as good in this context means that *zoe* is good.

²⁵ Of course, since life is numbered “among” those things good and pleasant in and of themselves, there is the question of what other things qualify as good and pleasant, but it is not of immediate concern to our present examination.

²⁶ It would be possible to conduct a search of what constitutes the good life for Aristotle just as the present examination pursues the essential information that gets at that which is life. While the present focus should and will be maintained and not distracted by a pursuit of the good life, it is impossible to ignore completely and will yet be brought into consideration to a certain extent in the course of this project.

In summary, the capacities of sensation and thought given in this passage can be added to those in *On the Soul* 412a13-21 (section 1.2) and *Parva Naturalia* 479a28-479b7 (section 1.3), and in this regard, there is something of a connection to the definition given for *zoe* in the lexicon insofar as it appears to be getting at one's substance or property. The good that can be attributed to *zoe* also appears to in some way be getting at its nature. What is not clear, because of how the picture of life now seems to be going beyond a simply biological understanding, is how it might relate to Arendt's understanding of *bios* and *zoe*, and this is a question that will need to be addressed as we proceed.

1.5

PASSAGE (IV) NICOMACHEAN ETHICS

The fifth statement from Passage IV comes from the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book X, Chapter 4:

One might think that all men desire pleasure because they all aim at **life (ζῆν)**; **life (ζωή)** is an activity, and each man is active about those things and with those faculties that he loves most; e.g. the musician is active with his hearing in reference to tunes, the student with his mind in reference to theoretical questions, and so on in each case; now pleasure completes the activities, and therefore **life (ζῆν)**, which they desire. It is with good reason, then, that they aim at pleasure too, since for everyone it completes **life (ζῆν)**, which is desirable. But whether we choose **life (ζῆν)** for the sake of pleasure or pleasure for the sake of **life (ζῆν)** is a question we may dismiss for the present.²⁷ (1175a11-19)

²⁷ Aristotle, "Nicomachean Ethics" in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, trans. W. D. Ross and J. O. Urmson, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 2: 1857. See also "It might be held that all men seek to obtain pleasure, because all men desire **life (ζῆν)**. **Life (ζωή)** is a form of activity, and each man exercises his activity upon those objects and with those faculties which he likes the most: for example, the musician exercises his sense of hearing upon musical tunes, the student his intellect upon problems of philosophy, and so on. And the pleasure of these activities perfects the activities, and therefore perfects **life (ζῆν)**, which all men seek. Men have good reason therefore to pursue pleasure, since it perfects for each his **life (ζῆν)**, which is a desirable thing. The question whether we desire **life (ζῆν)** for the sake of pleasure or pleasure for the sake of **life (ζῆν)**, need not be raised for the present."

In the first sentence of this passage, Aristotle states that humans desire pleasure because they aim at life. It is unquestionable for Aristotle that humans aim at life. Certainly, without life, humans cannot do anything and, in fact, really are not anything either, and so aiming at life or maintaining life is the ultimate necessity. How this means exactly that all humans desire pleasure begins to be explained in the next line: “life is a form of activity.” If we recall the examination in *Nicomachean Ethics* 1170a15-20 (section 1.4 above), perceiving and thinking are introduced as the two most notable *activities* ascribed to life. Just as these two activities were related to life traced back to *zoe*, the first two instances of life in this passage come directly from the Ancient Greek words ζῆν and ζωῆ. This fact must be noted; although this discussion is about *zoe*, it is now very human-oriented especially when compared to the discussion in *Nicomachean Ethics* 1170a15-20 (section 1.4), which focused on animals and humans and sections 1.2 and 1.3, which dealt mostly abstractly with them by being focused on natural bodies with life.

Moreover, Aristotle strengthens this connection between *zoe* and humans stating, “Each man is active about those things and with those faculties that he loves most.” This means that in addition to thinking and perceiving, which are as we have seen requirements for human life, there are many other activities with which humans can and must be occupied. The interesting thing is that these activities are just as foundational for life as are thinking and perceiving. Thinking and perceiving are obviously necessary for reasons already explained, but also because these additional faculties that humans use for the activities they love most are dependent on the first two. At least, given the examples that Aristotle introduces, this certainly seems to be the case. The first example is “a

(1175a) Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 597/599.

musician is active with his hearing in reference to tunes” and what is hearing but one of the five senses related to the power of perception? The second example, “the student with his mind in reference to theoretical questions,” requires the power of thought which is related to the thinking activity. Interestingly, he refers to life as “an activity” and it is in this statement that lies the crucial piece of information which made up the fifth essential statement in the overview of life. He goes on to indicate what he means by activities providing the examples of the musician and the student. According to this passage, it almost appears as though a life can be simply defined by the activity that a person most prominently pursues.

Aristotle believes all humans desire pleasure. Individuals choose which activities to pursue, with some kind of gain in view. Often these activities are in pursuit of pleasure (though this is not always the case). Further, these activities are certainly not just limited to the ones discussed above. But more notable than the activities leading to pleasure is the fact that according to Aristotle pleasure actually completes the activities. Once pleasure is attained it seems that activity is more fulfilling. Incidentally, life then is also more fulfilling when its activities are completed by the attainment of pleasure since the pursuit behind the activity only takes place because of life and because of the need to maintain life and because it is maintaining life. If we follow his train of thought, then it makes sense to wonder as he does “whether we choose life for the sake of pleasure or pleasure for the sake of life.” Though he dismisses the question “for the present,” he does make it clear that pleasure and life are intrinsically connected for humans at least. Of further note is that the remaining instances of life in this passage are directly tied to the Ancient Greek

word ζῆν, which comes from the root word *zoe*. This connection ascribes to *zoe* a new property, pleasure.

As already mentioned, this passage is different from the three examined before, because it treats life exclusively as it pertains to or is possessed by humans. Nowhere is there any mention of plants or animals (not that this would necessarily be expected as it is a work on ethics from which this passage comes). The focus is on abilities to perform activities that are by far and large limited to the domain of humans. Granted, as we know from *Nicomachean Ethics* 1170a15-20 (section 1.4 above) the power of perception is available to animals. The example that is provided here, the craft of the musician, however, which relies on the activity of perceiving, leaves little doubt that humans are the only ones who approach the subject in such a creative manner.

Insofar as this passage continues the discussion of activities or capacities, it is possible to once again draw the connection to the definition for *zoe* in the lexicon by way of its getting at one’s substance or property, more so when we recall the importance of pleasure. It is also possible, by way of the specific examples Aristotle provides, to see a connection to the definition of “way of life.” Though as was discovered in *Nicomachean Ethics* 1170a15-20 (section 1.4), the more directly that the information Aristotle gives relates to humans specifically, the further we seem to get from Arendt’s understanding of *zoe*. Therefore, I note once again that this is a question that yet needs to be addressed.

1.6

PASSAGE (V) *POLITICS*

The sixth statement in the essential overview of life comes from Aristotle's *Politics*, Book I, Chapter 4:

Further, as production and action are different in kind, and both require instruments, the instruments which they employ must likewise differ in kind. But **life (βίος)** is action (**πρᾶξις**) and not production (**ποίησις**), and therefore the slave is the minister of action.²⁸ (1254a5-9)

Just as we got a more complete sense of Aristotle's conception of life as we looked at the accounts in *Nicomachean Ethics* 1170a15-20 (section 1.4 above) and *Nicomachean Ethics* 1175a11-19 (section 1.5 above), this final selection gives insight into yet another, new aspect of the Aristotelian account of life. The interpretation of this passage is a challenge because it is by far the shortest of the five, and the account of life in it is both pithy and ambiguous. Aristotle starts by distinguishing production and action, which are "different in kind." That is, Aristotle's understanding of production and action differs according to the very natures of production and action and not in the manner of them being simply different of a degree. Furthermore, there are instruments of both production and action respectively, and they too are different in kind. Exactly what is this difference in kind is not yet clear. But some insight can be gained from the explanation provided for life. It is namely action and not production. We have also the statement telling us that both action and production use instruments whereby the instrument of action is the slave.

²⁸ Aristotle, "Politics" in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, trans. B. Jowett, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 2: 1989. See also "And also inasmuch as there is a difference in kind between production and action, and both need tools, it follows that those tools also must possess the same difference. But **life (βίος)** is doing things, not making things; hence the slave is an assistant in the class of instruments of action." (1254a) Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 17.

The Rackham translation is more explicit: the slave is described as “an assistant in the class of *instruments* of action,” [emphasis added]. Also of note is that the Rackham translation explains that life does things, but does not make things. Thus, if we compare it with the Jowett translation, we can better articulate Aristotle’s position: life is action, which is doing things, and not production, which is making things. Likewise, the difference in kind between the instruments of action and production can be explained as the difference between the instruments used to do things and the instruments used to make things.

If we consider the difference between doing something and making something, it becomes clear that it hinges on the question of the end of the activity. That is to say, when we make something it is meant as a means to achieve some further independent end, whether it is a pie to feed ourselves or a house to shelter us. When we do something, however, it is possible that it be something which is not meant as a means towards an independent end (though our use of the term certainly makes this scenario possible also; think of the act of baking the pie or the act of building the house as constituting doing something) but rather that the activity itself be the end itself. As such, stating that life is action and not production is like saying that life is about doing things for their own sakes and not about creating things that are only to be put to some further use. In light of this, the statement of the slave being the minister of action makes significantly more sense if the slave is regarded as responsible for completing tasks directly required for supporting life, enabling the master to pursue the activities that consist of ends in themselves.²⁹

²⁹ The tasks that the slave completes can sometimes be tasks of production but are more properly those of action. See John M. Rist, *The Mind of Aristotle: A study in Philosophical Growth* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1989), 251. What shape these tasks might take respectively is not made immediately apparent by Aristotle in this passage but they are “determined by reference to his [the slave’s] master’s

There is only one mention of life in this passage, but it is especially significant since it is the word *bios*. This is the first instance of *bios* from any of the passages of this study. It is significant because this passage suggests that *bios* refers to life where activities are ends in themselves (we know that there are many activities that lead to further independent ends but those do not seem to belong properly to *bios* as it is explained here). Furthermore, that the context of the discussion contains no mention of animals or plants but refers instead solely to humans, implies that it is a life exclusive to humans. What is clear, then, from the understanding of *bios* presented here is that it lines up neatly with the definition provided for *bios* in the Greek-English lexicon. Moreover, it agrees with Arendt's explanation of the term.

1.7

CONCLUSION TO CHAPTER ONE

The examination of the above passages allows us to begin to understand how Aristotle distinguishes between *bios* and *zoe*. To sum up this distinction, when Aristotle uses *zoe* he is referring to natural bodies that begin in generation and maintain a participation in their composite nature which is warm substance, referring specifically to heart and lungs, and soul, referring in particular to the nutritive soul. Further, these natural bodies with life possess the capacities of self-nutrition, growth and decay. Additionally, animals possess the power of perception and humans possess the power of perception and the power of thought. Moreover, all of this is good and pleasant in and of itself, and human activities in particular aim at that which is pleasant. On the other hand, when Aristotle

actions and activities," (C. D. C. Reeve, *Action, Contemplation, and Happiness: An Essay on Aristotle* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 137).

uses *bios* it is to refer to a life that pursues activities that are ends unto themselves, distinct from life that maybe pursues activities that only serve as a means to an end, even if those activities do in fact lead to ends unto themselves. With this basic distinction between *zoe* and *bios* in place, there should no longer be any discussion of “life” in the course of this investigation, but rather only a discussion of *zoe* and a discussion of *bios* depending on the meaning the discussion intends to capture. Interestingly, while it was shown in the examination of each of the passages that Aristotle uses the terms *bios* and *zoe* in ways that are consistent with the definitions provided for each of the terms in the lexicon, some questions arise surrounding how they relate to Arendt’s interpretation. It is these questions which we must now address.

Arendt’s explanation of *bios* and *zoe* seems to cohere both with Aristotle’s and the lexicon. Aristotle does go beyond her account, however. There is a discrepancy at which we should take a closer look. If we recall Arendt’s understanding of *zoe* as “the motor of biological life man shares with other living things and which forever retains the cyclical movement of nature,” then the information presented by Aristotle in the examination of *On the Soul* 412a13-21 (section 1.2 above) and *Parva Naturalia* 479a28-479b7 (section 1.3 above) corresponds appropriately. But, we must also recall that at the end of the examination of *Nicomachean Ethics* 1170a15-20 (section 1.4 above) and *Nicomachean Ethics* 1175a11-19 (section 1.5 above), there remained questions concerning how the power of perception and the power of thought from *Nicomachean Ethics* 1170a15-20 (section 1.4 above) and the musical and philosophical activities of *Nicomachean Ethics* 1175a11-19 (section 1.5 above) fit into this view of *zoe*. That is, these activities seem to play an important role for humans rather than for other living

beings. These activities would seem to hint at those things which might inform events, tell a story, and establish a biography, which Arendt associates with *bios*, but which things are here associated with *zoe*.

