The Virtuous Life of Pleasure: Aristotle, Contemplation, and Corporate Sustainability

Melissa Fitzpatrick
Loyola Marymount University, USA

This article sketches an answer to the call for a normative foundation for the paradox perspective on corporate sustainability and also enriches an understanding of firm objectives that ought to be otherwise than profit by offering a rendering of Aristotelian virtue ethics—what I call the virtuous life of pleasure—that highlights how contemplative activity or *theorein* cultivates, and is essential to, virtue and *eudaimonia.* My claim is that the virtuous life of pleasure not only characterizes how to live the most meaningful and pleasant life, rendering it good and thus worth pursuing, but it is also, as a flourishing life, the normative foundation for safeguarding the intrinsic value of nonfinancial corporate aims, as the paradox perspective prescribes. It does so by establishing a *principle of enough*, which seeks to preserve integral, interdependent parts as ends in themselves and as constitutive of a larger ecosystem.

Key Words: virtue ethics, Aristotle, well-being, corporate sustainability, contemplation, moral philosophy

The gravity of the ecological crisis is an enduring part of our daily reality, and businesses are among the most culpable for environmental degradation, due to their excessive toxic waste dumping, carbon emissions, and natural resource extraction (Johnsen 2020; Shrivastava 1994). Stakeholders are increasingly demanding that firms embrace objectives beyond profit maximization (Lankoski and Smith 2018), especially objectives that promote the health of the planet (Simon-Kucher 2024). As Johnsen (2020, 2) writes: "The prevailing mantra is that ecological degradation can be counteracted by businesses that develop and implement ecological solutions … and reconcile environmental concerns with economic profits." Businesses ought to *meaningfully* commit to corporate sustainability—but how?

The mainstream defense of corporate sustainability is the "business case" (Carmine and De Marchi 2023, 139), which views environmental initiatives as a means to the company's economic bottom line—conditional variables in a firm's cost-benefit analysis, vulnerable to quick elimination if they conflict with profit (Johnsen 2020). The leading alternative to the business case is the "paradox perspective" (Hahn et al. 2015), which heeds the challenge companies face to continue their core business practices while also, paradoxically, addressing environmental goals *as ends in themselves.* Although the paradox perspective is a promising alternative to the business case, it lacks a normative foundation, which would deepen our understanding of both

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why it should be, and how it can be, implemented (Hahn et al. 2018). Therefore, to justify a shift toward the paradox perspective on corporate sustainability and make it viable, we need a suitable moral grounding—that is, an account of why it is good and ought to be pursued (Scanlon 1998)—that recognizes the reality of conflicting albeit co-constitutive goods and does not systematically subordinate some to others.

The main contribution of this article is to sketch a normative foundation for the paradox perspective on corporate sustainability (Hahn et al. 2018) and to also enrich an understanding of firm objectives that ought to be otherwise than profit (Lankoski and Smith 2018). To do so, I propose that we recollect Aristotle's conception of what I call *the virtuous life of pleasure*, which is, I will argue, controversially anchored in Aristotle's notion of contemplative activity or *theorein.*[1] Aristotle is clear that *theorein*, a fixed attention on and deep appreciation of intrinsic goods, is the most virtuous and pleasant activity that we are capable of as humans. It is vital to our well-being, for all walks of life, and it is also an essential foundation for our acquisition and practice of virtue, as it is what facilitates us cherishing and being motivated to protect what is intrinsically good as constitutive of the whole or common good. It is indeed bold to suggest that business, the world of productivity, ought to be more contemplative, but I will flesh out the ways in which the activity proper to it—the deep, pleasant appreciation of intrinsic value—normatively grounds virtuous behavior and the paradox perspective on corporate sustainability.

An important premise in my argument is that individual change agents—that is, company leaders—are those who decide to pursue sustainability as a corporate value, as organizational leaders have a substantial impact on corporate behavior (Visser 2007; Hambrick 2007). Core values in organizations derive from what company leaders take to be good and are largely driven by them. Thus, I will engage in analyses at both the individual level and the organizational level, applying the individual-level insights to the organization level. This premise is grounded in the Aristotelian view that corporations are ultimately expressions of the virtues (or vices) of the individuals who comprise them (Solomon 1999; Macintyre 2007). Organizational values emerge from their "individual level origins," that is, the individuals who think and make decisions on behalf of the organization (Balarezo and Corcuera 2020; Bernacchio, Foss, and Lindenberg 2024).

To make my case, I begin, in Section 1, by engaging the discourse on corporate sustainability and individual well-being in relation to the business case for corporate sustainability and the paradox perspective on corporate sustainability. I do this to set up Aristotelian virtue ethics, that is, Aristotle's account of *eudaimonia*, as the most suitable normative ground for the paradox perspective, *contra* utilitarianism, which

[1] In addition to being almost entirely absent in the literature on Aristotle in business ethics, Aristotle's claims in Book X of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (Aristotle 1999; hereafter EN) have always been a point of controversy within Aristotle scholarship. To give just one example, Martha Nussbaum sees Book X.6-8 as something "clearly different" and "incompatible with the main line of argument in the EN" (1990, 368)—an un-Aristotelian, part of a set of "Platonic" outliers within Aristotle's corpus that appears to abandon distinctly human goods (1990, 384). For an excellent solution to the perceived theoretical tension, see Gurtler (2003 and 2008). Many of my interpretative claims here are inspired by Gurtler's meticulous Aristotelian analysis.

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grounds the business case (Hahn et al. 2018). In Section 2, I provide an individual-level analysis, interpreting Aristotle's claims about *theorein* as an essential dimension of *eudaimonia* in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (Aristotle 1999), and explicating what the contemplative, virtuous life of pleasure looks like *beyond* the life of the philosopher—emphasizing why it is worth pursuing for any and every individual, including those in business. In Section 3, I provide an organizational-level analysis, justifying how this development of Aristotle's account of *eudaimonia* at the individual level normatively grounds the paradox perspective in organizations. I turn to Patagonia as a paradigmatic example of an organization grounded in both my depiction of the virtuous life of pleasure and the paradox perspective, acknowledging the challenges that still exist for companies beholden to structures that make its implementation difficult.

