

*Theoria,
Praxis,
and the
Contemplative
Life after
Plato and
Aristotle*

EDITED BY
THOMAS BÉNATOUÏL
& MAURO BONAZZI

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and the Contemplative Life
after Plato and Aristotle

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This volume is dedicated to Fernanda Decleva Caizzi

“What are these books of yours, Alison?” Jedwell amiably intervened. “Something to read? (...) Nothing much to do in this hole except read.”

“Alison’s writing a history, sir,” Sezley answered, his temper past.

“But history,” Jedwell said, “is being made ... A history, may I ask, of what?”

Lewis might have let the question slide; it had been asked for the sake of asking. But he could not resist watching Jedwell’s face and saying:

“A history of the contemplative life.”

“The what?”

“The contemplative life—particularly in England since the Renaissance.”

“But who lives it?”

“You know India and I don’t, sir, but isn’t it true that in India—”

“In India, yes. I know. But you said England. Who lives it there? Who and how and why and with what effect?”

“That’s a goodish summary of my book.” Lewis said. (...)

“Are you really writing that book—seriously? Then let me tell you this. You can’t write a book about the contemplative life unless you’re the sort of man capable of living it.”

“I know,” Lewis said. “It’s much more important to me to become a man of that sort than to write the history. But you must have a concrete task to live by while you’re learning—worshipping God, or shepherding, or illuminating manuscripts, or writing a history. It’s all one.”

Charles Morgan, *Fountain* (1932)

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ΘΕΩΡΙΑ AND ΒΙΟΣ ΘΕΩΡΗΤΙΚΟΣ
FROM THE PRESOCRATICS TO THE END OF ANTIQUITY:
AN OVERVIEW

T. Bénatouil and M. Bonazzi

I

The notion of *θεωρία* and the advocacy of the contemplative life have often been considered as central and specific to Greek philosophy, and have thus received quite a great deal of attention. For a very long time, it has been however heavily biased in favor of Plato and Aristotle. Many philosophers have taken their views about contemplation as more or less representative of the views of Greek philosophy as a whole, or even of ‘the Greeks’ or ‘the Ancients’ about theory and practice, as if no other philosophical position had been voiced on this topic in Antiquity.¹ As for historians of Ancient philosophy, during the last fifty years, they have focused on Plato and, above all, Aristotle to the point that it seems that *θεωρία* and the contemplative life have no history outside the *Republic* and the last chapters of the *Nicomachean Ethics*.²

Although this focus might be a by-product of academic fashion, it testifies also to a belief in the lack of significant theoretical ambitions in Ancient philosophy after Plato and Aristotle. Hans Blumenberg aptly spelled out this belief in his *Hauptwerk, Die Legitimität der Neuzeit*.³ According to his analysis, the theoretical curiosity defining philosophy for the Presocratics, Plato and Aristotle was drastically limited by Hellenistic philosophers through a combination of metaphysical dogmas about the *cosmos* and scepticism about knowledge of nature. Stoics, Epicureans and Sceptics offered an essentially therapeutic philosophy directed chiefly against theoretical

¹ See for example Pieper (1952), despite his apt mention of Antisthenes; Arendt (1958) ch. 1, who distinguishes only between the Greeks and the Romans; Heidegger (1977) or Rorty (1979) 11, 38–39.

² In the huge bibliography on *θεωρία* and the theoretical life in Plato and Aristotle, see for example Festugière (1936); Adkins (1978); Gigon (1987); Cooper (1987); Gastaldi (2003); Lisi (2004); Richardson Lear (2004) and Nightingale (2004).

³ Blumenberg (1985) 243–325.

investigation, which was held to be useless and even damaging for man in his search for happiness. As for Platonists (Cicero, Philo, Apuleius or Plotinus), Blumenberg approaches them mainly, if not only, as preparing the Christian censure of *curiositas*. This view of Hellenistic and Imperial philosophy seems quite wrong to us, and, although it cannot be discussed in detail here, it is a chief overall purpose of this volume to show that *θεωρία* and the theoretical life survived after Aristotle and were the objects of thorough debates, powerful arguments and original applications from Theophrastus to the end of Antiquity.