In order to answer the question concerning how to deal with the accounts of *zoe* in the *Nicomachean Ethics* which seem to go beyond plant and animal life, we must consider that information which we have for *bios*. It is perhaps convenient, though not coincidental or planned that the explanations for *bios* derived from Aristotle's work and from Arendt's work (and, incidentally, the lexicon) are consistent with one another, primarily because Arendt is using the very same passage of Aristotle for her interpretation that I also chose to draw upon. This passage explains the difference between action and production, between doing things and making things, and the difference is due to the nature of the activity. It needs to be determined whether the activity consists of an end in itself or if it is only the means to an end, as it seems *bios* only includes the former. Therefore, we must consider the capacities and activities mentioned in *Nicomachean Ethics* 1170a15-20 (section 1.4 above) and *Nicomachean Ethics* 1175a11-19 (section 1.5 above) in light of this distinction.

The exercise of the power of perception, the five senses, shared by animals both human and non-human, qualifies as activity insofar as one can taste, hear, see, smell and touch. None of these activities are considered ends in themselves, however, since they all enable us to pursue other activities. The power of thought, however, that which is supposed to differentiate animals and humans, allows us to make decisions, develop ideas, and perhaps we might even say form a story, all of which suggests an end in itself. Furthermore, Aristotle's reference to musical activity and philosophical activity appears

to be a reference to activity consisting of an end in itself. Therefore, though it becomes clear that Arendt’s explanation of *bios* is not unfounded, there is a difficulty here that we need to reconcile. Because of this, and in light of the fact that the texts we have examined thus far have given us a fairly substantial account of *zoe* (which nonetheless mostly aligns with Arendt’s view) but leave us with a rather incomplete picture of *bios*, we must now turn to an examination of the meaning of *bios* in Aristotle.

CHAPTER TWO – AN EXAMINATION OF *BIOS*

2.1

INTRODUCTION TO CHAPTER TWO

As we have seen in Chapter One, Aristotle’s most explicit statements about *bios* and *zoe* dealt substantially with *zoe* but much less so with *bios*. This may in part be due to the wide range of meaning attributed to *zoe*, which could conceivably imply a greater number of occurrences of the term, but it is primarily because of the limited number of passages where Aristotle explicitly talks about life as *bios*. The objective of this chapter is therefore to take the basic account outlined in my first chapter where I characterized *bios* as consisting in an activity that has an end in itself (insofar as it is action and not production) and to verify the accuracy of and further develop the account, seeking the meaning that it holds for Aristotle.

In this chapter, I will look at four passages drawn from the works which were studied in Chapter One, *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics*, that refer both to “activity consisting of an end in itself” and to “life” as *bios*.³⁰ Not one of these passages is the same as the ones that were reviewed in the first chapter.

2.2

BIOS AS AN END IN ITSELF

We read the following in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book I, Chapter 2:

³⁰ Interestingly, *On the Soul* does not appear to contain any references to *bios*, and *Parva Naturalia* has but very few where they all relate to a sense of the length of life or lifetime, a sense which we can recall from the Introduction was given in the Greek-English lexicon. See *On Dreams* 462a34 and *On Length and Shortness of Life* 464b-467b.

If, then, there is some end of the things we do, which we desire for its own sake (everything else being desired for the sake of this), and if we do not choose everything for the sake of something else (for at that rate the process would go on to infinity, so that our desire would be empty and vain), clearly this must be the good and the chief good. Will not the knowledge of it, then, have a great influence on **life (βίον)?**³¹ (1094a17-22)

The first point of discussion in this passage concerns the “things we do” (or our “actions” as is seen in Rackham’s translation in the footnote). Aristotle supposes that there is an end or an objective to the “things we do,” which implies that the “things we do” or the actions we undertake in this sense are not in fact activities that consist of ends in themselves and are only activities leading to this end. This does not undermine the claim which I seek to validate in this chapter, since Aristotle further supposes that the end to the “things we do” is desired for its own sake. To be desired for its own sake means that the end of the “things we do” is not desired simply because it might lead to some further end again but rather that it is the desired end, period. Additionally, Aristotle supports the possibility of this end being desired for its own sake by supposing that not everything can be desired for the sake of something else; he points out that then this process would go on forever (an infinite regress) and would thus negate any point to desiring anything at all, since it would be impossible for one to ever be completely satisfied.³² This does not mean that once that thing which is desired for its own sake is obtained then that is the end and it

³¹ Aristotle, “Nicomachean Ethics” in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, trans. W. D. Ross and J. O. Urmsom, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 2: 1729. See also “If therefore among the ends at which our actions aim there be one which we wish for its own sake, while we wish the others only for the sake of this, and if we do not choose everything for the sake of something else (which would obviously result in a process *ad infinitum*, so that all desire would be futile and vain), it is clear that this one ultimate End must be the Good, and indeed the Supreme Good. Will not then a knowledge of this Supreme Good be also of great practical importance for the conduct of **life (βίον)?**” (1094a) Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 5.

³² I am not saying that this is necessarily the case as many people today might conceive of life as a series of desires that are sequentially satisfied with no ultimately attainable end, or indeed hold an altogether different view, rather, I am simply discerning what Aristotle seems to be saying in the text.

is guaranteed to remain so forever. Constant vigilance would be necessary for it to be maintained, which is different from a search ranging from one random desire to the next. Therefore, there is much reason to keep on living in order to maintain possession of this end that is desired for its own sake (and which will be elucidated in short order). It is a *reductio ad absurdum* argument that Aristotle employs here to show that only that which is desired for its own sake truly satisfies that very desire which convinces us to do things, as anything else would lead to the absurdity that all desires are unfulfilled and unsatisfying. By supposing, however, that it is in fact possible to be satisfied, there must be an end desirable for its own sake. This end is regarded as the ultimate end or chief or supreme good because it essentially makes life worth living. Life is not worth living through an infinite series of activities that will never allow one to find fulfillment, and such fulfillment exists. Aristotle concludes the passage therefore by stating that knowledge of this good or end must be necessary for life which in this instance may be traced from the Ancient Greek **βίον**, which comes from the root word *bios*.

The important thing to draw from this passage is the description of the chief good which influences the things we do, and therefore also his account of an activity that consists of an end in itself. For though at first it may not seem to explain the activity that consists of an end in itself, the fact that such "supreme good" fulfillment can be found necessarily means that there are activities that give this fulfillment. While he does not elucidate the chief good in this passage, it is of no detriment for the present as it is his emphasis on knowledge of this good having "great influence on life" which serves to affirm just how crucial the activities that consist of ends in themselves are for *bios*. As the Rackham translation reads, this knowledge is of "importance for the conduct of life"

and what is conducting life but pursuing activities of life? Having knowledge of this end then does two things. It affirms the existence of the activities that consist of ends in themselves and also lends itself to characterizing the activities that are ends in themselves, orienting the activities of *bios* towards being constituted of such ends. Therefore, this passage supports the explanation given in the basic account of *bios* and *zoe* in the first chapter.

2.3

THE END OF *BIOS* IS HAPPINESS

Aristotle writes in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book I, Chapter 7:

Let us examine this question, however, on another occasion; the self-sufficient we now define as that which when isolated makes **life (βίον)** desirable and lacking in nothing; and such we think happiness to be; and further we think it most desirable of all things, without being counted as one good thing among others—if it were so counted it would clearly be made more desirable by the addition of even the least of goods; for that which is added becomes an excess of goods, and of goods the greater is always more desirable. Happiness, then, is something complete and self-sufficient, and is the end of action.³³ (1097b14-22)

This passage is obviously closely connected to the previous one. Aristotle begins by dealing with that which is self-sufficient, which is of course, the supreme good elicited in the examination of *Nicomachean Ethics* 1094a17-22 (section 2.2 above). The opening

³³ Aristotle, “Nicomachean Ethics” in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, trans. W. D. Ross and J. O. Urmson, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 2: 1734-1735. See also “But this is a point that must be considered later on; we take a self-sufficient thing to mean a thing which merely standing by itself alone renders **life (βίον)** desirable and lacking in nothing, and such a thing we deem happiness to be. Moreover, we think happiness the most desirable of all good things without being itself reckoned as one among the rest; for if it were so reckoned, it is clear that we should consider it more desirable when even the smallest of other good things were combined with it, since this addition would result in a larger total of good, and of two goods the greater is always the more desirable. Happiness, therefore, being found to be something final and self-sufficient, is the End at which all actions aim.” (1097b) Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 29/31.

question that arose in the beginning of that passage but which did not immediately require a response for that which was under examination at the time is here posed again and swiftly answered. Aristotle asks what is the supreme good, and the answer is that which "makes life desirable and lacking in nothing" or what he otherwise terms happiness. It is important to note that life in this instance comes from the Ancient Greek word **βίον**, which traces its root to *bios* and which affirms the relevance of this passage for the present examination.

Aristotle continues to explain that not only does happiness make life desirable but it is also itself the most desirable of all things. Aristotle's solution is to explain how happiness is most desirable in and of itself and is not to be simply counted as one among many desirable things. If happiness were to be counted as just one desirable thing among many, it would hardly seem to be a self-sufficient thing lacking in nothing, in that it would be no different from any other good thing. However, it does indeed belong to its own category because if it did not, then if some other good, even the least of these other goods, were to be combined with happiness, the resulting good would and could only be that much greater, but this is simply not the case. Happiness, if it is truly happiness, is as great as it can be all on its own.

The above argument might seem like a long-winded way to say that happiness is a greater good and most desirable because happiness is a greater good and most desirable. Worded in this way, Aristotle's argument would seem to be a mere tautology, providing no actual proof for the claim. However, Aristotle does argue for this claim. He arrives at the very notion of happiness in the first instance, because it stands alone as a possible self-sufficient good at the end of a thought experiment. That is to say, he essentially

takes, in the preceding passages, numerous examples of goods at which people aim and arrives at happiness as the only one that is not taken as a means to another good. For example, people aim at gaining money (a good) believing it will bring them happiness, but do not aim at happiness believing it will gain them money. This example also illustrates the reason for which he concludes this passage saying that happiness is the end of action or the end at which all actions aim (cf. the Rackham translation).

If one follows Aristotle's thought experiment or commences one's own thought experiment, it would be a monumental challenge to come up with a scenario in which happiness is taken simply as a means to an end. And, even in those situations where some other good might appear to be the end of a particular pursuit, the result would need to be closely examined to ensure that any apparent lack of happiness is not in fact influencing the final end of the pursuit.

What this passage affirms, then, is indeed that there is a connection between *bios* and activity that consists of an end in itself, that end being happiness. It is then possible to state that *bios* is activity that consists of an end in itself where the end is happiness. It is happiness that provides the essential character of the activity.

2.4

THAT HAPPINESS IS ACHIEVED BY EXCELLENT ACTION

This next passage from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book I, Chapter 8, follows closely upon that which we have just examined:

With those who identify happiness with excellence or some one excellence our account is in harmony; for to excellence belongs activity in accordance with excellence. But it makes, perhaps, no small difference whether we place the chief good in possession or in use, in state or in

activity. For the state may exist without producing any good result, as in a man who is asleep or in some other way quite inactive, but the activity cannot; for one who has the activity will of necessity be acting, and acting well. And as in the Olympic Games it is not the most beautiful and the strongest that are crowned but those who compete (for it is some of these that are victorious), so those who act rightly win the noble and good things in **life (βίω)**. Their **life (βίος)** is also in itself pleasant. For pleasure is a state of soul, and to each man that which he is said to be a lover of is pleasant; e.g. not only is a horse pleasant to the lover of horses, and a spectacle to the lover of sights, but also in the same way just acts are pleasant to the lover of justice and in general excellent acts to the lover of excellence. Now for most men their pleasures are in conflict with one another because these are not by nature pleasant, but the lovers of what is noble find pleasant the things that are by nature pleasant; and excellent actions are such, so that these are pleasant for such men as well as in their own nature. Their **life (βίος)**, therefore, has no further need of pleasure as a sort of adventitious charm, but has its pleasure in itself.³⁴ (1098b30-1099a16)

I have quoted this passage at length since it provides a very good introduction to the discussion. Aristotle begins by identifying excellence and happiness. His reason for this arises from the search of what actually constitutes happiness, because he recognizes that

³⁴ Aristotle, "Nicomachean Ethics" in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, trans. W. D. Ross and J. O. Urmsen, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 2: 1735-1736. See also "Now with those who pronounce happiness to be virtue, or some particular virtue, our definition is in agreement; for 'activity in conformity with virtue' involves virtue. But no doubt it makes a great difference whether we conceive the Supreme Good to depend on possessing virtue or on displaying it—on disposition, or on the manifestation of a disposition in action. For a man may possess the disposition without its producing any good result, as for instance when he is asleep, or has ceased to function from some other cause; but virtue in active exercise cannot be inoperative—it will of necessity act, and act well. And just as at the Olympic games the wreaths of victory are not bestowed upon the handsomest and strongest persons present, but on men who enter for the competitions—since it is among these that the winners are found,—so it is those who *act* rightly who carry off the prizes and good things of **life (βίω)**. And further, the **life (βίος)** of active virtue is essentially pleasant. For the feeling of pleasure is an experience of the soul, and a thing gives a man pleasure in regard to which he is described as 'fond of' so-and-so: for instance a horse gives pleasure to one fond of horses, a play to one fond of the theatre, and similarly just actions are pleasant to the lover of justice, and acts conforming with virtue generally to the lover of virtue. But whereas the mass of mankind take pleasure in things that conflict with one another, because they are not pleasant of their own nature, things pleasant by nature are pleasant to lovers of what is noble, and so always are actions in conformity with virtue, so that they are pleasant essentially as well as pleasant to lovers of the noble. Therefore their **life (βίος)** has no need of pleasure as a sort of ornamental appendage, but contains its pleasure in itself." (1099a) Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 39/41.

calling happiness the supreme good may appear a truism.³⁵ His reasoning leads him to say that it is essentially humans fulfilling their function that leads to happiness and explains that it is the function of humans to act in accordance with excellence. And so his first statement in this passage is to affirm how those who identify happiness with excellence have no problem with this account of the function of humans that he has developed in the preceding part of his work. His next statement simply affirms the clear connection between excellence and activity in accordance with excellence, as any such activity would be excellent in itself.

