

## Aristotelian thought and philosophy as a way of life

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### ABSTRACT

The purpose of the manuscript is to discuss the relationship between Aristotelian thought and the understanding of philosophy as a way of life. Based on a bibliographic study, the text highlights the distinction that Aristotle makes between the happiness that can be found in political, or active, life and philosophical happiness, associated with "theoría" – the contemplative life dedicated to the intellect. The Philosopher argues that true happiness is achieved through excellence of character and intellect, and that the contemplative life is the closest to this perfection. However, Aristotle recognizes that practical life, with its ethical and political demands, is also essential for the common good. In Aristotle, philosophy as a way of life is an invitation to participate in the good life. An active participation, founded on the ideal of the search for the construction of a virtuous life from the development of moral excellence, through wisdom. But it is also, and above all, to seek within the limits of what is human to share the ideal of contemplative life, of the search for knowledge and wisdom. This intellectual virtue consists more in the search for than in the attainment of excellence itself, for this would be a quality fully developed only in God.

**Keywords:** Excellence, Happiness, Philosophy, Contemplative Life.

### INTRODUCTION

Born in 384/383 B.C. and died in 322 B.C.<sup>2</sup>, in Stagira, on the border with Macedonia, Aristotle went to Athens at a young age where he entered the Platonic academy, where he remained for more than 20 years. With the death of Plato, the Stagyrite left the academy and went to Asia Minor, where he would teach in the cities of Mytilene and Assos and found a school with the Platonists Erastus and Coriscus.

In 343/342 BC, at the invitation of Philip of Macedon, he became tutor of Alexander, his son, then thirteen years old. Aristotle remained in Macedonia until 336 BC, returning to Athens the following year and founding the Lyceum, the name given to his school.

The period he remained at the head of the Lyceum, a place that was also known by the name of "Peripatus" as a form of reference to the walks that Aristotle used to take students during classes, was the most fruitful for his intellectual production, elaborating and systematizing most of the treatises of which we are aware.

With Alexander's death, Aristotle retired to Calis, distancing himself from the anti-Macedonian discussions and movements of which he had become the target several times due to his preceptorial activities during the sovereign's youth, and died in exile a few months later.

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<sup>2</sup> The dates referring to Aristotle's biography are based on the work of Reale and Antiseri, *História da Filosofia*, vol.1 – ancient pagan philosophy.

His work has crossed the centuries as one of the most important systems of thought elaborated by humanity. The grandeur of his thought must be sought beyond the variety of topics addressed. It is mainly located in the depth and logical way in which he thinks about problems and in the conceptual rigor with which he approaches them.

According to Reale and Antiseri (2003), Aristotle's writings are divided into two groups: the exoteric (dialogical, intended for the general public) and the esoteric (intended for his disciples, constituting an internal patrimony of the School).

Most of the exoteric writings have been lost. The esoteric writings are, therefore, the main source of knowledge we have about Aristotelian thought, of which the *Aristotelic Corpus*, the *Metaphysics* and the treatises on moral and political philosophy, specifically, the *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics*, deserve to be highlighted.

It comprises topics ranging from metaphysics, physics and mathematics, psychology, logic, rhetoric and poetics, to the practical sciences (ethics and politics). They are the latter that arouse special interest for the present work, whose objective is to analyze the implications of Aristotelian thought for the constitution of a philosophy as a way of life.

For Hadot (2011), although the representation that is usually made of Aristotle's thought seems to contradict the thesis that philosophy was conceived by the ancients as a way of life, the philosopher's defense of the contemplative ideal as the most perfect form of happiness, the ultimate purpose of human life, does not imply the understanding that contemplative activity should be understood as a form of life dedicated to rest or in a split between thought and action.

Aristotle distinguishes between the happiness that man can find in political life, in active life – it is happiness that can lead to the practice of virtue in the city – and philosophical happiness that corresponds to *theoria*, that is, to a kind of life totally consecrated to the activity of the spirit (HADOT, 2011, p. 121).

