**Abstract:** Recently, scholars have disagreed over how to understand the telos, or goal, of citizen life in Aristotle’s *Politics*. In Book VII, Aristotle claims that philosophy is a virtue necessary for a life of leisure. But the sketch of the educational program that we get in book VIII does not include philosophy; it is focused almost entirely on music. This has led some scholars to argue that a life of leisure spent appreciating music and the other arts is the telos of citizen life. I argue that although we do not have a program for philosophical education in the *Politics* Book VIII as we have it, the telos of citizen life is philosophical activity in its narrowest sense of theoria.

**The Telos of Citizen Life:**
**Music and Philosophy in Aristotle’s Ideal Polis**

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I

In the *Politics*, Aristotle presents a teleological conception of the ideal *polis*. The polis is arranged with a view to promoting some *telos*, or purpose. And a city is excellent, he claims, when its individual citizens are excellent (VII.13.1332a33-35). The legislator in his ideal city ought to “make it his business to determine how and through what practices men become good, and what the end of the best life is,” (VII.14.1333a14-16). If according to the text, the end of life requires leisure and leisured activity (*scholē* and *diagôgê*, respectively, see VII.3 and VII.15 for example). But what is the best use of leisure time? Two candidates emerge. Aristotle claims that philosophy is a virtue necessary for leisure (VII.15.1334a22-25). But Aristotle also claims that music is a noble use of leisure time (See, for example, VIII.5.1339a25-26, VIII.5.1339b13, VIII.7.1341b37). So what is the *telos*, or end, of life for citizens of Aristotle’s ideal city: philosophy or music? What is his characteristic activity? Will he spend his time in rapt philosophical contemplation? Or will he spend his time enjoying music, drama, poetry, and dance? I argue that philosophy is the end of life for the citizen of ideal *polis*. And, further, that it is philosophy in its most narrow, theoretical sense that Aristotle has in mind.
In their landmark commentaries on the *Politics*, Newman\(^5\) and Susemihl\(^6\) give us the traditional interpretation of the good life for citizens of the ideal *polis* as including the philosophy. Newman takes Aristotle as asserting that the best life is the life of complete virtue, along with the habit of intellectual inquiry.\(^7\) Life for the citizen of the ideal city will be many-sided, including work, war and necessary things (including political activities) on the one hand, and peace, leisure and intellectual activity (philosophy) on the other.\(^8\) The most choiceworthy part of this many-sided lifestyle will be intellectual activity. The study of music is necessary to orient the youth toward the character virtues and to accustom them to the value of “useless” activities. But the educational system is ultimately meant to prepare young citizens to engage in philosophy.\(^9\) Education culminates in rationality and a habit of intellectual inquiry.\(^10\) In addition, the citizen must be educated to carry out political duties and have the ability to deal with all aspects of the many-sided life. But, on Newman’s interpretation, neither the character virtues, nor the “habit of intellectual inquiry” is enough by itself to have the best life overall. The best life is the one of complete character virtue along with the correct intellectual attitude.

Similarly, Susemihl interprets the end of life for citizens of Aristotle’s ideal city to be one spent engaged in intellectual activity. According to Susemihl, Aristotle privileges the education of the intellect over the education of the character.\(^11\) The text tells us that citizens are to receive primary education in the gymnastics, letters, drawing and music. And, according to Susemihl, we can reasonably expect that Aristotle would continue this educational program\(^12\) to include natural science, mathematics, and music theory, ultimately culminating in the study of philosophy.\(^13\) Unlike Newman, Susemihl sees a tension between taking philosophy as the end of life and the political project of the
state. Susemihl notes that it is odd that Aristotle would rank an activity that is antithetical to the political life as the best life for the citizen of the ideal city. “[H]e ranks the theoretical life above the life of practical politics, and yet he considers the individual to be merely one living member of that corporate body the state: and the reconciliation of this antithesis can only be found in a political life which itself regards the promotion of art and science as its highest and ultimate aim.” So this tension is resolved only by noting that the promotion of the intellectual life is itself a political endeavor.

The traditional interpretation has much to recommend it on its face. Understanding philosophy as the end of life fits in well with what readers of Nicomachean Ethics X.7 might expect. And within the text of the Politics Aristotle claims that peace and leisure are what we are aiming at.

For what is most choiceworthy for each individual is always this: to attain what is highest. But the whole of life is divided into work and leisure, war and peace, and of actions some are necessary or useful, others noble. ... War must be chosen for the sake of peace, work for the sake of leisure, necessary and useful things for the sake of noble ones. (VII.14.1333a29-36)

Leisured activity is itself held to involve pleasure, happiness, and living blessedly. This is not available to those who are working, however, but only to those who are engaged in leisured activity. For one who is working is doing so for the sake of some end he does not possess, whereas happiness is an end that everyone thinks is accompanied not by pain but by pleasure. (VIII.3.1338a1-6)

Work, war, and other necessary things may have to be done. But what we are aiming at is always leisure, peace, and the noble things. We work in order to be in a position to engage in leisured activity. Aristotle also makes it clear that philosophy is a virtue required for leisure:

Courage and endurance are required for work, philosophy for leisure, and temperance and justice for both... (VII.15.1334a22-25)

Philosophy is distinguished from the other virtues here as being required for leisure only and not for work. And since everything is done for the sake of leisured activity and
philosophy is a virtue required for leisure alone, this suggests that philosophy is the aim of life.