It is at this point that this passage begins to draw out new information. For Aristotle poses the question whether it matters if the supreme good, happiness, is regarded only as possessing excellence or rather whether it must necessarily be acting excellently. He states that the possession of excellence is possible without leading to anything good as would be the case with a good person who lies asleep, not doing good but not necessarily doing bad either. In comparison, acting excellently clearly implies that good is being done and achieved, hopefully over and over again. So, follows his analogy of the Olympians, and his claim that it is those who act excellently that receive the good things of life. This instance of life is *bios*.

For these same people who act excellently and receive the good things in life, such life is correspondingly pleasant in itself. Life in this instance is once again *bios*. Aristotle uses the argument that that which one loves will be that which provides pleasure for that person, which really amounts to a self-evident statement. More importantly he further claims that excellent actions are pleasant by nature in comparison to most

³⁵ See line 1097b9 in Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 31.

people's pleasures that are not pleasant by nature. "Most people's pleasures" here refer to those things that one loves that are not directly attributable to "excellent actions." Thus, because the activities of those people who are occupied with excellent actions in life are inherently good there can be no substitute for the pleasure that is derived from them. If it seems at all controversial to make the claim that such excellent actions are pleasant by nature, one need only be reminded of the fact that Aristotle views these excellent actions as the function of humans which lead to happiness as the proper end. It might even be that the pleasure derived from the excellent actions is what constitutes Aristotle's understanding of happiness since the life of the person who is committed to those actions has pleasure in itself. This last instance of life, referring to those who pursue excellent actions is also *bios*.

The three instances of life in this passage all come from *bios*. Initially, it may appear ambiguous as to whether the passage affirms the explanation of *bios* as consisting in activity that has an end in itself because there is very little explicit mention of "end in itself" in the passage. This life of excellent actions, however, is said to provide "pleasure in itself" and pleasure is nothing if not desirable. It is known from *Nicomachean Ethics* 1097b14-22 (section 2.3 above) that the end of one's action is happiness, and happiness is desirable. Though the language is perhaps not as clear in this passage, there is enough proof that supports *bios* as consisting in activity that has an end in itself. It can also be said that the excellent actions as they refer directly to the fulfillment of a person's function are ends in themselves. The achievement of the particular pleasure that is arguably happiness in this sense and the fulfillment of a person's function may be regarded as one and the same.

It is important to clearly understand what this passage implies for the question concerning what role happiness plays in the account of *bios*. That is to say, we need to determine whether happiness is properly the unique end of the activity of *bios*. But we also have to say something about what Aristotle means by happiness. It is apparent in this passage that he does not mean to say that any simple pleasure can be called happiness since he differentiates between different pleasures and because he is delineating a particular sense of pleasure that is derived from excellent actions.³⁶ It is this identification of happiness and excellence that provides the most crucial new element for the explanation of *bios*, and it makes better sense if we pay attention to the Greek term which is translated by happiness here. That is, “happiness” translates from *eudaimonia* which, it has been proposed, may perhaps be more accurately translated as “well-being” or “human flourishing.”³⁷ Therefore, where we last said that *bios* consists in activity that has an end in itself where the end is happiness, we can now more accurately say that *bios* consists in activity that has an end in itself for which the end is happiness which is pleasure achieved by excellent actions in accordance with the function of humans.

2.5

THAT EXCELLENT ACTION MAY BE EXTERNAL OR INTERNAL

The passages examined in sections 2.2, 2.3, and 2.4 above, make clear the import of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* for this present examination. The following passage,

³⁶ It should be noted that this end of happiness must also be a distinct kind of pleasure, different from those which are mentioned in sections 1.4 and 1.5 above, wherein the passages were also from the *Nicomachean Ethics*, but the instances of which make no reference to *eudaimonia*.

³⁷ The explanation given for *eudaimonia* can be found in the Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy, but is also advanced by Daniel N. Robinson in *Aristotle’s Psychology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989) 101.

from his *Politics*, Book VII, Chapter 3, is just as significant for the very reason that it shows a continuity of his thought across works:

If we are right in our view, and happiness is assumed to be acting well, the active **life (βίος)** will be the best, both for every city collectively, and for individuals. Not that a **life** of action must necessarily have relation to others, as some persons think, nor are those ideas only to be regarded as practical which are pursued for the sake of practical results, but much more the thoughts and contemplations which are independent and complete in themselves; since acting well, and therefore a certain kind of action, is an end, and even in the case of external actions the directing mind is most truly said to act.³⁸ (1325b14-23)

Aristotle commences this passage by affirming the fact that if his previously held view is right, and happiness is about acting excellently, then the active life is the best. This statement aligns very closely with those above in terms of dealing with the concern of happiness and excellent actions. That this same train of thought permeates through multiple works is testament to the strength with which Aristotle holds this view, though it may be noted that the two works are closely related such that *Politics* can be regarded as a continuation of *Nicomachean Ethics*.³⁹

This first reference to life in the passage, notably the active life, is to *bios*, further affirming the fact that this passage maintains the same view of life or *bios* as the other passages examined in this chapter. The fact that this active life is the best life affirms the explanation of activity that consists of an end in itself, since an active life must consist of

³⁸ Aristotle, "Politics" in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, trans. B. Jowett, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 2: 2104. See also "But if these things are well said, and if happiness is to be defined as well-doing, the active **life (βίος)** is the best **life** both for the whole state collectively and for each man individually. But the active **life** is not necessarily active in relation to other men, as some people think, nor are only those processes of thought active that are pursued for the sake of the objects that result from action, but far more those speculations and thoughts that have their end in themselves and are pursued for their own sake; for the end is to do well, and therefore is a certain form of action. And even with actions done in relation to external objects we predicate action in the full sense chiefly of the master-craftsmen who direct the action by their thoughts." (1325b) Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 551.

³⁹ See *Nicomachean Ethics* 1181b.

activity and the attribute of being the best gives finality to its character. Even more important is the fact that Aristotle says, “happiness is assumed to be acting well” or in the Rackham translation, “happiness is to be defined as well-doing.” This is because he is identifying happiness and acting well, meaning that the actions taken in this regard are not simply a means to an end, nor do they lead to happiness, rather they actually constitute happiness. If it seemed a stretch at the end of the examination of *Nicomachean Ethics* 1098b30-1099a16 (section 2.4) to identify happiness and excellence by way of the excellent actions, this shows that it is not only appropriate but clearly what Aristotle intends.

Now, this active life is the best for both cities (or states, according to Rackham’s translation) and also for individuals. The discrepancy between cities and states is one that I believe just allows us to understand that Aristotle means that the active life is best for a group of people. What Aristotle means when he says the active life is best for individuals is not clear. It might mean that the active life is best for individuals pursuing the active life on their own. On the other hand, it could also possibly mean that although the active life is pursued in conjunction with others, it is still the best for each person. In the next statement, Aristotle says that the active life does not necessarily always have relation to others. This would seem to mean that the active life need not always be interpersonal but can be implemented independently. While this supports the first view of what Aristotle means by the active life being the best for individuals, it does not rule out the second view.

The next part of the passage suggests that the active life consists of ideas. Aristotle goes on to break these ideas down into two categories. It is important to note,

however, that both kinds of ideas are to be considered practical, and on the basis of the Rackham translation we can conclude that practical means to be active. The first kind of ideas are those which are considered practical because they are pursued for the sake of practical results, and the second kind of ideas are those which are independent and complete in themselves and pursued for their own sake. Aristotle deals with the first kind of ideas as though they are the kind in which most people would expect the active life to consist but it is in fact towards the latter which he himself leans. Aristotle's wording does not exclude the possibility that the first kind of ideas are connected to the active life. He only says that the second kind of ideas belong "much more" to the active life. He does not say that they belong exclusively to the active life. However, as the active life is characterized by activity consisting of an end in itself, it should be these ideas pursued for their own sake that we also recognize as more prominently a part of the active life.

Now we might pose the question whether the distinction between these two sorts of ideas is a matter of the distinction between external action and internal action. The language used with respect to each type of ideas does suggest that this is the case; that is, it seems to be a dichotomy between practical ideas versus independent thoughts. A little later into the passage Aristotle speaks explicitly of external actions. When he speaks of external actions directly, Aristotle is simply stating that we consider such actions to be directed by the mind, making it obvious that those other actions consisting of thoughts complete in themselves are also directed by the mind. What is not clear is the sense in which the pursuit of each of these types of ideas is to be understood. For the pursuit of the practical thoughts, by having other objects as their end, is clearly external, but the pursuit of thoughts that have their end in themselves, needing no external objects to tie

themselves to, can only be described as internal action. This internal action is affirmed by Aristotle's statement that the active life need not have relation to others.

In the Jowett translation of this passage there is another instance of "life" that follows closely upon the first. In the Rackham translation there are two more occurrences of the word "life." Although these occurrences do not directly translate from the Greek text, they do expand pronouns etc. and given their proximity to the first can be traced to *bios*. Given the fact that this passage so clearly refers to *bios* as a life of action necessarily entailing an end in itself that is achieved by excellent action, there can be no disputing that it supports the account of *bios* set out at the beginning of this chapter, that it is action consisting of an end in itself.

2.6

CONCLUSION TO CHAPTER TWO

The first objective of this chapter was to evaluate the explanation given for *bios* in Chapter One that it consists in activity that has an end in itself. The four passages examined in this chapter both independently and with respect to each other, reinforce this explanation. The examination of these four passages has, however, also provided further elements for our interpretation of the notion of *bios* in Aristotle. These elements are that the end of the activity is happiness, that such happiness is achieved by excellent actions in accordance with the function of humans, and that such excellent actions need not necessarily be external but may also be internal.

Obviously, none of these three points creates any problem for the account of *bios* as consisting in an activity which has an end in itself and therefore this continued

examination validates the explanation Arendt gives for *bios* in her work, which was based on the same passage from Aristotle's *Politics* given in section 1.6 that forms the foundation of Aristotle's explanation of *bios* in this examination. These new points do change and develop the overall account of *bios*, however. It may therefore be said that *bios* consists of excellent, external or internal, human function-fulfilling activity that directly results in the ultimate end of happiness. This then may be considered the revised account of *bios*.

This revised account of *bios*, however, still leaves us with a particularly important, unanswered question that also raises a couple of connected issues. The big question is what exactly qualifies properly as an activity of *bios*. In the conclusion to the first chapter, we discussed the relationship between the powers of perception and the power of thought and between musical activities and philosophical activities. It was shown how while the powers of perception might not have ends in themselves, the power of thought certainly seems to and similarly so too musical and philosophical activities. This is problematic because they were mentioned in relation to *zoe*, but it is *bios* that relates to the understanding of activity as an end in itself. These activities of *zoe* are, it may be recalled, pursued for the pleasure that they bring, and our richer explanation of *bios* explicitly incorporates a particular form of pleasure, happiness, as the end in which consists its activities, but the form of pleasure of the activities as they relate to *zoe* is not connected to *eudaimonia*. Further, the point of the activities of *bios* is that they consist of excellent actions in accordance with the function of humans. The activities of *bios* are more nuanced, and it cannot simply be said that such and such an activity leads to

happiness and therefore belongs to *bios*. So to speak of musical activity then might not necessarily imply an activity of *bios*.

There remains, however, an issue with relation to the power of thought and philosophical activity. It seems that it cannot be explained away in the same fashion as musical activity insofar as it is much of the focus in *Politics* 1325b14-23 (section 2.5 above) directly relating to *bios* even though it is not explicitly mentioned as such. Yet, because of its connection to *zoe* in *Nicomachean Ethics* 1175a11-19 (section 1.5 above), it must be determined to which account of life philosophical activity in fact belongs. If philosophical activity belongs to *zoe*, then we must reconcile the fact of it being the subject of focus in *Politics* 1325b14-23 (section 2.5), but if it is to *bios* then we must reconcile what this means for the explanation of *zoe* given in the first chapter of this thesis. We would also have to explain what it means for the account of the distinction between *bios* and *zoe* given in the lexicon, which generally aligns with Arendt's view, the accuracy of which we seek to determine. The problem is made more difficult by the fact that while she uses the distinction between *zoe* and *bios* to distinguish between labor and action, she also distinguishes between the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa*, though not by again clearly applying the distinction between *bios* and *zoe*.

I will now seek to resolve this discrepancy by determining more precisely what exactly is the activity of *bios* according to Aristotle. For other than the allusion to philosophical activity, there has been no statement which clearly says what is the activity of *bios*. Certainly, there has been no statement in the manner used to determine the essential pieces of information used in the first chapter where the information was given

in an $x=y$ fashion, or in the passages of this chapter that referred directly to the term in question and the conception of end in itself.