Despite the superiority attributed to the contemplative life, Aristotle does not neglect the importance of any other forms of human activity. Especially in *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics*, we can perceive the great importance attributed to the search for a way of conducting oneself that, based on a rational and, therefore, philosophical choice, results in actions of both an ethical and theoretical nature that promote the good for community life. To understand the distinction between the happiness that can be obtained in active life, whether in its practical or philosophical form, it is first necessary to understand what happiness itself consists of.

Aristotelian thought distinguished the sciences into three major branches: 1) *theoretical*, sciences that seek knowledge in itself; 2) *poietic*, which seek knowledge in function of doing; and 3) *practical*, seek knowledge in order to achieve moral perfection through it (REALE, 2003).

It is known that Aristotle established a hierarchy among these knowledges, of which the theoretical sciences were the highest form because they were free from material needs. This hierarchy is associated with the way the philosopher thought about the organization of the world, that is, with the theory of the four causes which, with regard to the world of becoming, are classified as formal, material, efficient and final.

Three theorems clarify the theory of causes. Due to the objective of the present work, I will mention them only briefly: 1st the contemporaneity of the current cause and its effect; 2nd the hierarchy of causes, by which it is always necessary to seek the highest cause; 3rd the homogeneity of cause and effect (REALE, 2003).

We are particularly interested in the fact that these causes are not on the same plane. Formal and material causes refer to the form (or essence) and matter that constitutes all beings. To explain movement, the change inherent in all things, efficient (or motive) causes and the final cause are necessary, understood as the end or objective towards which man's becoming tends.

Aristotle presents the final cause as superior to the others, because everything in the universe tends towards an end. This ultimate purpose, in the human world, consists of the good, which in its most perfect form is happiness.

The whole art and the whole process of investigation, as well as the whole practical procedure and the whole decision, seem to be set out for a certain good. That is why it has been rightly said that the good is that for which everything yearns. There seems, however, to be a difference between the ends: one is, on the one hand, pure activities; others, on the other hand, certain products that result from them beyond them: the product of their labor. There are, therefore, ends that exist beyond their productions. In this case, the products of labor are naturally better than the mere activities that originate them. (Et. Nic., I, 1094a, 1-8).

The supreme good is the ultimate end to which one must yearn, for it is desirable in itself. For Greek civilization, the good and, therefore, happiness can only exist from a collective perspective. The whole has primacy over the part, just as the community over the individual. It is the responsibility of political art to determine the necessary knowledge and responsible men (better prepared) to lead the community to the good life. The end which it must pursue is so superior to private goods that it can be said that its aim is the supreme good.

For even if there be a single good for each individual in particular, and for all in general in a state<sup>3</sup>, it would seem that to obtain and retain the good belonging to a state is to obtain and preserve a greater and more complete good. The good that each one obtains and keeps for himself is sufficient to give himself satisfied; but the good which a people and states obtain and preserve is more beautiful and nearer to what is divine (Eth. Nic., I, 1094 b 8-12).

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<sup>3</sup> Despite the conceptual problems arising from the translation of the term *polis* by State, I chose to keep the term according to what is found in the version translated by Antônio de Castro Caiiro, duly mentioned in the references at the end of the work.

Since the end of political activity is the good of the community, a good for which everyone yearns, this good can only be happiness<sup>4</sup>. On what happiness is, however, Aristotle himself recognizes that there are divergences.

For the majority, it consists in obtaining the pleasure that reduces them to the condition of slaves of their own instincts. There are those who think that happiness consists in honor, in success, placing the conditions of happiness again in dependence on external factors. There are also people for whom happiness lies in the accumulation of wealth. None of these definitions is consistent with the philosopher's thought.

The supreme good that can be realized, happiness, is achieved by the perfection of character, according to the rational principle that dwells in man. "It is a certain activity of the soul according to a complete excellence" (Ét. Nic., I, 1102a, 5-6). It presupposes an active state, a certain excellence of character acquired by the constant search for balance, for the right measure in all acts.

But man is not only reason, intellect. Although Aristotle considers this human dimension to be the superior, the noblest and closest to perfection, there is in each human being a vegetative part, which does not participate in reason, but also a desiring part and an appetite that, participating in some way in the rational part, listens to it and obeys it.