My claim is that the virtuous life of pleasure, which is cultivated by the habituation of *theorein*, not only characterizes how to live the most meaningful and pleasant life, rendering it good and thus worth pursuing, but it is also, as a flourishing life, the normative foundation for safeguarding the intrinsic value of nonfinancial corporate aims. It does so by establishing a *principle of enough*, which seeks to preserve integral, interdependent parts as ends in themselves and as constitutive of a larger ecosystem.

1. CORPORATE SUSTAINABILITY AND *EUDAIMONIA*

In this section, I will engage the discourse on corporate sustainability and individual well-being in relation to the business case for corporate sustainability and the paradox perspective on corporate sustainability. I do so to set up Aristotelian virtue ethics, that is, Aristotle's account of individual well-being, as the most suitable normative ground for the paradox perspective, *contra* utilitarianism, which grounds the business case. Corporate sustainability involves the balance of three interconnected, interdependent, co-constitutive principles: economic prosperity, social equity, and environmental integrity, that is, keeping life on earth within planetary boundaries (Carmine and De Marchi 2023).[2] These three principles are "intrinsically connected" and represent the necessary conditions for sustainable development (Carmine and De Marchi 2023, 141; Bansal 2005). Though the definition of corporate sustainability also includes social equity, I will primarily focus on the co-constitutive relationship between economic prosperity and environmental integrity.[3]

[2] "Co-constitutive" here means that these three aims are not instrumental to each other, but rather different sides of the same coin, so to speak. If one element were simply a means to another, it would be conditional, contingent, and thus unnecessary in itself. In the case of co-constitution, each of the elements implies the others. This means that social and environment aims are not pursued as a means to economic prosperity. Instead, the three elements constitute a system in which each part is essential, albeit as interdependent and in relation to the other elements. You cannot have one element without the other(s), because they essentially define and mutually influence each other—integral parts of a greater system (Hahn et al. 2018; Carmine and De Marchi 2023).

[3] I do so to keep my argument focused, but the analysis here could be extended to the social dimension of corporate sustainability as well, as the three elements are co-constitutive.

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Because corporate sustainability is a normative and therefore prescriptive construct, it must be implemented by individual change agents within organizations who think it is good and decide that it is worth pursuing (Visser 2007). Vucetich and Nelson (2010, 543) rightly claim that "if we attain sustainability, it will not only require critical changes in technology, but also the most profound shift in ethical thought witnessed in the last four centuries." This is because, as a prescriptive concept, advocating sustainability goals requires individuals who understand and value ecological health *as good* and earnestly strive to resist environmental degradation—ultimately understanding that our well-being is deeply bound to ecological health. This understanding is currently not the status quo in business.

Painter-Morland, Demuijnck, and Ornati's (2017) analysis of the limitations of the business case and the relationship between sustainable development and individual well-being exposes an essential human motivation that goes beyond utility-driven cost-benefit analysis. The authors call for us to readjust our values by moving away from pecuniary terms to describe well-being, as these are grounded in "the calculative mentality that pervades contemporary thinking about sustainable development" (Painter-Morland, Demuijnck, and Ornati 2017, 302). They join Küpers (2005) in an effort to "integrate the hedonic (the pleasurable), with the eudaimonic (the meaningful) as mutually reinforcing aspects of becoming well" Painter-Morland, Demuijnck, and Ornati 2017, 307). Among the chief aims in their study is to challenge the equation "well-being = wealth" as a pervasive "root metaphor," which is itself an inevitable implication "of a much more basic set of common assumptions regarding the nature of human agency," and, as an essential dimension of that, what we think constitutes our subjective well-being, that is, happiness (2017, 302).

The Business Case

The image that explains the business case for corporate sustainability and, more generally, the business perspective on who we are and what we take to be good, is *homo economicus* (Painter-Morland, Demuijnck, and Ornati 2017; Arjoon, Turriago-Hoyos, and Thoene 2018). *Homo economicus* is guided by means-ends calculation and motivated by self-interest and utility, that is, pleasure or the satisfaction of preferences (Painter-Morland, Demuijnck, and Ornati 2017). For *homo economicus*, decision-making is governed by the principle of utility, which involves deciphering the most efficient means to maximizing utility. As such, pleasant outcomes take precedence over intention and, thus, the ends can justify the means (Mill 2001, chap. 2). Quoting Painter-Morland, Demuijnck, and Ornati (2017, 303): "The conception of the market economy that informs most contemporary textbooks is based on the assumption that economic agents (be they consumers, producers, employers, employees, etc.) are rational utility maximizers," who are adept at "optimizing output with a given input." In the perpetual quest for utility-driven outcomes, *homo economicus* over-habituates the pursuit of instrumental or extrinsic goods—that is, what is good for the sake of something else in the future (circumstantially or conditionally good)—while intrinsic goods—that is, good for their own sake (universally or commonly good)—fade from view. For the utility maximizer, the calculated pursuit of the

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hedonic eclipses the intrinsic desirability of the eudaimonic, as the eudaimonic may not immediately provide pleasure.

Painter-Morland, Demuijnck, and Ornati's (2017) analysis builds upon Hahn et al.'s (2015) depiction of the trouble with the business case for corporate sustainability and concomitant advocacy for the paradox perspective as the most viable alternative to it. The business case for corporate sustainability eliminates any tensions between conflicting corporate goals by allowing one goal, the economic bottom line, to effectively imperialize the others (Hahn et al. 2018). The business case's calculative cost-benefit analysis not only fails to recognize the intrinsic value of nonfinancial initiatives (Hahn et al. 2018, 238), it also prevents the actors within an organization from identifying, encouraging, or enjoying anything beyond instrumental value. A steadfast commitment to the economic bottom line is the organizational-level manifestation of utility-maximization in the sense that it is driven by a cost-benefit analysis. And profit, the result of the consumption of goods that yield satisfaction, is what, *prima facie*, maximizes satisfaction for all.

The other issue with the business case's subordination of sustainability aims to the economic bottom line is that a company's ability to actually benefit the environment is compromised (Carmine and De Marchi 2023). This is because the moment the economic bottom line is threatened by environmental aims, environmental aims are eliminated, and it is back to unsustainable business as usual. If sustainability is nothing other than a business risk or opportunity—a conditional variable in a utilitarian cost-benefit analysis—it remains vulnerable to disregard if it contradicts the financial bottom line (Johnsen 2020).

