Matthew D. Walker, *Aristotle on the Uses of Contemplation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. 261 pp.

The activity of philosophy is thoroughly useless. This, at any rate, is the view typically attributed to Aristotle. Philosophical contemplation or *theôria*, the ultimate end for human beings, consists in the active understanding of eternal and divine objects. Entirely disconnected from human affairs, it is an activity we can engage in only during times of leisure, free from the demands of our material, embodied condition.

This conception of philosophy might strike us as an important corrective on familiar pressures to demonstrate that philosophy can be useful: that it can illuminate or clarify real world problems or, at the very least, land our students lucrative careers. Or, this conception of philosophy might strike us as hopelessly archaic, a reflection of the immense privilege historically enjoyed by the philosophers who have shaped the canon.

In a wide-ranging and provocative new book, Matthew D. Walker argues that, however we evaluate this conception of philosophy, it is not one we should attribute to Aristotle. Against the orthodox view, Walker sets out to show that, although philosophical contemplation is not directly concerned with practical affairs, and although it does not subserve any higher function, it is authoritative in the soul in part because of the way it guides and supports our lower-life functions. Indeed, Walker argues that such an account is necessary if Aristotle's conception of philosophical contemplation is to be consistent with his natural teleological commitments elsewhere.

The book is neatly divided into two parts. In the first part (chaps. 1–5), Walker motivates his central puzzle via what he calls *the utility question*: if contemplation is useless, how can it be central to the human good? Crucial to the setup is the way Walker relates an organism's good to their threptic (nutritive and reproductive) activity: on Walker's view, perishable organisms achieve their good, approximating the divine, "by persisting and being active *as* the kinds of beings they are, i.e., by exercising their authoritative functions as part of a full, self-maintaining pattern of life-activity" (10). In the second part (chaps. 6–10), Walker develops and defends his response: contemplation is useful insofar as it helps derive "boundary markers" of the human good which inform our practical reasoning. By indirectly regulating our appetitive and spirited desires via the

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activity of our practical reason, contemplation guides our nutritive and reproductive capacities, which, in turn, are necessary for our higher life-functions including contemplation.

Walker's discussion is rich and illuminating, and leaves almost no corner of Aristotle's corpus untouched. His book is an important contribution to the growing body of literature attempting to bring Aristotle's ethical theory into conversation with his natural science and metaphysics. In this context, his discussion of passages from the *Protrepticus* is particularly rewarding.

Despite the book's considerable virtues, I did not find myself fully convinced by Walker's account. In what follows, I raise some concerns about each of the two central parts of the argument. Consider first the puzzle. Referencing influential work by Andrea Wilson Nightingale, Kathleen V. Wilkes, and Thomas Nagel, Walker suggests that there is, intuitively, something odd about the view that contemplation could be the highest human good while being "troublingly inert and detached from the rest of human life" (3). There is, moreover, a deeper interpretive puzzle lurking beneath this intuitive worry. Walker argues that contemplation's purported uselessness is in tension with Aristotle's commitment to the principle that "nature does nothing in vain." As Walker understands the principle, perishable living organisms possess only *useful* parts and functions, which is to say, parts and functions that guide and direct the self-maintenance of perishable organisms, allowing them to approximate the eternal persistence and activity of Aristotle's god, the Prime Mover. The deeper interpretive puzzle Walker sets for himself then is to explain how contemplation does not violate this principle:

> If contemplation offers no benefits for maintaining the whole system of psychic functions constitutive of the human soul, then why, on Aristotle's view, should human beings ever possess the power to contemplate in the first place? Does nature not operate in vain by providing human beings with useless contemplative capacities? Instead of benefitting human beings, might not such capacities count instead as psychic appendages that waste resources, and interfere with functions, necessary for our self-maintenance? If contemplation does not guide or direct our other life-functions, how—if at all—is it *authoritative* within the human soul? (2)

I worry that Walker's puzzle may rely on a misapplication of the principle that "nature does nothing in vain." Consider, for example, the way Aristotle appeals to the principle to explain why snakes are the only blooded land-dweller that lacks legs. He argues that given the length of their bodies and the fact that no blooded animals can move at more than four points of motion, legs would be "in vain" for snakes since they would be unable to do what legs are supposed to do, namely, serve as an instrument of locomotion (*Progression of Animals* 8: 708a9–20; cf. *Parts of Animals* 4.13: 695b17–26; see Henry 2013).

