On the (Meta)biopolitics of "Happiness"

Jussi Backman (University of Jyväskylä)

Colloquium Biopoliticum

May 19, 2022

Abstract

The paper approaches the question of biopolitics in ancient political thought looking not at specific political techniques but at notions of the final aim of the political community. It argues that the "happiness" (*eudaimonia*, *beatitudo*) that constitutes the greatest human good in the Aristotelian tradition is not a "biopolitical" ideal, but rather a *meta*biopolitical one, consisting in a contemplative activity situated above and beyond the biological and the political. It is only with Hobbes that civic happiness becomes "biopolitically" identified with simple survival; for modernity, as Hannah Arendt puts it, mere being alive becomes the greatest human good, and happiness is understood as a subjective "quality of life." In both models, the political realm is a means to an end. Arendt draws our attention to a neglected third alternative to both the classical/metabiopolitical and the modern/biopolitical ideals: "public happiness" consisting in political participation itself.

1. Introduction: Foucault, Ojakangas, and the Biopolitics of Antiquity

In his Collège de France lecture courses *"Society Must Be Defended"* (1975–6) and *Security, Territory, Population* (1977–8), Michel Foucault develops his newly introduced concept of biopolitics, understood as the wielding of biopower, that is, techniques of government aimed at biological human populations as collective subjects (Foucault 1997, 213–35; 2003, 239–64; 2004, 3–118; 2009, 1–114). Biopower is seen by Foucault as a sequel and complement to the disciplinary control and normalization of individual bodies

studied in *Discipline and Punish* (1975) and the lecture courses of the early 1970s; disciplinary power had, in turn, evolved from the sovereign power of the absolutist early modern state, which had primarily addressed its subjects as moral agents in the form of commands and punishments.[1] In the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* (1976), Foucault singles out the disciplinary "anatomo-politics of the human body"—the administration of individual bodies—and the regulatory "bio-politics of the population"—the management of species-life—as the two central aspects of the new technology of power associated with nascent modern capitalism (Foucault 1976, 177–91; 1978, 135–45).

In Foucault's narrative, the idea of the biopolitical management of life gradually emerges in the second half of the eighteenth century; he traces its roots back to the Christian notion of the pastoral government of human beings, modelled on the manner in which a shepherd governs a flock of sheep. The notion of pastoral political power, Foucault maintains, remained fundamentally foreign to Greek antiquity (Foucault 2004, 139–51; 2009, 135–47). The herder, such as a keeper of horses or cows (*hippophorbos, bouphorbos*), and herding (*agelaiotrophia*) as metaphors for a political ruler and political rule are taken up and analyzed by Plato in the *Statesman* (261d–277a) but, according to Foucault's interpretation, are ultimately discredited there. Defining political rule as caring for the human flock does not, Plato's Socrates notes, allow us to distinguish between the statesman and other providers, such as merchants and physicians (*Plt.* 267e–268a), or between the political ruler and the divine shepherd (*poimēn*) who allegedly provided for humankind in the mythical age of Cronus (274e–275c). The ruler is not an uncontested superior who cares for the needs of inferiors, as a herdsman is to his flock, but rather a human being among humans, and the art of the ruler must thus be distinguished from arts related to the management of herds (*agelas*; 287b4–6). The art of ruling, Socrates concludes, should rather be compared to the art of weaving (*hyphantikē*) a unitary texture out of separate and contrasting elements (279a–283b,

[1] On the distinction between sovereign power, disciplinary power, and biopower, see Lilja and Vinthagen 2014.

305e–311c; Foucault 2004, 144–50; 2009, 140–7).[2] Foucault claims that classical antiquity generally rejected the very idea of political "government" in the modern sense.

> [I]t seems that for Greek and Roman societies the exercise of political power entailed neither the right nor the possibility of "government" understood as an activity that undertakes to conduct individuals throughout their lives by putting them under the authority of a guide who is responsible for what they do and for what happens to them. (Foucault 2004, 373; 2009, 363)

It is during the Christian centuries of ecclesiastical pastorate, Foucault maintains, that the Western human being has been gradually penetrated by "governmentality" and has "learned to see himself as a sheep in a flock, something that assuredly no Greek would have been prepared to accept" (Foucault 2004, 134, see also 151–93, 374; 2009, 130, see also 147–90, 364). The development leading from the pastoral administration of human herds to the subsequent biopolitical management of human populations is thus decisively set apart from the political thought and practices of Greek antiquity. While, in the Aristotelian paradigm, the human being was "a living animal with the additional capacity for a political existence," in the biopolitical matrix of modernity, (s)he becomes "an animal whose politics places his existence as a living being in question" (Foucault 1976, 188; 1978, 143).

[2] This reading is challenged by Ojakangas (2016b, 3–4, 79–83, 134), who argues that the model of the herdsman is in fact not rejected in the *Statesman,* but that herdsmanship and weaving are rather mutually complementary paradigms in a Platonic pastoral model of political governance as "selective breeding." Ojakangas notes that in the *Laws* (5.734e–736a), the analogy between political rule and herdsmanship is reintroduced side by side with the analogy of weaving, and the civic "purges" performed by the lawgiver (*nomothetēs*), especially the one who is also a tyrant (*tyrannos*), are compared to the selective breeding performed by the shepherd (*poimēn*) or the cowherd (*boukolos*). A similar critique of Foucault's reading of the *Statesman* can be found in Naas (2018, 72–96). Lane (1998, 57–8) offers an interpretive compromise: "[T]he revision of the name of the herding art so as to embrace what the statesman actually does . . . makes the notion of 'caring' for a herd sufficiently general as to purge it of any special reference to herds at all. The language of 'caring for' [*therapeuein*] is emptied of its pastoral references and made available to weaving as to statecraft."