The Paradox Perspective

As an alternative to the business case for corporate sustainability, Hahn et al. (2015) offer the paradox perspective, which necessitates working through, rather than eliminating, the inevitable tensions among competing corporate initiatives with intrinsic value (Hahn et al. 2018). The paradox perspective has a "strong normative core" in the sense that social and environmental concerns "represent objectives for their own sake, irrespective of their ability to further financial or shareholder interests" (Hahn et al. 2018, 240; Donaldson and Preston 1995). The paradox perspective focuses on honoring the tensions that arise among competing initiatives within corporations, urging corporations to paradoxically promote the intrinsic values of competing interests (Hahn et al. 2018, 238). In addition to this, "framing sustainability tensions through a paradox lens enables scholars to consider the complexity of sustainability problems, the intrinsic value of social and environmental elements, and their systemic nature" (Carmine and De Marchi 2023, 142).

Drawing from Maletič et al. (2014), Hahn et al. emphasize that the paradox perspective calls for "organizational ambidexterity" (2018, 238). They insist that the paradox perspective's plurality of ostensibly contradictory objective functions pushes organizations to innovate: "accepting and pursuing competing sustainability objectives due to their inherent value brings into proximity competing demands; it highlights hidden connections and unconventional responses, thus creating 'spaces of possibility'" that would otherwise go unnoticed in the service

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of the economic bottom line (Hahn et al. 2018, 244; Byrch et al. 2015). The paradox perspective thereby opens the firm up to new, creative possibilities for action (Carmine and De Marchi 2023; Johnsen 2020). This is distinct from the business case, which limits not only the type of solutions a firm can provide but also inhibits certain forms of creative thinking in organizations; for example, innovation that is driven by the earnest pursuit of ecological health, rather than profit. For the business case, there is only one end—the company's financial bottom line—and any other perceived ends are in fact a mere means (as a risk or opportunity) to that bottom line. The paradox perspective, therefore, enhances our conception of the objective functions and purpose of business (Lankoski and Smith 2018), promoting earnest innovation that safeguards intrinsic goods like environmental well-being.

A Normative Foundation for the Paradox Perspective

Hahn et al. (2018, 241) stress that the paradox perspective needs a normative foundation that provides "suitable moral grounds to justify the demand that firms balance different, equally relevant but competing sustainability challenges" and stands opposed to the "utilitarian foundation" for the business case. Most importantly, a normative foundation for the paradox perspective requires a motivation to protect environmental aims *as ends in themselves*, as this is what differentiates it from the business case. This means it must be grounded in an account of human agency that recognizes, desires, and protects intrinsic goods—understanding that they are valuable.

Because the business case is guided by the principle of maximizing satisfaction by whatever means necessary, it reduces our conception of ourselves to utility-driven *homo economicus*, which inevitably misses vital aspects of what we desire, value (i.e., take to be good), and do in practice for the sake of our well-being (Crockett 2005; Bina and Vaz 2011; Arjoon et al. 2018). Utilitarianism provides an insufficient normative foundation for human well-being because pleasure is not the only thing that human beings desire, value, and pursue. Although well-being (the eudaimonic) is connected to utility (the hedonic), and well-being is pleasurable, they are distinct and only virtuously integrated through *theorein*, as I will flesh out in Section 2. Aristotle stresses that pleasure is not intrinsically good because pleasure should not be chosen in every circumstance, whereas virtue is intrinsically good and should be chosen in every circumstance by anyone, irrespective of the pleasure that follows (Aquinas 1964, 695, 877).

With the paradox perspective in view, Painter-Morland, Demuijnck, and Ornati (2017) turn to Summers and Smith's (2014) analysis of the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (MEA, 2005) to unearth the essential features of subjective well-being, that is, what humans desire and are therefore motivated by. The authors note that subjective well-being, distinct from objective need, involves subjective desire, which encompasses more than the strategic calculation that seeks to maximize utility (Painter-Morland, Demuijnck, and Ornati 2017). The type of non-calculative subjective desire that the authors emphasize in their analysis is the human desire for a form of "sovereignty" that goes beyond "utility, efficiency, or productivity"

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(Painter-Morland, Demuijnck, and Ornati 2017, 309). To elaborate on this, the authors turn to George Bataille's notion of sovereign or useless consummation (distinct from *consumption*) (2017, 304). That is, our desire and freedom to do what "makes no practical sense," such as beholding a pristine natural landscape (2017, 309). Essential to useless consummation is an experience of freedom that is not subjected to the logic of utility.

With Bataille's account of subjectivity in mind, the authors offer "non-calculative sovereignty" as an alternative to "homo economicus' calculative autonomy" and "believe that this capacity to include, rather than exclude the important role of subjective experience in human behaviour ultimately makes it a more appropriate conceptual basis for thinking about sustainable development" (Painter-Morland, Demuijnck, and Ornati 2017, 303). This model of human agency stands in stark contrast to the utilitarian agent that undergirds the business case for corporate sustainability (2017, 304), utilitarianism involving a cost-benefit analysis that aims to maximize net satisfaction for salient stakeholders—ultimately in service of the economic bottom line (Friedman, 1970). Bataille's notion of noncalculative sovereignty provides a sense of the self that is not perpetually calculating (dwelling in the past and future), or producing and consuming material commodities, but rather a self that is present to and energized in their experience, "completely absorbed in one's experience in the moment … unperturbed by any particular aim or concern for the future" (Painter-Morland, Demuijnck, and Ornati 2017, 305). This is a self that is attuned to what makes life worth living.