CHAPTER THREE – THE CONSTITUTION OF THE ACTIVITY OF *BIOS*

3.1

INTRODUCTION TO CHAPTER THREE

In the first chapter, I explained how *zoe* refers to life in all natural bodies that begin in generation and maintain their composite nature which is warm substance, while possessing the capacities of self-nutrition, growth and decay. This includes animals that possess the power of perception and also humans, who possess the power of perception and the power of thought, additional capacities which allow for the pursuit of activities that aim at that which is pleasant. I explained how, in contrast, *bios* means life consisting in excellent, external or internal, human function-fulfilling activity that directly results in the ultimate end, which is happiness. In one sense *bios* is more restricted and the account of it more succinct than the account of *zoe*, but it is no less complex. Much of the complexity involved in the concept of *bios* is related to the ambiguity regarding which activities belong to each *bios* and *zoe*.

This is because both *bios* and *zoe* consist of activities. *Zoe* consists of self-nutrition or one's ability to find nourishment, which certainly qualifies as an activity; but *zoe* also apparently consists of musical and philosophical activity insofar as one's powers of perceptions and thoughts are exercised. Herein arises part of the problem. If *bios* consists in activity that has an end in itself, and Aristotle clearly states that thoughts can have ends in themselves, it would seem to follow that philosophical activity belongs properly to *bios* rather than *zoe*, even if Aristotle does not articulate it in quite this way.

This issue concerning higher philosophical activity serves as an excellent point from which to attempt to determine a more precise constitution of the activity of *bios*. This is because our initial attempts to delimit the activity of *bios*, by pointing out that it aims at the good or excellence or leads to happiness or that it belongs to the proper function of humans or that it is internal or external were not specific enough. It is only the “ideas, thoughts, and contemplations” discussed in the second chapter that begin to provide any specificity regarding the proper constitution of the activity of *bios*. The objective of this chapter is therefore to provide an account of this activity as it pertains to *bios*, to verify the account, to flesh out in greater detail the constitution of the activities pertaining to *bios*, and finally, confirm whether Arendt’s basic interpretation of *bios* is founded in Aristotle. This last task is particularly challenging because, as was explained in the introduction above, Arendt not only distinguishes between the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa* but also rejects the traditional prioritization of the *vita contemplativa* over the *vita activa*,⁴⁰ which would seem to put her at odds with Aristotle if the activity of *bios* consists only in these “ideas, thoughts, and contemplations.”

3.2

A PRELIMINARY ACCOUNT OF PHILOSOPHICAL ACTIVITY

The initial objective is not to define philosophical activity but rather to explain how it can be that Aristotle would essentially have such an activity in mind when speaking of both *bios* and *zoe*. This is because if the two Ancient Greek words have different meanings, it is not clear how the same activity could be properly considered in relation to both

⁴⁰ Arendt states, “The primacy of contemplation over activity rests on the conviction that no work of human hands can equal in beauty and truth the physical *kosmos*, which swings in itself in changeless eternity without any interference or assistance from outside, from man or god.” See *The Human Condition*, 15.

concepts. The problem concerning what seems to be Aristotle’s conflation of the two concepts for life can begin to be addressed with a study of the following passage from the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book I, Chapter 3:

Hence a young man is not a proper hearer of lectures on political science; for he is inexperienced in the actions that occur in life (**βίον**), but its discussions start from these and are about these; and, further, since he tends to follow his passions, his study will be vain and unprofitable, because the end aimed at is not knowledge but action.⁴¹ (1095a2-5)

In the Ross and Urmson translation of this passage we do not have a direct reference to philosophy or philosophical activity. Rather it is political science that Aristotle is discussing. The Rackham translation of the passage, though, notes that this is but a single branch of philosophy and herein does a solution present itself. If Aristotle uses philosophical activity with regard to both *bios* and *zoe*, it must be because he has in mind different branches of such activity that apply to each respective explanation. There is no reason why philosophical activity cannot be so encompassing of different things that it might be applicable in different cases. In this case of *bios*, he is referencing political science, the end of which, he states, is action and not knowledge.

This idea is also supported in the following passage which comes from Aristotle’s *Sense and Sensibilia*, Chapter 1, another treatise of the *Parva Naturalia*:

But it behoves the natural scientist (**Φυσικοῦ**) to obtain also a clear view of the first principles of health and disease, inasmuch as neither health nor disease can exist in lifeless things (**ἔστερημένοις ζωῆς**). Indeed, we may say of most physical inquirers, and of those physicians who study their art more philosophically, that while the former complete their works

⁴¹ Aristotle, “Nicomachean Ethics” in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, trans. W. D. Ross and J. O. Urmson, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 2: 1730. See also “Hence the young are not fit to be students of Political Science. For they have no experience of life (**βίον**) and conduct, and it is these that supply the premises and subject matter of this branch of philosophy. And moreover they are led by their feelings; so that they will study the subject to no purpose or advantage, since the end of this science is not knowledge but action.” (1095a) Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 9.

with a disquisition on medicine, the latter start from a consideration of nature.⁴² (436a18-21)

Though the Beare translation uses a more “scientific” terminology rather than the more “philosophic” terminology found in the Hett translation, the meaning cannot be clearer. There is activity that would be considered philosophical activity but it is very different from political science. The activity of the “natural scientist” of *Sense and Sensibilia* seems to seek knowledge rather than aim at action like political science. Though political science and natural science are generally regarded as very different kinds of activities in our day, it is not impossible to regard them both as philosophical pursuits broadly construed.⁴³ Thus the reason that Aristotle uses “philosophical activity” in relation to both *bios* and *zoe* can be explained in a basic sense in terms of the different branches of science which he would have perhaps considered falling under the umbrella notion of philosophical activity. I only say “perhaps” because ultimately it is not clear what Aristotle means when he speaks of philosophical activity.⁴⁴ Invoking the distinction between the branches of Aristotelian philosophy, though, does allow us to resolve the question that remained at the end of the second chapter, that is, the question whether philosophical activity belongs to *bios* or *zoe*. Now we will further probe this account of

⁴² Aristotle, “Sense and Sensibilia” in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, trans. J. I. Beare, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 1: 693. See also “It is further the duty of the natural philosopher to study the first principles of disease and health; for neither health nor disease can be properties of things deprived of **life (ζωή)**. Hence one may say that most natural philosophers, and those physicians who take a scientific interest in their art, have this in common: the former end by studying medicine, and the latter base their medical theories on the principles of natural science.” (436a) Aristotle, *On the Soul, Parva Naturalia, On Sense and Sensible Objects*, trans. W. S. Hett (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), 217.

⁴³ Aristotle considers three main branches of science: the productive, the practical, and the theoretical. See for instance *Topics* 145a13-17, *Metaphysics* 1025b25-27, and *Nicomachean Ethics* 1139a26-31. Therefore, there are reasonable grounds to believe Aristotle could be imagining different senses of what might be philosophical activity, insofar as the disciplines one pursues belong to one of these three main branches.

⁴⁴ I will address this issue again before the end of this chapter.

philosophical activity and its relationship to *bios* and *zoe* and elaborate upon that which belongs to *bios* specifically.

3.3

PHILOSOPHICAL ACTIVITY

As we have just seen in *Nicomachean Ethics* 1095a2-5 (section 3.2 above), philosophical activity as it pertains to *bios* seems to include as at least one of its subjects, political science (**πολιτικῆς**), the end of which I must emphasize is not knowledge but rather action. This is but one branch of science, and so what we must now do is determine whether it is appropriate to consider it a part of philosophical activity pertaining to *bios*, and what might, if anything, accompany it.

The first passage that must be examined to verify this notion comes from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book I, Chapter 5:

To judge from the **lives (βίων)** that men lead, most men, and men of the most vulgar type, seem (not without some reason) to identify the good, or happiness, with pleasure; which is the reason why they love the **life (βίον)** of enjoyment (**ἀπολαυστικόν**). For there are, we may say, three prominent types of **life**—that just mentioned, the political (**πολιτικός**), and thirdly the contemplative (**θεωρητικός**) **life**. Now the mass of mankind are evidently quite slavish in their tastes, preferring a **life (βίον)** suitable to beasts.”⁴⁵ (1095b14-20)

⁴⁵ Aristotle, “Nicomachean Ethics” in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, trans. W. D. Ross and J. O. Urmson, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 2: 1731. See also “To judge from men’s **lives (βίων)**, the more or less reasoned conceptions of the Good or Happiness that seem to prevail among them are the following. On the one hand the generality of men and the most vulgar identify the Good with pleasure, and accordingly are content with the **Life (βίον)** of Enjoyment—for there are three specially prominent **Lives**, the one just mentioned, the **Life** of Politics, and thirdly, the **Life** of Contemplation. The generality of mankind then show themselves to be utterly slavish, by preferring what is only a **life (βίον)** for cattle.” (1095b) Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 13/15.

In this passage, Aristotle distinguishes three modes of life, that is, *bios*. If we recall that *bios* and *zoe* have distinct understandings, and it is implied that *zoe* is necessary, humans are less able to affect it. With *bios*, however, insofar as it does not pertain to those things required for mere survival, it is not simply necessary. There is much about it that humans can affect. These three ways of life are therefore very important. I do not simply believe that this is a different usage of *bios* referring simply to different ways of life as was pointed out in the lexicon. Primarily this is because of the fact discerned in the second chapter that Aristotle clearly has a meaningful account of *bios*, and it can only be the case that a passage like this one that goes into such detail holds significance for this account. The three forms of life that Aristotle outlines are, he explains, "prominent lives," i.e. the main ones. Consequently, it is possible to consider them as covering most activities which are included in *bios*. These prominent forms of *bios* are described as the life of enjoyment, the life of politics, and the life of contemplation.

The first way of life described, the life of enjoyment is primarily devoted to the pursuit of pleasure. For Aristotle states that it is people who identify the good with pleasure who prefer the life of enjoyment. This does not explicitly mean that such a life consists solely of pleasure. Rather, Aristotle only asserts that it is pleasure that provides the primary reason for which people find the life of enjoyment attractive. These people who find the life of enjoyment attractive are, in Aristotle's estimation, by far the largest part of the population. Furthermore, he states that it is reasonable to identify happiness with pleasure, but he hastens to add that the people who find the life of enjoyment attractive are a "vulgar" (**ὕπολαμβάνειν**) group. Moreover, when he speaks of most

people preferring a life that is slavish and fit only for beasts or cattle it is clear that he has in mind this life of enjoyment.⁴⁶

Aristotle’s pejorative view of the life of enjoyment, the life of the “vulgar” majority is problematic. It is helpful to recall the point from *Nicomachean Ethics* 1098b30-1099a16 (section 2.4 above); there we saw that according to Aristotle excellent actions of the kind that belong properly to *bios* generate pleasure in and of themselves. The negative references to the life of pleasure in this passage show Aristotle emphasizing the remaining two forms of *bios* where the end is not pleasure but excellent action, and so though he is not discrediting the life of enjoyment entirely it seems that he views it as not as focused on excellent action as it could be.⁴⁷

For that reason, it is important to focus on the latter two forms of *bios*: the life of politics and the life of contemplation. As we have just seen in *Nicomachean Ethics* 1095a2-5 (section 3.2 above), Aristotle’s conception of political science suggests that action is not just a part of the “philosophical activity” of *bios* but an end. It is the contemplative life, however, that would seem to relate to the “ideas, thoughts and contemplations” from *Politics* 1325b14-23 (section 2.5) that really even gives the first clear indication that the notion of philosophical activity is activity of *bios*. By this I simply mean that though we do not yet know with absolute certainty what Aristotle imagines philosophical activity truly includes (as stated in section 3.2 above), if there is

⁴⁶ This notion of a particular form of *bios* being suitable only for beasts or cattle is a point Finlayson raises as proof that Arendt’s interpretation of *bios* and *zoe* in Aristotle is untenable, but I believe it is outweighed by the fact there is a more consistent use and understanding of *bios* by Aristotle across his works that says otherwise as is illustrated throughout this examination. See Finlayson, 108.

⁴⁷ Aristotle’s denigrating view of the life of enjoyment might also be related to the fact that it would include people focused on choosing pleasures and therefore pursuing activities which will result in those pleasures, while instead people should be focused first on excellent actions that will have their pleasure already within. See *Nicomachean Ethics* 1175b24-26.

anything then it would seem it must be this contemplative life.⁴⁸ The dichotomy that Aristotle draws between these two forms of *bios* therefore merits further examination. Let us have a look at another passage from the *Politics*, Book VII, Chapter 2:

Now it is evident that that form of government is best in which every man, whoever he is, can act best and **live (ζῶνῃ)** happily. But even those who agree in thinking that the **life (βίον)** of excellence is the most desirable raise a question, whether the **life (βίος)** of business and politics is or is not more desirable than one which is wholly independent of external goods, I mean than a contemplative **life**, which by some is maintained to be the only one worthy of a philosopher. For these two **lives (βίους)**—the **life** of the philosopher and the **life** of the statesman—appear to have been preferred by those who have been most keen in the pursuit of excellence, both in our own and in other ages.⁴⁹ (1324a22-34)

In the context of this passage Aristotle is discerning the best mode of life in order to determine the best form of government; he thinks that the latter is based on the former. The discussion in the passage begins with the notion of a government under which everyone can act best and live happily. The notion of living happily while acting one's best is broad. It could refer to any of the multiple forms of life presently under discussion. There are several pertinent points that we should note here. The first is that there is some ambiguity in the Greek. This has led to divergences in the translations.