Ours is obviously not the first study on the post-classical history of *θεωρία*, but the previous attempts have been either vast overviews, which could not do justice to the complexity of the various post-classical philosophers' positions,⁴ or were undermined by too loose a definition of their topic. For example, Alberto Grilli's *Il problema della vita contemplativa nel mondo greco-romano*, which covers the Hellenistic and early Imperial age, is in fact concerned with the peaceful life away from politics and gives pride of place to *εὐθυμία*, more than to *θεωρία* proper.⁵ Other studies about the Stoics simply assimilate their claim that ethics is dependent upon physics to an advocacy of contemplation.⁶ As Michael Erler shows in his paper about Epicurus in this volume, more attention should be paid to specific uses of the notion of *θεωρία* by each author, to the practical consequences of the various ways of life and to critical engagements with Plato or Aristotle. Shifting the attention from Plato and Aristotle to their successors does not entail ignoring Plato and Aristotle but, on the contrary, taking stock of their profound influence.

This volume is in fact less concerned with the post-classical debate about ways of life as such than with the appropriation, criticism and transformation of Plato's and Aristotle's positions about *θεωρία* and the contemplative life from Theophrastus onwards. This is only natural in a volume arising from a conference, the fifth of the *Diatribai di Gargnano*, which was part of a series devoted to the history of Platonism from the early Hellenistic age to Late Antiquity. But there are also strong historical and philosophical reasons to this focus.

⁴ See for example Festugière (1949); Boll (1950); Snell (1951); Redlow (1966); Vogl (2002). Joly (1956) is also useful, but devotes only 60 pages (out of 194) to post-aristotelian authors.

⁵ See the critical remarks by Festugière (1971) 249 and Boyancé (1959).

⁶ Forschner (2002). As noted by Festugière (1949) 75–76, arguing about or from the order of the *cosmos* and contemplating it are two different things. Although both are present and connected in Stoicism, they should be distinguished.

It is very likely that Plato, followed by Aristotle, invented the concept of the life devoted to θεωρία and distinctive of the philosopher, so much so that later philosophers had to acknowledge this new conception of philosophy and take side for or against it. It is true that Plato, Aristotle and some of their disciples like Heraclides of Pontus or Theophrastus refer this notion to previous authors such as Thales, Pythagoras or Anaxagoras.⁷ But, as Werner Jaeger showed in a famous paper on this topic,⁸ we should not infer from these texts that these Presocratics already led a contemplative life. The biographical anecdotes testifying to it are more probably projections of the *Lebensideal* of the Academy on these *sophoi*. Jaeger's thesis has been criticized⁹ and should indeed be qualified: the advocacy of θεωρία or at least of knowledge of nature as one of most valuable human activities probably dates back to Ionian philosophy.¹⁰ There is thus no need to suppose that the Academy forged the biographical anecdotes exemplifying its *Lebensideal*: they were rather selected at the expense of others anecdotes, which testified to the political involvement of Thales or Pythagoras and which were in turn (as noted by Jaeger) emphasized by critics of the contemplative life such as Dicaearchus.¹¹

Before Plato, praises of knowledge over and above all other activities can also be found in some of Euripides' plays,¹² in Anaxagoras, who is often thought to have influenced Euripides on this matter, and perhaps in Democritus. Putting this tendency in the context of the various images of the specialists of the sacred competing at the end of the fifth century, Laura Gemelli Marciano (2006) has shown that this contemplative image of the philosopher probably has its roots in attempts by certain intellectuals to

⁷ See for example Plat. *Theaet.* 174a (Thales); Aristot. *Eth. Nic.* 1.1141b3, 1179a13 (Anaxagoras); Cic. *Tusc. Disp.* 5 (Heraclides Ponticus about Pythagoras); Diog. Laert. 1.25 (Heraclides Ponticus about Thales).

⁸ Jaeger (1948/1928). See also Burkert (1960) and Carter (1986) 131–154. Jaeger's interpretation is restated in Nightingale (2004) 17–26.

⁹ See Festugière (1936) 18–44; Joly (1956); Gottschalk (1980); Riedweg (2004); Gemelli Marciano (2006).

¹⁰ This is already acknowledged by Jaeger (1947/1933) 150–185. See also Decleva-Caizzi (1985).