This insight is crucial. However, relying on a notion of sovereign consummation (which involves a lack of restraint) to better understand sustainability invokes a sense of uninhibited license, domination, and freedom that the "free" market craves and emulates in its all-too-often frivolous and ecologically reckless pursuit of utility. The authors recognize this dilemma, wondering how "'sovereignty,' i.e., the squandering of resources on unproductive and useless activities" can "be reconciled with responsible stewardship of our planet's finite resources?" (Painter-Morland, Demuijnck, and Ornati 2017, 306). They respond by explaining that Bataille did not face the ecological concerns we face today, and that perhaps the crucial takeaway is the human desire to be, like a sovereign, *beyond calculation.*

Although noncalculative sovereignty provides a decisive depiction of a normative motivation that is otherwise than utility, it does not provide a sufficient normative foundation for the paradox perspective, which calls for organizations to balance co-constitutive, albeit competing corporate aims. As I will argue in the next section, Aristotle's virtuous life of pleasure fills this lacuna, grounding the non-productive human motivation (beyond calculation) that Painter-Morland, Demuijnck, and Ornati (2017) locate in Bataille, through his rendering of well-being, *eudaimonia*, and his crucial distinction and depiction of the relationship between intrinsic goods and instrumental goods. Aristotle is a critical ally in helping us better understand a normative motive that is otherwise than utility without wholly forsaking it, because, as I will argue, for Aristotle, the hedonic and the eudaimonic are integrated aspects of well-being, united by *theorein.* Immersing oneself in intrinsic value, for its own sake, is what makes life both joyful and worth living.

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To build on Painter-Morland, Demuijnck, and Ornati's (2017) important individual-level analysis, and to strengthen our understanding of the noncalculative dimension of who we are that values intrinsic goods and then balances them with other goods, I will turn to Aristotle's account of *theorein* (contemplative activity) as an indispensable dimension of *eudaimonia* in the *Nicomachean Ethics.*

2. INDIVIDUAL-LEVEL ANALYSIS: *THEOREIN* AS VITAL TO *EUDAIMONIA*

In this section, I will illustrate how Aristotle's normative theory harmonizes instrumental and intrinsic goods, and how *theorein*—understood as a fixed attention on and deep appreciation of intrinsic goods, *a pleasant access to the whole*—is constitutive of virtuous behavior, and thus of well-being or *eudaimonia.* Despite very brief mentions in Bragues (2006), Sison and Fontrodona (2012), and Hartman (2013), Aristotle's understanding of *theorein* has not, to the best of my knowledge, been thoroughly analyzed as constitutive of *eudaimonia* in business ethics literature to date. However, it is crucial that we incorporate it because we cannot provide a normative foundation for safeguarding intrinsic goods at both the individual and organizational levels without it.

Beyond this, it is important to turn to the source—in this case, Aristotle himself—when engaging normative ethical theories because they are grounded in robust accounts of human nature and well-being, governed by a clear conception of normative, motivating reasons; that is, they are based on investigations about the good (Bragues 2006; Wolcott 2015). I will do so with the help of Talbot Brewer's retrieval of Aristotle's ethics, to illuminate how the contemplative life is not just one superior way of life among others (Nussbaum 1990) but is in fact an aspect of life that we all need to care about within and beyond business. In short, anyone who is *eudaimon* contemplates because contemplation is the activity by which we recognize and appreciate intrinsic goods, which are essential to *eudaimonia.*

Eudaimonia, Theorein*, and the Pleasure of Virtue*

For Aristotle, 'good' (*telos*, the aims we desire) has two distinct meanings: "(1) things which are intrinsically good, and (2) things which are good as being conducive to the intrinsically good" (EN, 1096b13-16). He is clear that we need both types of goods to live well, though the former are sought for their own sake, while the latter are instrumental, sought for the sake of something else—above all, happiness (*eudaimonia*). *Eudaimonia* is the activity of the soul in accordance with virtue (*arete*) or excellence. To act virtuously is to habituate dispositions that make us excellent at actualizing who we truly are, our proper function (*ergon*), which is *reasoning*. This enables us to live pleasant, flourishing lives (EN, 1097a30-35). To be *eudaimon* is to reason well.

Reason, for Aristotle, conceptually breaks down into two chief faculties: one dealing with what is necessary (universal truth, that which is true always, for

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everything, truth according to the whole [*kat'holon*],[4] i.e., intrinsic goods), the other dealing with what can be deliberated and calculated (what can be otherwise, relative truths, i.e., instrumental goods that secure intrinsic goods) (EN, 1139a17–1139a18). *Phronesis* or practical wisdom is the virtue pertaining to this latter faculty, while *sophia* or theoretical wisdom is the virtue pertaining to the former, that is, our capacity to behold, understand, and cherish the "ultimate meaning of things" (Bragues 2006). *Theorein* is the activity proper to *sophia*, operative at any moment that we are attending to intrinsic value—that is, to things that are good *not only for me*, but universally good, and thus in themselves—as the recognition of intrinsic value involves grasping or beholding "the things most honorable by nature," which go beyond human beings because "man is not the best thing in the world" (EN, 1141b5; Roochnik 2009). *Theorein* pursues an understanding of truth (e.g., what is the good? What is justice? What does it mean to live in accord with nature?), not practical results.

Given Aristotle's account of what reason is, it seems clear that *eudaimonia* as excellent reasoning requires both of these intellectual virtues (Aquinas 1964, 923; Gurtler 2003 and 2008). *Phronesis* allows us to *apply virtue* in the context of particular circumstances that could be otherwise, but *sophia*, through *theorein*, allows us to *understand virtue itself*—that is, why virtuous activity is intrinsically good and an end in itself, situating our activity as a part that relates to, and is one with, what is beyond ourselves. As an intellectual activity, *theorein* involves cherishing, beholding, or keeping one's gaze fixed on intrinsic goods (Ostwald 1999, 315; Brewer 2009). This is to say that *sophia*, constituted by *theorein*, grasps and appreciates the values that govern practical wisdom. *Phronesis* requires a deep understanding of universally intrinsic goods (e.g., courage, moderation, generosity, justice, knowledge, nature, etc.) to choose how to proceed in particular circumstances after careful deliberation (Walker 2018). When we contemplate, we access intrinsic goods, which we then protect and recreate as they shape our decision-making process. Quoting Aristotle, "we suppose Pericles and those of that sort [statesmen] to be prudent—because they are able to contemplate (*theorein*) the good things for themselves and those for human beings" (EN, 1140b5-10; Roochnik 2009). The prudence of a virtuous leader hinges on their refusal to sacrifice what is intrinsically good for the community. The practice of virtue, therefore, requires *theorein.*

[4] The "whole" (*holon*) is a very complex and obscure concept in Aristotle's thought and a full explanation of it and its various uses requires a metaphysical analysis that goes beyond the scope of this paper—engaging what is often called the "problem of universals" therein, which relates to "form" in the Platonic tradition (see Yu 2003 for an excellent analysis the concept in Aristotle's *Metaphysics* 1979). For the purposes of this paper, the whole refers to what is universal not in a rigid Kantian sense (see Alzola 2015), but in the sense that it is a good or truth that is shared, i.e., a common (rather than particular) good in which various parts participate (see Mayhew 1997 and Walker 2018). To say that something is good according to the whole or in connection with the whole means that it is something that is unconditionally good, in itself, for its own sake and also in relation to everything else in the cosmos (Walker 2018). As I will explain in this section, attending to the whole signifies a style of thinking and feeling (an attitude and mood) that grasps being-with and sharing a world with others, rather than being an individual agent in a vacuum maximizing utility. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for helping me clarify what this experience entails.