In *On the Greek Origins of Biopolitics: A Reinterpretation of the History of Biopower* (2016), Mika Ojakangas challenges this view of biopolitics and biopower as distinctively modern phenomena in the history of Western political theory and political technology. According to Ojakangas's main thesis,

> the conception of politics as the regulation of the living in the name of the security and happiness of the state is as old as Western political thought itself: the politico-philosophical categories of classical thought, particularly those of Plato and Aristotle, were already biopolitical categories. (Ojakangas 2016b, 6; see also Ojakangas 2012, 2016a)

In the alternative narrative offered by Ojakangas, the Christian pastorate was not a prologue to modern governmentality, but rather "a rupture in the historical process that had started in classical Greece and continued in early modern Europe. . . . It is not the Judeo-Christian pastorate, but the Renaissance of classical culture and literature . . . that is the true prelude to modern governmentality and biopolitics" (Ojakangas 2016b, 142).

Among the specific aspects of the Foucauldian narrative that Ojakangas criticizes is the notion he attributes to Foucault according to which it was only the emergence of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century theories of the "police," in the sense of early welfare policies or management techniques designed to enhance the vital forces of the state (see Foucault 2004, 320–1; 2009, 312–14), that "made the happiness of individuals relevant for government for the first time in the history of Western societies" (Ojakangas 2016b, 31). Against this view, Ojakangas maintains that "the aim of the Platonic-Aristotelian biopolitics was exactly the same as in the modern biopolitics, that is to say, the security (*asphaleia*) and well-being (*eudaimonia*) of the city-state and its inhabitants" (9). Citing Aristotle's premise in the *Politics* (7.2.1324a23–6, 7.9.1328b33–6, 7.13.1332a3–7), according to which the optimal polity (*politeia*) is the one that provides maximal "prosperity" (*eudaimonia*) and a "blessed life" (*zōē makaria*) to its citizens, Ojakangas points out that, already for Aristotle, "the ultimate aim of the art of government is to promote the happiness of the city-state and the felicity of its inhabitants" (Ojakangas 2016b, 38–9). Since Aristotle

starts his discussions of the material framework of the *polis* by considering the quantity and quality of its multitude of people (*plēthos tōn anthrōpōn*) as its most basic prerequisite (*Pol.* 7.4.1326a5–7), Ojakangas goes on to claim that "the main means for achieving this end" is "the regulation of the quality and quantity of population according to the immanent norms of life known through the scientific inquiry of human nature" (Ojakangas 2016b, 39).

That Aristotle's ethics and political thought indeed revolve around *eudaimonia*, happiness, prosperity, or human fulfillment, is certainly undeniable. Foucault, too, is fully aware how focused the entire Western tradition of political thought has been on happiness as the aim of political government—the Aristotelian tradition culminating in Thomas Aquinas, in particular (Foucault 2004, 239; 2009, 233). If concern with the happiness of the civic community is taken as a defining feature of biopolitics, "biopolitics" would indeed be practically coextensive with political theory since antiquity. However, there is a decisive distinction to be made between the classical and the modern forms of this concern. Foucault maintains that it is only with the modern conception of the "reason of state" or "national interest" (*raison d'État*) that this happiness and felicity, the ultimate instance of which Aristotle and Aquinas had situated beyond the political realm and, to a certain extent, beyond ordinary "terrestrial" human life itself, becomes fully immanent to the life of the state.

> Royal government [for Aquinas] did indeed fall under a particular terrestrial art, but its final objective was to ensure that on leaving their terrestrial status, and freed from this human republic, men can arrive at eternal bliss [*félicité*] and the enjoyment [*jouissance*] of God. This means that, in the end, the art of governing or ruling in Saint Thomas was always organized for this extraterrestrial, extra-state . . . purpose . . . and, in the last and final instance, it was for this end that the *res publica* had to be organized. . . . The end of *raison d'État* is the state itself, and if there is something like perfection, happiness [*bonheur*], or felicity [*félicité*], it will only ever be the perfection, happiness, or felicity of the state itself. (Foucault 2004, 264; 2009, 258)

What, for Foucault, is specific to the modern "police" or "policy" state is the "connection between strengthening and increasing the powers of the state, making good use of the forces of the state, and procuring the happiness of its subjects"—this happiness being now understood as the "well-being" (*bien-être*) or welfare of individuals that constitutes the strength of the state (Foucault 2004, 335; 2009, 327–8). In other words, while for Aristotle and Aquinas the political realm is ultimately an instrument for making possible the supreme individual felicity, for modern state reason, civic well-being becomes an instrument for enhancing the forces of the state.

Foucault's distinction gives us a useful tool for comparing and contrasting the Aristotelian-Thomistic understanding of the kind of fulfillment that is the ultimate aim of polities with the happiness inherent in modern "governmentality," in which, for Foucault, political power for the first time assumes a genuinely biopolitical form. In what follows, I will briefly sketch out such a contrast and suggest that the Aristotelian *eudaimonia* and the Thomistic *beatitudo* are inherently "*meta*-biopolitical" ideals, in the sense that they are situated above and beyond the realm of "human affairs"—beyond human life in its ordinary biological and terrestrial form and beyond politics as the intersubjective realm in which human affairs are played out. Finally, I will point to the Hobbesian theory of the commonwealth as a distinctive turn to a modern, truly "biopolitical," and immanent understanding of civic happiness as essentially consisting in the preservation of life itself and the optimization of its inherent (subjective, material, biological) quality. In the modern liberal and utilitarian paradigm, life itself is promoted, according to Hannah Arendt, to the position of the "highest good," the *summum bonum*.