But Aristotle also states that it is the job of the legislator to educate citizens to make good use of their leisure time. So when Aristotle outlines a program of education for the ideal city, we might expect him to focus a great deal of attention on philosophical study. But in fact, Aristotle does not even include philosophy among the subjects to be studied. The program of education in book VIII is focused entirely on music.

In the course of the discussion of musical education, Aristotle mentions several possible functions for music. Music is useful as an amusement insofar as it provides relaxation and casual enjoyment. Music can be used as a medicine for the ills of work (VIII.5.1339b14-32). Music is also a valuable educational tool as it has an effect on one's soul; since music is the purest representation of character (5.1339b42-1340b19). Music is also a pleasant activity and so it is a good way to habituate young citizens in associating pleasure with noble character (5.1340a12-28). Provided, of course, that one is educated in the music that represents noble characters and not ignoble ones. Aristotle distinguishes this educational purpose for music from the purgative uses (7.1341b32-1342a2). Some people are prone to be possessed by strong emotions such as pity, fear, and inspiration. Aristotle observes that after these people have been under the influence of those sacred melodies that induce frenzy, they calm down. Finally, Aristotle mentions music as a candidate for the appropriate use of leisure time. He claims that the study of music contributes something to leisure and practical wisdom (5.1339a25-26). He also claims that music is noble use of leisure time (5.1339b17-19, 7.1341b40-41). This point arises most sharply at VIII.3.1338a9-13. Aristotle claims that: “It is evident, then, that we should learn and be taught certain things that promote leisure activity.
And these subjects and studies are undertaken for their own sakes, whereas those relating to work are necessary and for the sake of things other than themselves.” This suggests to some interpreters that Aristotle has completed his discussion of how a legislator might educate young citizens to make appropriate use of leisure time. Aristotle has said a great deal about musical education and nothing at all about a course of study in philosophy.

This focus on musical education and the exclusion of any philosophical education lead interpreters such as Solmsen, Lord, and (to a lesser extent) Kraut to argue that musical appreciation is the end of life and the characteristic activity at which the constitution of Aristotle’s ideal city aims. Solmsen claims that the promises Aristotle makes for the education of the citizens in the correct use of leisure are fully borne out in book VIII. Music as a subject of study differs from the other educational subjects insofar as it is not useful (VIII.3.1337a25-1338b8). Some subjects are taught with a view to the necessities of life. For example, gymnastics is taught in order to prepare citizens for future battles. Other subjects are taught with a view to laying the groundwork for further areas of study. Reading and writing, for example, make it possible to take up more advanced studies. Music, however, is not useful in any of these ways. And it is just this uselessness that makes music such an important area of education. The uselessness of music makes it an appropriate noble leisure activity.

On Solmsen’s view, the instrumental, educational, and leisurely functions of music are not easily separable. According to Solmsen, “The reason why music is such an ideal occupation for the citizen’s leisure is that it molds and strengthens the character.” Music is an appropriate use of leisure time for Aristotle, he claims, simply because of its contribution to character development.
Aristotle here actually dwells on the effects produced by music in education and says relatively little about its value for leisure. His views are nevertheless clear enough; music is so valuable and so productive of arête and happiness because when practiced or enjoyed in scholē it fosters the right ethical disposition.23

Because music has such an effect on one’s character and because music is associated with great pleasure, music is a suitable candidate for the end, or telos, of citizen life.24 Solmsen remarks that the effect of music is moral and not intellectual.25 And so, the telos of human life for the citizens of Aristotle’s ideal polis is moral and not intellectual in nature.

Carnes Lord argues in the same vein as does Solmsen.26 Lord claims that the arguments at VII.1-3 rule out the possibility that Aristotle could mean for theoretical reason to be the end of citizen life. 27 Lord claims that Aristotle goes to great lengths to show that the best life for most men is practical and political and not speculative. “The best way of life for the city is not the speculative life simply but rather the closest approximation to that life which is possible on the level of politics.”28 For each citizen is to be ruled first and be a ruler later on (VII.14.1333a11-16). Too much time spent preparing for and engaging in theoretical philosophy would hinder one’s ability to rule effectively. Hence, the citizen cannot transcend the political life completely. Lord concludes “The activity in question -- the way of life characteristic of the best regime -- is the leisured enjoyment of music and poetry.”29

But recall that Aristotle says that philosophy is a virtue required for leisure at 1334a22-25. And leisure is most choiceworthy and involves happiness. In other words, leisured activity is the telos of human life. However we understand ‘philosophy’ at 1334a22-25, it is a virtue necessary for leisure only. So, anyone who interprets the telos as being something other than philosophy (as the term is usually understood) faces the challenge of giving a plausible interpretation of 1334a22-25 that is wide enough to
accommodate the account of telos. Both Solmsen and Lord claim that we must read “philosophy” at 1334a22-25 very broadly. We should understand “philosophy” here in the way that we now use the term “culture” they claim. Neither of these interpreters thinks that culture excludes philosophy as the term is ordinarily understood. And neither thinks that philosophical study would be forbidden to those citizens with the propensity to pursue it. But Lord claims that philosophy, understood as culture, has the literary arts as its core. “The core of that ‘philosophy’ that is politically relevant is, in the language of Aristotle and his contemporaries, ‘music’. So, if Lord is right, music and theoretical philosophy are not merely on a par as choiceworthy uses of leisure time, but that music is the more choiceworthy of the two.