According to these distinctions, there are three ways of living life: in the constant pursuit of pleasure, in a political way, or in a contemplative way.

(...) the majority of men and the most vulgar of all suppose that good and happiness are pleasure; It is for this reason that they gladly welcome a life dedicated to its enjoyment. There are, then, three main ways of living life: the one that has just been mentioned; secondly, that which is devoted to political action, and thirdly, that which is devoted to contemplative activity (Ét. Nic., I, 1095b, 16-18).

The enjoyment of pleasures, the attainment of honor, of excellence, or the attainment of wealth, belong to the first two forms of life mentioned, and therefore do not concern the ideal of the contemplative life, with which we shall deal later. For the moment, it is sufficient to state that the forms of life whose objectives are related to external causes do not seek the supreme good which, being an end in itself, can only be fully achieved by the contemplative life.

If happiness as a supreme good, desirable in and of itself, is the purpose of human life, because it is the most perfect form of life, its meaning is active, it consists in "a certain activity in exercise according to excellence" (Ét. Nic., I, 1198b 32-33). It is only through the joint development of moral excellence, acquired through practical actions, and intellectual excellence, achieved through

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<sup>4</sup> According to the translator Antônio de Castro Caeiro, the translation of εὐδαιμονία as "happiness" cannot but be only an approximation to the original meaning of the Greek. Happiness, in Aristotle's work, has an active dimension that can be understood as "... a certain activity of the soul according to a complete excellence" (Ét. Nic., I, 1102a5).

exercises pertaining to the human soul, that it becomes possible to attain the state which should be called happiness.

However, due to the existence in the human soul of the vegetative and desiring dimensions, the latter participating in the rational part, the capacity for reason is divided: first, we have the capacity for reason in an absolute way and, secondly, in the sense "in which we have the possibility of listening to a father".

Excellence will also present distinctions in accordance with this difference. It can be divided into theoretical, or dianoetic, that is, of thought that applies understanding, and ethical, which are the excellencies of the Human character. "Wisdom, understanding, and wisdom are theoretical dispositions; generosity and temperance are ethical dispositions" (Et. Nic., I, 1103a 5-7).

Due to the dual nature of excellence, their training will also be different, in accordance with the provision to which it relates. While in ethical excellences, the permanent disposition of character results from a process of habituation, theoretical excellences are developed by the teaching process, requiring experience and time for their formation.

As the rational soul can turn to the changeable things of life or to the immutable and necessary things, principles and truths, for this reason, there are also two dianoetic virtues: sensibility (*phrónesis*) and wisdom (*sophia*).

From what has been said it is evident then that wisdom is composed of scientific knowledge and intuitive understanding concerning those things which are the most esteemed and most important of all by nature. (...) Now, sensibility concerns the Human and on which it is possible to deliberate. We say, then, that this is above all the work of the sensible, to deliberate well. (...) An absolutely good deliberator is one who aims to achieve the best of the goods attainable through good human actions, conformed by a calculation (Ét. Nic., VI, 1141b, 3-14).

Wisdom consists in the art of conducting human life well, practical disposition according to the guiding and true sense, capable of deliberating correctly about good and evil for the Human. Wisdom, on the other hand, is related to theoretical science and metaphysics, realities that are above man (REALE, 2003).

To explain the various changes undergone by being, Aristotle states that all things are constituted of act and potency. Potency is the capacity that a being possesses to modify itself, to become what it is not yet, according to the purpose that is inherent to it. The act refers to the manifestation of the being in what it is at a given moment, its realization according to this same principle of finality.

In the hierarchical way the Greeks thought about the world, every form of change was understood as imperfection. Only pure, immaterial forms are pure acts, and therefore devoid of potentiality. In them, there is the full perfection of their nature.

In a form of thought like this, the conclusion that Aristotle arrives at could not be otherwise: the higher part of the soul, the most perfect part of the human being, is the one that deals with perfect beings who, not being subject to mutability and deliberation, must be contemplated in their perfect existence.