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To return to the importance of integrating the hedonic with the eudaimonic as integrated aspects of well-being, Aristotle stresses that pleasure and pain are vital to *eudaimonia* because everything we choose and avoid is rooted in these (EN, 1104b30–1105a15). Because *eudaimonia* is that toward which everything aims, pleasure and *eudaimonia* are tightly bound, but distinct, meaning pleasure has a motivating force, though we must decipher which pleasures are worth pursuing—namely, those associated with reason, as "the pleasure proper to virtuous activity is good, and the pleasure proper to vicious activity is bad" (Aquinas 1964, 896). Vicious pleasures are those associated with excess, instrumental goods (e.g., money) and bodily compulsions (1964, 640–43), while virtuous pleasures are those associated with intrinsic goods (1964, 689, 904). As Aristotle puts it, the virtuous, desirable activity is always principle, not pleasure (1964, 888). Virtue is desirable and choice worthy regardless of the pleasure that follows, and even if no pleasure were to follow (1964, 877), though pleasure will eventually accompany and perfect virtuous activities (1964, 886). As stated in Section 1, the pleasure that accompanies virtue may not be (and often is not) immediate, but through habit (EN, 1103a19-23), we come to recognize that attending to what is intrinsic valuable—what is *meaningful*—is pleasant.

Theorein, as the fixed attention on and deep appreciation of intrinsic goods, is thus completed by the most meaningful type of pleasure we can experience as human beings—and it is also the most meaningful activity we are capable of (Aquinas 1964, 907). *Theorein* is what ultimately integrates the hedonic with the eudaimonic, as we experience the *rational pleasure* of being present with truth, what is commonly good, attending, as much as we can, to what is beyond, albeit interconnected with, ourselves. This pleasant experience of being present to the whole is perhaps best understood as a style of thinking and attitude or mood. That is, a mood of communion rather than individuation, as we recognize that we and other phenomena are part of and unified with something other than our individual selves (Brewer 2009). When there is no experience of the past and future, we are not individuals isolated in a vacuum, but rather integral parts that are essentially connected to *and at home within* a greater whole; we are an integral part of a common good (Sison and Fontrodona 2012).

Pleasure plays an important role in virtue ethics because the experience of pleasure further anchors us in the virtuous activity at hand and keeps it "unobstructed"—complete, whole, and at rest, rather than in motion (EN, 1153b10-15; Brewer 2009). For Aristotle, time is the measure of motion, so to say that pleasure is complete, whole, and at rest is to say that it is experienced without a sense of time. The pleasure that accompanies virtue is the experience of timelessness or "losing track of time" in the sense that we are immersed in the activity at hand, *utterly present* to and enjoying the experience of something good in itself, that is, as an end in itself, and thus as a part connected to the whole. While pleased, future aims fade from view, meaning there is a cessation of calculation (Brewer 2009). When we calculate, we are divided in the sense that we are deciphering means to projected ends in the future; whereas when we contemplate, we are complete and whole in the sense that we are savoring the present *qua* appreciating intrinsic value and being in *communion with* whatever we are

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contemplating, as it connects with everything in its environment. "Environment" here means natural, but also social and economic environing worlds (wholes).

The contemplator attains "a higher degree of happiness than anyone" (Brewer 2009; EN, 1179a30) because there is nothing more essential to being human or more delightful than *theorein* (Roochnik 2009, 78; Walker 2018). But a life that consists solely in *theorein*, ostensibly void of calculation and instrumental aims, is not a human life, but rather the life of a god (EN, 1177b25-30; Nussbaum 1990). This brings us back to Aristotle's definition of *eudaimonia* as excellent reasoning—reason itself having two prongs. In order for us to truly flourish, we must exercise both *phronesis* and *sophia*, which is to say that *eudaimonia* requires practical virtues and *theorein.* Beyond this, *phronesis* seeks to secure *sophia* (Walker 2018), as it is a "more excellent" intellectual capacity, and it does so in the sense that *theorein* grasps the intrinsic goods—that is, *values*—by which we are able to decipher how to deliberate and choose in practice by way of *phronesis* (EN, 1145a1-10; Aquinas 1964, 604).

Although we all need sufficient external goods, as this is an important part of *eudaimonia* (EN, 1099b30), those who contemplate simply need less: "self-sufficiency and moral action do not consist in an excess of possessions … It is enough to have moderate means at one's disposal, for the life of a happy man whose activity is guided by virtue will be happy" (EN, 1179a1-10). The reason that those who are adept at *theorein* have less need for external goods is that those who engage in *theorein* come to appreciate truths that show us the intrinsic value and goodness of non-material things, especially our own, non-productive (useless) and non-consumptive activities. The experience of *theorein*—the pleasant experience of communing-with rather than individuating-from our environment, granting us access to the whole—reveals and reminds us that as individuals, humans are but small pieces within the whole of a large, interrelated web of life; and, echoing Aristotle, that we are not the most important feature of the universe.

In contemplation, we see that we share the world with (human and nonhuman) others. We also realize that we need less material goods because these things, despite their apparent utility, are much less meaningful than other things. When contemplating, we are humbled, in wonder and awe, before something that is more than us as individuals, and in that experience recognize that each thing has its place and ought to be cherished and preserved, for its own sake, as an end in itself *and* as interrelated with the common good. This includes ourselves, as part of humanity, as well as the natural world, as the home upon which humanity and all forms of life depend. This appreciation of intrinsic goodness acquired through *theorein*, which habituates the overthrowing of *homo economicus*, leads to an ecological perspective on the world and our place within it, because of its orientation toward the whole —"ecological" in the sense that we understand ourselves and our activities as integral parts of a something that is common or shared, the interrelated and interdependent system of the environment (Satchel, Kaaronen, and Latzman 2021; Taylor 1981).