Richard Kraut’s more recent interpretation of the telos in the Politics also requires a wider than usual reading of ‘philosophy’ in these passages. Kraut suggests that musical appreciation is an appropriate use of leisure time, not because it is the best life for human beings, but because it is an approximation or imitation of the best life. According to Kraut, the best life without qualification is one spent in contemplation of the first cause of the universe. But ‘philosophy’ at 1334a22-25 must be construed broadly enough to accommodate imitations of this state of contemplation, including musical appreciation. On Kraut’s interpretation, Aristotle mentions no institutions for philosophical education because it is not the goal of the city to prepare citizens for the philosophical life. Kraut writes, “[T]his explains why he does not assert in the Politics what he surely believes: that the theoretical life is best. Such an assertion would have no point, since it is not the goal of the ideal city to prepare people to lead such a life.” Those with the propensity and ability to engage in philosophy (theoretical activity) will be led to it by their natural curiosity.
On the face of things, interpretations of this kind that take a wide reading of ‘philosophy’ have much to recommend them. First, we do not have to speculate about what kind of educational program Aristotle would have included if he had only finished the text of the *Politics*. If we take music appreciation to be the *telos* of citizen life, the educational program as we have it is preparation enough for achieving this end. Secondly, music appreciation is a goal that almost all citizens will be able to achieve. Just about any normal functioning adult is capable of engaging in music appreciation. But theoretical philosophy is beyond the ken of many people. Music appreciation is a *telos* that individual citizens can achieve always or for the most part. And finally, music appreciation is a leisure activity in which individuals can come together and participate in as a group. Citizens can come together as an audience and enjoy musical performances. The same cannot be said of theoretical philosophy. Philosophy requires solitude, and so is at odds with community life. Shared participation in music, on the other hand, arguably strengthens community.38

Despite its initial advantages, however, there are numerous problems with taking music to be the *telos*. First, on at least some of these accounts (notably Solmsen’s), music is taken to be a valuable and important use of leisure time because of the contribution that music makes to the development of character. Aristotle clearly does think that music can have such an effect on the character. But music’s good effects on the character cannot be what makes it the *telos*. But in order to be the end, or *telos*, music must be valuable for its own sake apart from any further effects that it might have. In the language of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, the *telos* must be complete, worthy of choice for its own sake and not for the sake of any further end. So, if music is valuable for its effects on the character, it is merely instrumentally valuable, and thus, not the right kind of thing to be the *telos*. What we really value, in this case, is the good state of
character that is the result of correct music appreciation. If we do take music to be the telos, we must have an explanation of how it is valuable for its own sake.

Second, recall that one thing that recommends the music as telos view is that music appreciation is a leisurely pastime that all adult citizens will be capable of. Lord claims that music is the best life available on the level of politics. Kraut is explicit in stating that on his view the polis is not responsible for providing the citizens with the means to achieve the best life overall. But the text, by contrast, suggests that the ideal polis will provide citizens with the educational institutions necessary to achieve the best life without qualification. VII.13 stresses the idea that “happiness (eudaimonia) is a complete activation or use of virtue, and not a qualified use but an unqualified one” (VII.13.1332a9-10). An unqualified activation of virtue is one that is “noble”, that is, it is chosen for its own sake. “Reason and nature constitute our natural ends” (VII.15.1334b14-15). A city is virtuous when its citizens are virtuous (VII.13.1332a33-35). And educating citizens who have the appropriate nature is the task of the legislator (VII.13.1332b8-10). All of this suggests that educating citizens to live the best life without qualification, the most noble life, is an appropriate project of the ideal state. And this, in turn, suggests that the life of leisurely enjoyment of music is not the telos of the citizen of the ideal polis.

Finally, Solmsen, Lord, and Kraut must find a way to interpret the ‘philosophy’ passages in a sense that is wide enough to consider music appreciation a kind of philosophy. But intuitively this is a bit of a stretch. Aristotle gives us reason to reject such a broad reading of ‘philosophy’ based on contrasts that he draws elsewhere. In the Eudemian Ethics Aristotle explicitly contrasts artistic contemplation with philosophy:

I mean the greatest good one can share; but to some it falls to share in bodily delights, to others in artistic contemplation, to others in philosophy. (VII.12.1245a20-22 EE)
Notice that in this passage Aristotle contrasts artistic contemplation with philosophy as ultimate ends (teleis). So it seems unlikely that Aristotle would mean ‘philosophy’ to include music appreciation at 1334a22-25.

