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Aristotle on a Meaningful Life

Andrius Bielskis, *Existence, Meaning, Excellence: Aristotelian Reflections on the Meaning of Life*, Routledge, London-New York 2017, pp. 132.

Andrius Bielskis's book is a novel and ambitious endeavour to address the problem of the meaning of human existence—the question of the meaning of life—that has been formulated by many modern and contemporary philosophers. To tackle this question Bielskis critically engages with a number of celebrated European thinkers such as Friedrich Nietzsche, Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus and Jürgen Habermas. Bielskis rejects criticisms, advanced by some analytical philosophers, that the question about the meaning of life is a nonsense question, but he, nevertheless, applies analytical argumentation throughout his book by challenging the modern and contemporary continental answers to this question. But, at the same time, Bielskis is also committed to a historical approach to philosophical analysis (and to historical materialism). He argues that the question should be posed against the historical background of the present since “the horizon of human life is history and culture,” “human life is marked by temporality and historicity” and “our identities and our ability to understand ourselves are always historical.”¹

Indeed, the recurrent theme of the book in all chapters is to answer the question of whether life is worth living and whether it has any meaning. This, of course, is not a new question. What is new is that the author tries to answer the question by offering a novel and critical interpretation of Aristotle's moral and political philosophy, arguing persuasively that neo-Aristotelian philosophy provides a viable answer to the questions that have been raised by the aforementioned Euro-

¹ A. Bielskis, *Existence, Meaning, Excellence: Aristotelian Reflections on the Meaning of Life*, London-New York 2017, pp. 1–2.

pean thinkers. As Bielskis points out: “we must instead attempt to think through these ‘existentialist’ questions from a non-existentialist philosophical point of view. The central claim of this philosophical investigation will be that neo-Aristotelian philosophy can and should play an important role in this task. In this respect far too little, if any, research, examining the existentialist assumptions and questions from the perspective of virtue ethics, has been done. Hence, this book will aim to fill the lacuna.”²

This is undeniably a bold attempt on Bielskis’s part since it has been argued by Alasdair MacIntyre³ in a recent interview that the question of the meaning of human life did not arise in antiquity, and especially in Aristotle’s conception of the good life (*eudaimonia*):

Aristotle meant by *eudaimonia* a state such that there is nothing that we could wish for ourselves or anyone else, a state in which the life of a rational animal is complete and perfected. There is no concept of “a meaningful life” in Aristotle or indeed anywhere in thought, I am inclined to say, until the 19th century. It is only when people are unable to conceive of human lives as having by their very nature some *telos*, the achievement of which perfects and completes such lives, that they ask “What could give meaning to a human life such as mine?”. The question of the meaning of human life, as distinguished from the question about the ends of human life, is posed only when it can no longer be answered.⁴

According to MacIntyre, the only remedy that modernity can offer today to our contemporaries “is to provide the means for them to become once again—or sometimes for the first time—the kind of person for whom the question of the meaning of life does not arise.”⁵

MacIntyre here of course relies on the argument he has developed mainly in *After Virtue* and his distinction, by the application of teleology to Aristotle’s *Politics* and *Ethics*, “of man-as-he-happens-to-be and man-as-he-should-be-if-he-realised-his-essential-nature” which relies in his threefold scheme according to which “human-nature-as-it-happens-to-be (human nature in its untutored state) is initially discrepant and discordant with the precepts of ethics and needs to be transformed by the instruction of practical reason and experience into human-nature-as-it-could-be-if-it-realized-its-telos.”⁶ MacIntyre argues that Aristotle, by seeing everywhere the growth of an initial potentiality into a final form (*telikon eidos*) or end (*telos*), and distinguishing in its *eidos* or *telos* the essential nature of everything, applied his general philosophy to the development of human beings, as he/she struggled upward from the potentiality of primary instincts to the *eidos*, or the *telos*, or the *phusis* of a political being—a being intended by his/her potentialities for existence in a *polis* and a being who achieved his/her rational nature in and through such existence. The *polis* is therefore entirely and perfectly natural,

² Ibid., p. 2.

³ Alasdair MacIntyre has by the way endorsed A. Bielskis’s new book (*Existence, Meaning, Excellence*), along with Richard F. Stalley.

⁴ A. Bielskis, *Apie filosofijos ir meno prasmę* [On the Meaning of Philosophy and Art], Vilnius 2015, pp. 40–41.