2. Aristotle and Aquinas: The Transcendence of the Blessed Life

The basic premise of Aristotle's *Politics*, stated at the very outset of book 1 (*Pol.* 1.1.1252a1–7), is that all human communities (*koinōniai*) are constituted for the sake of some good (*agathon*); accordingly, as the supreme (*kyriōtatē*) and most comprehensive (*periechousa*) type of community, the *polis* aims at the supreme good. The *polis* grows out of more primitive types of community that address immediate or long-term

biological and economic necessities: households (*oikiai*), which are unions of husband and wife for the purpose of producing offspring, and of master and slaves for the organization of necessary labor, and villages (*kōmai*), which are conglomerations of households. The *polis,* however, is more than the sum of these constituent parts, more than an extended household or village: it exists not simply in order to guarantee mere staying alive (*zēn monon*), but for the sake of a specific, qualified kind of being-alive, "living well" (*eu zēn*; 1.2.1252a26–b30; 3.9.1280a31–2).[3]

The supreme good that is the purpose of the political community is a certain kind of good life within a civic framework, a form of *bene vivere politice,* as Aristotle's *kalōs politeuesthai* (*Pol.* 2.9.1269a34–5) was rendered in the Latin translation of William of Moerbeke.[4] This good life involves a "happiness" (*eudaimonia*) consisting in a life that is freely chosen (*zēn kata proairesin*) for its own sake, and for that reason, a community of unfree beings, such as slaves or nonhuman animals, can never qualify as a *polis* (3.9.1280a32–4). The fact that civic happiness is based on choice rather than necessity means that it cannot be defined by mere material interests: the *polis* is not primarily an economic cooperative for the purpose of protecting and accumulating property or advancing trade, nor does it exist simply for the sake of military organization or simply in order to guarantee the judicial rights of its citizens (1280a25–31, 34–b33). Aristotle explicitly rejects the idea that the political community could be based on a mere extrinsic contract or covenant (*synthēkē*) between individuals, without a qualitative transformation of the life of these individuals *qua* citizens (1280b10–12). Rather, it is only by becoming citizens that the members of households and families gain access to a life characterized by completeness and self-sufficiency (*zōē teleia kai autarkēs*), which is what living happily and appropriately (*zēn eudaimonōs kai kalōs*) fundamentally means (1280b33–5, 40–1281a2).

[3] As I have argued elsewhere (Backman 2017), this Aristotelian distinction between *zēn monon* and *eu zēn*, "merely living" and "living well," is the most appropriate rendering of what Agamben (1995, 3–4; 1998, 1–2) designates as the allegedly Aristotelian distinction between *zōē* and *bios*. On the problematic nature of Agamben's distinction, see also Finlayson 2010 and Miller 2020.

[4] On *bene vivere politice*, see Albertus Magnus, *Politicorum libri VIII* 2.7.b; Thomas Aquinas, *Sententia libri Politicorum*, 2.13.2.

What this complete and self-sufficient life of happiness consists in precisely is not really specified by Aristotle in the *Politics*. This is because politics is subservient to ethics. In the *Politics*, Aristotle simply posits that there is one mode of life (*bios*) that is maximally fulfilling and maximally "happy" for all human beings, taken either as individuals or as members of a political community (*Pol.* 7.3.1325b30–2), and it is ultimately the task of ethics to determine the nature of this absolutely supreme mode. Political science is an instrumental study whose task is to elaborate what type of political order (*taxis*) optimally allows any given individual to pursue the most blissful (*makarios*) way of life (7.2.1324a23–5). This instrumental role makes Aristotelian political theory, as Ojakangas (2016b, 12) notes, a largely technical inquiry into the organization of political life involving large amounts of empirical material, rather than a true "political philosophy" oriented to fundamental rational principles. The principal domain of this inquiry includes questions related to the material and institutional organization of the *polis*—geographical location, the physical structure of the settlement, political constitution, political institutions and offices, customs, norms, and laws. Political science inevitably also involves extensive considerations encroaching upon the domain of the household, *oikos,* as the biological and economic foundation and infrastructure of the *polis*; these include the quantity and quality of the population with its implications for the management of sexual relations, marriage, reproduction, and education as well as the role of women, slaves, and children, and the distribution of wealth and labor. On the technical level of means, Aristotelian political science thus certainly has an important "biopolitical" dimension, even though its focus is not biological life as such.

The question concerning the supreme *bios* is touched upon in the *Politics* only to the extent to which it involves participation in public affairs, as the ethical role of public life naturally has implications for the optimal organization of the *polis* (*Pol.* 7.2.1324a13–23). It is argued by Aristotle that true fulfillment cannot consist in the possession of any external good or in any bodily state but must rather be based on the ability to exercise a certain virtue or excellence (*aretê*) of the soul (7.1.1323a21–b36). This leaves us with two main candidates for the best mode of life: the life of political participation and action (*bios politikos kai praktikos*), based on the virtue of practical prudence (*phronēsis*), and the contemplative life (*bios*

theōrētikos) of the philosopher, based on the virtue of theoretical wisdom (*sophia*; 7.2.1324a25–35; see also *Eth. Nic.* 6.5.1140a24–b11, 6.7.1141a20–b8, 6.8.1141b23–1142a10). Aristotle agrees with those who favor the political life that the best mode of life cannot be an inactive one; flourishing necessarily involves action in the sense of the exercise of a virtuous capacity (*Pol.* 7.3.1325a16–b16). Yet the life of action, Aristotle emphasizes, is not necessarily a *public* life of *political* action, as many of his contemporaries would have been inclined to suppose. Action, *praxis*, is defined by Aristotle as an activity that does not aim beyond itself but is rather itself its own end. Applying this definition of action, the most perfect and complete form of action is precisely the most self-sufficient and self-immanent one: "The life of action is not necessarily oriented to others, as some believe, nor are only those thoughts active [*praktikas*] that concern the external results of acting; much more active are the contemplations [*theōrias*] and acts of thinking that are their own ends [*autoteleis*] and take place for their own sake" (7.3.1325b16–21; my translation). Aristotle has thus implicitly answered the question concerning the happiest *bios*: it is the life of self-referential contemplation, the *bios theōrētikos*, which, according to Aristotle's definition of *praxis*, is also the most "active" or "action-related," *praktikos* (on this, see also Backman 2010).