¹¹ About this disciple of Aristotle, see Bénatouil's paper in this volume, 18–19.

¹² See in particular Euripides, fr. 910 Kannicht: ὄλβιος ὅστις τῆς ἱστορίας / ἔσχε μάθησιν, / μήτε πολιτῶν ἐπὶ πημοσύνην / μήτ' εἰς ἀδικούς πράξεις ὀρμών, / ἀλλ' ἀθανάτου καθαρῶν φύσεως / κόσμον ἀγέρων, πῆι τε συνέστη / χῶθεν χῶπως. / τοῖς δὲ τοιοῦτοις οὐδέποτ' αἰσχρῶν / ἔργων μελέδημα προσίζει. Note that, while anticipating several aspects of the theoretical life, Euripides does not use the verb θεωρεῖν here. About Euripides' *Ion* and *Antiope*, see Carter (1986) 155–173 and Demont (1990) 165–174.

shield themselves from accusations of impiety raised against magicians and other specialists of the sacred under suspicion.

Nevertheless, ‘the tendency to exalt the contemplative life to the exclusion of practical activity’¹³ goes a step further in this direction and seems quite specific to the Academy. Moreover, if one wants to understand the originality and impact of the Academy, one should not reduce its position to the championing of a retired life devoted to liberal studies. There is much more to the contemplative life, which must be considered as a concept deeply embedded in Plato’s and Aristotle’s philosophies. At least four elements are crucial to this notion. First, an ethical justification of the superiority of knowledge over other human activities, and the ensuing advocacy of a life chiefly (but not necessarily exclusively) devoted to it. Second, a psychological and epistemological elucidation of contemplation, assigning it to a separable and immortal, faculty, *νοῦς*, and distinguishing it from other lower cognitive activities such as sensation, opinion, experience, practical reason, etc. Third, an ontological and cosmological definition of the entities contemplated as superior divine beings, which are both objects of knowledge and models to be imitated. Fourth, an implicit or explicit analogy between the intellectual activity defined by the first three aspects and the witnessing of a religious and cultural spectacle (*θεωρία*) or festival, which justifies the name *θεωρία* given to the philosopher’s activity.¹⁴

These four dimensions of contemplation are famously elaborated in many of Plato’s dialogues, especially the *Phaedo*, *Phaedrus*, *Republic*, *Timaeus*, and *Philebus*, and in Aristotle’s *Protreptic*, *Metaphysics* Λ.7–9, *De Anima* 3.4–5 and *Nicomachean Ethics* 6 and 10. Although Plato’s and Aristotle’s handling of these four points are clearly not identical,¹⁵ they distinguish both of them unmistakably from previous philosophers. If testimonies from Aristotle and later authors can be trusted, Anaxagoras might already have defined *θεωρία*, or at least knowledge of nature, and the life devoted to it by their focus on the heavens, but he does not seem to have taken the celestial bodies to be divine, and probably neglected the psychological and

¹³ Gottschalk (1980), 30. See also Carter (1986) 178–179; Demont (1990) 299–328 and Gemelli Marciano (2006) 205.

¹⁴ About the philosophical transposition of the religious and cultural practice of *θεωρία* by Aristotle and, above all, Plato, see for example Festugière (1936); Rausch (1982) and Nightingale (2004).

¹⁵ See below about Imperial Platonists such as Philo and Plutarch, who emphasized Plato’s articulation of contemplation and ethical or political practice.

epistemological specificity of this knowledge.¹⁶ The combination of the four aspects of contemplation is therefore not found before Plato and Aristotle.

Be that as it may, this strict fourfold definition is not meant to exclude any author from the history of the contemplative life or to focus our attention again on Plato and Aristotle, but merely to emphasize that *θεωρία* and *βίος θεωρητικός* are not philosophically neutral or strictly ethical concepts. This definition is offered here as an analytical tool useful to investigate the post-classical history of contemplation and to draw precise comparisons between various positions and Plato's or Aristotle's, as all the papers in this volume attempt to do.