II

Perhaps we gave up on the traditional interpretation too soon. Although the philosophy-as.telos interpretation faces certain obstacles, perhaps these tensions are not as daunting as they first appeared. First, it is true that the text of the Politics does not include a program of philosophical education for young citizens. But the Politics as we know it is almost certainly incomplete. The text contains a whole series of unfulfilled promises. Aristotle promises to give reasons why the state ought to have communal messes at VII.10.1330a3. He promises to discuss how slaves ought to be treated and why freedom should be held out as a reward to them at VII.10.1330a31-33. He promises to discuss which body types are most appropriate for parents (VII.16.1335b2-5). He says he will discuss the question of whether children should be allowed to attend certain types of performance (VII.17.1336b24-27). Finally, at VIII.3.1338a30-35 Aristotle promises to divulge which subjects of study are appropriate for children to study because they are noble and useful for themselves. None of these promises are fulfilled in the Politics as we have it. Moreover, we know that the text is corrupt at VII.15.1334b4. So we know we are missing at least some part of the text. The unfulfilled promises along with the lacuna in the text suggest that the text of the Politics as we have it is either corrupt or was never finished. We must bear in mind that Aristotle says that leisure is the goal of citizen life, philosophy is required for leisure, and that we have no textual evidence to support the claim that music is philosophy. When we take all of this into account, the best explanation for Aristotle’s promise to provide a plan for educating the citizens to be able to use leisure time appropriately is that the fulfillment of this promise is part of the
missing bit of the text. The institutions necessary to foster philosophical education among the citizens are not to be found in the discussion of the ideal state for the same reason that the answers to all of the above mentioned promises are not to be found.

In addition, Aristotle’s admiration for the text of Plato’s *Laws* gives us a positive reason to believe that a completed text of the *Politics* would include a program of philosophical education. It appears that the *Politics* is to some extent modeled on the *Laws*. The educational program of the *Laws* progresses from a regimen of music and poetry along with gymnastics to a curriculum of theoretical studies including computation, measurement and astronomy (See *Laws* VII, especially VII.817e-818d). Only after these studies have been mastered should the advanced student embark on more straightforwardly philosophical and theological studies (XII.967d-968b). We can sensibly infer that Aristotle has a similar curriculum in mind.

III

So, we should return, then, to the traditional interpretation: that philosophy is the *telos* of human life for citizens of Aristotle’s ideal *polis*. But even after we have settled on philosophy as *telos*, it is not entirely clear what this means. In the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle distinguishes thought into practical, productive, and theoretical (*Meta* VI.1.1025b24-25). Productive thought aims at producing some product. Practical thought aims at action. Theoretical thought aims at truth and is further divided into mathematics, natural science, and theology (*Meta* VI.1.1026a18-20). Productive wisdom is the skill of knowing how to produce a given product. So, productive wisdom is not valuable for its own sake, but only for the sake of the thing produced. This makes productive wisdom unsuitable as a candidate for the *telos* of citizen life. This leaves us with practical wisdom and theoretical wisdom as candidates for ‘philosophy’ in the
relevant passage. And a search in the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* confirms that Aristotle uses the term ‘philosophy’ in both of these ways at different points in his corpus.\(^{43}\)

Initially, practical wisdom seems like an ideal candidate for *telos* of human life for citizens of the ideal *polis*. Since practical wisdom aims at action this fits in with the communal nature of Aristotle’s ideal state. Practical wisdom is a way of seeing situations correctly and perceiving what ought to be done (*NE VI*.8.1142a10-30). Practical wisdom commands action (*NE VI*.10.1143a8-10). No one really has any of the moral virtues unless he is also practically wise (*NE VI*.13.1144b14-17). So, practical wisdom is a skill necessary for organizing a life and a state in the best possible way. Pericles, among others, is thought to be practically wise because he can see what is best for himself and what is best for people in general (*NE VI*.5.1140b7-11). Citizens of the ideal *polis* will have to be adept at practical wisdom since all citizens must rule and be ruled in turn (*Pol. VII*.14.1332b24-26). And it makes sense that when Aristotle sets out the *telos* of life in the ideal state, that *telos* will be compatible with and continuous with the other demands of citizen life. At 1334a22-25 Aristotle claims that philosophy is a virtue necessary for leisure. Practical wisdom as an action-guiding sort of wisdom is a faculty necessary for making good use of leisure time.

But, alas, certain problems arise if we understand practical wisdom to be the end of life. First, it is not entirely clear that practical wisdom is appropriate as a final end, or *telos*. An end is ‘complete without qualification’ if it is chosen for its own sake and never for the sake of anything else (*NE I*.7.1097a34-b5). Practical wisdom aims at action and so one might think that it is chosen for the sake of right action and not for its own sake.