This answer is explicitly given and elaborated in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Aristotle enumerates three main modes of life that are freely chosen for their own sake: the life of enjoyment (*bios apolaustikos*), the life of political participation (*bios politikos*), and the life of contemplation (*bios theōrētikos*). Of these, the first, despite its popularity, is instantly dismissed by Aristotle as a life "fit for cattle"; but even the second, focused on the quest for recognition through public activity, is not truly self-sufficient, since honor or recognition (*timē*) is dependent also on those who recognize, not only on the one who is recognized (*Eth. Nic.* 1.5.1095b17–26). We are thus left with contemplation (*theōrein*), which is the active exercise of wisdom (*sophia*) or comprehensive understanding, one of the principal intellectual virtues of the human soul (6.7.1141a16–22, 6.13.1145a6–11). The contemplative beholding of reality as a whole in the light of its fundamental, necessary, and permanent intuitive metaphysical principles is the most self-sufficient, enjoyable, and carefree activity, one that elevates the one who contemplates above the concerns and vicissitudes of communal human affairs (10.7.1177a12–b26). As such, the life of contemplation

constitutes the supreme human fulfillment, *eudaimonia*. Yet, Aristotle points out, as the closest approximation of the human being to the perfect activity of the metaphysical divinity, consisting in an immediate and complete reflective awareness of being-aware (*noēsis noēseōs*; *Metaph*. 12.9.1074b34–5), contemplation is in fact something more than human, something superhuman:

> Such a [contemplative] mode of life [*bios*] would be superior to the human mode of life; for one will not pass one's life [*biōsetai*] in this manner to the extent that one is human, but rather to the extent that there is something divine [*theion*] present in oneself. . . . If the intellect [*nous*] is indeed divine with respect to the human being, the mode of life according to the intellect is divine with respect to the human mode of life. One must not heed those who demand that one must consider human things, being a human, or mortal things since one is a mortal; rather, one must be immortal [*athanatizein*] to the extent that this is possible and do everything in order to live according to that which is supreme in oneself. (*Eth. Nic.* 10.7.1177b26–8, 30–4; my translation)

Since the human being is not the supreme being in the cosmic order—there are many far more divine, that is, intransient, necessary, and self-sufficient, things (*Eth. Nic.* 6.7.1141a20–b2)—the supreme human life, in which the human being maximally approximates the perfect and permanent life of the divinity, is not truly "human" but rather divine. The ultimate end of the *polis* is to make possible the life of contemplation—the activity of the philosopher—by providing the necessary institutional background framework of security, freedom, and leisure. The task of political science is to establish how this framework is to be organized and what kind of material, biological, and economic infrastructure is needed to support it. Politics is subservient to ethics and ethics is subservient to metaphysical theology. Politics must be based on biopolitics, on the proper administration of biological life and natural necessity, but the true end of politics is ethical and, literally, *meta*-biopolitical: the political realm serves a mode of life, a *bios*, that transcends the ordinary concerns of the situated, embodied, and temporal human *bios*.

This was the fundamental premise of Aristotelian political philosophy, a tradition that remained without much consequence or relevance during the Hellenistic and Roman periods, in classical Arabic philosophy, and in the early Middle Ages, but was reappropriated at the height of scholasticism by Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas and transposed into the Christian monarchical framework.[5] *De regno* (On Kingship), an unfinished treatise traditionally attributed to Aquinas—apparently originally intended as a gift to King Hugh II of Cyprus and later completed by Bartholomew (Tolomeo, Ptolemy) of Lucca under the title *De regimine principum* (On the Government of Rulers; see Dyson 2002, xix)—reiterates the basic premise of Aristotle's *Politics*. Human beings gather into a civic community in order to live well together (*ut simul bene vivant*), and the good life (*bona vita*) is life in accordance with virtue (*secundum virtutem*); thus, a true civic multitude (*multitudo*) is one that is directed by the same laws and the same government (*regimen*) to live virtuously (*De regno* 2.3.58–73 [1.15]).[6] However, for Aquinas, in contrast to Aristotle, supreme fulfillment does not consist in the exercise of a virtue; rather, virtuous temporal life is only a means for attaining the ultimate end (*ultimus finis*) common to the individual and the community, namely, the eternal enjoyment of God (*fruitio divina, fruitio Dei*) in the hereafter, which is also the ultimate happiness or beatitude (*ultima beatitudo*; 2.3.32–8, 74–80 [1.15]). In the *Summa Theologica* (1a.2ae.q3) Aquinas demonstrates, closely following the reasoning of the *Nicomachean Ethics,* that ultimate and perfect beatitude consists in the perfect activity of the contemplative or speculative intellect (*intellectus speculativus*)—more specifically, in an active contemplation (*contemplatio*) or vision (*visio*) of God's essence. This contemplative vision is delight (*delectatio*) or enjoyment (*fruitio*) insofar as it is not merely "intellectual"

---

[5] Aristotelian political theory was to a certain extent studied and developed within the original Peripatetic school, but access to the text of the *Politics* was severely limited during the Hellenistic period and late antiquity; the only Greek commentary on the *Politics* was a twelfth-century work by Michael of Ephesus of which fragments have been preserved in the manuscript scholia published in the 1909 Immisch edition of Aristotle's *Politics* (see Immisch 1909, xv–xx). On this reception history of the *Politics,* see Horn 2008; O'Meara 2008. No Arabic translation of the *Politics* has been discovered, and it only became relevant for medieval philosophy with the appearance of the Latin translation of William of Moerbeke (ca. 1260) and the subsequent Latin commentaries by Albertus Magnus (ca. 1264–7) and Thomas Aquinas (ca. 1269–72); see Söder 2008.

