

8 Aristotle on the meaning of life

MONTE RANSOME JOHNSON

Aristotle is the first philosopher on record to subject the meaning of life to systematic philosophical examination: he approaches the issue from logical, psychological, biological, and anthropological perspectives in some of the central passages in the *Corpus Aristotelicum*¹ and, it turns out, in some fragments from his (lost) early popular work the *Protrepticus* (*Exhortation to Philosophy*).² In the present context I can do little more than call attention to these texts and attempt to offer a coherent interpretation of them, without being able to enter into the usual controversies, many of them centuries and some millennia old.

From an Aristotelian perspective, in asking about life's "meaning," we may be asking either a theoretical question about the *definition* of the term life (and this either generically or with specific reference to human life), or a practical question about the final *end* or *purpose* of life (or human life). Aristotle carefully considered both questions, and in his view answering the theoretical question is the key to answering the practical question. Thus my plan is as follows. After examining a network of texts that show Aristotle's theoretical definition of life, I will discuss the practical implication he draws from his answer in the ethical works and the *Protrepticus*. A single continuous fragment of the *Protrepticus* begins with the premise "the word 'life' appears to have a double meaning" and concludes: "therefore, *living* with pleasure and enjoyment belong truly, either only or most of all, to the philosophers."³ This view, as extreme and rebarbative as it may seem at first glance, is maintained in Aristotle's ethical works.

In Aristotle's naturalistic view, all living things, including plants, animals, human beings, and even gods, may be rank-ordered according to their *erga* or functions, which are determined by a consideration of the generic features of their form of life and specific features of their way of life. Human beings can reflect on the meaning of their own lives in an Aristotelian way by reflecting on the capabilities that all living things possess, on the unique capabilities of their own species, and on the specific way that those capabilities may be employed in their own lives. These reflections aim to determine not just the theoretical meaning of "life" but also the practical means of "living well" and finding "the good life." To state Aristotle's position as briefly as possible:

living means actively engaging one or more vital capabilities (nutrition, sensation, movement, intellect), and living as a human specifically means engaging in intellectual activity. Thus the ultimate meaning of life, for humans, is engagement in intellectual activity.

Aristotle uses a pair of Greek terms that are commonly translated into English as "life": *zôê* and *bios*, from which we get the terms "zoology" and "biology." Although he frequently uses them interchangeably, we may distinguish Aristotle's technical uses of them. *Zôê*, "life, or living," is defined by the capabilities that any living natural kind possesses by definition, the activities that are sufficient for a thing's survival as a thing of that kind: nutrition and reproduction (for plants), sensation and self-movement (for animals), and reason and intellect (for humans and gods). *Bios*, which is often better translated as "way of life," refers to the mode of existence employed by a living kind within its ecological niche: e.g. the solitary or gregarious ways of life possible for land-animals, or the banausic or philosophical ways of life possible for human beings. The "meaning of life" can accordingly be determined relative to both a generic natural kind and to an individual specimen, that is, both by generic vital capabilities, and by the specific ways that an individual exercises its vital capacities.

Let us begin with *zôê*. In the *Topics*, a treatise on the logic and strategy of dialectical reasoning, Aristotle discusses the meaning of the term in order to illustrate a potential problem in the construction of definitions: things which have the same name and definition are named "synonymously," while things which have the same name but different definitions are named "homonymously." If then there are things homonymously named "living," a given definition of *zôê* would fail to apply to one of the things called by that name. As an example, Aristotle cites Dionysius' definition of life.

This happened also in the case of Dionysius' definition of the term living (*zôê*): "movement sustaining a kind of congenital nutrition." For this definition applies not more to the animals (*zôiois*) than it does to the plants. But the term living (*zôê*) seems to be said not in accordance with a single form, rather one exists for the animals (*zôiois*) and another for the plants. At the same time, it is possible also to deliberately frame the definition in this way and to speak in accordance with a single form of every living thing (*zôês*).