Why, we might wonder, should snakes lack legs instead of just having shorter bodies? Aristotle's answer seems to be that an organism's essence sets prior constraints on what its formal nature can do. As Aristotle says, "Nature does nothing in vain but in every case acts with a view to what is best for each thing from among the possibilities while maintaining the distinctive being and essence of the thing itself" (*Progression of Animals* 8: 708a9–12). The length of a snake's body is one of its essential properties; it could not have a shortened body while still being what it is. An initial worry for Walker's setup is that contemplation, like the length of a snake's body, may not be the right sort of feature to be subject to the principle that "nature does nothing in vain"; the power for contemplation is not something we could lose while still being what we essentially are.

Walker, in response, can point to *De Anima* 3.12 (discussed in chap. 4), where Aristotle explains why locomotive animals possess perception by appeal to this principle, arguing that if locomotive animals did not have the *aisthêtikon*, they would perish and fail to reach their end because they would be unable to find food. Here, Walker might insist, Aristotle is offering a teleological explanation for the presence of the *aisthêtikon* in animals, a capacity that *is* part of an animal's essential nature. Aristotle's argument in this passage might appear to vindicate Walker's application of the principle to contemplation.

It is not clear that it does however. In *De Anima* 3.12, Aristotle assumes as fixed the level of desire and imagination present in an animal, and uses this to explain the presence of locomotion and then, in turn, to explain the presence of perception in locomotive animals. But the powers of desire and imagination are themselves parts or aspects of the *aisthêtikon*. The upshot is that Aristotle's strategy in *De Anima* 3.12 is not simply to explain the presence of a higher capacity, perception, by appeal to the way it supports a lower capacity, the nutritive capacity. Instead, it is to explain the presence of *certain* perceptive powers by appeal to the way they support the nutritive capacity *given the organism's other perceptive powers*. It is not obvious to me what the analogous strategy would look like in the case of contemplation, but it does not appear to be the one employed by Walker.

Even if the "nature does nothing in vain" principle can be applied to contemplation, it is not obvious why contemplation has to be useful in the sense of supporting our threptic activity. After all, Aristotle goes on, in *De Anima* 3.13, to distinguish between capacities that are necessary for an organism's life, and those that serve an animal's well-being. So, for example, certain stationary animals have perceptive powers in addition to touch, and these are "not for the sake of their existence but for the sake of the good" (*De Anima* 3.12: 435b19–21). Why not think all that is needed to justify the presence of contemplation in humans is its role in serving our well-being? This is, after all, the answer Aristotle appears to give to a version of *the utility question* in *Nicomachean Ethics* 6.12: 1144a3–6.

Turn now to the positive proposal. Walker's argument comes in two parts: (1) practical reason and ethical virtue guide our threptic activity by regu-

lating our *epithumia* and *thumos*; (2) contemplation can help practical reason in this task by deriving "boundary markers" of the human good. With respect to (1), it is not clear to me why, in order to answer *the utility question*, Walker needs to show that *all* the ethical virtues, rather than just some, ultimately concern our threptic needs, the task he takes on in chapter 9. The threptic orientation of our virtues seems, at any rate, more plausible in the case of a virtue like temperance than in the case of courage or magnificence. It seems more natural to think that some of the goods that virtue secures, such as honor, are good for humans independent of the way they promote our threptic needs.

In defense of (2), Walker argues that, in regularly contemplating the divine, humans attain a particular kind of self-awareness of their nature and limitations as humans, and that this self-awareness provides a *horos* for practical reasoning, helping us to identify what counts as excess and deficiency with respect to our nonrational desires and use of external goods. But, we might wonder, why should *theôria* be *necessary* for this kind of self-awareness, even if we grant that it can be helpful? It would seem to be enough for the purposes of practical reason to grasp our nature as between bestial and divine in a less epistemically robust way. After all, we might think, one can come away from reading the *Nicomachean Ethics* with a nontrivial grasp of the human good of the sort sufficient for good moral reasoning, even if one lacks full blown *sophia*. Walker's best evidence is from a neglected passage in the *Protrepticus*, but even if one thinks the text has been fully authenticated, it is not clear how much one wants to lean on the *Protrepticus* to interpret Aristotle's later ethical works. After all, as Walker acknowledges, Aristotle does not clearly distinguish in the *Protrepticus* between *sophia* and *phronêsis*.

Despite the questions I have raised here, Walker's book offers an immensely rewarding discussion for anyone interested in Aristotle's ethics, his teleology, or the intersection of the two. In particular, it raises challenging questions about the direction of teleological explanation in Aristotle's works: Must the higher life-functions of perishable organisms always support the lower ones? Must contemplation be useful if it is to be the highest human good?

Reference

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Philosophical Review, Vol. 129, No. 3, 2020
DOI 10.1215/00318108-8311421