[6] There are two different main ways of dividing *De regno* into book and chapters. I use here the division adopted in volume 42 the Leonine edition of Aquinas's *Opera omnia*; the alternative division is given in brackets.

but also an attainment of the final end of the human will (*voluntas*). Ultimate beatitude is not attainable by human virtue alone, but also requires divine grace (*gratia*) and is thus dependent on divine government (*De regno* 2.3.94–8 [1.15]); nonetheless, the basic function (*officium*) of the temporal government of the king is to "promote the good life of the multitude in such a way as to make it suitable for the attainment of heavenly beatitude" (2.4.22–4 [1.16]; my translation). For Aquinas, in an even more radical sense than for Aristotle, the happiness that is the final end of civic government is thus entirely "meta-bio-political"—situated not only beyond communal and public life but beyond temporal and this-worldly human life in general. But even for Aquinas, as Ojakangas points out, optimal governmental technique involves not only moral but also "biopolitical" considerations of and interventions in the material and biological infrastructure of the human political community, such as climate, physical surroundings, food supply, health, and trade (2.5–8 [2.1–4]; Ojakangas 2016b, 130–1).

3. Hobbes and Modernity: The Life-Immanence of Happiness

We thus see that on the level of political technique, biopolitical considerations have indeed been an integral aspect of political theory since antiquity. Interventions into the material—biological and economic—domain of human life, which constitutes the infrastructure of the political domain, were deemed necessary by the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition in order to organize the optimal political framework most conducive to the ultimate end of individual and communal human life: perfect happiness. Yet this end itself was seen by the tradition as metabiopolitical, transcendent to the biological and communal levels of human existence. Political thought thus arguably became truly and completely biopolitical only at the point at which this transcendence was abandoned and the ultimate end and aim of politics was itself made immanent to the biological and the political. As Roberto Esposito (2008, 17, 46–7, 57–9, 149), among others, has shown, this happens, most clearly, at the threshold of modern political thought, in the work of Thomas Hobbes.[7]

[7] On biopolitics in Hobbes, see also Hull 2009, 14, 137–46; Piasentier and Tarizzo 2016. For Arendt's reading of Hobbes as *the* philosopher of the bourgeoisie and its interest in private acquisition, see Arendt 1979, 139–47; 1998, 31.

Hobbes begins the second part of his *Leviathan* (1651), "Of Common-wealth," by stating the fundamental aim of the commonwealth:

> The finall Cause, End, or Designe of men . . . in the introduction of that restraint upon themselves, (in which wee see them live in Common-wealths,) is the foresight of their own preservation, and of a more contented life thereby; that is to say, of getting themselves out from that miserable condition of Warre, which is necessarily consequent . . . to the naturall Passions of men. (Hobbes, *Leviathan* 2.17.85)

The final end of life in a political community is the "contentment" afforded by the preservation of life, which, in the prepolitical state of nature—for Hobbes, inherently a state of war consisting in the famous "warre of every man against every man" (*Leviathan* 1.13.63)—is constantly under the threat of violent death due to the "natural passions" of human beings, such as lust for honor and dignity, pride, envy, hatred, and vengefulness. Peace and preservation are brought about only through the fusion of conflicting individual wills into a common will under civil government; this is by no means a natural process, but indeed contrary to the human being's natural inclinations and based purely on an artificial covenant (2.17.87). It follows from this artificial character of the commonwealth that it can have no "natural" end, as in Aristotelian teleology, apart from the purpose for which human beings decide to enter into a civil covenant—that is, their desire to leave the state of war in order to preserve their lives. Moreover, Hobbes explicitly rejects the Aristotelian doctrine of an ultimate end of human life as such in the sense of a final object of all desire; desire is rather by nature an endless pursuit of transient and changing objects.

> [W]e are to consider, that the Felicity of this life, consisteth not in the repose of a mind satisfied. For there is no such *Finis ultimus*, (utmost ayme), nor *Summum Bonum*, (greatest Good,) as is spoken of in the Books of the old Morall Philosophers. Nor can a man any more

> live, whose Desires are at an end, than he, whose Senses and Imaginations are at a stand. Felicity is a continuall progresse of the desire, from one object to another. (*Leviathan* 1.11.47)[8]

The "Felicity of this life"—as opposed to the Thomistic beatific vision and other joys of the hereafter, which Hobbes considers incomprehensible from our viewpoint in the here and now—consists in "continuall prospering," that is, "[c]ontinuall *successe* in obtaining those things which a man from time to time desireth. . . . For there is no such thing as perpetuall Tranquillity of mind, while we live here" (*Leviathan* 1.6.29).

By contrast, there is a *summum malum,* a universal greatest evil: violent death, the fear of which is the greatest fear for all humans (Hobbes, *De cive* ep. ded. 10, 1.2.18). It is the fear of death, together with the "Desire of such things as are necessary to commodious living; and a Hope by their Industry to obtain them," that motivates humans to establish a commonwealth under a sovereign power for the sake of peace (*Leviathan* 1.13.63). The "ultimate end" of the commonwealth is thus primarily negative: avoidance of violent death and preservation of life in order to allow individuals to pursue the fulfillment their various, shifting, and unending desires by seeking "commodious living" through private industry.

In *De cive* (On the Citizen, 1642), Hobbes elaborates that civic "safety" (*salus*) does not mean simply the preservation of life in whatever condition (*vitae qualitercunque conservatio*) but rather the safeguarding of "happy life" (*vita beata*), of the possibility to live "in a maximally pleasurable way" (*iucundissime vivere*) to the extent that this is allowed by the human condition (*conditio humana*). Therefore, rulers are expected to provide their subjects with the means of sustaining not only "mere life" (*vita modo*) but also delight (*delectatio*), that is, with things that will enable the citizens to grow "strong" (*fortes*; *De cive* 2.13.4). But it turns out that this happy, delightful, pleasurable, and reinforced life amounts to nothing more than the "commodious" life of material prosperity acquired through work. Hobbes does take into consideration