(VI.10.148a23–33)

The problem with Dionysius' definition of *zôê* is the following. The cognate term *zôion* means both "living being" and "animal." It can be used to refer to any living thing, including a plant (and also to a figure or image of a living thing⁴), but is commonly used in a narrower sense with reference only to "animals," for example, horses, apes, or humans. Now if one were to accept Dionysius' definition of *zôê*, but intend to speak about *zôion* in the usual restricted sense, then one could be led into a problem, for example if one were

to argue that “every *zōion* has an organ of sensation”; the problem is that plants fit Dionysius’ definition of *zôê*, since they use nutrition, but they do not have any sense organs, no plant being a *zōion* in the narrow sense of “animal.” The ambiguity in the term *zōion* is reflected in the fact that at the time Aristotle was writing and for a long time afterwards there was a debate about whether plants are alive and have a *psychê*. For this reason, Aristotle remarks, the term *zôê* seems to be applied homonymously to both plants and animals: plants on the basis of their capability for nutrition, animals on the basis of their capability for sensation. In that case there would be no single definition of *zôê* that applies to every *zōion* in the wider sense that includes plants.

But in the final sentence of the *Topics* passage, Aristotle changes perspectives and suggests that one might deliberately frame a definition of *zôê* so that it synonymously applies a single form to every *zōion* in the wider sense. Aristotle does not explain this suggestion in the *Topics*, but it becomes clear what he means in *On the Soul*, when he discusses a parallel problem with respect to the definition of the term *psychê* (usually translated *anima* or soul). He complains that all of his predecessors’ research on the *psychê* was restricted to the human one, but he exhorts us to take seriously and not neglect the question “whether the account of *psychê* is a single one, as in the case of ‘living thing’ (*zōiou*), or whether each one has a different account, for example “horse,” “dog,” “human,” “god,” in which case the universal is either nothing or posterior” (I.1.402b3–9). If the terms *zōion* and *psychê* are applied to things that necessarily have different definitions, then attempting to frame a single definition of these terms will occasion the problem with homonymy that Aristotle warned about in the *Topics*. For example, if one were to define the *psychê* as a sensing thing or a thinking thing, then, since the term *psychê* is also applied to cows and other animals that cannot think, these things, since they have different definitions, will be homonymously referred to by the same term.

Aristotle’s solution to this problem is to frame a disjunctive definition of *psychê* which explicitly recognizes that there are different kinds of *psychê* (or different souls), and this definition will reflect the fact that the term *zôê* has several senses.

Taking up the inquiry from the beginning, one may say that the animate (*empsychon*) is distinguished from the inanimate by reference to the living (*toi zên*). But the term “living” (*tou zên*) is said in many ways, and any one of these alone being present, we say this thing is living, for example intellect, sensation, motion and rest with respect to place, and even motion in accordance with nutrition and decay and growth.

(*On the Soul* I.1.413a20–25)

Thus there will be as many kinds of soul (or souls) as there are ways of being a living thing, and the term “living” is rightly applied to anything that shows any one or more of the capabilities on the above list. It immediately

follows that all plants, since they possess the capability for nutrition and decay and growth, are living things (413a25–26). But it is not merely by disjunction that the term “living” is applied synonymously to both plants and animals because, it turns out, both plants and animals possess the vegetative capability: “It is possible to separate this capability from the others, but it is not possible to separate the others from this in the case of the mortals” (413a31–32). It may be possible in the case of the gods to separate their activities (e.g. intellection) from the vegetative capability, assuming they do not use nutrition and the stories about ambrosia and nectar are myths. But in mortal living things, including plants, animals, and humans, the vegetative capability is a necessary condition for the presence of any other capability. So Aristotle says that “because of this principle the term ‘living’ (*to zên*) applies to the animals (*tois zôsi*), even though the term ‘animal’ (*to zōion*) is primarily used because of sensation. For even those things that do not move, not even with respect to place, but yet have sensation, we say are ‘animals’ (*zōion*) and not merely ‘living’ (*zên*) (413a20–b4; cf. 412a13–16).

We thus have a definitive answer to the theoretical question of the generic “meaning of life” for Aristotle: setting aside immortal life, living means having an ability to use nutrition, and perhaps also sensation, or locomotion, or intellection. But as Aristotle points out, although it is possible to attribute life to animals on the basis of their vegetative capability, in a sense this does not seem to reflect what makes them specifically “animals,” since we say that they live as animals primarily because of their capability for sensation. A sign of this is that even sea creatures that remain motionless, like a rooted plant, but are nevertheless capable of even minimal sensation, we call “animals,” not merely “living things.” Thus we can call something “living” because of nutrition, but we can only call it an “animal” if it has sensation.