Engaging in contemplation, therefore, leads us to the sort of wisdom that allows us to effectively combat the urge to take more than we need by feeling fulfilled in the present, helping us learn how to discern what boundaries should be drawn in light of

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a strong attunement to that which is good for its own sake and thus commonly good, including the environment. The contemplator pursues instrumental goods, because we also need them, but with more clearly defined limits given by the recognition and appreciation of the value of intrinsic goods—above all, *eudaimonia.* How precisely to construct those limits is clearer for the one who contemplates because they have understood *and enjoyed* the intrinsic value of what is commonly good, like the natural world, but also community-oriented virtues like moderation, courage, honesty, and generosity. Moral lines can and must be drawn for the sake of intrinsic goods. The person who habituates *theorein*, "fully actualizing [their] knowledge that [they] should not do something, will not in fact do it" (Roochnik 2009, 74), because they have properly understood what is intrinsically good, and are thus motivated to safeguard those goods because they understand their value *in themselves.*

This appreciation of intrinsic goods ultimately establishes what I call a *principle of enough*, which insists that ends in themselves ought to be cherished and preserved as such, thereby mitigating our temptation to understand the maximization of utility as the good. *Theorein* is required for a principle of enough because in order to mitigate the bias of utility and preserve things beyond oneself that are in fact interconnected with oneself, one must be attuned to goods that are otherwise than utility—intrinsically valuable for their own sake, above all, *eudaimonia.* It is because of *theorein* that we can cherish and thus insist on protecting intrinsic goods as constitutive of the good of the whole, unwilling to sacrifice them for the sake of utility. *Theorein* reveals goods and values that are common, shared with others, thereby exposing our interrelation with, and interdependence on, what is beyond our individual selves.

Theorein Beyond the Philosopher

Although Aristotle seems to suggest that contemplation is limited to philosophers because they dedicate their lives to studying truth (Nussbaum 1990), I want to insist that it is a vital activity for all human beings. The deep cherishing and appreciation of intrinsic goods simply cannot be sacrificed if we truly want to be *eudaimon*, which we all in fact do—a fact that is confirmed in the social sciences (Cameron and Winn 2012). It is also important to stress that *theorein* is also not limited to the contemplation of any particular intrinsic good (Walker 2018), but is an attitude we assume while striving to understand things for what they are, and being one with whatever we are doing for its own sake, not for the sake of an outcome (Roochnik 2009, 75–77)—be it manual workmanship, collaborating with a team, immersing oneself in nature, or engaging in philosophical reflection. Within organizations, occasions for *theorein* could be facilitated through reflective exercises in meetings, community-building retreats, wellness programming, or designated time and spaces to disconnect from productivity more broadly (Duerr 2004), for example, to meditate, engage in conversation with colleagues, or enjoy nature; or through leisure-promoting policies that facilitate work-life balance, such as three-day weekends, paid mental health and personal days, and flexible work hours (Stanley and Chouinard 2023).

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In *The Retrieval of Ethics* (2009), Brewer, taking his cue from Macintyre's *After Virtue* (2007), elaborates how virtue ethics provides a more relevant moral framework (than utilitarianism and deontology) because it makes sense of what each of us desire and find pleasurable in every walk of life, refusing to reduce us to output-oriented cogs in a production-oriented, utility-maximizing machine. Brewer analyzes the role of pleasure in human flourishing, stressing that to engage in an activity that you love and truly enjoy, you surrender yourself and "pay tribute" to its intrinsic goodness (Brewer 2009, 48). "Goodness" here refers to the value we see in the activities we love, including how they align with virtue. Building upon the analysis above, Brewer aptly describes the "attention-arresting" mode of engagement with intrinsic goodness as "unselfing" because when attending to an activity in this way, we are removed from distractions—above all, the "most banal and obsessive human distraction: the self" (2009, 64). The self he has in mind here is *homo economicus*, the utility-maximizing calculator—battling (perceived) scarcity.

Brewer also differentiates "sensory pleasure" from "attentive pleasure," the former being pleasure that involves passively basking in instant gratification, while the latter involves actively and rationally appreciating the "vivid appearances of the value of our doings or circumstances" and the intrinsic goodness therein (2009, 132). This is the experience of *theorein*—the integration of the hedonic and the eudaimonic. Intrinsic value and the attentive pleasure that accompanies it pulls us from outcome-oriented concerns, as we are mesmerically attracted to and immersed in the timeless experience of the present (Brewer 2009, 64). And what is crucial here is that this experience of the present is always directed toward what is good according to the whole—that is, what is good not just for a particular set of circumstances, but good in itself. And again, the experience of the present is being in communion-with, rather than being individuated-from; the present reveals our deep relationship with what is beyond our (utility-maximizing) selves. This also means that *homo economicus*'s pursuit of self-interested and utility-oriented outcomes is disrupted and tempered, as it is captivated by intrinsic goodness—that which is not only good for me, but good for all. Contemplation thus allows us to properly understand ourselves and our activities as parts that contribute to and thus depend upon the common good.

It is therefore the habituation of *theorein* that allows us to shift our mindset from one that is governed by utility-maximization, *homo economicus*, to one that is able to comprehend and value an entirely different order of goods, namely, intrinsic goods (above all, *eudaimonia*), that provide reasons for action. The utility-maximizer is limited to utility as a motivation for action, whereas the contemplator understands that utility is but one reason for action—and one that must be balanced with, or even subjected to, things are good for their own sake and thus good for the whole. To give an example, a contemplator would understand that being honest with a customer is good because honesty is an intrinsic good, good for the whole, something that should be cherished and actualized regardless of its projected utility. Being honest may of course provide utility, but that is not the primary motivation. The primary motivation is safeguarding the intrinsic value of honesty as a virtue that is constitutive of well-being not only for oneself, but for all. In this case, the principle of enough shows the contemplator that there is a moral line that ought not be crossed, even if it may lead to

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less utility. The utility maximizer does not have access to this type of intrinsic motivation as such—a motivation that opens up new pathways for innovation and action, as I will show in Section 3.