[8] On the early modern transformations in the philosophical concept of happiness and the break with the Aristotelian *eudaimonia* and the Christian *beatitudo,* see Spaemann 1974a, 1974b. On Hobbes on happiness, see also Kitanov 2011; Foisneau 2014; Hamilton 2016; Airaksinen 2019, 163–80.

the Thomistic notion that it is the ultimate task of rulers to guide their subjects towards eternal salvation (*salutem aeternam*), noting that the princes themselves generally believe this to be their duty, and that there is no reason why they should not heed their conscience (*conscientiam*) in this matter (2.13.5). However, insofar as *this* (temporal) life is considered (*quae hanc tantum vitam spectant*), there are four main concrete benefits (*commoda*) that sovereign government holds out to its subject: protection from external enemies, preservation of internal peace, private enrichment to the extent that is allowed by public security, and enjoyment of a liberty harmless to others. "Even the supreme commanders [*imperatores*] can contribute no more to civic happiness [*faelicitatem civilem*] than that, preserved from external and civil war, they [the citizens] may enjoy [*frui*] the works of their industry" (2.13.6; my translation). Here, then, in stark contrast to the Thomistic ideal of eternal salvation and the enjoyment of God—which, for Hobbes, has become a matter of faith and conscience—we find the modern liberal paradigm of civic happiness: preservation of life for the pursuit of maximal private enjoyment and contentment, primarily in the form of private acquisition and wealth.

4. Arendt on Life as the Greatest Good and the Possibility of Public Happiness

It is the post-Hobbesian liberal ideal of happiness as "commodious" living that is at stake in Arendt's (1998, 133–4, 308–11) interpretation of the modern utilitarian principle of the "greatest happiness for all" and of the ubiquitous demand for happiness in the contemporary consumer society of the *animal laborans,* the late modern human being whose principal activities are labor and consumption, in other words, the sustainment and enjoyment of biological life. Happiness, in the modern sense, is simply the fundamental subjective quality of the biological life-process, the "quality of life" that modern consumer societies ceaselessly seek to enhance; it is the presence of the feeling of pleasure in the largely negative sense of the absence of pain (112–15). Arendt points out that the Aristotelian *eudaimonia* or the Thomistic *beatitudo* do not mean "happiness" at all in this modern subjective sense but rather "blessedness," fulfillment of one's inherent potential (192–3). Once the Aristotelian-Christian aspiration for salvation in an immortal blessed life of contemplation loses its orienting meaning, the only "highest good" left to

Western political thought is life *as such*, the bare biological life-process, and the optimization of its inherent quality, that is, happiness (313–20). Late modernity has succumbed to

> the persistent demands of the *animal laborans* to obtain a happiness which can be achieved only where life's processes of exhaustion and regeneration, of pain and release from pain, strike a perfect balance. . . . For only the *animal laborans*, and neither the craftsman nor the man of action, has ever demanded to be "happy" or thought that mortal men could be happy. (Arendt 1998, 134)

This understanding of the post-Hobbesian promotion of the intertwining ideals of life and happiness or "quality of life" is, as Giorgio Agamben (1995, 6; 1998, 3–4) and Esposito (2008, 149–50) point out, Arendt's account of the birth of modern "biopolitics"—an account that, even though it operates without the terms "biopolitics" and "biopower," comes quite close to Foucault's interpretation of the maximization of civic happiness through emerging modern welfare policies as a maximization of the vital forces of the state (see Braun 2007; Blencowe 2010; Suuronen 2018). Like Foucault, Arendt, too, finds the roots of biopolitics in this sense in Christianity—in the Christian belief in the sacredness of life as such that "has survived, and has even remained completely unshaken by, secularization and the general decline of the Christian faith" (Arendt 1998, 314). As we have seen, the "immanent" biopolitics of modernity in the sense proposed here emerges from the medieval metabiopolitics of Aquinas precisely at the point where, due to the process of increasing secularization, the ideal of life loses its transcendent, spiritual, speculative, and beatific status, and its sanctity is bequeathed to our material, biological, and organic life here and now, transforming temporal government from a preparation for salvation into a "government of the living." It is only in this sense that the Christian belief in personal immortality ultimately gives life on earth the status of the "highest good of man" (316).

With the modern turn to life's biological immanence, the great aversion of the Church Fathers to certain types of biopolitical interventions—cited by Ojakangas as the main reason for the "decline and

eventually . . . the end of Greco-Roman biopolitical rationality in the medieval Christian world" (Ojakangas 2016b, 125)—also gradually begins to fade, but now in the light of a completely new rationality that was as such unknown to classical antiquity. While the ancient ideas of the necessity of "purging" life deemed degenerate, described by Ojakangas as a central facet of ancient biopolitics, were always geared to the interests of the *polis* and its metabiopolitical ends, the modern focus on the inherent and immanent quality of the biological life-process as an end in itself ultimately gives rise to the notion of "life unworthy of being lived" (*lebensunwertes Leben*) so infamously exploited by Nazi and proto-Nazi eugenicists.[9] As soon as the maximization of the quality of (biological) life—of "happiness" in the genuinely biopolitical sense—is accepted as a political end, the elimination of life regarded as biologically inferior readily offers itself as a means towards this end.

Without disputing the presence of biopolitical techniques in Plato's and Aristotle's political thought, I have tried to show that the underlying rationale for these measures—the overall understanding of the ends of politics and the *polis*—is most appropriately characterized as metabiopolitical in the context of ancient and medieval Aristotelian political theory. For Aristotle and Aquinas, the final end of politics is neither mere preservation of life nor "happiness" in the sense of the optimal subjective quality of the life-process, but rather fulfillment in the form of an extraordinary mode of life beyond involvement in ordinary communal human affairs, even beyond temporal and biological life as such. Moreover, in Arendt we find a narrative that complements and supports Foucault's notion of the Christian roots of modern biopolitics: the post-Hobbesian focus of political theory on the preservation and enhancement of life as such is grounded in the Christian concept of the sanctity of life.