Aristotle’s reference to a species that resembles a plant in being motionless but an animal in having sensation reflects his metaphysical doctrine that there is a continuous series of natural kinds that proceeds from lifeless things, like the elements, through inanimate compounds, plants, animals, humans, and gods. There are natural kinds that “dualize” between inanimate things and plants; plants themselves dualize between inanimate things and animals; some kinds “dualize” between plants and animals (as we have just seen); and some other kinds dualize between animals and humans. And since Aristotle holds that a human may become like a god, there is even a human kind that dualizes between human and god, namely, the philosopher. Each kind is actually discrete and in theory has its own definition, but the exact differences between them are often difficult to perceive, especially at the lower levels, and in some cases require further research – this is the reason Aristotle calls the series continuous: “and so from the lifeless things nature makes a transition little by little into the living things, such that the border between them, and which side the intermediate thing is on, escapes our notice. For beyond the kind of lifeless things is, first, the kind of plants” (*History of Animals* VIII.1.588b4–7).

The continuous series can be rank-ordered according to a number of different criteria, including degree of vital heat, mode of locomotion, ecological niche, and mode of reproduction. But a single rank-ordering of natural kinds corresponds to relative degrees of vitality or "participation in life": "among plants one kind differs from another kind with respect to seeming to participate more in life, but as a whole the kind of plants seems animate relative to the other bodies, but relative to animals inanimate" (588b7–10). The fact that plants resemble both inanimate things and animals is why there was a controversy about whether they were alive and thus had souls. Animals, in turn, resemble on the one hand plants, and on the other humans. And the transition between animal kinds with respect to degrees of vitality and activity, as with plant kinds, is continuous (*History of Animals* VIII.1.588b10–21; cf. *On the Parts of Animals* IV.5.681a10–29). So there is a continuous series with respect to living and moving (588b21–23), and with respect to modes of sensation. Some animals, for example, are capable only of tactile sensation, while others are capable of other kinds of sensation in addition to this, including smelling, tasting, hearing, and seeing. Some animals, including humans, possess capabilities for all these modes of sensation. On the basis of these different degrees of sensation, Aristotle is willing to allow that some things actually "live more": "inasmuch as more sensation is a property of the thing living more, so less sensation will be a property of the thing living less, and the most sensation of the most living and the least sensation of the least, and sensation without qualification of life without qualification" (*Topics* VIII.1.137b23–27).

Most consequentially, there is for all living things a continuous variation with respect to "the activities of their way of life" (*History of Animals* 588b23) and thus their *erga* or functions. Even spontaneously generated organisms show differences in activities that make their lives "more or less valuable or honorable" (762a24–25), depending on the "degree to which they embrace the principle of animation" (762a25–26). In general, "the *ergon* of the soul is to produce living" (*Eudemian Ethics* II.1.1219a24). Plants clearly have an *ergon*, but it is mere reproduction: "among the plants that come about through seeds there is no other *ergon* apparent except to make another again like itself" (*History of Animals* 588b24–26). And some animals have virtually no *ergon* beyond that of a plant (588b26–27). But animals show immense variation in degree of vitality and activity: "Some animals, like plants, achieve procreation simply according to the seasons, but others also labor at nurturing the offspring, and when they have achieved this, separate and never make anything in common with them. But others, being more sagacious and taking part in memory do so for longer and get along with their descendants on a more political basis" (588b21–589a2). By attributing a degree of sociality and even intelligence to some animals, Aristotle holds that some natural things dualize between animals and humans, that is, in their way of life they resemble both animals and humans.

Humans, then, can be said to live not only on the basis of their vegetative capabilities, but also their animal capabilities for sensation and locomotion. But it seems obvious that the distinctive activity and goal of a human life is not based on such capabilities but rather: "obviously it is sensing and knowing ... For each person, the most choiceworthy thing is to sense oneself and know oneself, and that is why everyone has an innate desire to live. For we should specify that living is a kind of knowing" (*Eudemian Ethics* VII.12.1244b23–29). When he says that we should "specify that living is a kind of knowing" Aristotle here means that living for a human being is a kind of knowing. Just as living for an animal means sensing and not just vegetating, so living for a human means knowing and not just sensing.