Wisdom leads to the most perfect form of happiness, attained through contemplation. Philosophy is the activity that possesses the most perfect possibility of pleasure. It also leads to self-sufficiency, for "the wise man is able to create a contemplative situation on his own, only from himself and in himself, and the wiser he is, the easier he can do so" (Eth. Nic., X, 1177a 35-37).

Wisdom has in mind the possibility of happiness, which must be achieved from a correct deliberation, which leads to good. Although it is only possible to fully achieve happiness with wisdom, contemplation of immutable and perfect truths, this way of life cannot be understood as a state of indifference and individualism in the face of the world of practice.

Community life cannot at any time be neglected. Happiness cannot be an individual and selfish benefit. The true sage is not insensitive to the problems of the *polis*. The supreme good for the city and for the individual are not antagonistic conditions, as one might think from a modern individualistic perspective. It is for this reason that political life and wisdom are one and the same disposition in which wisdom is not an agent, but a participant.

... We must say that wisdom and wisdom are in themselves necessarily preferential possibilities. That is, each is the extreme possibility of the part of the soul in which it arises. (...) Moreover, the specific work of the human being is fulfilled, insofar as it is done with wisdom and excellence of character. In fact, excellence makes the end a right end, and sensibility opens the way to the direction in that direction (Et. Nic., VI, 1141a 1-10).

The best political regime, the best laws, should be a concern for both sensible and wise men. The concern with politics is, in the sphere of practical life, an inseparable issue from the reflection on the constitution of a happy life. "It is natural that it is the best-governed peoples who, under given circumstances, have the best life" (Pol., VII, 1323a 15), since "the happiness of the individual and that of the city are the same" (Pol., VII, 1324a 7).

If the best regime is the one that enables any citizen to perform the best actions and live happily, there is a relationship of complementarity between the ethical plane of individual virtue and the political plane of the common good, as well as between practical and contemplative life. However, this complementarity does not imply symmetry.

But it is a different happiness from the political activity we seek. If, therefore, among the activities carried out in accordance with excellences, activities in the field of political action and the treatment of matters of war stand out eminently in beauty and grandeur, but they lack free time and aim at attaining another end, not being themselves choices in themselves; if, on the other hand, the activity of the power of understanding, being a contemplative activity, is extraordinarily distinguished in seriousness and does not aim at attaining any other ultimate end than that which is already obtained by its own actuation and has a pleasure that belongs to it by essence (pleasure which increases the intensity of the activity); if, again, self-sufficiency, free time, and, within human limits, indefatigability, as well as all the rest that can be imputed to the blessed, is manifested by the very activation of this activity, then this activity is human happiness in its degree of completeness, provided it extends throughout life, for no aspect of happiness can be left incomplete (Eth. Nic., X, 1177b 15-28).

Aristotle's position is clear: although practical excellence produces the happiest life of all on the horizon of the human, its happiness must be considered as second-order. Only happiness attained by the power of understanding is autonomous from external needs, needs no complement, and therefore can be defined as the highest form of happiness. "Happiness is a certain form of contemplation" (Ét. Nic., X, 1178b 33-34).

Amaral and Gomes (1998)<sup>5</sup> affirm that active life assumes in Aristotle's thought a triple meaning: a) moral action - when the result internally qualifies the acting subject; b) pragmatic attitude - when the result has consequences for other subjects; and c) theoretical activity – when it is exercised by itself and the result coincides with the intended end itself. The opposition between contemplation and action disappears, for contemplative activity also consists of a practical form of life.

Practical life, however, does not properly refer to other individuals, as is sometimes believed, nor is thought necessarily practical that is aimed only at the result obtained by the action. Contemplation and meditation are much more practical, for they have an end in themselves and exercise themselves. Success is an end, and for that very reason it is activity. Hence it is said that the individuals who direct the activities, even if external by the intelligence, act in the full sense (Pol., VII, 1325b 17-24).

Philosophy consists of a theoretical way of life that cannot, however, be confused with theoretical, in the form in which the term is understood today. Theoretical is a word of Greek origin whose meaning would be "what refers to what is seen". This meaning is modified in modern language, and is usually applied in opposition to what is related to the concrete and the world of action (HADOT, 2011).