This concern about the appropriateness of practical wisdom as a final end, or *telos*, may or may not be well founded. One might argue that practical wisdom is not really chosen for the sake of some further goal (namely, action).\(^{44}\) But that practical
wisdom is a constitutive part of right action. Consider the virtue of justice, for example. On the one hand, one might think that practical wisdom is chosen for the sake of just action and so practical wisdom, in this case, is not chosen for its own sake. But on the other hand, one might think that practical wisdom is a necessary part of the exercise of justice. So that when a just person acts justly he is exercising practical wisdom. And, conversely, when a person of practical wisdom is faced with a situation that requires just action, he will see that this is what the situation requires and he will, in turn, act justly. When we look at things this way, practical wisdom is not chosen for the sake of justice and just action, but is a constitutive part of justice. And justice, like all moral virtues, is chosen for its own sake.

While the example above may save practical wisdom from the charge of being insufficiently complete to be the telos of human life for citizens of the ideal polis, it points to a further problem. Recall that at 1334a22-25 Aristotle claims that courage and endurance are virtues needed for work, philosophy is needed for leisure, and justice and temperance are needed for both work and leisure. If we take ‘philosophy’ here to indicate practical wisdom, we cannot maintain the distinction between the virtues that are needed for work and those that are needed for leisure. Practical wisdom governs action and so it is necessary for work. Indeed, practical wisdom is a necessary condition of courage, justice, and temperance – all of which Aristotle claims are necessary for work. The moral virtues and practical wisdom develop together (NE VI.13.1144b14-17). So if practical wisdom is what Aristotle means by ‘philosophy’ here, we cannot tell what he is marking out as being specially necessary for leisure.

Finally, practical wisdom seems to be ruled out as the end of life based on Aristotle’s discussion of the parts of soul in Pol. VII.14.
The soul is divided into two parts, one of which has reason intrinsically, whereas the other does not, but is capable of listening to it, and we say that the virtues of the latter entitle a man to be called, in a certain way, good. As to the question of which of these the end (telos) is more particularly found in, to those who make the distinction we mentioned it is not unclear what must be said. For the worse part is always for the sake of the better, and this is as evident in the products of the crafts as it is in those of nature. (VII.14.1333a14-23)

So the soul is divided into the part that has reason intrinsically, i.e., the rational part or intellect, and the part that is capable of listening to reason, i.e., the character. And, we are told, that someone who has the virtues of character is good in a qualified way. The virtues of character include courage, justice, temperance, etc. We are also told here that the worse part is always for the sake of the better. Next, Aristotle tells us that the reasoning part is the better part of soul. So, the virtues of character are for the sake of the virtues of the reasoning part.

But the part that has reason is better; and it, in accordance with our usual way of dividing, is divided in two: for there is practical reason and theoretical reason. So it is clear that the rational part of the soul must also be divided in the same manner. (VII.14.1333a23-26)

So not only is the character for the sake of the reason, but practical reason is for the sake of theoretical reasoning. The end, that for the sake of which the character virtues and practical reason are undertaken, is theoretical reason.

This passage above is critical for understanding what Aristotle is up to in the Politics. Throughout the text, he has applauded the Spartan system of inculcating virtue and the Spartan orientation towards a specific goal. But he has criticized the fact that the Spartans only train their youth to have one of the virtues, namely courage. And he has criticized the particular goal that the Spartans strive towards. The Spartans have been extraordinarily successful in war. But war is merely about the protection and acquisition of material goods. And, according to Aristotle, we do not want the material goods for their own sake. The goods of the body are valuable for the sake of the goods
of the soul. The worse part is always for the sake of the better; the useful things are for the sake of the noble things. Work, war and suchlike are necessary, but regrettable. We undertake these projects so that we can enjoy peace, leisure, and the noble things; things that are valuable for their own sake and not for the sake of their consequences. The Spartans take as their end something that cannot possibly be an end. The end, or telos, of the ideal polis is peace, leisure, and noble things – things that are not useful for any further end. The appropriate end must be something that is peculiar to our nature as human beings (Pol VII.15.1334a11-14, I.1253a8-18 and see NE I.7.1097b22-1098a20). So, the end is not merely to survive and reproduce. “Reason and understanding constitute our natural end,” (VII.15.1334b14-15). And the reason and understanding cannot be useful, or valuable, for the sake of some further end. Practical wisdom is certainly necessary for arranging one’s affairs and managing one’s time in leisure as it is in work. But this arranging and managing are done for the sake of theoretical reason.

We can conclude from this, I contend, that the telos for citizens of the ideal polis is theoretical reasoning. But at the same time, the theoretical reasoning in question cannot be the sort of thing that has a beginning, a middle, and an end. It has to be all end. Recall that Aristotle had divided theoretical philosophy into mathematics, natural science, and theology. Suppose that someone is engaged in mathematical reasoning. She may begin by being faced with some problem or puzzle of a mathematical nature. She may work on the problem and engage in multiple steps of reasoning. And she may finally, end by finding a workable solution. But this bit of mathematical reasoning has been undertaken for the sake of finding the solution. The end of the mathematical inquiry was determining the answer. Once the answer is found, the mathematical exercise is complete. Reasoning in the natural sciences faces a similar complaint. The exact, particular type of theoretical reasoning cannot be of this sort, it has to be sustainable
and complete in itself. What sort of theoretical reasoning can this be? It must be *theoria*, or contemplation, theology in its highest form.