In the biological works and the *Politics*, Aristotle raises the possibility that a human could metamorphose from being the most perfect and divine specimen on earth into a four-footed animal, or a many-footed insect, or even a plant.⁵ Aristotle seems best interpreted in all these passages not as describing a process of evolution (or devolution) of species, but instead a transformation of an individual person, with results that can be correlated to the rank-ordering of the continuous series of living things. The idea of becoming like a brute animal or plant, I would suggest, is the flip side to the hortatory rhetoric of "becoming like a god." Thus, in the *Protrepticus* both possibilities are mentioned together in order to make a moral point: "when sensation and intellect are taken away, a human becomes roughly the same as a plant; when intellect alone is taken away, he turns into a beast; when irrationality is taken away but he remains in his intellect, a human becomes similar to a god" (*Protrepticus*, *apud* Iamblichus, *Protrepticus* V.35.14–18). So, an individual human may devolve into a beast (thus the pleasures that cause intemperance are *bestial*; *Nicomachean Ethics* III.10.1118b5), or even a plant (thus we still describe some patients as being in a persistent *vegetative* state). This is not metaphorical: eating, drinking and sex are the pleasures we have in common with animals, and when we cannot move or sense we literally have the capabilities of a plant.

On the other hand, by exercising their intellect, a human may also metamorphose into something like a god. It seems this is the reason that only humans among animals can be *eudaimon*, as Aristotle stipulates in the *Eudemian Ethics*.⁶ The conventional term for "happiness," "flourishing" or "success," *eudaimonia* indicates the final end of human life, and Aristotle holds that it requires participation in a special kind of intellectual activity, one available uniquely to humans. We see this line of reasoning at work in all versions of the *ergon* argument in the ethical works, beginning with the *Protrepticus*, where "contemplating truth" is said to be the ultimate *ergon*, whether a human is conceived as an animal with a single *ergon* or with several *erga*.

So if a human is a simple animal whose substance is ordered according to reason and intellect, there is no other function for him than only the most

precise truth, i.e. to tell the truth about existing things; but if more capabilities are ingrown in him, it is clear that, of the larger number of things he can naturally bring to perfection, the best of them is always a function, e.g. of a medical man health, and of a navigator safety. And we can name no function of thought or of the contemplating part of our soul that is better than truth. Truth therefore is the function in the strictest sense of this portion of the soul.

(*Protrepticus*, *apud* Iamblichus, *Protrepticus* VII.42.13–23)

We have already discussed what is meant by saying that humans might have multiple *erga*: as mortal animals, humans have as *erga* nutrition, reproduction, growth, sensation, movement, and intellect. The vegetative capabilities can be eliminated on the grounds that they are not unique to humans (*Eudemian Ethics* II.1.1219b20–1220a1). The animal capabilities can be eliminated on similar grounds: “Living seems to be common even to plants, but we are seeking what is unique to a human. Let us exclude, therefore, the life of nutrition and growth. Next would be a life of sensation, but it also seems to be common even to the horse, the ox, and every animal. There remains, then, an active life of the part having reason” (*Nicomachean Ethics* I.7.1097b33–1098a4). These arguments, when read in light of Aristotle’s claims about the continuous series of *erga* among living things, cohere with the extreme intellectualist account of *eudaimonia* at the end of *Nicomachean Ethics*. After all, we need to find a kind of activity that, despite the continuity of vital activities between humans, animals, and plants, does not overlap with any other, lower capability. Although some of the animals have, more or less, “sagacity,” a kind of “political” existence, and even a kind of “intelligence,” they do not have intellects and cannot think or attain theoretical wisdom.⁷ And for this reason, while other forms of animal life and ways of human life can be pleasant and good, without participating in this *divine* activity, they cannot be *eudaimon* (*Nicomachean Ethics* X.8.1178b21–30).

Aristotle goes so far as to claim that even the cultivation of the moral virtues, which certainly requires intellectual activity, is not our ultimate end, but when we take into account the criteria of self-sufficiency, finality, leisureliness, and uniqueness, only theoretical contemplation corresponds to the “complete *eudaimonia* for a human, assuming he has a complete term of life (*biou*)” (*Nicomachean Ethics* X.7.1177b24–25). The result is that, somewhat paradoxically, the ultimate end of human life is to transcend human life and become like a god – this would be to act on what is at once the most human and the most divine part in us, the overlap being due to the continuity of all living things.

But such a life would be too high for a human; for it is not in so far as he is a human 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 virtue. If reason is

divine, then, in comparison, the life according to it is divine in comparison with human life. But we must not follow those who advise us, being human, to think of human things, and, being mortal, of mortal things, but must, so far as we can, make ourselves immortal, and strain in every way to live 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 human itself, since it is the authoritative and better part. It would be strange, then, if one were to choose not the life of oneself 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 a human, therefore, the life according to reason is best and pleasantest, since reason more than anything else is human. This life therefore is also the happiest.