II

The Hellenistic period is the golden age of the Athenian philosophical schools. In this context, it might seem natural for philosophers to embrace the contemplative life or some version of it, thus promoting their own devotion to philosophical teaching and research in order to gain more followers. This is clearly not what happened. After the first generation of disciples of Plato,¹⁷ we have no trace of an explicit defence of contemplation in the Academy. As to the new philosophical schools, the Cynics or the Pyrrhonists,¹⁸ the Epicureans or the Stoics,¹⁹ they clearly did not subscribe to Plato's and Aristotle's *Lebensideal* and even attacked several aspects of it.

The paradox is however only apparent here. First, as far as philosophical arguments are concerned, it is wrong to assume that intellectuals are bound to recommend their own life as the best or fall into a contradiction between their words and deeds: philosophers ranking political activities

¹⁶ Although Anaxagoras posited an eternal intellect (*νοῦς*) and gave it a crucial cosmological role, testimonies do not suggest that this entity had any counterpart in human souls and knowledge: see Laks (2002).

¹⁷ Besides the *Epinomis*, usually attributed to Philip of Opus, and Heraclides Ponticus' descriptions of past philosophers as contemplative, positive allusions to contemplation can be found in testimonies about Xenocrates: see Joly (1956) 130–131.

¹⁸ The Cynics are probably the most radical opponents of the contemplative life, since they do away not only with knowledge of heavens as useless but also with intellectual knowledge and imitation of god as a whole: see Diog. Laert. 6.27 about Diogenes mocking astronomy. Although Timon opposes Pyrrho to philosophers investigating nature, he still compares Pyrrho's peaceful life and wisdom to the Sun and holds them to be godlike (see Diog. Laert. 9.64–65 and Sextus *Adv. Math.* 11.20= fr. 60–62 Caizzi).

¹⁹ See Decleva Caizzi (1993) and below.

over academic pursuits could lead a scholastic life,²⁰ and others who had occasional political activities nevertheless favored a version of the contemplative life.²¹ Plutarch blames the first Stoics for advocating political involvement while spending their life in a school away from their city, but this is part of a polemical attack aimed at defending the Platonic conception of the philosophical life against the Stoic criticism of it.²² In fact, the Stoics and the Epicureans usually cast their practical ideals in terms of what the sage would do, and thus do not imply that they should or can themselves put these ideals into practice. Moreover, their recommendations are explicitly or implicitly very sensitive to circumstances, both for philosophical and social reasons,²³ and thus easily qualified or suspended without contradiction.²⁴ This is especially true in the case of ways of life, which are rarely exclusive: they are defined by a dominant activity, which does not preclude and sometimes implies the temporary practice of others.

Second, Plato and Aristotle championed the contemplative life in order to define a new kind of pursuit, to distinguish themselves and their disciples from other intellectuals—chiefly the sophists and the orators—and to explain or legitimize the foundation of their schools.²⁵ Once the philosophical schools were securely established in Athens, there was no need anymore to advocate the value of intellectual studies and the retreat from the public sphere associated with them. In fact, the recognition of the philosophical schools as institutions of higher education and of their leaders as members of the social elite probably lead the philosophers to mitigate the anticivic dimensions Plato had attached to the philosophical life.

These considerations suggest that the lack of any explicit advocacy of the contemplative life in our testimonies about the Hellenistic Academia and Lyceum should not be taken as implying a rejection or neglect of Plato's and

²⁰ Good examples are the Peripatetic Dicaearchus, or Zeno and Chrysippus.

²¹ Xenocrates for example took part in an Athenian embassy to Antipater (Diog. Laert. 4.9).

²² See Bonazzi (2007) and his paper in this volume, 141–146.

²³ By 'social reasons', it is meant that we should not forget that only a very limited number of people were able to choose their way of life (or profession) in ancient societies, even in the affluent classes, where the daughters had no choice whatsoever and the sons were supposed to conform to family traditions, social norms and what perpetuating the wealth of the family required. This is evidenced by the frequent references, among philosophers, to family resisting their son's desire to become a philosopher: see for example Diog. Laert. 6.75–76 or Muson. *Dissert.* 16.

²⁴ See Roskam (2007) 35 about Epicureanism and Inwood (1999) for Stoicism.

²⁵ About the Academy and the Lyceum as institutions aimed at fostering the contemplative life and the possible echoes of their activities in Plato's and Aristotle's texts, see Natali (1991) and Vegetti (2003).