In sum, a life rich in *theorein*, which nurtures *eudaimonia*, is the kind of life that we cannot help but desire as human beings, regardless of our respective vocation and occupation, as it allows us to embrace a vital rational activity—namely, cherishing things for their own sake—that we need to live well *and enjoy. Theorein* involves the simultaneous disruption of self-interested and outcome-oriented desires, and pleasant experience of ends in themselves beyond, albeit interconnected with, oneself. Appreciating intrinsic goods as such establishes a principle of enough, which insists that ends in themselves ought to be cherished and preserved as such *and* as constitutive of the good of the whole, and that they simply cannot be sacrificed for the sake of projected utility. *Theorein* shows that the production and consumption of instrumental goods must always be taken in relation to the preservation and flourishing of intrinsic goods: recognizing intrinsic goods, protecting them as such (not reducing them to mere means), cherishing them both as they are and as part of the balance that lets each member of the whole thrive—and, in so doing, contributing to the flourishing of ourselves and others as parts of an interrelated whole.

With this individual-level analysis in view, we can now turn to how the virtuous life of pleasure (*eudaimonia*), cultivated by *theorein*, provides a normative foundation for the paradox perspective on corporate sustainability at the organizational level.

3. ORGANIZATIONAL-LEVEL ANALYSIS: *EUDAIMONIA* MOTIVATING THE FIRM

In this section, I will build out how the virtuous life of pleasure (*eudaimonia*) as a normative core motivates change agents—that is, company leaders—to meaningfully pursue corporate sustainability by way of the paradox perspective. I will also illustrate how Patagonia embodies the paradox perspective through their understanding of economic prosperity and environmental integrity as co-constitutive.

Organizational values guide the decisions a corporation makes as an individual entity in the market, and these organizational values emerge from the values of individual change agents who think and make decisions for the company, based on what they take to be good and thus worth pursuing (Visser 2007; Hambrick 2007). The paradox perspective involves addressing environmental aims as ends in themselves and as co-constitutive of economic prosperity, meaning environmental integrity is not a mere means to economic prosperity, but is properly understood to be a necessary condition for it. Therefore, its implementation requires change agents who are motivated to cherish, uphold, and refuse to sacrifice nonfinancial aims for their own sake and as co-constitutive of economic prosperity—grasping the truth that we (and our companies) belong to a greater ecological whole. Organizations are not passive containers (Moore 2015; Macintyre 2007), but rather contexts for virtues to grow or diminish that require both intrinsic and instrumental goods; *theorein* is the activity through which individuals are able to grasp and are motivated to protect

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what is intrinsically good and thus virtuous. *Theorein* is also the activity through which individual change agents within companies are able to recognize that economic prosperity, guided by utility-maximization, should not be the company's sole objective because economic prosperity is in fact interdependent on and interconnected with environmental integrity.

Analogous to a virtuous statesperson contemplating things that are good in themselves and good for human beings to ensure that the community (or society) flourishes, a virtuous change agent within an organization would contemplate what we, human beings, need to flourish; what the company's purpose is in relation to the society in which we operate and in relation to the natural world from which we extract resources; and also what the biosphere—housing ourselves, our companies, and society—needs to flourish. This of course does not mean that the organization stops striving for economic prosperity, because it must (to continue to exist); the principle of enough, facilitated by *theorein*, insists that corporate goals beyond profit can be pursued so long as there is room for the bias of utility to take a backseat. And with this, the understanding that a firm can persist and prosper while ensuring that the welfare of the ecological whole is protected and sustained over time.

It then follows that the paradox perspective must be driven by organizational change agents who insist that the company simultaneously embraces the intrinsic values of those competing aims. And if this is the case, then a normative foundation for the paradox perspective requires change agents who are motivated by an appreciation of environmental aims as ends in themselves that should not be compromised by, subordinated to, or sacrificed for the sake of economic aims, and are also understood to be constitutive of the good of the ecological whole (of which the organization is a part). If environmental aims are only instrumentally, and thus conditionally valued for the sake of utility-based ends, as change agents advocating the business case would have it—failing to grasp their intrinsic value—they inevitably run the risk of not being seriously taken into consideration in corporate decision-making processes *because they are nonessential.* Thus, the moment a conflict arises among competing corporate aims, environmental aims will be subsumed by the economic bottom line, since they are not understood to be intrinsically good and connected to the whole. This also means the utilitarian calculus of the business case prevails; concern for the environment is a mere risk or opportunity, exploited for the sake of the firm's competitive advantage.

Therefore, in order for change agents in corporations to be motivated to protect intrinsic goods, and to justify the effort to paradoxically build upon and destroy current unsustainable business activities (Hahn et al. 2018), they must be adept at *theorein.* This is because *theorein* is the only activity through which we grasp intrinsic value, disrupt and humble *homo economicus*'s relentless pursuit of utility-maximization for the sake of the meaningful, and see ourselves and our organizations as part of a greater whole in which each interdependent part has its place as an end in itself. *Theorein*'s pleasant access to the whole facilitates the virtuous quality of mind in organizational change agents that properly orders competing corporate aims as co-constitutive and equally essential. It tempers the relentless pursuit of utility by insisting that it is balanced with, and ordered alongside, environmental

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flourishing. A principle of enough facilitates this balancing process for change agents by providing clear, paradoxical limits on financial aims because environmental aims are understood to be intrinsically good and worth protecting *as constitutive of the good of the ecological whole*, of which the company is a part. This individual-level understanding, motivated by *theorein*, becomes the organizational-level *ethos* by grounding the organization's core values, which dictate the company's vision, policies, processes, and decisions.