(*Nicomachean Ethics* X.7.1177b27–1178a8)

Thus we have both the theoretical and practical answer, to both the general and specific questions about the meaning of life. In general, the meaning of life is the exercise of the best and most unique capability that makes a living thing a being of a certain kind. Specifically, the meaning and end of human life is to engage in intellectual activity, both because intellect is not shared with any lower living things (with whom we share so much else), and because it is shared with the gods (with whom we share so little else). Although scholars frequently recoil from intensely intellectualist and arguably elitist conclusions about the final human end, you, the reader, should take comfort in the fact that you are, even right now, engaging in the very activity that Aristotle thinks gives human life its meaning.

Notes

- 1 All translations of the *Corpus Aristotelicum* are adapted from those included in the Revised Oxford Translation, edited by J. Barnes.
- 2 On the authenticity of the fragments of the *Protrepticus* see Düring 1961 and Hutchinson and Johnson 2005.
- 3 Aristotle, *Protrepticus*, *apud* Iamblichus, *Protrepticus* XI.56.15–59.11–13.
- 4 This happens to be the very first example in the whole *Corpus Aristotelicum*: as an example of homonymy, Aristotle points out that both a human and a sketching are called *zōion*, and as an example of synonymy, both a human and a cow are (*Categories* I.1a1–8).
- 5 “The bodies of animals grow smaller and many-footed, and finally become footless and stretched out on the earth. Proceeding in this way a little, even their origin is below, and the part corresponding to the head is in the end unable to move and sense, and a plant comes to be, having its above below and its below above” (*On the Parts of Animals* IV.10.686b29–34; cf. *On the Generation of Animals* I.23.731a25–b8; V.1.778b29–779a4; *Politics* V.3.1302b34–1303a3).
- 6 “Perhaps there could be *eudaimonia* of some other, better thing, among the things that exist, e.g. of a god. Surely, among the other animals, who are in their nature worse than the humans, none participates in this; for the predicate *eudaimon* applies to neither a horse, nor a bird, nor a fish, nor any of the other things that exist which, in accordance with the general name of their kind, do not in their nature participate in a certain divine thing. But in accordance with participation in some other of the good things, some of them live better and others live worse than others” (*Eudemian Ethics* I.7.1217a22–29).

7 On the *Parts of Animals* I.1.641b8. In the *Protrepticus*, Aristotle makes it even more clear how humans differ from other animals: "for what makes us different from the other animals shines through in this life alone, a life in which what happens cannot fail to have great worth. For animals too have little glimmers of reason and intelligence, but they have absolutely no share of theoretical wisdom, and this is shared only with the gods, just as humans are actually left behind by many animals in the precision and strength of their senses and their drives" (Aristotle, *Protrepticus*, apud Iamblichus, *Protrepticus* V.36.6–13).

9 Epicurus and the meaning of life

CATHERINE WILSON

Epicureanism is the natural and moral philosophy taught by the ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus (341–270 BCE), and by his Roman follower Titus Carus Lucretius (99–55 BCE), who set his admired forerunner's doctrines to verse in his *On the Nature of Things*.

The master notoriously defended pleasure as the starting point for reflection on the good life and the goal of rational activity. He says:

Pleasure is our first and kindred good. It is the starting point of every choice and of every aversion, and to it we always come back, inasmuch as we make feeling the rule by which to judge of every good thing.

(In Diogenes Laertius third century CE: X, 129)

Many readers are apt to feel strongly from the outset that there is a distinction between a *pleasant* life and a *meaningful* life. A meaningful life is one with a number of meaningful experiences and meaningful actions. It seems to be compatible with endurance and hardship, and even to require them. Rather than setting out the conditions for a meaningful life, Epicurus seems to saying that we needn't be concerned with meaningfulness at all and should aim instead for the maximum of enjoyment.

For many centuries, two main conceptions of the meaningful life have been available in cultures with literary philosophical traditions. Neither one mentions pleasure. On one conception, worldly achievement makes an individual's life meaningful, and on the other, it is only moral or spiritual achievement that can do so.

On the worldly view, the best sort of life involves *doing* something or *being* something that earns admiration and respect and that can leave a mark on history, and keep one's memory alive. The great artists, writers, conquerors, scientists and philosophers have achieved this status. Thus Michelangelo, Shakespeare, Alexander the Great, Einstein, Socrates and a number of others have all had meaningful lives according to this criterion, but very few women. Altogether, however, only a small percentage of past humans have had *very* meaningful lives, while a somewhat larger percentage have had somewhat

The Meaning of Life and the Great Philosophers

Edited by Stephen Leach and James Tartaglia