Aristotle's hierarchy between intellectual and practical activities in these schools. Most Academics had the reputation of keeping their distance from public affairs.²⁶ It is thus probably the revision of Plato's epistemological and metaphysical—rather than ethical—doctrines that lead the Academy away from contemplative life in the strictest sense. Note however that, as Carlos Lévy remarks in this volume, Cicero emphasizes that doubts about the possibility of reaching the truth do not preclude the search for it to be a worthy and fulfilling activity for human nature (*Lucullus* 127). Although this position might date back only to Philo of Larissa, it suggests that the New Academy did not throw away the contemplative baby with the dogmatic and metaphysical bath water.²⁷ A different evolution can be reconstructed from the rare testimonies about the Hellenistic Lyceum. As shown in Thomas Bénatouïl's paper, although Theophrastus maintained the substance and structure of Aristotle's doctrine, he emphasized several practical limits or obstacles to the contemplative life and was thus led to raise doubts about Aristotle's notion of intellectual activity, which probably paved the way to more serious evolutions, from Strato onwards, and ultimately to the advocacy of the 'mixed life' in the Hellenistic Lyceum.

These changes in the Academia and the Lyceum can be seen as reactions, concessive or not, to the criticism of Plato and Aristotle which are central to the Epicurean and Stoic positions. This is particularly clear in the case of Epicurus, as Michael Erler suggests. Indeed Epicurus' reference to θεωρία in his *Letter to Menoeceus* (128) has to be properly regarded as an Epicurean interpretation of the *Timaeus*, in which the adoption of some Platonic notions enables Epicurus to better explain the value of his philosophy. For Epicurus insists, on the footsteps of Plato, upon the importance of contemplating the world as a necessary basis for all philosophical investigation, thereby rejecting the charge of reducing human life to a quest for bestial pleasure. But, in opposition to Plato, Epicurus further argues that his philosophy leads human beings to a sure knowledge of the world and thus makes possible a truly happy life. Appropriation is thus used as a polemical device for claiming the superiority of one's own school.²⁸

²⁶ See esp. Philodemus' *Historia Academicorum* (*PHerc.* 1021 and 164), col. XIV about Polemo.

²⁷ See further Bénatouïl (2007) about evidence pointing to an Academic defense of the scholastic life directed against Stoicism.

²⁸ On the similarities and important differences between the contemplative life and the Epicurean life, and between θεωρία and φυσιολογία, see Erler's paper in this volume, 48–55, and Festugière (1946) 50–54, 127–130, Boyancé (1959), Bénatouïl (2003), Roskam (2007) and Brown (2008).

As for the Stoics, they are a difficult case. Probably targeting the Academy and the Lyceum, Zeno held knowledge of the liberal arts to be useless (Diog. Laert. 7.32) and Chrysippus blamed as covert hedonists the philosophers advocating a ‘scholastic life’.²⁹ Yet, the Stoics gave a new definition of and an important role to θεωρία in the philosophical life. These have recently been the object of several studies and are thus not dealt with in detail in this volume.³⁰ Still, the main aspects of the Stoic position, especially the ethical import of contemplation, are discussed in Margaret Graver’s paper about Seneca and Emidio Spinelli’s about Sextus Empiricus. Using our previous strict definition of contemplation as a yardstick, we can summarise the position of the Stoics as follows.

Their most obvious disagreement with Plato and Aristotle is on the psychological and epistemological dimensions of contemplation, since they do not posit an intellectual faculty sharply separated from lower cognitive faculties. Hence Cleanthes’ surprising claim that poetry is the best way to reach ‘the truthful contemplation of the gods’.³¹ Of the cosmological or theological dimension, the Stoics retain—probably influenced by the *Timaeus* itself—³² the idea that the sage imitates God through his knowledge of the workings of the cosmos, but these are hardly similar to Platonic or Aristotelian unmoved Forms and Gods, since the Stoic Zeus is constantly and actively engaged in the whole world and its transformations. Contemplation is therefore not the paradigmatic divine activity it was for Aristotle, and its scope and functions are broadened: the heavens are still a central object of contemplation, but the diversity, beauty and efficiency of nature around us receives a lot of attention too, as eloquently shown in Aratus’ *Phaenomena*,³³ Cicero’s *De natura deorum*, book 2 or Seneca’s *Quaestiones naturales*.