When Aristotle asserts that even those who agree on a life of excellence as most desirable find something to dispute, he is laying out the fact that even those who agree to

⁴⁸ The question of what activity exactly the contemplative life is composed is a long-standing issue. Is it, for example, composed of those disciplines of the theoretical branch of science "namely, natural science, mathematics, and theology" asks Gavin Lawrence. See "Aristotle and the Ideal Life," *The Philosophical Review* 102, no. 1 (1993): 2. As Aristotle does not explicitly say, it is impossible to really know.

⁴⁹ Aristotle, "Politics" in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, trans. B. Jowett, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 2: 2101-2102. See also "Now it is clear that the best constitution is the system under which anybody whatsoever would be best off and would **live (ζῶνῃ)** in felicity; but the question is raised even on the part of those who agree that the **life (βίον)** accompanied by virtue is the most desirable, whether the **life (βίος)** of citizenship and activity is desirable or rather a **life** released from all external affairs, for example some form of contemplative **life**, which is said by some to be the only **life** that is philosophic. For it is manifest that these are the two modes of **life (βίους)** principally chosen by the men most ambitious of excelling in virtue, both in past times and at the present day—I mean the **life** of politics and the **life** of philosophy." (1324a) Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 541.

pursue a life of excellence, still disagree upon which form of *bios* is best. The life of excellence—here in the passage the term is *bios*—is therefore complex. That is to say, the life of excellence is composed of multiple facets. If *bios* consists in “excellent” activity as I have explained above, this means that all three forms of life from the previous passage qualify as life of excellence. The fact that Aristotle goes on to divide the subject of this passage into just the latter two modes of life, the life of politics and the life of contemplation, again indicates his preference for people to resist pursuing a simple life of enjoyment, the actions of which cannot be as excellent as are those pertaining to these other two modes of life.

There are two further points raised now in this passage. First, the life of politics is described as the life of politics and also business. Secondly, new information is given about the life of contemplation: it is a life completely free of external goods. These forms of *bios* are further illustrated as the life of the statesman and the life of the philosopher. Further affirmation that Aristotle believes the actions of the life of enjoyment to not be so excellent comes from the fact that he describes people who “have been most keen in the pursuit of excellence” as choosing one of these two latter forms of life. Therefore, those who choose the first form of life, that of enjoyment, are not most earnestly pursuing *bios*. Those who choose this form of life are perhaps less diligent in their attitude towards achieving excellence, but at times some of their actions might be sufficiently excellent for which reason Aristotle included it as one of the forms of *bios*.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ It is not entirely clear if Aristotle relegates the life of pleasure to such a forlorn position because of his own prioritization of the life of contemplation but still regards it properly as having the meaning of *bios* that we have discerned attributed to it, or if he meant *bios* in this instance to refer to the simple fact that it is possible for humans to choose such a life, but was not attributing any of the particular meaning about *bios* that has been discerned. If the former, then it makes sense to discuss its validity or lack thereof with respect to the quality of the excellence of its actions, or even whether the actions pursued are pursued for the right

Included in the second form of *bios*, the political life, according to the Jowett translation, is also “business.” The Greek here reads “**εἶναι βίον αἰρετώτατον πότερον ὁ πολιτικός και πρακτικός**” (1324a26-27). In contrast, the Rackham translation refers to the life of citizenship and activity, but whether it is business or activity, it is clear that there occurs some form of action. The passage affirms the third form of *bios*, the life of contemplation, is “wholly independent of external goods.” This is crucial for our understanding of the second form of *bios*, because the life of business and politics is juxtaposed with the contemplative life. This means that the life of business and politics may or may not be wholly dependent on external goods, but that it is likely not wholly independent. For more clarity regarding what is meant by “external goods,” it is perhaps helpful to consult Rackham’s translation which uses “external affairs” instead. This is especially interesting if we recall the fact that in *Politics* 1325b14-23 (section 2.5 above) Aristotle explains that the “ideas, thoughts and contemplations” that are free of encumbrances and complete in themselves are no less a form of action and can still be considered practical or active.

So, we are presented then with a life of politics and business that consists in practical activity that leads to practical results. Though such activity may not entirely depend on external affairs, it is clearly there where the emphasis lies. We are also presented with a life of contemplation that is completely free of external affairs but nonetheless consists in practical activity (some kind of action). It is important to recall that the three main branches of science—the productive, the practical, and the theoretical—are also regarded as three kinds of reason: productive reason, practical

reasons. If the latter, then it is really of no matter at all, but it is too easy to dismiss it in this way, thus my reason for leaning towards the former interpretation and ascribing the meaning of *bios* to it just like with the life of politics and the life of contemplation.

reason, and theoretical reason.⁵¹ The fact that each of these divisions includes various activities might help us explain how both business and politics and the life of contemplation can be considered “practical,” as there are different subjects that need to be considered.

Aristotle’s emphasis on the importance of action for both the life of the philosopher and the life of the statesman is crucial. In light of the fact that in *Nicomachean Ethics* 1095a2-5 (section 3.2 above) Aristotle emphasized action rather than knowledge in *bios*, we can conclude that even with this contemplative life, in so far as it is a *bios*, the objective is not simply the accumulation of knowledge, but essentially includes action. As Aristotle remarks, some consider the contemplative life the only one suitable for the philosopher. Given his hierarchical conception of the sciences and reason, it might be argued that he holds this view (see also, for example, the description of the soul found in *On the Soul* 415a1-12 and the discussion in section 1.3 above). But it is not yet totally clear whether he does in fact hold this view.

3.4

ELABORATION OF PHILOSOPHICAL ACTIVITY

If at first in this chapter we encounter only a vague conception of philosophical activity as *bios*, it soon becomes clear that philosophical activity involves political science. Now

⁵¹ In *Nicomachean Ethics* 1139a1-17 Aristotle remarks that there are two divisions or parts of the soul, that which possesses reason and that which is irrational, and the part which possesses reason he divides again into two parts: the scientific and the calculative. Between these parts is it possible to see a parallel to the aforementioned branches of science which only makes sense as it goes on to form the understanding of those branches of science. Shortly after in *Nicomachean Ethics* 1139b16-17, Aristotle also notes that there are five states of the soul: art (or technical skill), knowledge, practical wisdom, philosophic wisdom, comprehension (intelligence), which follow a similar trajectory, and can be used to help expand upon the other terms to a certain extent.

if Aristotle holds contemplative life in higher regard than the political life, we must try to understand what this contemplative or theoretical life really is. The following passage from the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book X, Chapter 7, gives us some indication why Aristotle seems to hold the contemplative life above all others:

So if among excellent actions political and military actions are distinguished by nobility and greatness, and these are unpleasurable and aim at an end and are not desirable for their own sake, but the activity of the intellect, which is contemplative, seems both to be superior in worth and to aim at no end beyond itself, and to have its pleasure proper to itself (and this augments the activity), and the self-sufficiency, leisureliness, unweariedness (so far as this is possible for man), and all the other attributes ascribed to the blessed man are evidently those connected to with this activity, it follows that this will be the complete happiness of man if it be allowed a complete term of **life (βίου)** (for none of the attributes of happiness is incomplete). But such a **life (βίος)** would be too high for man; for it is not in so far as he is man that he will **live** so, but in so far as something divine is present in him; and by so much as this is superior to our composite nature is its activity superior to that which is the exercise of the other kind of excellence. If intellect is divine, then in comparison with man, the **life (βίος)** according to it is divine in comparison with human **life (βίον)**. But we must not follow those who advise us, being men, to think of human things, and, being mortal, of mortal things, but must, so far as we can, make ourselves immortal, and strain every nerve to **live (ζῆν)** in accordance with the best thing in us; for even if it be small in bulk, much more does it in power and worth surpass everything. This would seem, too, to be each man himself, since it is the authoritative and better part of him. It would be strange, then, if he were to choose not the **life (βίον)** of himself but that of something else. And what we said before will apply now; that which is proper to each thing is by nature best and most pleasant for each thing; for man, therefore, the **life (βίος)** according to intellect is best and pleasantest, since intellect more than anything else *is* man. This **life** therefore is also the happiest.⁵² (1177b15-1178a8)

⁵² Aristotle, "Nicomachean Ethics" in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, trans. W. D. Ross and J. O. Urmson, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 2: 1861-1862. See also "If then among practical pursuits displaying the virtues, politics and war stand out pre-eminent in nobility and grandeur, and yet they are unpleasurable, and directed to some further end, not chosen for their own sakes: whereas the activity of the intellect is felt to excel in serious worth, consisting as it does in contemplation, and to aim at no end beyond itself, and also to contain a pleasure peculiar to itself, and therefore augmenting its activity: and if accordingly the attributes of this activity are found to be self-sufficiency, leisureliness, such freedom from fatigue as is possible for man, and all the other attributes of blessedness: it follows that it is the activity of the intellect that constitutes complete human happiness—provided it be granted a complete span of **life (βίου)**, for nothing that belongs to happiness can be incomplete. Such a

In the beginning of this passage Aristotle brings up political activity, military activity, and activity of the intellect, all of which are excellent activities. The first two, however, are distinguished from the latter by virtue of the fact that they do not share in the characteristics he deems necessary for the best type of activity which is the last one, contemplation. This is a clear statement of Aristotle's view that the contemplative life is the only life suitable for the philosopher. What is interesting is that the disregard he shows for the first two kinds of activity almost seems at first to contradict what he said above about the political life being a form of *bios*. What is important to note in this instance is that Aristotle is not discussing these activities explicitly with regard to *bios*. It could be that Aristotle is here thinking that some aspects of these activities do not necessarily qualify in the fullest sense as forms of activities proper to *bios*, but more likely he is simply trying to more strongly make his case for the contemplative life being the best. Moreover, it is not clear if the military action of which he speaks in this passage is to be regarded as a part of the political life itself or of something else altogether. In any case, insofar as it would not be the first time Aristotle spoke pejoratively about something which is connected to *bios*, this is not necessarily a denial of a link between it and these actions (recall the discussion regarding the life of pleasure).

life (βίος) as this however will be higher than the human level; not in virtue of his humanity will a man achieve it, but in virtue of something within him that is divine; and by as much as this something is superior to his composite nature, by so much is its activity superior to the exercise of the other forms of virtue. If then the intellect is something divine in comparison with man, so is the **life (βίος)** of the intellect divine in comparison with human **life (βίον)**. Nor ought we to obey those who enjoin that a man should have man's thoughts and a mortal the thoughts of mortality, but we ought so far as possible to achieve immortality, and do all that man may to **live (ζῆν)** in accordance with the highest thing in him; for though this be small in bulk, in power and value it far surpasses all the rest. It may even be held that is the true self of each, inasmuch as it is the dominant and better part; and therefore it would be a strange thing if a man should choose to **live** not his own **life (βίον)** but the **life** of some other than himself. Moreover what was before will apply here also: that which is best and most pleasant for each creature is that which is proper to the nature of each; accordingly the **life (βίος)** of the intellect is the best and the pleasantest **life** for man, inasmuch as the intellect more than anything else is man; therefore this **life** will be the happiest." (1177b-1178a) Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 615/617/619.

What is clear from this passage though is that the contemplative life is the most fulfilling and that one can achieve complete happiness if it is pursued throughout one's whole life. Life in this instance is translated from the Ancient Greek βίου, which takes its root in *bios*. The connection to *bios* in this instance can be regarded in two manners, as on the one hand it may be recalled from the explanation in the introduction that the lexicon provides the sense of a "lifetime" as pertaining to *bios*. It may also be considered to be affirming the fact that the contemplative life (and therefore philosophical activity) is the preeminent form of *bios* (and that its activity is therefore the preeminent activity of *bios*).

Aristotle values the life of contemplation so much, that what he goes on to say implies that every effort should be made to maintain its activity (the activity of the intellect) as continuously as is possible. However, he admits that generally we cannot without interruption maintain the contemplative life and its activity. In fact, he seems to be saying that we would not even be able to participate in the contemplative life at all if it were not for the fact that we share in something divine. Only because humans have in themselves a divine part, is it even possible to pursue the activity of the intellect even a little bit.

When speaking about human life in this passage, Aristotle refers to *bios*. And when Aristotle speaks about the contemplative life in contrast with human life he also uses the word *bios*. This supports my reading of the various forms of *bios* in section 3.3 above. That is, the description of human life separately from the contemplative life indicates that the political life is a form of *bios* and that the contemplative life is also a form of *bios*. However, just as I stated at the end of section 3.3 that it might be tempting

to outright declare the contemplative life the only one suitable for the philosopher, this call to participate in the life of contemplation must be examined more closely. This is all the more obvious when considering the next line of the passage that says that we must strive to make ourselves immortal and not concern ourselves with human things, which I can imagine would be more the concerns of the political life.