Aristotle generally used the word "theoretical," and when he did so, it was with the intention of designating a mode of knowledge whose purpose was knowledge itself, without a purpose outside himself and the way of life of the one who devoted his life to this form of knowledge.

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<sup>5</sup> The ideas presented in this paragraph are based on endnote number 35, referring to Book VII of Politics, published by Vega.

It is again perceived that there is no opposition between the theoretical way of life and the active life. Theoretical can be applied to a philosophy that requires the intellect to be constantly active, in a constant search for higher forms of knowledge.

Nor is it in accordance with the truth that inactivity is to be praised more than activity, because happiness implies action, and it is in just and prudent action that the end of many noble acts is consummated (Pol., VII, 1325a 31-33).

In the above quotation one can see the resumption of the formula presented at the beginning of the Nicomachean Ethics, where the philosopher states that the most extreme good to be obtained by human action is happiness (1095a 15) and ratifies its active condition whether it is a contemplative or practical activity.

However, whatever virtue in question, to be considered as such, it must be in a condition of independence from external things. A political action that has power, honor or wealth as its end cannot be considered virtuous. In the same way, a man who seeks knowledge to gain fame, recognition, or any other form of profit, cannot be considered a sage.

Sensible is he who seeks the right measure in his actions to conquer virtue itself, recognizing in it the excellent and therefore happy way of life. Wise is the man who seeks knowledge as an end in himself and is capable of taking pleasure in contemplative activities.

For Jaeger<sup>66</sup> *apud* Hadot (2011), the one who seeks knowledge, according to Aristotelian thought, cannot be a simple collector of facts. The contemplative life consists of a constant activity of search for knowledge that "one could dare to define as an almost religious passion for reality, in all its aspects, whether humble or sublime, since in all these things there is a trace of the divine" (*op. cit.*)element. Every minute aspect of reality must be known, not because a practical use can be found for this knowledge, as it has become common to think, but because every minute knowledge we acquire makes us in some way participate in the greatness of the divine intellect, which makes us more excellent and, therefore, happier.

In Aristotle, philosophy as a way of life is an invitation to participate in the good life. An active participation, founded on the ideal of the search for the construction of a virtuous life from the development of moral excellence, through wisdom. But it is also, and above all, to seek within the limits of what is human to share the ideal of contemplative life, of the search for knowledge and wisdom. This intellectual virtue consists more in the search for than in the attainment of excellence itself, for this would be a quality fully developed only in God.

Aristotle's texts are largely the result of students' class notes. In these works, it can be seen that the search for wisdom as a form of active life proposed by the philosopher was not merely the

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<sup>66</sup> JAEGER, W. *Aristotle*. Oxford University Press, 1967 (1ª ed 1934), capítulo XIII, "The Organization of Researche".

discourse of a teacher to his students, but a way of life personified by the master in front of his disciples.

In these courses, he shows in an exemplary way by which brand of thought, by what method, the causes of phenomena in all domains of reality should be investigated. He likes to approach the same problem from different angles, starting from different starting points (HADOT, 2011, p. 134).

At the Lyceum, what was at stake was not the mere transmission of information, but the training of the citizens who were there. An education built on the ideal of theoretical life in which, as in political life, students were provoked to think, discuss, formulate judgments, criticize. Teaching was fundamentally a dialogue between thinking minds, in which the search for solutions, the discussion of problems was more important and more formative than the solution found.

Just as moral excellences are developed through the formation of a virtuous habit, in the theoretical order, it is not enough to understand or repeat a discourse in order to become a sage. It is necessary that there be a provocation based on the experience of thought for the creation of a constant disposition to seek knowledge, for the creation of an attitude of friendship for knowledge.

Philosophical discourse is not enough to form this contemplative virtue. It is necessary to develop the intellectually and morally necessary skills to participate in the pleasures of the philosophical life, the supreme form of happiness. This is the purpose of the education that Aristotle attributes to the city, to its constitution, to its laws!

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