As to the ethical dimension of the contemplative life, the Stoic position grants an equal value to action and knowledge as two inseparable aspects of reason.³⁴ Together with the previous assumptions, this has two consequences. First, virtue or wisdom has a strong theoretical component, which is not reduced to the contemplation of the cosmos, nor even to physics, but

²⁹ Plut. *De Stoic. rep.* 1033C.

³⁰ Forschner (2002), Bénatouïl (2007), Brown (2008), Inwood (2009), Bénatouïl (2009) and (forthcoming).

³¹ Philod. *De musica* col. 28.1 Kemke= *SVF* 1.486. See Festugière (1949) 310–333.

³² See Reydams-Schils (1999) and Betegh (2003).

³³ See Festugière (1949) 333–339.

³⁴ A similar tenet is crucial for Epicureanism as well, as emphasized by Erler in this volume, 52–54.

also includes dialectic and ethical principles. Second, since virtue is sufficient for happiness, the happy life is automatically *always* based on theory (and includes practice), no matter what activity it is chiefly devoted to. The sage does not need to spend his days studying or contemplating Nature to fulfill the theoretical dimension of his nature. The choice between ways of life becomes a matter of preference based on circumstances and human nature, the social dimension of which is crucial and leads the sage to favor the political over the 'scientific' life, when the former is available to him, but also allows him to opt for a retired life in other circumstances, as shown by Margaret Graver's close analysis of the arguments of Seneca's *De otio*.

III

As is now well known, the passage from Hellenistic to Early Imperial philosophy is not marked by a radical break. Rather it is easy to remark that in many cases philosophers continued to discuss and debate the same problems. This explains the central position that the Stoics kept holding on our topic in the following centuries.³⁵ First, Imperial Stoics had much to say on contemplation, to the point that they have often been thought to lean towards Platonism.³⁶ Allusions to or appropriation of Platonic ideas however hardly imply rejection of traditional Stoic positions, as shown by Margaret Graver about Seneca. The case of Sextus Empiricus is also a good sign that, despite the changing philosophical scene with new protagonists entering it, the Stoics are still important players. As shown in Emidio Spinelli's paper, Sextus offers a systematic criticism of θεωρία in the Stoic sense, that is to say not only of contemplation but also of any theory which claims to ground our conduct and to provide a scientific 'art of living'. This radical and unique attack does not however lead Sextus to give up the whole idea of a way of life guided by some knowledge of the world around us: the Pyrrhonist is allowed to make his everyday decisions on the basis of an empirical 'observance' of life and even of *technai*, provided these are restricted to the relevant phenomena.

However, in spite of the persisting influence of Hellenistic problems and solutions under the Empire, the philosophical agenda was increasingly dominated by the return to Plato and Aristotle, to the effect that a new and

³⁵ Remarkably, traces of Stoic doctrines continuously pop up in later philosophers, as most of the papers collected in this volume argue.

³⁶ See Bénatouil (forthcoming).

explicit emphasis on contemplation and the contemplative life was now laid upon.³⁷ Yet, below the surface of an apparent concord, the problems were many and the views strikingly differed. In particular, the problem of conciling Plato's and Aristotle's theories progressively came to dominate the scene.³⁸ For if it is true that both Plato and Aristotle celebrated the value of θεωρία, such celebrations were far from identical. Two different accounts can be spotted as the most interesting. On one side we can enlist Philo of Alexandria and Plutarch of Chaeronea, whose positions are investigated respectively by Valéry Laurand and Mauro Bonazzi. In spite of many differences, both Philo and Plutarch agreed in not paying too much attention to the problem of conciling Plato's and Aristotle's view, and the result is that both argued for a tight connection between θεωρία and πράξις. For the (divine) objects we strive to contemplate, once they are properly grasped, necessarily foster a deep transformation of oneself (i.e. of one's own soul) which inevitably bears practical (ethical but also political) consequences. Philo's and Plutarch's analyses of this issue enable them to promote a daring celebration of the philosopher as the real guide of the human community, at a time when the possibility of a real involvement in politics for philosophers was more and more difficult.