⁵ Ibid., p. 44.

⁶ A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, Notre Dame 2007, pp. 53–54.

it was the natural home of the fully grown and natural human being. However, it should be noted that MacIntyre conceives the notion of the good as being the excellent performance of a function for the achievement of a common *telos*. But, this functionalistic interpretation of the good made by MacIntyre is likely taken in by a specific interpretation of the Aristotelian sense of *telos* which he also applies to his interpretation of Aristotelian *eudaimonia*.⁷

Furthermore, it should be pointed out that Aristotle's understanding of *eudaimonia* depends on whether one would adopt a "dominant" or an "inclusive" view about *eudaimonia*, and MacIntyre, according to my interpretation, is adopting a "dominant" one. As John Ackrill pointed out, "the term 'inclusive' suggests the contrast between a single aim or 'good' and a plurality, while the term 'dominant' suggests the contrast between a group whose members are roughly equal and a group one of whose members is much superior to the rest."⁸ These two terms, when used as a contrasting pair of terms, are to be understood as follows: (a) "by an 'inclusive end' might be meant any end combining or including two or more values or activities or goods; or there might be meant an end in which different components have roughly equal value (or at least are such that no one component is incommensurably more valuable than another)"; (b) "by a 'dominant end' might be meant a monolithic end, an end consisting of just one valued activity or good, or there might be meant that element in an end combining two or more independently valued goods which has a dominant or preponderating or paramount importance."⁹

Hence, Alasdair MacIntyre, by adopting a dominant interpretation of *eudaimonia*, interprets Aristotle's conception of nature (*phusis*) as hierarchical, i.e., as subordinated to one highest end.¹⁰ It is indeed this line of reasoning that allows him to juxtapose meaning to a fixed teleological nature. In that sense, MacIntyre's argument is therefore historical. To put it brutally and simplistically: prior to modernity, Aristotelian teleology dominated theoretically and practically. Humans saw themselves as having a fixed nature directed towards the good and thus they never had a need to pose the meaning-of-life question. It is when this Aristotelian ontology was rejected and people found themselves in "wilderness," in a universe without *telos*, the non-perfected universe, their place in the world and purpose was lost, then they were forced to pose the meaning-of-life question, the question which, according to MacIntyre, cannot be answered without the reference to "the ends of human life."

But still, MacIntyre poses a very interesting question in the aforementioned interview: "Were the ancients perplexed by what makes life meaningful?" or, as he

⁷ For an extensive development of this criticism, see S. Salkever, *Finding the Mean*, Princeton 1990, pp. 15–36 and E. Leontsini, *The Appropriation of Aristotle in the Liberal-Communitarian Debate*, Athens 2007, pp. 87–92.

⁸ J. Ackrill, "Aristotle on Eudaimonia," [in:] *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*, A.O. Rorty, (ed.), Berkeley-Los Angeles 1980, p. 17.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ His Thomism also allows us to read it this way in his later work, and especially in his *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (London 1989).

says in the endorsement of Andrius Bielskis's book, it is only modernity that gives rise to a sense that life is meaningless?

This is a question that has puzzled me ever since I read the first draft of Andrius Bielskis's book. That is to say, it is true that modernity does indeed give rise to a sense that life is meaningless (hence our obsession with the question of the meaning of life). It is also true that the question of the meaning of life was not posed in antiquity, and by Aristotle in particular. However, even if it was not posed *explicitly*, I believe that it is at least implied in all ancient moral texts, starting from Socrates who was the first to render ethics and human moral life as the central philosophical question,¹¹ but also in Aristotle's ethical treatises in relation to both *eudaimonia* and *bios*, as well as in the Minor Socratic Schools (especially the Cynics) and in Hellenistic philosophy where the agony of human existence is apparent, although not explicitly stated, and not in the same way as in modernity. In fact, as far as Aristotle is concerned, one could argue that *Nicomachean Ethics* focuses on the pursuit of the human good (*agathon*) and the good life (*eudaimonia/eu zēn*), the different kinds of *bios* that one *could* follow and the moral and the intellectual human excellences (*aretai*) that should allow us to pursue a meaningful life for ourselves, but also a meaningful and well-lived life for the rest of the society (*koinōnia*) and the *polis* in general, as it is most explicitly argued in his *Politics*.