At *Nicomachean Ethics* X.7 Aristotle discusses philosophy as a virtue and as an end (*telos*):

> And we think happiness ought to have pleasure mingled with it, but the activity of philosophy is admittedly the pleasantest of virtuous activities; at all events the pursuit of it is thought to offer pleasures marvelous for their purity and their enduringness, and it is to be expected that those who know will pass their time more pleasantly than those who inquire. And the self-sufficiency that is spoken of must belong most to the contemplative activity. (NE X.7.1177a23-28)\(^{46}\)

In this passage, Aristotle is famously discussing philosophy as an end in itself.\(^{47}\) The features that make philosophy appropriate as the end (*telos*) here are continuousness, purity, enduringness, and self-sufficiency. He claims that those who know will pass their time (*diagôgê*) more pleasantly than those who inquire. The “one who knows” will contemplate the highest object of his knowledge. In this way, he who knows will imitate the divine activity of the Unmoved Mover. Like the Unmoved Mover, the contemplator in the passage above will think about the best thing that exists, the Unmoved Mover itself, for as long as possible.\(^{48}\) In this way, the citizen engages in philosophy as *telos*.

IV

Understanding the philosophy that is necessary only for leisure as *theoria*, or contemplation, gives us a sense of ‘philosophy’ that is appropriate as a final end. But this interpretation does raise some further worries. Perhaps the most serious of these is whether *theoria* is suitable as the *telos* of members of a political community. *Theoria*, as I’ve described it above is an isolated and isolating activity. *Theoria* takes its participants away from the community. So how can the *telos*, end, and perfection of the human beings who are citizens of the ideal community be something that separates them from...
that community? Aristotle shows that he is aware that philosophy removes one’s needs for community.

Human beings do not commit injustices only to get necessities which Phaleas thinks equality of property will cure (in that they will not steal because of cold or hunger); they also commit them to get enjoyment and assuage their desires. For if they have a desire for more than the necessities, they will seek to remedy it by committing injustice. Nor is this remedy the only motive: but even without desires, they will commit injustices in order to enjoy the pleasures that are without pain. What, then is the cure for these three? For the first, moderate property and an occupation. For the second, temperance. Third, if anyone wants to enjoy things because of themselves, he should not look for a cure beyond philosophy, since all other pleasures require human beings (Pol II.7.1267a2-12)

‘Philosophy’, as the term is used in this passage, is a self-sufficient pleasure. All other pleasures require other human beings, but philosophy does not. So how can Aristotle, at the same time, claim that theoretical philosophy is the telos specifically of citizens of the ideal polis? Philosophy in this sense is a super-communal activity.

This is a difficult worry that is related to puzzles that arise elsewhere in Aristotle’s corpus. I will attempt to sketch a solution here. It is true that while the telos of human life for citizens of Aristotle’s ideal polis does not require engagement with other human beings for its immediate performance, theoria as a self-sufficient activity, like many other human activities, does rely on my being supported by a robust community structure. If I am to spend time engaged in philosophy, or theoria, I will have to have access to prepared food, shelter, security from intruders among many other necessary things. I will have to have been educated in an appropriate way. I will need to be comfortable in the knowledge that my children and household are being cared for in an appropriate way. A well-run polis will provide the necessary infrastructure to make my moments of contemplation possible. Aristotle frequently claims that in order to be happy we need to have external goods, goods of the body, and the goods of the soul. People typically agree that we need these three, but they do not all agree about the ranking of these three classes of goods. Aristotle claims that the
external goods and the goods of the body are tools valuable for securing the goods of the soul. (See VII.1.1323a22-b11, for example.) We can say, I think, that for Aristotle’s ideal polis the infrastructure provides care of the body and development of the soul for the ultimate purpose of creating a space within which its citizens can engage in theoretical activity. Consider the all of the people involved in a Tour de France victory. In the race, the cyclist rides the bicycle alone. Engaging in the characteristic activity of a cycling champion takes the cyclist away from his friends, family, coaches, trainers, and physical therapists. But an entire team is assembled and working to promote that characteristic activity of one cyclist. The cycling victory is the purpose and function of the entire team. In the same way, I suggest, the ideal polis has the purpose and function of making theoria possible for citizens during appropriate times of leisure. At I.8.1256b15-22 Aristotle suggests that all of nature is arranged for the purpose of assisting the good man in achieving his telos. So it makes sense to think that the ideal polis, too, is arranged with an eye to promoting this goal.

I have argued that the telos of human life for citizens of Aristotle’s ideal polis is philosophy construed narrowly as theoria. This means that the project and goal of Aristotle’s state is to cultivate a difficult, remote, and isolating activity in its citizens. Attempts to interpret the telos as music appreciation offer the hope that citizens will engage in a characteristic activity that is pleasant, communal, and within the grasp of ordinary people. The text, however, cannot sustain this kind of interpretation. What we get instead is an ideal polis dedicated to the project of cultivating the most perfect end available to human nature.52
See also VII.1323a14-16. Aristotle writes, “Anyone who intends to investigate the best constitution in the proper way must first determine which life is most choiceworthy, since if this remains unclear, what the best constitution is must also remain unclear.”