In closing, we should note that we also discover in Arendt an alternative to the metabiopolitical Aristotelian ideal of *eudaimonia/beatitudo* as well as the biopolitical Hobbesian quality-of-life ideal of happiness as "commodious living": a genuinely *political* ideal of "public happiness," consisting in political

---

[9] The concept was popularized by a 1920 pamphlet published by the jurist Karl Binding and the psychiatrist Alfred Hoche, bearing the ominous title *Die Freigabe der Vernichtung lebensunwerten Lebens* (trans. *Allowing the Destruction of Life Unworthy of Life*). See Agamben 1995, 150–9; 1998, 136–43; Esposito 2008, 194.

participation in public affairs, in having access to the public realm and a share in public power (Arendt 1990, 119, 123, 126–38, 255, 269, 279). This ideal, Arendt emphasizes, was promoted by the founders of the American Revolution, particularly John Adams, for whom the desire for public esteem was itself a "principal end" as well as a "principal means" of government (Adams 2000, 313; Arendt 2018, 213).[10] As Arendt points out, while both the Aristotelian and Hobbesian models instrumentalize politics as a means to an end found outside the political sphere, the ideal of public happiness sees political activity as an end in itself: "In this definition of the 'end of government,' means and end obviously coincide; the moment one puts the notion of 'public happiness' in the place of private rights and personal interests, the very question: What is the end of government? loses its sense" (Arendt 2018, 213). Between the transcendent beatitude of the contemplative life and the immanent happiness of optimized biological life, we find the public happiness of participating in a shared political space of visibility, so manifestly neglected by the Western tradition of political theory.

References

Adams, John. 2000. *The Political Writings of John Adams*. Edited by George W. Carey. Washington, DC: Regnery.

Agamben, Giorgio. 1995. *Homo sacer: Il potere sovrano e la nuda vita*. Turin: Einaudi.

Agamben, Giorgio. 1998. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Airaksinen, Timo. 2019. *Vagaries of Desire: A Collection of Philosophical Essays*. Leiden: Brill.

Albertus Magnus. 1891. *Opera omnia*, vol. 8: *Politicorum libri VIII*. Edited by Auguste Borgnet. Paris: Vivès.

Arendt, Hannah. 1979. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. 2nd ed. San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace & Co. First published 1951.

[10] Soni (2010) challenges Arendt's notion of public happiness, maintaining that the idea of happiness espoused by the American revolutionaries was an essentially private one.

Arendt, Hannah. 1990. *On Revolution*. London: Penguin. First published 1963.

Arendt, Hannah. 1998. *The Human Condition*. 2nd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. First published 1958.

Arendt, Hannah. 2018. *Thinking without a Banister: Essays in Understanding 1953–1975*. Edited by Jerome Kohn. New York: Schocken Books.

Aristotle. 1872. *Politicorum libri octo*. Translated into Latin by William of Moerbeke, edited by Franz Susemihl. Leipzig: Teubner.

Aristotle.1894. *Ethica Nicomachea*. Edited by Ingram Bywater. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Aristotle. 1909. *Politica*. Edited by Otto Immisch. Leipzig: Teubner.

Aristotle. 1924. *Metaphysics*. 2 vols. Edited by David Ross. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Aristotle. 1957. *Politica*. Edited by David Ross. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Backman, Jussi. 2010. "The End of Action: An Arendtian Critique of Aristotle's Concept of *Praxis*." In *COLLeGIUM: Studies across Disciplines in the Humanities and Social Sciences*, vol. 8, *Hannah Arendt: Practice, Thought and Judgment*, edited by Mika Ojakangas, 28–47. Helsinki: Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies. http://hdl.handle.net/10138/25817.

Backman, Jussi. 2017. "Aristotle." In *Agamben's Philosophical Lineage*, edited by Adam Kotsko and Carlo Salzani, 15–26. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. https://doi.org/10.3366/edinburgh/9781474423632.003.0002.

Binding, Karl, and Alfred Hoche. 1922. *Die Freigabe der Vernichtung lebensunwerten Lebens: Ihr Maß und ihre Form*. 2nd ed. Leipzig: Meiner. First published 1920.

Binding, Karl, and Alfred Hoche. 2012. *Allowing the Destruction of Life Unworthy of Life: Its Measure and Form*. Translated by Cristina Modak. Greenwood, WI: Suzeteo Enterprises.

Blencowe, Claire. 2010. "Foucault's and Arendt's 'Insider View' of Biopolitics: A Critique of Agamben." *History of the Human Sciences* 23 (5): 113–30. https://doi.org/10.1177/0952695110375762.

Braun, Kathrin. 2007. "Biopolitics and Temporality in Arendt and Foucault." *Time & Society* 16 (1): 5–23. https://doi.org/10.1177/0961463X07074099.

Diprose, Rosalyn, and Ewa Plonowska Ziarek. 2018. *Arendt, Natality and Biopolitics: Toward Democratic Plurality and Reproductive Justice*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Dyson, R. W. 2002. Introduction to *Political Writings*, by Thomas Aquinas, edited by R. W. Dyson, xvii–xxxvi. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511801952.002.

Esposito, Roberto. 2008. *Bíos: Biopolitics and Philosophy*. Translated by Timothy Campbell. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Finlayson, James Gordon. 2010. "'Bare Life' and Politics in Agamben's Reading of Aristotle." *The Review of Politics* 72 (1): 97–126. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670509990982.

Foisneau, Luc. 2014. "Hobbes on Desire and Happiness." *Homo oeconomicus* 31 (4): 479–89.

Foucault, Michel. 1976. *Histoire de la sexualité*. Vol. 1, *La volonté de savoir*. Paris: Gallimard.

Foucault, Michel. 1978. *The History of Sexuality*. Vol. 1, *An Introduction*. Translated by Robert Hurley. New York: Pantheon.