The strict articulation between θεωρία and inner transformation is distinctive of Imperial Platonism as a whole, and this appears to distinguish it from the Aristotelian position. Yet, in the long history of Platonism, the confrontation with Aristotle was regarded as more and more crucial, and the practical-political consequences of contemplation were progressively neglected. A telling example is Alcinous, as David Sedley shows in his paper. Unlike Philo and Plutarch, Alcinous turns out to be heavily influenced by Aristotle, to the extent that he tries to detect into the dialogues, and most notably in the *Republic*, a theory corresponding to what we read in the celebrated chapters of the tenth book of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. The result is that a tension between θεωρία and πράξις emerges with the greatest emphasis laid on the former. The major divergence with Philo and Plutarch is then not so much the different evaluation of the active life (which Alcinous too somehow commends) as the possibility that *theoria*

³⁷ The first step of this evolution can perhaps be witnessed in Antiochus of Ascalon, who recovered many of Plato's and Aristotle's positions about contemplation to answer the Stoics' and the Epicureans' ethical attacks, as Cicero's *De finibus* book 5 shows: see Bénatouïl (2009) and Tsouni (2012).

³⁸ For a general assessment, cf. now Karamanolis (2006).

and *praxis* focus on different objects. Here as elsewhere, Alcinous' combination of Aristotelian problems and Platonic texts remarkably anticipates the Neoplatonist agenda, as can be seen in Alessandro Linguiti's and Gerd Van Riel's papers. Indeed, as already noted by Pier Luigi Donini, Plotinus' position can be described 'as the triumph of the ideal of θεωρία as it emerges in the tenth book of the *Nichomachean Ethics*'.³⁹ The same conclusion also applies to other Neoplatonists, down to Damascius. Sure, the emphasis on *theoria* still involves an inner transformation (i.e. of the soul), but less interest is now paid to the practical-political consequences.⁴⁰ A further clue about the Aristotelian influence is the strict connection between contemplation and pleasure, which is investigated by Gerd Van Riel in Damascius' *Commentary on the Philebus*.

Needless to say, however, such agreement on the superiority of a life devoted to detached contemplation, which betrays an Aristotelian influence, led to new and intriguing problems. For, unlike Aristotle and the Peripatetic tradition, Platonists had to cope with the fact that the proper objects of contemplation, the transcendent forms and principles, were not completely graspable by human beings. As Michael Erler suggests, this was already part of the Epicurean anti-Platonic polemics. Indeed, whereas Hellenistic and Imperial philosophers, like Antiochus of Ascalon, Seneca or Ptolemy⁴¹ directed contemplation at celestial bodies and at 'the secrets of nature',⁴² Imperial Platonists from Philo to Plotinus to Damascius tried on the contrary more and more to refocus θεωρία on purely intelligible objects and beyond, with nature and heavens as only the first steps of a ladder inspired from the ascent of the *Symposium*.⁴³ But this shift from physics to metaphysics was dramatically complicated by the acknowledgment that a proper contemplation of the divine and transcendent principles was not available to human beings. A solution was provided by Plotinus' famous claim that a part of our soul is always contemplating the forms, even when

³⁹ Donini (1982) 272 quoted and supplemented by Linguiti in his paper, 185 below.

⁴⁰ See Linguiti, 186–190 below and O'Meara (2003).

⁴¹ See *Almagest*. 1.1, H4–7, where Ptolemy defines theoretical philosophy in an aristotelian manner, divides it into physics, mathematics and theology, but emphasizes that mathematics is the only theoretical science which yields 'sure and incontrovertible knowledge', so much so that mathematics (including astronomy) rank above physics and theology and can contribute to them. About Ptolemy's quite unique position on these matters, which draws on Aristotle and Platonism, see Feke and Jones (2010) 202–205 and Feke (2012).

⁴² See *De fin.* 5,58 or *Ac. Post.* 1.19 with Hadot (2004) 48–50, 105–106, 178–183.

⁴³ Cf. Laurand's remarks, this volume, 129–135, and Festugière (1971) 245–246.

we are not aware of it.⁴⁴ But Plotinus' theory of the 'undescended soul' was rejected by later Platonists, who offered other ways to account for the possibility of human contemplation. Indeed, this is one of the major problems in the history of Platonism, upon which the study of the genres of lives debate casts a new light.