Next Aristotle says that because we share in something divine, it only makes sense that we should vigorously pursue that part of ourselves as best as we can. Since it is the best of part of ourselves, and because it aims at no end other than itself, it would be counterintuitive not to do so. Moreover, even if it is only a small part, it is the best part of ourselves, sharing as it does in the divine, and since it is the intellect which really makes us who we are, it is in pursuing its activity that we are truly happiest. Another passage which follows shortly after this in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book X, Chapter 8, affirms this necessary connection to the divine:

For while the whole of the life (**βίος**) of the gods is blessed, and that of men too in so far as some likeness of such activity belongs to them [...] ⁵³
(1178b25-27)

The translation here uses the word “gods” rather than “divine,” but because they come from the same Ancient Greek word (**θεοῖς** and **θεῖόν**) it is fair to say that Aristotle is referring to the same thing. Both passages are concerned with the fact that the activity of the intellect is divine or belongs to the gods. In addition, the result of the activity of intellect is that the gods are blessed, or supremely happy. By virtue of the pursuit of the activity and insofar as humans can also participate in the activity such blessing also

⁵³ Aristotle, “Nicomachean Ethics” in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, trans. W. D. Ross and J. O. Urmson, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 2: 1863. See also “The whole of the **life (βίος)** of the gods is blessed, and that of man is so in so far as it contains some likeness to the divine activity.” (1178b) Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 623/625.

belongs to them. There is reference here in this passage to the whole of life, *bios*, and this could have twofold significance as it did in the last passage. The first comes from its sense of a lifetime, an explanation from the lexicon (as explained in the introduction); but the second sense of import is that it is a form of *bios* that is attributed to both the divine and to humans.

Since the divine and its activity, which overlaps with human activity, was not introduced in the account of *bios* developed in the second chapter, it is worth considering the following passage from the *Metaphysics*, Book XII, Chapter 7:

On such a principle, then, depend the heavens and the world of nature. And its **life (διαγωγῆ)** is such as the best which we enjoy, and enjoy for but a short time. For it is ever in this state (which we cannot be), since its actuality is also pleasure. (And therefore waking, perception, and thinking are most pleasant, and hopes and memories are so because of their reference to these.) And thought in itself deals with that which is best in itself, and that which is thought in the fullest sense with that which is best in the fullest sense. And thought thinks itself because it shares the nature of the object of thought; for it becomes an object of thought in coming into contact with and thinking its objects, so that thought and object of thought are the same. For that which is *capable* of receiving the object of thought, i.e. the substance, is thought. And it is *active* when it *possesses* this object. Therefore, the latter rather than the former is the divine element which thought seems to contain, and the act of contemplation is what is most pleasant and best. If, then, God is always in that good state in which we sometimes are, this compels our wonder; and if in a better this compels it yet more. And God *is* in a better state. And **life (ζωῆ)** also belongs to God; for the actuality of thought is **life (ζωῆ)**, and God is that actuality; and God's essential actuality is **life (ζωῆ)** most good and eternal. We say therefore that God is a **living being (ζῶον)**, eternal, most good, so that **life (ζωῆ)** and duration continuous and eternal belong to God;⁵⁴ (1072b14-31)

⁵⁴ Aristotle, "Metaphysics" in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, trans. W. D. Ross, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 2: 1695. See also "Such, then, is the first principle upon which depend the sensible universe and the world of nature. And its **life (διαγωγῆ)** is like the best which we temporarily enjoy. It must be in that state always (which for us is impossible), since its actuality is also pleasure. (And for this reason waking, sensation and thinking are most pleasant, and hopes and memories are pleasant because of them.) Now thinking in itself is concerned with that which is in itself best, and thinking in the highest sense with that which is in the highest sense best. And thought thinks itself through participation in the object of thought; for it becomes an object of thought by the act of apprehension and thinking, so that thought and the object of thought are the same, because that which is receptive of the

The first principle referred to by Aristotle at the beginning of this passage is the connection to the “divine, the “gods” of the previous passages; only in this case it is specifically the Aristotelian notion of “God” that is the subject. Everything in existence is dependent on God he states. But it is the following line that is most meaningful for our examination because it affirms that God’s life is the best, and that it is a life in which humans are able to partake. The main difference is that God is forever and continuously in that state of the contemplative life while humans are only for short periods of time. This instance of life comes from the Ancient Greek **διαγωγή**, which means a “passing of life,” or “a course of life,” but can also mean just a way of passing time according to the Greek-English lexicon, and these understandings of the term may or may not have any relation to *bios*. Therefore, it cannot be confirmed that Aristotle is referring to *bios* in this case.

For God, this activity of the intellect is two things: it is continuous time-wise and it is self-regarding. There is therefore a dual sense in which the activity is all-consuming. For humans, however, it is not clear that it is all-consuming in either manner as humans can participate in it for but a short while and because it is not by definition the same thing as the activity of the intellect available to humans which is unable to deal wholly with itself. The all-consuming state that it is for God and with which God is preoccupied is the activity of contemplation which is here described as thought in itself dealing with what is

object of thought, *i.e.* essence, is thought. And it actually functions when it possesses this object. Hence it is actuality rather than potentiality that is held to be the divine possession of rational thought, and its active contemplation is that which is most pleasant and best. If, then, the happiness which God always enjoys is as great as that which we enjoy sometimes, it is marvelous; and if it is greater, this is still more marvelous. Nevertheless it is so. Moreover, **life (ζωή)** belongs to God. For the actuality of thought is **life (ζωή)**, and God is that actuality; and the essential actuality of God is **life (ζωή)** most good and eternal. We hold, then, that God is a **living being (ζῶον)**, eternal, most good; and therefore **life (ζωή)** and a continuous eternal existence belong to God; for that is what God is.” (1072b) Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. H. Tredennick (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962), 149/151.

best in itself. Given all of these superlatives one might wonder with what it is that thought is actually concerned. The answer to this is that it is concerned with itself. This only really works because of the nature of thought which is uniquely able to be considered as both thinking of something and being that something about which it is thinking (both the subject and the object simultaneously). It is important to note though that it is only when thought (subject) is thinking of thought (object) that it is considered active, and only in this active sense is it the act of contemplation required for God to be achieving the best state. Moreover, if it were to turn out that that thought thinking itself, which is God, is not the best, then whatever it is with which it is concerned would in fact just be that which is the best.⁵⁵

This first part of this passage sets up a clear understanding of Aristotle's view of God, as the activity of the intellect, thought thinking itself. It is though really this latter part of the passage that is significant for this examination for what he ties into this understanding. For none of this elaboration on the activity of the intellect really contradicts what was verified about philosophical activity and the life of contemplation in section 3.3. Here though, Aristotle's statement "And life also belongs to God; for the actuality of thought is life," is really quite momentous and seems to set back the understanding heretofore conveyed regarding the life of contemplation. This is because of the fact that both of these instances of life in this statement are translated from Ancient Greek words that take their root from *zoe*. Furthermore, two more instances of life swiftly follow which are also translated from Ancient Greek words that take their root from *zoe*. That is a total of four references to *zoe* in quick succession that all seem to pertain to

⁵⁵ A *reductio ad absurdum* argument is employed here to show how God can only be what it can be by nature of what it is. That is, it is the best because of what it is, and if it were to be something else, then that would be the best, but that would be absurd if the first view is indeed the best, and so therefore it must be.

God, that is, the activity of the intellect, and therefore the purely contemplative life. This stands in stark contrast to the fact that the life of contemplation was considered a form of *bios* in the passages from section 3.3 and even in the first two passages examined in this section.

It is obviously problematic that this activity at which the philosopher aims, contemplation, in its purest sense, loses all connection to *bios* when fulfilled in such a perfect manner. As far as the activity's nature is concerned, there is still a strong emphasis on action and not just some static apprehending of knowledge. The question with which we are faced then is how exactly is it possible for something like this contemplative life to be considered properly relating to *bios*? To that end, we must now turn to an examination of the constitution of philosophical activity—the activity of *bios*.

3.5

THE CONSTITUTION OF PHILOSOPHICAL ACTIVITY

It has been shown that philosophical activity (and here I am using “philosophical activity” in a broad sense) includes at least both political activity and the activity of the intellect. While reconciling political activity with *bios* is a relatively straightforward affair, the activity of the intellect elicits confusion because it is apparently related to *bios* in the form of the contemplative life, but is truly and fully implemented only when considered as God, which has its relation to *zoe*. As there are no other passages where Aristotle explains “what the activity of *bios* is” with the same directness that is seen in *Politics* 1254a5-9 (section 1.6 above) where he explains “what *bios* is” we must rely on the enlightenment of the passages of sections 3.3 and 3.4. While through the examination

of these we have been able to identify some attributes specific to each of these two activities, we still lack an account of how these activities are properly pursued. So, while much of the above might be viewed as being related to the constitution of the activity insofar as it has informed us further, the specific objective of this section is to get at this process, which will in turn resolve the question of how this activity of the intellect at which Aristotle clearly prefers we aim, can seem to be so uniquely related to *zoe* and yet be the most important form of *bios*.

In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book IV, Chapter 8, Aristotle provides direct insight into the structure of these activities of *bios* beyond what we have already seen. He writes:

Since **life (βίω)** includes rest (**ἀναπαύσεως**) as well, and in this is included leisure and amusement, there seems here also to be a kind of intercourse (**ὀμιλία**) which is tasteful; there is such a thing as saying (**λέγειν**)—and again listening (**ἀκούειν**) to—what one should and as one should. The kind of people one is speaking or listening to will also make a difference. Evidently here also there is both an excess and a deficiency as compared with the mean.⁵⁶ (1127b33-1128a5)

This passage is clearly about *bios* but there are divergences in the translations that make it more challenging to determine what Aristotle is saying. The first thing that becomes apparent is that “rest” (according to the translation by Ross) or “relaxation” (according to the translation by Rackham) forms a necessary part of *bios*. I say that rest or relaxation forms a part of *bios* and not an activity of *bios* per se because it is not entirely clear if that is how it should be interpreted. It may well be an activity because in one sense it does

⁵⁶ Aristotle, “Nicomachean Ethics” in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, trans. W. D. Ross and J. O. Urmson, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 2: 1780. See also “But **life (βίω)** also includes relaxation, and one form of relaxation is playful conversation. Here, too, we feel that there is a certain standard of good taste in social behaviour, and a certain propriety in the sort of things we say and in our manner of saying them, and also in the sort of things we allow to be said to us; and it will also concern us whether those in whose company we speak or to whom we listen conform to the same rules of propriety. And it is clear that in these matters too it is possible either to exceed or to fall short of the mean.” (1127b-1128a) Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 245.

seem to imply doing something i.e. resting or relaxing. Just doing something, however, seems to be very basic and not enough to qualify, given what we have so far said about philosophical activity as an activity of *bios*. Rather, I think it is better to interpret this “rest” or “relaxation” in a manner like the discussion of sleep in *Nicomachean Ethics* 1098b30-1099a16 (section 2.4 above), where it is recognized as a state. It is important, however, that we do not simply conflate this sense of rest with sleep. For relaxation does denote a more active state out of which the one doing the relaxing in fact seems to gain something. Additionally, sleeping, while indeed an activity of some kind, would seem to have its function align more with the explanation given above for *zoe* insofar as it is an activity common to plants and animals as well as humans and does not lead directly to any apparent end in itself. The distinction between rest and sleep is compounded if relaxation or rest (from the Greek *anapausa* wherein *ana* means “from” and *pausa* “to stop”) is considered to be a space in which the activity of *bios* truly has room to grow. This idea of it being a space is reinforced by the fact that it is used as an umbrella term which Aristotle divides into subcategories, something that would seem simply not possible with sleep.

The subcategories that Aristotle divides “rest” into are translated as “leisure and amusement” (Ross) or “playful conversation” (Rackham), and these give us new information about the activity of *bios*. “Leisure and amusement,” however, are still very broad notions themselves, and they do not really unpack “rest” in a satisfactory manner. We might be able to interpret them better if we consider them in relation to “playful conversation” or “social behavior” that finds its equivalent in Ross’ translation as “tasteful intercourse” and in which words an action is specifically elicited.

The best explanation of what playful conversation is can be drawn from a more general reading of the text and attention to the nuances in the different translations. To be clear, playful conversation would seem to be more appropriately considered like tasteful intercourse despite not lining up in the translations that way, and in this way, I recognize them. If we can glean a meaning from a combination of the translations it is that Aristotle says playful conversation or tasteful intercourse is a form of social behaviour which maintains necessarily a certain standard. It is translated from the Ancient Greek **ὁμιλία** (*homilia*), which means a being or living together, intercourse, to converse, or to have dealings with another.⁵⁷ I prefer Rackham's translation of *homilia* by "playful conversation," although neither this nor Ross' "tasteful intercourse" is a completely satisfactory rendering of the Greek. On the one hand, playful conversation does suggest an activity that is somewhat frivolous, while on the other hand the idea of play does also indicate the activity is not oriented towards some other goal.