All quotations from the Politics are from C.D.C. Reeve, trans., Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett 1998.

Music in the ancient world connotes more than just song. The Greek “musikê” refers to the literary arts generally, including drama, poetry, and dance.

Aristotle claims that the virtue of a citizen *qua* citizen is to preserve the constitution that he lives under the way that the virtue of a sailor is to preserve his ship (III.4.1276b21-29). In the ideal city, the good citizen is coextensive with the good human being. This does not mean, however, that what it is to be a good citizen is identical with what it means to be a good being. In this paper, I am pursuing the question of whether and how the ideal *polis* cultivates the *telos*, or end, of the good human being in its citizens.

I use male pronouns to refer to citizens quite consciously. In Aristotle’s ideal state only adult males qualify as citizens. Aristotle claims both that it is the virtue of citizens to rule and be ruled in turn (III.4.1277a25-26) and that the natural relation of woman to man is ruler to ruled (I.5.1254b13-15).


“Habit of intellectual inquiry” and “intellectual aptitude” are the locutions Newman uses to interpret the term ‘philosophy’ at 1334a22-25. See Newman, vol. 1, pp. 346-347.
As we shall see, a lot hangs on the question of how we interpret ‘philosophy’ at this juncture in the text.


11 Susemihl, p. 50.

12 Scholars agree that we do not have the Politics in its complete form. Unfortunately the text as we have it breaks off abruptly just as Aristotle is outlining his views on the educational effects of different musical modes.

13 Susemihl, p. 51.

14 Susemihl, p. 48. A related issue will be discussed in section 6.

15 I will return to a discussion of the problem that Susemihl raises in the last section.

16 See for example: VII.13.1332b8-10, VII.14.1334a5-10, VIII.3.1338a9-12.


21 Solmsen, p. 213.

22 Solmsen, p. 215.

23 Solmsen, p. 216.
Solmsen makes the further claim that, “[i]t is in accord with the Ethics, that also the finest pleasure is caused by the music which produces aretai for the purest pleasures are concomitants of the most valuable human activities.”

Solmsen notes that one may think that because music has such a strong effect on one’s character, music is the end of life because it will make citizens more virtuous. Thereby making them better citizens, in terms of being better at performing their civic duties and so on. Solmsen, himself, maintains, however, that Aristotle is concerned with the private happiness of the citizen and not merely in their civic or political lives. Thus, Solmsen agrees with Susemihl in this respect. The best life for the citizen (qua human being) is the least political aspect of citizen life. (See “Leisure and Play”, p. 219.)

Lord, Education and Culture in the Political Thought of Aristotle.

Lord, p. 197-98.

Lord, p. 198.

Lord, p. 198.

One might be tempted to argue that she who interprets the telos of the citizen qua human being as something other than philosophy faces no such challenge. After all, at 1334a22-25 Aristotle claims: “Courage and endurance are required for work, philosophy for leisure, and temperance and justice for both…” So, philosophy is a virtue required only for leisure and not for work. But justice and temperance are required for both work and leisure. So, suppose music is the telos of human citizens of the ideal city, and therefore, an appropriate use of leisure time. One might think that we do not need to understand music as a kind of philosophy, as both Solmsen and Lord do. Aristotle claims that philosophy is required only for leisure. He does not claim that philosophy is the only thing required for leisure. Perhaps music is a part of leisure that requires justice
and temperance. In other words, music can still be a choiceworthy use of leisure time without being a species of philosophy.

31 Solmsen, p. 198. Lord, p. 199.

32 Lord, p. 200.

33 Solmsen takes a more moderate approach. He claims that theoretical philosophy is more choiceworthy than music. But the Politics, Solmsen claims, is not meant to describe the best life overall, but only the best life of the citizen. “In Politics VII and VIII, [Aristotle] provides for the scholê and eudaimonia not of philosophers but of citizens the best content that he can find without either demanding the impossible or surrendering his standards of value.” Solmsen, p. 218.


35 Kraut, p. 140.

36 Kraut, p. 139.

37 Kraut, p. 139.

38 Lord takes this to be a significant point. “The best way of life for the city is not the speculative life simply but rather the closest approximation to that life which is possible on the level of politics.” (Lord, p. 198) For each citizen is to be ruled first and be a ruler later on (VII.14.1333a12). Too much time spent preparing for and engaging in theoretical philosophy would hinder one’s ability to rule effectively. Hence, the citizen cannot transcend the political life completely. Lord concludes “The activity in question - - the way of life characteristic of the best regime -- is the leisured enjoyment of music and poetry.” (p. 198).

39 Lord, p. 198.
I argue below that the best reading of VII.14 holds that the best life without qualification is the life of theoretical philosophy. All other virtuous actions and activities are chosen for the sake of it.