IV

Along with theoretical problems, one must not neglect the historical, social, and political contexts, which prove often crucial to the assessment of the very sensitive issue of the best way of life. Particularly telling are the already mentioned Cicero, Philo, Seneca, and Plutarch. Cicero's changing position about the best life is influenced not only by his philosophical preferences but also by the Roman *mos maiorum* and his own political career, as Carlos Lévy argues in his paper. In his *De vita contemplativa* studied by Valéry Laurand, Philo describes and praises as 'contemplative' the marginal way of life of a sect which has few things in common with his own life in Alexandria. As for Seneca, he seeks to advocate his or his friends' contemplative retreat in ways both compatible with Stoic principles and acceptable to the Emperor, as shown by Margaret Graver. And Plutarch too, according to Mauro Bonazzi, reminds us of the crucial importance of the Emperors' attitudes towards philosophers, hostile or requiring their service, in their assessment of political activities and choices of life.

This political context is crucial for Late Antiquity as well. With the christianization of the imperial court and the whole empire, pagan philosophers progressively lost any opportunity to assume the role of counsellors they were regularly offered in previous periods,⁴⁵ and were forced to retire into the schools, since teaching was nearly the only social activity they could legally and safely undertake, especially after Hypatia's murder in Alexandria in 415.⁴⁶ This is probably one important non-philosophical reason why late Neoplatonist philosophers seem much more contemplative than previous platonists like Plutarch and than Plato himself. The problem of choosing between a life of study and a life devoted to one's community did not however disappear in Late Ancient philosophy. Christian intellectuals were

⁴⁴ Cf. Chiaradonna (2005) and (2009a) 81–115.

⁴⁵ See Brown (1992) ch. 2.

⁴⁶ See Chuvin (1990) 95–121.

dramatically faced with it when they were elected as bishops, an office which involved numerous political, social and administrative activities and was thus perceived as hindering intellectual ones.

A good but almost tragic example is Synesius of Cyrene, a pupil of Hypatia who was elected bishop of Ptolemais in 411 and often writes in his letters about his reluctance to assume this function, because it will prevent him from devoting himself to ‘the beauties of the intellect, which one can enjoy only in blessed leisure, without which “life is unlivable” for me and my kindred spirits’ (*Ep.* 11.14–17, cf. 41.94–115). When his fears become real, he complains to other bishops that their office is a sacred one which should be aimed at contemplation (*Ep.* 41.290). Although he concedes that some kings-priests in the past and some bishops with a stronger character than his have combined contemplation and political activities, he insists, using both Neoplatonic and Christian doctrines, that they are incompatible for men in general, and chiefly for himself, and suggests to his peers that a man of action should replace him as bishop (*Ep.* 41.290–355). While his situation was far less dramatic (Synesius died in 413), Augustine faced a similar challenge, which informed his thinking on the contemplative and active lives: it probably led him to qualify his early strictly Neoplatonic position about the hierarchy between contemplation and action with a defence of the active life too, as Giovanni Catapano shows by focusing on the polemics against the Manicheans. It is a remarkable fact, and a further confirmation of the enduring importance of the topic of the present volume that the defence of some biblical figures, notably Leah and Rachel, leads a Christian priest to tackle a problem which was distinctive of the debates between pagan philosophers.

Similar remarks apply also to Maximus Confessor, a theologian whose philosophical merits still await to be adequately acknowledged, as Carlos Steel argues in the last paper of the present volume. Indeed, in Maximus, we find a last and extremely fascinating appropriation of the philosophical defence of the contemplative life, which is adapted to the context of the monastic life. In one of his treatises (*Ambigua ad Johannem* VI 10), while interpreting some ambiguous sentences by Gregory of Nazianze, Maximus offers a clearly Platonic celebration of *theoria* which also includes practical life as a necessary condition for the proper contemplation of God. And just like Platonists had to face the problem that a proper contemplation of the forms was not possible, so theologians such as Maximus (needless to say, similar remarks apply to the case of Philo of Alexandria and Augustine) tackle the same problem with regard to God’s superiority and transcendence, by elaborating a series of modes which enable us, as far as this is

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