Since the notion of *homilia* as playful conversation plays a crucial role in my argument, let us try to have a closer look at this notion. *Homilia* clearly must occur between multiple parties as one would normally expect this to be implicitly necessary; but more importantly one should recognize that the conversation reflects certain conventions and norms in both manner and content. In *homilia*, two skills are necessary: the ability to speak of course, but also the ability to listen, and the ability to do both of these things with regard to both manner and content. In *homilia* it is also imperative that attention be paid to those with whom one is conversing, since according to different discussion partners there will be differences both in manner and content of the conversation depending on the persons involved. Now all the discussion surrounding

⁵⁷ See Liddell and Scott's Abridged Greek-English Lexicon.

manner and content stems from Aristotle's concern with the achievement of the mean, as becomes clear in final statement of this passage. Therefore, *homilia* that is presently being discussed as a key action of *bios*, must reflect the mean in order to be properly understood as an action of *bios*. *Homilia* that exceeds or falls short of the mean would seem to render it ineligible for being considered a proper action applicable to the multiple forms of *bios*.⁵⁸ I believe that this action, *homilia*, properly characterized, can be translated as speech. And, speech of course is one of the key elements in Arendt's interpretation of *bios* that we set out to verify in the first place.⁵⁹

This reading can be reinforced if we look at how the achievement of the mean in speech is shaped by the participants of the discussion. Aristotle makes some important assertions in another passage from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book IX, Chapter 9:

Now if he were a solitary, **life (βίος)** would be hard for him; for by oneself it is not easy to be continuously active; but with others and towards others it is easier. With others therefore his activity will be more continuous, being in itself pleasant, as it ought to be for the man who is blessed.⁶⁰ (1170a4-9)

⁵⁸ It is worth noting that Aristotle reaffirms the importance of playful conversation, stating shortly after the previous passage, "But relaxation and amusement are thought to be a necessary element in **life (βίω)**." (1128b3). In addition to this being another instance where the Ancient Greek word for life used in the passage takes its root from *bios*, affirming on one level the importance of the activity, what becomes apparent is not just that he believes these matters create a necessary space and actuating method of pursuing the activities of *bios*, but also that he affirms their intrinsically bound and connected nature. See Aristotle, "Nicomachean Ethics" in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, trans. W. D. Ross and J. O. Urmson, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 2: 1780. See also "Yet relaxation and amusement seem to be a necessary element of **life (βίω)**." (1128b) Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 249. See also *Nicomachean Ethics* 1108b9-14 and 1127b2-3 for more passages that affirm the connection between conversation and *bios*.

⁵⁹ See the passages of *Politics* 1253a3-18 that includes "man is the only animal who has the gift of speech" for further emphasis on the uniqueness of this attribute and therefore of the reasonability in asserting that this is very much what Aristotle has in mind as an action of *bios* since both specifically relate to humans.

⁶⁰ Aristotle, "Nicomachean Ethics" in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, trans. W. D. Ross and J. O. Urmson, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 2: 1849. See also "Now a solitary man has a hard **life (βίος)**, for it is not easy to keep up continuous activity by oneself; it is easier to do so with the aid of and in relation to other people. The good man's activity therefore, which is pleasant in itself, will be more continuous if practised with friends; and the **life** of the supremely happy should be continuously pleasant." (1170a) Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 561.

This passage begins by describing the life of a solitary man as a hard life, a difficult life. The term here for "life" in the Ancient Greek is *bios*. Interestingly the life of this solitary is difficult but not, it seems, impossible. It is tacitly acknowledged that there is room to pursue a solitary life—a *bios*, or form of life—even though it does indeed seem to be a poor option, since, as Aristotle states, it is not easy by oneself to be continuously active.

If we apply to this passage the account of *bios* as consisting in excellent, internal or external human function-fulfilling activity that directly results in the ultimate end of happiness that we developed in the second chapter, we are reminded that the activity of *bios* can be both internal as well as external. By internal I mean that the activity is free of external encumbrances. That such action can be internal and that in this passage Aristotle seems to acknowledge the plausibility of one leading a *bios* on their own are two facts that seem to go hand in hand.

So, then what does all of this mean for the activities of *bios*, political activity and the activity of the intellect? There are several things we must consider. With regard to external action in particular, it does not seem too complicated to relate the notion of *homilia* (speech) and political activity. But it is less obvious how *homilia* (speech) is related to the activity of the intellect. Since intellection seems to be a kind of internal action—even a kind of solitary action—there is the question of how speech is connected since it is with that action that we are presently concerned.

A potential solution can be found in the manner in which someone pursues a dialogue with oneself, imagining the voices of more than one party to the conversation; as one might prepare for a "real" conversation or debate with others in trying to imagine what they might say, all in preparation for the day when the activity can be applied with

respect to others.⁶¹ Moreover, this notion of a dialogue with oneself presents a way in which the isolated activity of the intellect is in fact accessible to humans as an activity of *bios*, as Aristotle says that it is. This, however, does not by itself present a complete solution to the problem of the activity of intellect being related to *zoe* in its truest sense.

Despite leaving the door open for the possibility that the activities of *bios* might be pursued internally, Aristotle goes on to say in this passage that they are undertaken more easily “with others and towards others.” These “others” as they are called in the Ross translation of this passage are the participants in *homilia*. The use of the term “others” is not very enlightening. However, Rackham’s translation of the passage is much more helpful, since he explains that this activity will be more “continuous if practised with friends.”⁶² “Friends” represents a much more precise description of the participants of *homilia* (speech) than just “others” or “other people,” and it is crucially important. That the translation by Ross omits the mention of friends might be explained as a way to show how the activities of *bios* may be more widely and easily pursued by everyone in most circumstances, and that with friends it is just possible to imagine it being a much smoother process.

Further, it must be noted that such activity is pleasant in itself and therefore, when the activity is pursued continuously, one’s life is also continuously pleasant (traits which are, interestingly enough, shared with the pure activity of God who is intellect).

⁶¹ This is not even an entirely novel idea. Richard McKeon, in examining Aristotle’s conception of language, refers to the “discourse of the mind” on multiple occasions. See pages 194, 202, 203 of “Aristotle’s Conception of Language and the Arts of Language,” *Classical Philology* 41, no. 4 (1946) and pages 22, 31, 32 of “Aristotle’s Conception of Language and the Arts of Language (Concluded),” *Classical Philology* 42, no. 1 (1947). Moreover, he refers to and focuses much of his discussion on how language pertains to all three branches of science: the theoretic, the practical, and the productive, which means that it is certainly possible to discuss the contemplative life as incorporating speech.

⁶² Rackham notes in his translation that the last four words are implied by the context, but the words for friends found in *NE* 1169b27 (**φίλων**) and *NE* 1170a4 (**φίλου**) can be seen to inform this decision.

Moreover, the pleasantness that results from the activities and the life that is pursuing the activities are even more intrinsically connected. For Aristotle states that those pursuing the life are supremely happy or blessed, and therefore their activities are pleasant. It must therefore also be the case that because of the effort made pursuing the activity that their lives are happy and blessed. This reaffirms the account of *bios* that I offered at the end of the second chapter; there we saw that it leads to happiness, and it seems especially to be the case when it is shared with friends (who are required for the full implementation *homilia*) that the activity is pursued. And, if it is easiest to pursue the activity with friends, life will also be easier to enjoy in this way. It follows therefore that life will also be more pleasant because of the friends.

We have only seen one single passage which asserts that friends are the main participants in *homilia* and so it is important to delve a little deeper into the matter and see if yet another connection between *bios* and friends can be found to reinforce this view. Let us look at another passage from Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book VIII, Chapter 1:

After what we have said, a discussion of friendship would naturally follow, since it is an excellence or implies excellence, and is besides most necessary with a view to **living (βίον)**. For without friends no one would choose to **live (ζῆν)**, though he had all other goods.⁶³ (1155a3-5)

This is an interesting passage and not least because at first glance it contains a reference to *bios* and friends which suggests that the view that I have laid out so far—that it is *homilia* understood as speech which allows for the pursuit of the activities of *bios*—is

⁶³ Aristotle, “Nicomachean Ethics” in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, trans. W. D. Ross and J. O. Urmson, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 2: 1825. See also “Our next business after this will be to discuss Friendship. For friendship is a virtue, or involves virtue; and also it is one of the most indispensable requirements of **life (βίον)**. For no one would choose to **live (ζῆν)** without friends, but possessing all other good things.” (1155a) Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 451.

correct. The Greek term for life *zoe* also appears in this passage such that it might threaten to undermine the interpretation I am proposing. I will show how this is not the case. That is, I can take account of this fact by recognizing its context in the passage and in my overall interpretation.

The first part of the passage introduces the idea that friendship must be examined because it is an excellence or implies excellence, or else a virtue or involves virtue. If we look at this claim through the lens of the account of *bios* I have been constructing, it becomes clear that it does fit well with the conception of *bios* consisting in excellent activity. This is because, the activity's excellence is supported and strengthened by virtue of its intrinsic relationship with friendship, another excellence. The fact that friendship is an excellence or a virtue, however, is not what deserves the most attention. It is the following assertion in this passage which is of the greatest significance to our current study: Aristotle says that friendship "is besides most necessary with a view to living" (in the Ross translation). The fact that friendship is an excellence makes it all the greater an instrument for life; but even if it were not intrinsically an excellence and were instead only some sort of decent thing, Aristotle's assertion here shows that it would still be a crucial requirement for life (**βίον**). All of this supports what we said above with regard to the previous passage from *Nicomachean Ethics* 1170a4-9. First of all, the participants of *homilia* (speech) can be called friends, as the participants positively are in most cases by virtue of the fact that friends are a necessity for *bios*. Secondly, the excellence of friendship involves pleasantness. Therefore, those involved with the correct pursuit of *bios* are blessed or supremely happy.

The second part of this passage, where reference is made to *zoe* does not undermine my argument. It only reinforces the importance of friendship for the activity of *bios*. Aristotle states, "For without friends no one would choose to live, though he had all other goods." It does not matter if one were to possess an entire array of good things, if friendship were not to be found amongst those good things, that one would not choose life.⁶⁴

Since the Greek word for life in the last sentence of the passage is *zoe*, it would seem that we should interpret Aristotle's argument as follows: one would not choose to live a life of *zoe*, as it were, if one were lacking friendship. This actually shows just how strongly Aristotle believes friendship is for *bios*. This is because if one would not choose to even lead a *zoe* without friends, then it is hardly any more possible to imagine that one would lead a *bios* without friends when such a thing is implicitly demanded. This highlights how the connection between those involved in *homilia* is very important. The participants in the conversation must be embedded in a particular kind of relationship.⁶⁵ They must be friends whose relations with one another observe the mean, and who provide the best qualities of speakers and listeners required for *homilia*.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ There are many instances where friendship is discussed in context with *bios*, affirming the importance of the connection between the two. See for example *Nicomachean Ethics* 1097b, 1100b, 1108b, 1162a, 1167b, 1169b, 1170b, and 1172a.

⁶⁵ Aristotle states that there are three kinds of friendship (see *Nicomachean Ethics* 1156a6-21). As they are laid out in a hierarchy not unlike that which he presents of the soul or the types of reason, one might want to assume that the perfect form of friendship is the only applicable one for *homilia*. It seems, however, that it must be allowed that as long as the characteristics of the conversation meet the necessary criteria that any of the kinds of friendship would suffice. Certainly, if there is an allowance for one to be able to pursue *homilia* on one's own, we cannot exclude the lesser forms of friendship. Nonetheless, it is fair to say that the more perfect the friendship, the more easily these conditions are satisfied and therefore the more easily the activities of *bios* are pursued.

⁶⁶ Furthermore, if there is any doubt as to the crucial role for *bios* that Aristotle believes is played by friends, one need only read *Politics* 1252a1-6, the very first passage of that work, which emphasizes the community and the importance it plays with a view to the good. It, of course, hardly seems possible to imagine any realistic community that would not involve friends in some form or another.

My examination of this passage has attempted to show the importance of friends for *homilia* and ultimately for *bios*. The question that remains then is how the activity of the intellect can be a form of *bios* despite being related to *zoe* in its truest sense. Despite Aristotle saying that *bios* may be pursued internally and therefore on one's own, it has become clear that it is not the preferred method.⁶⁷ Since it has now become apparent that one would not choose to lead a life without friends even if possessing all other goods, and regardless of what those goods are, one would not rest simply in solitary conversation but rather make a concerted effort to engage with others. It seems that the option of living a solitary life is only an exception open to those who have no other choice given their circumstances in the choosing and whereabouts of potential friends, so that they are not left in a position where it would seem to such an individual that it is not in fact worth leading a life at all.

Homilia is not meant to be understood in itself as the activity of *bios* but rather a form of action that is crucially connected to the activities of *bios* such that they would in fact not even qualify as such without it. Nor is Aristotle to be understood as saying that just any old form of talking, jesting, speaking, and such manner of activity of just any variety are to be considered as even part of *bios*.⁶⁸ Rather, it is this notion of *homilia* pursued between friends and specifically understood in relation to the political life and the contemplative life that is considered an activity of *bios* insofar as it forms a way and gives space by and through which that political activity and contemplative activity can

⁶⁷ See A. W. H. Adkins, "Theoria versus Praxis in the Nicomachean Ethics and the Republic," *Classical Philology* 73, no. 4 (1978): 304. Adkins states that "Aristotle counsels that choice of friends which most produce the contemplation of God." I am therefore not alone in suggesting that at this highest level of activity that we attempt to approach, does Aristotle insist on the importance of friendship.