Foucault, Michel. 1997. *"Il faut défendre la société": Cours au Collège de France (1975–1976)*. Edited by Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana. Paris: Gallimard/Seuil.

Foucault, Michel. 2003. *"Society Must Be Defended": Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–76*. Translated by David Macey. New York: Picador.

Foucault, Michel. 2004. *Sécurité, territoire, population: Cours au Collège de France (1977–1978)*. Edited by Michel Senellart. Paris: Gallimard; Seuil.

Foucault, Michel. 2009. *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977–78*. Translated by Graham Burchell. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Hamilton, James J. 2016. "Hobbes on Felicity: Aristotle, Bacon and *eudaimonia*." *Hobbes Studies* 29 (2): 129–47. https://doi.org/10.1163/18750257-02902002.

Hobbes, Thomas. 1983. *De Cive: The Latin Version*. Edited by Howard Warrender. Oxford: Clarendon Press. First published 1642.

Hobbes, Thomas. 1996. *Leviathan*. Edited by Richard Tuck. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. First published 1651.

Horn, Christoph. 2008. "Hellenismus und frühe Kaiserzeit: Der Peripatos." In *Politischer Aristotelismus: Die Rezeption der aristotelischen "Politik" von der Antike bis zum 19. Jahrhundert,* edited by Christoph Horn and Ada Neschke-Hentschke, 20–41. Stuttgart: Metzler. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-476-00106-1_2.

Hull, Gordon. 2009. *Hobbes and the Making of Modern Political Thought*. London: Continuum.

Immisch, Otto. 1909. Preface to Aristotle, *Politica*, edited by Otto Immisch, v–xxxix. Leipzig: Teubner.

Kitanov, Severin V. 2011. "Happiness in a Mechanistic Universe: Thomas Hobbes on the Nature and Attainability of Happiness." *Hobbes Studies* 24 (2): 117–36. https://doi.org/10.1163/187502511X597667.

Lane, Melissa S. 1998. *Method and Politics in Plato's Statesman*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Lilja, Mona, and Stellan Vinthagen. 2014. "Sovereign Power, Disciplinary Power and Biopower: Resisting What Power with What Resistance?" *Journal of Political Power* 7 (1): 107–26. https://doi.org/10.1080/2158379X.2014.889403.

Michael of Ephesus. 1909. Scholia and glosses to *Politica*, by Aristotle, edited by Otto Immisch, 293–329. Leipzig: Teubner.

Miller, Paul Allen. 2020. "Against Agamben: Or Living your Life, *Zōē* versus *Bios* in the Late Foucault." In *Biotheory: Life and Death under Capitalism*, edited by Jeffrey R. Di Leo and Peter Hitchcock, 23–41. New York: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003021506-3.

Naas, Michael. 2018. *Plato and the Invention of Life*. New York: Fordham University Press.

Ojakangas, Mika. 2012. "Michel Foucault and the Enigmatic Origins of Bio-politics and Governmentality." *History of the Human Sciences* 25 (1): 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1177/0952695111426654.

Ojakangas, Mika. 2016a. "Biopolitics in the Political Thought of Classical Greece." In *The Routledge Handbook of Biopolitics*, edited by Sergei Prozorov and Simona Rentea, 23–35. London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315612751-2.

Ojakangas, Mika. 2016b. *On the Greek Origins of Biopolitics: A Reinterpretation of the History of Biopower*. London: Routledge.

O'Meara, Dominic J. 2008. "Spätantike und Byzanz: Neuplatonische Rezeption—Michael von Ephesos." In *Politischer Aristotelismus: Die Rezeption der aristotelischen "Politik" von der Antike bis zum 19. Jahrhundert,* edited by Christoph Horn and Ada Neschke-Hentschke, 42–52. Stuttgart: Metzler. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-476-00106-1_3.

Piasentier, Marco, and Davide Tarizzo. 2016. "'The Government of a Multitude': Hobbes on Political Subjectification." In *The Routledge Handbook of Biopolitics,* edited by Sergei Prozorov and Simona Rentea, 36–49. London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315612751-3.

Plato. 1900. *Platonis opera*. Vol. 1. Edited by John Burnet. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Plato. 1907. *Platonis opera*. Vol. 7. Edited by John Burnet. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Söder, Joachim R. 2008. "Hochmittelalter: Die Wiedergewinnung des Politischen." In *Politischer Aristotelismus: Die Rezeption der aristotelischen "Politik" von der Antike bis zum 19. Jahrhundert,* edited by Christoph Horn and Ada Neschke-Hentschke, 53–76. Stuttgart: Metzler. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-476-00106-1_4.

Soni, Vivasvan. 2010. "A Classical Politics without Happiness? Hannah Arendt and the American Revolution." *Cultural Critique* 74: 32–47. https://doi.org/10.1353/cul.0.0057.

Spaemann, Robert. 1974a. "Glück, Glückseligkeit III." In *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, vol. 3, edited by Joachim Ritter, 697–707. Basel: Schwabe. https://doi.org/10.24894/HWPh.5161.

Spaemann, Robert. 1974b. "Gut, höchstes." In *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, vol. 3, edited by Joachim Ritter, 973–6. Basel: Schwabe. https://doi.org/10.24894/HWPh.1467.

Suuronen, Ville. 2018. "Resisting Biopolitics: Hannah Arendt as a Thinker of Automation, Social Rights, and Basic Income." *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 43 (1): 35–53. https://doi.org/10.1177/0304375418789722.

Thomas Aquinas. 1891. *Opera omnia*. Vol. 6, *Summa theologiae, Ia IIae, qq. 1–70*. Rome: Typographia poliglotta S. C. de Propaganda Fide.

Thomas Aquinas. 1971. *Opera omnia*. Vol. 48, *Sententia libri Politicorum, Tabula libri Ethicorum*. Rome: Ad Sanctae Sabinae.

Thomas Aquinas. 1979. *Opera omnia*. Vol. 42. Rome: Editori di San Tommaso.