Hence, although Bielskis is much influenced by MacIntyre, I want to argue that the fundamental project in this book, so to speak, is to challenge MacIntyre's claim that there is no notion of the meaning of life in antiquity. Or, to put it in a better way, what Andrius Bielskis attempts to show is that Aristotelian and neo-Aristotelian moral and political philosophy can successfully provide us with a viable and better answer to the contemporary question on what is it that gives meaning to our lives.

This is not to say of course that Andrius Bielskis has not been influenced deeply by Alasdair MacIntyre's philosophy, and he also engages with it throughout his book, and especially in chapter 3 entitled "A Revival of Aristotelian Practical Philosophy: The Case of Alasdair MacIntyre—Practice, Unity of Life, and Tradition," although in a critical and analytical way, endorsing though, at the same time, many of MacIntyre's radical views on his critique of liberal modernity and the failure of the Enlightenment project. Bielskis, following MacIntyre, argues that

The Enlightenment project was a philosophical attempt to provide the basis for the rational universality of human civilisation. As we saw from the discussion in chapter three, one part of this project failed: ethical discourse ceased to inform the collective deliberation on common goods within which individual pursuits of good lives would find their meaningful place. The rejection of Aristotelian teleology also meant a widening gap between the political and the ethical. Yet the political project of modernity, whose establishment was possible due to the exile of religion from the sphere of the political among other things, survived in the form of liberal democracy.¹²

¹¹ It should also be noted that since Socrates the notion of *epimeleia eautou* (care of the self) dominated ancient moral philosophy and it was re-introduced much later by Foucault in his famous lecture course at the Collège de France (M. Foucault, *L'herméneutique du sujet. Cours au Collège de France (1981–1982)*, Paris 2001).

¹² A. Bielskis, *Existence, Meaning, Excellence*, p. 124.

Nevertheless, Bielskis develops MacIntyre's argument further when he claims that

Following the destruction caused by the Second World War, the politics of compromise was gradually established due to the frail social pact between capital and labour. For more than thirty years a near universal social progress gave hope to the erroneous belief, prevalent even among the brightest social theorists such as Ralf Dahrendorf (1959), that post-capitalist societies were indeed created. Their false optimism soon ended when a new drive for competitiveness, efficiency and economic modernisation was advanced first in theory and then in political practice. As a result, the power of the liberal polity to mitigate the social risks that global capitalism creates has dramatically decreased. Informed and critically minded citizens lean towards melancholic reflective resignation vis-à-vis the vanity and stupidity of the political establishment, including unsuccessful and often ridiculous attempts to challenge it by the "radical," but in fact not nearly radical, Left.¹³

Furthermore, I would like to point out that, according to my interpretation, Bielskis's account of *eudaimonia* is not a dominant one, like MacIntyre's, since Andrzej Bielskis—in order to develop an Aristotelian approach to the question of the meaning of existence—introduces the novel philosophical conception of the "structures of meaning." He links it to the notion of excellence, yet "structures of meaning" has a much wider meaning than that of *aretē* and includes all sort of meaningful activities, i.e., the analysis of practices and activities that sustain human life, that enable humans to flourish, and that give meaning to their lives. Bielskis applies the neo-Aristotelian philosophical analysis of the structures of meaning against the background of the philosophical articulation of the thesis of the temporality of human existence and the sense of the loss of meaning in modernity, in order to be able to conceptualize practices and structures of meaningful human existence in the late/post-modern world.¹⁴ He does so throughout his book, including art as a meaningful activity in his last chapter, but it has to be said that this novel and original philosophical conception of the structures of meaning should have been developed more and more explicitly elaborated and analyzed.

Moreover, Bielskis adamantly rejects in chapter 3 of his book the revival of Aristotelian virtue ethics, originally initiated and promoted by Elizabeth Anscombe and Peter Geach and their contemporary followers, for being both conservative and moralistic. Hence, his case is against "conservative Aristotelianism" that some contemporary neo-Aristotelians have associated themselves with. In this, he is in total agreement with Alasdair MacIntyre who in the "Prologue" of the third edition of *After Virtue* attests that "conservatism is as alien to the projects of *After Virtue* as liberalism is" and includes the "conservative moralist" as another notable character of modernity:

This critique of liberalism should not be interpreted as a sign of any sympathy on my part for contemporary conservatism. That conservatism is in too many ways a mirror image of the liberalism that it professedly opposes. Its commitment to a way of life structured by a free market economy is a commitment to an individualism as corrosive as that of liberalism. And, where liberalism by permissive legal enactments has tried to use the power of the modern state to transform social relationships, conservatism by prohibitive legal enactments now tries to use that same power for its own coercive pur-

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 2 ff.

poses. Such conservatism is as alien to the projects of *After Virtue* as liberalism is. And the figure cut by present-day conservative moralists, with their inflated and self-righteous unironic rhetoric, should be set alongside those figures whom I identified in chapter 3 of *After Virtue* as notable characters in the cultural dramas of modernity: that of the therapist, who has in the last twenty years become bemused by biochemical discoveries; that of the corporate manager, who is now mouthing formulas that she or he learned in a course in business ethics, while still trying to justify her or his pretensions to expertise; and that of the aesthete, who is presently emerging from a devotion to conceptual art. So the conservative moralist has become one more stock character in the scripted conversations of the ruling elites of advanced modernity. But those elites never have the last word.¹⁵

It is precisely on Bielskis's Aristotelian or rather neo-Aristotelian arguments which attempt to attribute meaning to human existence and provide solutions to modernity's existential angst, that I would like to elaborate on in the rest of my review paper. These are found in the fourth chapter of his book, its core and the most interesting one. It is there that he clearly presents his understanding and interpretation of Aristotle's political teleology and excellence (virtue/*aretē*). Chapter 4 is entitled "Existence, Meaning, Excellence" and provides his answer to the maladies of contemporary modernity, maladies that we all experience in one way or the other ourselves today.

According to Bielskis, "To exist in the world ontologically means to exist with others, it means to exist socially and politically."¹⁶ He substantiates this claim by elaborating, first, on Aristotle's thesis of *zōon politikon* and, second, on his notion of *aretē* which he goes on to develop it further. As he succinctly states:

Any attempt to conceptualize human existence philosophically will be flawed, unless it accounts for the intersubjective and cooperative nature of existence. This point cannot be emphasised enough: human existence is ontologically intersubjective and cooperative. Aristotle's claim that the human being by its *nature* is a political animal entails this ontological intersubjectivity and cooperativeness. One of the meanings of Aristotle's *phusis* is to be predisposed to be that way or that such condition is structural and constitutive of being (human). Yet, as we will see, *phusis* does not mean that the condition towards which a being is predisposed will necessarily be realised. For Aristotle, *phusis* is what potentially is, however, it is only at the *end* of existence that *phusis* becomes fully revealed. Our thesis therefore is that existence in the world is ontologically *political* in so far as the constitutive *nature* of human subjectivity is intersubjective cooperation.¹⁷

Bielskis chooses to translate *aretē* as "excellence" (a translation that is nowadays standard in the recent English translations of *aretē*), providing two reasons in order justify its usage as excellence rather than as virtue: "First, virtue, in the historical context of post-Victorian moral culture and imagination, has too strong a moralistic connotation. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the revival of Aristotelian virtue ethics, originally initiated and promoted by the likes of Elizabeth Anscombe and Peter Geach, has been both conservative and moralistic. Thus, rendering *aretē* as excellence is an attempt to move beyond this context. Second, and more importantly, since the scope of our enquiry is ontological and not merely ethical, excellence is more fitting than virtue."¹⁸

¹⁵ A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. xv.

¹⁶ A. Bielskis, *Existence, Meaning, Excellence*, p. 69.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

Indeed, more importantly, he chooses to conceptualize *aretē* as “excellence” in order to relate it with his novel notion of structures of meaning, since, as he claims, the meaning of excellence is wider than that of the meaning of virtue and since his concern lies with practices as meaningful activities, i.e., structures of meaning, *aretē* should be conceptualized in terms of excellence. According to Bielskis, “excellence is a habituated state of mind (*hexis* to use Aristotle’s word) due to which the choice and performance of, as well as participation in, meaningful practices and structures of meaning become possible in such a way that the *I* contribute both to his/her individual well-being and to the well-being of a wider community.”¹⁹

According to the author, it is at this point that Aristotle’s political and moral philosophy becomes essential, since “the gradual development of human subjectivity occurs through ontological cooperation, inter-existence, and co-existence”²⁰ allows the process of becoming a/n (ethical) subject that should be understood in both political and teleological terms. As he argues:

A successful human development, the development of linguistic skills and of (practical) rationality, is possible due to political structures which are always informed (whether implicitly or explicitly) by some understanding of the socially embodied conception of the good. The latter can be articulated only through language due to which a given community draws on, extends, and expands the existing horizon of meanings. Through poetry, literature, arts, philosophy and sciences traditions are being formed and expanded which provide semantic resources for individuals to conceptualise their lives as meaningful. Yet the temporality of existence (of *Dasein*) and its growth into language using (ethical) subjects are also to be understood in terms of Aristotle’s *dunamis*, *energeia*, and *telos*. That is, in terms of potentiality, actuality, and end: existence has a potentiality to grow into a human subject who, if successful, is able to live a meaningful life which contributes both to his/her own well-being and to the well-being of others. Note, however, that to become so two types of interlinked conditionality must be met: ethical and political. For the sake of brevity and despite the fact that the two cannot be easily separated, by the ethical condition I mean the *ego*’s moral ability (or inability) to choose and pursue his/her (genuine) good/s, while by the political condition I mean the wider institutional context in which the *ego* finds him/herself and which contributes to habituating some of the *ego*’s dispositions and therefore helps or obstructs *ego* to pursue his/her ends.²¹

Furthermore, Bielskis rightly endorses and philosophically engages with the famous Aristotelian pronouncements in *Politics* Book I, amongst which are the conceptualization of the nature of the *polis* and his well-known thesis that “*ho anthrōpos phusei politikon zōon*” (*Pol.* 1253a 2–3), by sustaining that “*politikon zōon* means our ability to realize that my interest and the interests of others are intimately linked.” As he says: “Aristotle’s conceptualization of *politics* in terms of and focus on the ‘common good’ is essential for us to understand what he means when he claims that the *polis* is created for the best life. He distinguished good constitutions and city-states from the deviant ones by arguing that the latter are ruled for the sake of the private benefit of the rulers, whereas the correct ones do so for the common good (*Pol.* 1284b 5–6). Only well-ordered cities which aim at the good for the whole of the *polis* can hope to create the institutional setting and

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 86.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

laws that enable, rather than frustrate, their citizens' attempts to live creative and meaningful lives."²²

Yet, Andrius Bielskis is not "blind" to Aristotle's failings in *Politics*, Bk. I. 6–7, 13, *vis à vis* the relationships and the hierarchies that we find in Aristotle's conceptions of *oikos* and its management (*oikonomia*) which are utterly disappointing, because of Aristotle's sexist, elitist and xenophobic bias against women, slaves, artisans and non-Greeks. He critically engages at length with these Aristotelian views which are usually silently "omitted" by both Aristotelians and neo-Aristotelians as embarrassing or irrelevant to the overall Aristotelian project. Without being unfair to Aristotle and without offering an ideologically informed attempt to moralize Aristotle for his cultural prejudice, he nevertheless points out that his views on *douloi* and women undermine his natural political teleology, since, and I quote, "the hierarchies to which Aristotle ascribes an ontological status—the 'natural' superiority of men over women as well as the 'natural' hierarchy between master and slave in the household and the *polis*—are based on his false conception of nature, and therefore, it is neither essential nor necessary for us not to take Aristotle's teleology seriously. Second, the erroneous defence of these natural hierarchies do not prevent us from arguing that equality, especially gender equality, within modern families and their households—the households of gays and lesbians raising children as well as of heterosexual couples looking after their offspring—is perfectly compatible with (neo)Aristotelian ethical theory and teleology."²³

According to Bielskis, "Aristotle reduces his teleology to brute nature and therefore misses the point of his very own teleological method. Moreover, he *goes against* his teleology which is normative and progressive: it is directed towards a future, towards the normative future of realizing the *telos*, i.e. the full realization of one's potential. Aristotle claims, as we saw, that '*phusis telos estin*', that nature is the end and that the end is the best ('*to telos beliston*'). Thus, by equating nature with actual hierarchies and actual human psychological traits of submissiveness, he is depriving those who he calls natural slaves from the very possibility of achieving their *telos*."²⁴

These are very intriguing criticisms that Andrius Bielskis puts forward in his book which every Aristotelian scholar and neo-Aristotelian philosopher, in general, should consider, if, of course, they agree that in these errors and others, "Aristotelianism is to be rescued from Aristotle."

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²² *Ibid.*, p. 89.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

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