Although it may seem like a stretch to consider mousikê a type of philosophy a connection between the two is not unprecedented. Isocrates appropriates the term philosophia and applies it to a traditional educational practice involving recitation of poetry and rhetoric, traditionally known as mousikê. In her study on Isocrates and Aristotle, Ekaterina Haskins writes, “He [Isocrates] gives the name philosophia to the educational practice that in the fifth and even early fourth centuries had been called mousikê, which involved memorization and recitation of the poetic tradition.” (Haskins, p. 40) Isocrates’ idea of philosophy and philosophical education is constructed in opposition to that of Plato and Aristotle. “Philosophy” in Isocrates’ sense puts the student to the task of imitating good speeches. In this way, the student will become a well-spoken gentleman of the polis himself. So, Isocrates’ account of philosophy is practical and performative by nature. Theoretical pursuits of the type that preoccupy Plato and Aristotle are not philosophy properly speaking according to Isocrates. But theoretical studies do have a place in the educational process. The rigors of astronomy and geometry, for example, give students practice in working persistently and hard at a problem and paying attention to detail. This is a kind of mental gymnastics and prepares the student for “philosophy” (in Isocrates’ sense). (See Haskins, p. 42)


A TLG search reveals that Aristotle uses the term ‘philosophy’ to refer to what is quite clearly theoretical philosophy very many times throughout the corpus. Uses of
‘philosophy’ to refer to practical wisdom are somewhat less clear. Two references make the claim that practical wisdom is also rightfully called ‘philosophy’ at least plausible. At *Nicomachean Ethics* I.6.1096b31, Aristotle puts off a discussion of the precise nature of the good. Since, he claims, such a discussion is more appropriate to another branch of philosophy. This suggests that Aristotle conceives of the study of ethics as a kind of philosophy. And the study of ethics is plausibly understood as involving practical wisdom. Again at *Politics* III.12.1282b23 Aristotle claims that questions about equality and inequality require political philosophy. Politics is also a matter that requires practical wisdom. So, it is at least plausible to consider practical wisdom a kind of philosophy.

44 The idea that practical wisdom is not chosen for the sake of some further end is supported by *NE* VI.13.1145a2-5. “Clearly, even if practical wisdom were not of value in action, it would be needed, since it is the virtue of this part of the soul…” (But, then again, it is not clear that the goodness of “this part of the soul” is valuable for its own sake given *Pol* VII.14.1333a16.)

45 See, for example, VII.14.1333b6-34, II.9.1271a41-1271b6, and VII.2.1324b4-9. As Aristotle points out, similar criticisms can be found in Plato’s *Laws*, see for example I.625c – 638b.


47 *Spectacles of Truth in Classical Greek Philosophy: Theoria in its Cultural Context* by Andrea Nightengale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) is an excellent treatment of the concept of *theoria* in Aristotle and other ancient authors. *Theoria* was originally a cultural and religious practice involving a three step process of journey or pilgrimage to a sacred site or festival, observing or participating in the festival or ritual
– which will include a “theoric gaze” at the divine, and a return journey and report to one’s home city of what one has seen. Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle appropriate this term in developing a “spectator theory of knowledge”. We can see the structure of the three step theoric process in Plato’s cave allegory in the Republic. Aristotle removes theoria even further from its original cultural context. He makes no mention of a journey to a sacred site or a return journey home. Only the second step, the theoric gaze at the divine, remains. Aristotle thus “completely separates theoretical contemplation from all practical endeavors, treating it as an isolated activity that is an end in itself.” (198).

For more on the divine activity of the Unmoved Mover see Metaphysics XII.9.

It is clear that ‘philosophy’ here cannot refer to practical wisdom since in this passage philosophy does not rely on other human beings, but the exercise of practical wisdom certainly does rely on other human beings.

An anonymous referee at the journal Polis suggests the possibility that ‘philosophy’ here may refer to a kind of popular philosophy, perhaps of the kind found in Aristotle’s lost exoteric works. This suggestion is tempting and appealing in several ways. Aristotle makes passing mention of his “external works” once at III.6.1278b31. And at VII.1.1323a22 he mentions that he has already said a great deal about the best life in his external works. We can only hope that these external works were more widely accessible to a general audience than his surviving works are. This may go some way in explaining Cicero’s comment that Aristotle’s writing is a “golden river of eloquence” (Academica 2.38.119). Some scholars believe that these exoteric works included dialogues that could have been performed publicly. If this is right, then we can imagine a broad swath of citizens of the ideal city coming together in community to perform and enjoy widely accessible philosophical dialogues. This would be a philosophical activity that is
not only accessible, but communal as well. This idea could take us a long way in harmonizing the emphasis on both philosophy and music in the text. Aristotle may well have public activities such as this in mind. We do have some surviving fragments of Aristotelian works that are thought to be exoteric. The _Protrepticus_ is one such work and may have been written in dialogue form. So far as we can tell, the _Protrepticus_ does not offer us an alternative popular philosophical mode. On the contrary, it is designed to attract people to philosophy properly speaking. The _Protrepticus_ extols the virtues of—and the uselessness of—theoria. So it seems that Aristotle’s more popular philosophical works are aimed at promoting more narrow, specialized philosophical activity as the end. (See Aristotle’s _Fragments_ in Barnes and Nightengale 191-197.)


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