⁶⁸ Quite the opposite in fact, as I can imagine that *homilia* and in particular the kind of conversation that applies to one who is carrying on a conversation with oneself as proceeding from one point to another by way of a refutation of the first point—a form of dialectic. It is interesting then that Aristotle says that dialectic can be especially useful for the study of the philosophical sciences. See *Topics* 101a25-101b4.

actually begin to occur and take shape. This is all the more evident in the way that he frames *homilia* as needing to meet a certain mean, aided by having the proper participants, which is not unlike the way that those pursuing political and contemplative activity must be considered to be acting well. The fluidity that necessarily forms the character of *homilia* inclines political and contemplative activity towards action and not only the apprehending of knowledge. Moreover, this is how it is possible to see how to reconcile Aristotle's understanding of the activity of the intellect as relating to *zoe*.

The activity of the intellect, insofar as it refers to the life of contemplation and pertains to *bios*, clearly cannot be pursued in isolation. Rather, there must be a form of the activity of the intellect for which speech provides the means by which it is not only differentiated from God but implicitly makes it a form of *bios*. That is to say that the contemplative life as a form of *bios* for humans is different from the activity of the intellect of Aristotle's God (which, as seen in *Metaphysics* 1072b14-1073a31, has no connection to *bios*, but only *zoe*). There are at least three reasons for this: God is thought thinking itself, meaning that the activity as such is unavailable to humans as we are not just thought. Further, thought thinking itself takes place instantaneously or timelessly, while for humans such activity necessarily occurs through time. Secondly, that God is thought thinking itself implies that speech is unavailable to God, meaning that it is uniquely available to humans. And thirdly, there is the difference in being between humans and gods, illustrated in part by the difference in these activities.⁶⁹ Put another way, the difference between these activities of God and of humans might be understood as a difference between intellection which is intuitive and *dianoia*, or discursive

⁶⁹ I alluded to this distinction in being already in section 1.2 above, noting Aristotle would have considered gods separately from other natural bodies with life: humans, animals, and plants.

reasoning, which follows a process like a dialogue.⁷⁰ This makes even more sense recalling that *bios* aims primarily at action and not knowledge. A dialogue is more of an action than is the intellection of thought thinking itself, which has knowledge as its aim. Furthermore, we must not confuse the ability to pursue this action internally as an equation with the intellection with God. We can pursue the activity internally but generally only for short periods of time because we truly need others in order to pursue the activity, through the medium of speech, in order for it to be a form of *bios*.⁷¹

3.6

CONCLUSION TO CHAPTER THREE

The examination of this chapter began with the question of the constitution of the activity of *bios* as might fit with the account of *bios* as consisting in excellent, internal or external human function-fulfilling activity that directly results in the ultimate end of happiness. The only activity that we had been given as a possible candidate was philosophical activity, but of course there was the question of whether it could even be properly considered an activity of *bios* or whether it was more aptly an activity of *zoe*. The first step of our investigation determined that the ambiguous use of the term by Aristotle was in no way a detriment to considering philosophical activity as an activity of *bios*, and so it

⁷⁰ See for support “Therefore a man ought also to share his friend’s consciousness of his existence, and this is attained by their living together and by conversing and communicating their thoughts to each other; for this is the meaning of living together as applied to human beings, it does not mean merely feeding in the same place, as it does when applied to cattle.” (1170b) Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 565.

⁷¹ Nancy Sherman argues “that self-knowledge requires external dialogue and audience” noting that Aristotle says that we live with friends to “share in argument and thought” (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1170b11-12). See “Aristotle on Friendship and the Shared Life,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 47, no. 4 (1987): 612. This reinforces the connection I draw between the internal and external dialogue of the contemplative life and the fact that it cannot be pursued entirely on one’s own.

became necessary to elaborate upon what it is in which consists philosophical activity as it relates to *bios*.

Initially it seemed that the leading branch of philosophy for Aristotle was political science. Our investigation led us to the realization that while Aristotle might consider political activity to be a branch of philosophy, he distinguishes it from another kind of philosophical activity—the activity of the intellect. So, both the activity of the intellect and political activity, sharing some important traits, can be considered activities of *bios*. It is clear that Aristotle is inclined to give priority to the activity of the intellect in contemplation; he thinks that it is the best activity to pursue (and in this there is a clear disagreement with Arendt who denies this prioritization). In the course of examining the life of contemplation, it was discovered that in its purest form in God it relates to *zoe*. We therefore needed to see how it could still possibly fit with the notion of *bios*.

Consequently, we have investigated the framework in which the activities are even possible. The framework consists of a space, a form of rest and relaxation, wherein *homilia* (speech), an activity in its own right and intrinsically connected to political activity and the activity of the intellect, can occur. And when *homilia* (speech) is implemented between friends, insofar as it pursues the more practical results of political activity or the more independent formulations of the activity of the intellect, it is possible for all of the conditions of *bios* to be fulfilled.

These two sorts of activities can be considered excellent; one of which can be implemented internally (when contemplation occurs in isolation) but also externally (when contemplation specifically incorporates speech), and another (political activity) that is external. Both of these kinds of activities are fulfilling of our human function and

result in our ultimate happiness. Moreover, these activities are by nature the very opposite of static and are concerned foremost with action. By virtue of the way through which they are largely pursued, the form of action that is speech, we have those characteristics that are uniquely human and allow for the forms of *bios*. A *bios* conceived in this way is not available to Aristotle's God, because this God is pure contemplation and does not have the community or ability to communicate in the way that humans do, which is the crucial, differentiating factor of the activities of *bios*.⁷²

While Arendt clearly disagrees with Aristotle's prioritization of the contemplative life over the political life (or the *vita contemplativa* over the *vita activa* as she calls it), it is clear that this distinction between these two forms of life is found in Aristotle as Arendt claims. This fact does not really undermine my objective, however, which was not to determine whether one of these views should be prioritized over the other, but rather to confirm that Arendt's interpretation of *bios* can be found in Aristotle, distinct from *zoe*. If her interpretation of *bios* from Aristotle is a human life "whose appearance and disappearance constitutes worldly events . . . which can be told as a story, establish a biography . . . [and] is a kind of *praxis*"⁷³ which consists of action and speech, it certainly seems to have a solid foundation in Aristotle. For to *bios*, it has been determined, belongs political activity which does indeed consist of actions, and in which speech plays a particularly significant role.

⁷² In recognizing the crucial role of *homilia* or speech occurring between friends for *bios*, I am not conflating the political life and the contemplative life, because, as is acknowledged in section 3.3 above, we can speculate as to the subject matter of these thoughts and conversations, but Aristotle does not explicitly state what they are. So, the content of these two forms of life need not overlap as a pluralist account might present. Furthermore, I am not advocating for an intellectualist understanding of Aristotle's view of the best life, as it certainly cannot be by virtue of the inclusion of speech. It is only that Aristotle uses the life of God as an objective towards which we should strive.

⁷³ *The Human Condition*, 97.

Furthermore, the connection between *zoe* and labor was made evident in Chapter One. Therefore, there is a clearly established distinction in Aristotle between both terms—*bios* and *zoe*—that aligns with Arendt's perceived distinction between labor and action. And, though not the primary aim of this examination, it is significant that while searching for a foundation for Arendt's interpretation in Aristotle, I discerned that even contemplative activity must share in the character of action and speech if it is to be considered an activity of *bios* (which it clearly is according to Aristotle).

CONCLUSION

I set out to investigate the distinction between *bios* and *zoe*—two Ancient Greek words for life—which was articulated in the modern era by Hannah Arendt in her work, *The Human Condition*. According to Arendt, Aristotle distinguishes between an understanding of *zoe* as referring to cyclical, biological life, and *bios* as referring to that which can form a biography because it is a kind of *praxis*, which she interprets as action and speech. I examined Arendt’s account in light of Aristotle’s writings.

In the first chapter, I set out a general account of *zoe* and *bios* according to Aristotle. What we discovered was that much of Aristotle’s use of *zoe* supports Arendt’s account of *zoe* as cyclical and biological life. We then arrived at one passage which included the term *bios* and corresponded to the passage upon which Arendt based her interpretation of *bios*. While this passage provided a relatively solid foundation for Arendt’s understanding of the distinction between *bios* and *zoe*, it did not provide a sufficiently detailed account of *bios* in Aristotle to fully back up her claims. Further examination of *bios* remained to be undertaken.

In the second chapter, I pursued a more detailed explanation of *bios* for Aristotle and arrived at an account which specified excellent, external or internal, human function-fulfilling activity that directly results in the ultimate end of happiness. This more detailed picture of *bios* affirms the initial understanding of *bios* which had been worked out in the first chapter but left us with one outstanding question. Despite it being clear that *bios* consists of activity, the nature of this activity was only broadly sketched out. An indication of how we might better understand the activity of *bios* was found in the idea that it represents some kind of philosophical activity.

In the third chapter, I began by trying to figure out how it could be that philosophical activity might pertain both to *zoe* and to *bios*. It was determined that philosophical activity is a broad term and can refer to different branches of science that are related both to *bios* and *zoe*. Substantiating this claim was the idea that there are three prominent forms of *bios*: the life of pleasure, the political life, and the contemplative life. The life of pleasure is largely disregarded by Aristotle. In his view, it is not an ideal form of life. This could be because it does not fulfill the idea of ending in action as something like political science, which, as we saw, was a form of philosophical activity and must be related to the political life. In comparison to the life of pleasure, that form of life is much more capable of achieving excellent action, but it is really the third form, the contemplative life, for which Aristotle says we should strive. In its extreme, this form of life, it is interesting to note, is the pure activity of the intellect, which Aristotle also labels God—thought thinking itself—and relates to *zoe*. In this sense, it is unavailable to humans, but rather than being a confounding problem in our search for the activity of *bios*, it instead proves to show a way to solidify the account. Primarily, this is because though Aristotle notes that we should strive for it as much as we are able, he recognizes that it is not something achievable by humans all the time. This means that crucially there must be a differentiating characteristic that allows for the contemplative life to be considered a form of *bios*.

This characteristic, we find out, arises out of a space of relaxation (*anapausa*), which allows for *homilia* (speech). Properly understood, *homilia* (speech) must be in accordance with the mean and ideally pursued between friends. We can then rework our account of *bios* to include this and say that it consists in excellent, external or internal,

human function-fulfilling activity that involves speech and action and directly results in the ultimate end of happiness.⁷⁴ We might also say that the ideal for humans is to pursue the contemplative life as it is this that fulfills all of the parameters of the account of *bios*.⁷⁵

My examination of the passages where Aristotle discusses *bios* and *zoe* confirms the legitimacy of Arendt's interpretation of *bios* as a form of *praxis* involving speech and action.⁷⁶ This is not to say that the trajectory Arendt follows on the basis of her understanding of the distinction between *bios* and *zoe* reproduces Aristotle's thought. I assert only that Arendt's reading of the fundamental differences between *bios* and *zoe* is valid. Arendt's account of the natures of *bios* and *zoe* allows her to distinguish between labor and action in what she refers to as the *vita activa*. Further, the focus she puts on action and speech in one particular *bios*, that is, the political life, does not entail that they cannot be part of the contemplative life. The contemplative life, as another form of *bios*, must, in fact, include speech and action. Moreover, since Aristotle suggests that the ideal is for humans to pursue the contemplative life, Arendt's claim that it has been given priority in relation to the political life is valid. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to

⁷⁴ This account might seem somewhat unwieldy, but it must be noted that to do away with any of these parameters leaves us lacking a clear understanding of this activity and it is for this reason that I do not try to summarize it any further. This full account, it must be noted, applies appropriately to Aristotle's best form of life—the contemplative life—but elements of the account can certainly be found in the other forms of life that he delineates (i.e. the life of enjoyment and the political life).

⁷⁵ This is the ideal account of *bios* according to Aristotle, but is this to be understood as “the good life?” Each form of life, *bios* and *zoe*, are required by humans and therefore to compare them to determine which one might be better is inappropriate. If there is a best form of life at which we should aim it is the one that pursues the philosophical activity of *bios*. It is notable then that when Aristotle makes his most direct references to “the good life” it is εὖ ζῆν (see for example just some of the instances in *Nicomachean Ethics* 1098b and 1140a and also *Politics* 1280b and 1326b) which takes its root from the Ancient Greek word *zoe*. But if we recall that the perfect life is the life of God which is also *zoe*, there does not seem to be the same kind of contradiction. Insofar as we try to approach something like this life of God as best as we are able, it is perhaps the good life available to us.

⁷⁶ Since this examination focuses on the distinction between *bios* and *zoe*, it may appear as though the claim is being made that they are somehow fully separable. This is not the case. Indeed, without life in the sense of *zoe*, there can be no *bios* for any individual or group.

evaluate the implications of Arendt's reading of the history of the relations between the contemplative and political lives.⁷⁷

⁷⁷ As was suggested in my introduction, any study that can shed even a bit of light on the complex term that is "life" is a worthwhile endeavor. In this case, the fact that speech, and therefore a form of action, is crucial for each of the three lives that Aristotle describes in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, is probably the most important. This is the case especially insofar as it alters the traditional understanding of the contemplative life. Significantly, however, this point helps to illuminate the difference between human life and the life of God, as well to shed light on the fact that it is difficult to distinguish between the mental capacities of humans. Just as Aristotle lists different intellectual virtues that each have unique responsibilities, similarly, Arendt will also list different capacities that form the *vita contemplativa*: thinking, willing, and judging. In the end, perhaps it is fair to say that the similarities between Aristotle and Arendt's thought are stronger than any differences that might exist. A definitive answer to this question though deserves a thesis of its own.

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