The ultimate criterion guiding organizational change agents in the face of paradoxical aims is *eudaimonia*, which, given the role of intrinsic goods—that is, what is good for all—includes the common good (EN, 1094b10; Sison and Fontrodona 2012). *Eudaimonia* as an overarching criterion does not resolve paradoxes or neglect economic prosperity but, through *theorein*, pushes organizations to understand that ostensibly conflicting aims are in fact "two sides of the same coin" that will continue to "persist over time" (Carmine and De Marchi 2023) and must be balanced—for the sake of individual well-being and the well-being of the whole that houses them and their communities, including organizations. As Arjoon, Turriago-Hoyos, and Thoene (2018, 150) stress, "the neo-classical organization, whose goal is to maximize shareholder value/profits through the pursuit of self-interest" relies on "the homo economicus assumption of the economic person … guided by principles of the 'greatest good for the greatest number' and efficiency." The authors continue:

> With respect to the virtuous organization, its goal is *eudaimonia* … an organization can be said to be virtuous to the extent to which the internal goods of the practice (excellence of the product or service) contribute to the common good … unethical practices occur when there is a disorder between internal and external goods … An exclusive focus on goods of efficiency can distort one's perception and judgment through blind spots and moral slippages, which make it difficult to recognize the ethical issues and to determine what is the right thing to do (Arjoon, Turriago-Hoyos, and Thoene 2018, 150).

The virtuous life of pleasure prohibits these "blind spots" and "moral slippages" by allowing the company to be appropriately understood as an integral part of an ecological whole, therefore motivating the company to preserve that ecological whole *and* its constitutive parts. This is because change agents within the company appreciate the fact that organizational well-being and environmental well-being are one and the same, in that they are interdependent, interconnected, and co-constitutive, as the paradox perspective insists. This appreciative understanding then compels the company to innovate in a way that refuses to subordinate environmental integrity to profit, as this would erroneously presume that the company is detached and independent from the whole and what is good for the whole.

Patagonia

To further flesh out what this looks like at the organizational level, and how individual change agents within organizations can actualize this, I will analyze a concrete, paradigmatic example of a company that embodies a deep, contemplative appreciation of intrinsic goods that ought not to be compromised by or subordinated to profit-oriented aims: Patagonia. Patagonia has had the courage to innovate in the

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face of paradoxes, has unwaveringly safeguarded their core values, and has created a corporate culture of sustainability governed by *eudaimonia*, nurtured by *theorein.* In addition to cherishing the intrinsic value of environmental aims, the company has remained economically prosperous. Facilitated by change agents within the company, Patagonia engages in *theorein* through its motivation to reflect on humanity's and business's place within the biosphere, understanding that their company's health (and every company's health) depends on the health of the biosphere (the health of the whole), and through its practice of cherishing and appreciating this truth as a guiding principle for the company's vision, policies, processes, and decisions.

In *The Future of the Responsible Company* (2023), Patagonia's founder, Yvon Chouinard, and Director of Philosophy, Vincent Stanley, sketch the road to being a responsible company, in Patagonia's sense of the term, after fifty years of success. By "responsible," they mean the capacity, privilege, and *desire* to do what is right, simply because it is the right thing to do (Stanley and Chouinard 2023, 25–29), a capacity grounded in *theorein.* Stanley and Chouinard show that *any* company can be a responsible company insofar as they are deeply committed to treating their people well and improving the environmental performance of their operations for their own sake (2023, 11); they even include practical checklists for company leaders who want to be more responsible. While the authors are well aware of the fact that Patagonia is often understood to be an exceptional company, outside of the status quo, they stress that Patagonia is "only exceptional at the margins. As mice and men share 99 percent of their genes, so do Amazon, Exxon, Twitter … and Patagonia" (Stanley and Chouinard 2023, 32). Stanley and Chouinard acknowledge that other companies have external pressures that can make it more difficult to be responsible—for example, being publicly traded—but their claim is that the status quo simply needs to change, given the ecological crisis in which we find ourselves and the power of business (2023). The ecological truth of humans being a part of a greater whole, upon which we depend, sits at the core of Patagonia's mission, internalizing all of the company's policies, strategies, and processes. As the company puts it on their website, one of their core values is to "Protect our home planet. We're all part of nature, and every decision we make is in the context of the environmental crisis challenging humanity" (Patagonia 2022).

In 2022, the company set the gold standard for corporate sustainability by making the earth their only shareholder; it is now owned by two non-profits that are dedicated to fighting climate change (Gelles 2022). With the paradox perspective in view, Patagonia has been at the forefront of environmental protection in North America for its own sake—founded by "a small band of climbers and surfers who had a love for the natural world" (Stanley and Chouinard 2023, 32). The authors recount the early days of the company when they realized that hard-steel pitons for rock climbing "had become environmental villains," and decided that, because of their love for the rocks themselves and the ecosystem to which they belonged, they had no choice but to phase them out and find an alternative (2023, 35). As they put it:

> It was a huge risk … but the changes had to be made for reasons both moral and practical: the routes were beautiful and satisfying and shouldn't be ruined; and to ruin them would

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> put an end to, or greatly reduce the possibilities for climbing in the most popular areas, and thus eventually hurt our business … we learned by addressing the problem, we had forced ourselves to make a better product … doing the right thing motivated us—and turned out to be good business (Stanley and Chouinard 2023, 35–36).

This is a clear example of how Patagonia engaged in *theorein* in the face of paradox. Here, the recognition of the intrinsic value of the environment (the rocks themselves and their connection to the good of the environment as a whole) appears paradoxically in tension with the financial security of the company, but in fact facilitated excellent innovation. The moral motive here again finds its ground in *theorein*: a deep appreciation of the intrinsic value of something that is otherwise than profit—and at least seemingly at odds with their company's economic prosperity, although interconnected with and interdependent on it. As the authors put it, doing the right thing for its own sake "turned out to be good business," though they did not do the right thing for the sake of profit, exemplifying the co-constitution of environmental integrity and economic prosperity. Echoing the paradox perspective's aim to foster innovation that would not happen if profit subsumed other aims, another one of Patagonia's core values is that they are not bound by convention (Patagonia 2022). The way the authors describe it again fits neatly with the theoretical description of the paradox perspective and the virtuous life of pleasure: "Our success—and much of the fun—lies in developing new ways to do things," which is always also grounded in quality integrity, environmentalism, and justice (Patagonia 2022). The company embraces *and enjoys* the entrepreneurial spirit of business, albeit always as rooted in an unwavering commitment to the core values—intrinsic goods—that govern every company decision.

It perhaps goes without saying that Patagonia is financially successful with an estimated net value of $3 billion as of 2023, bringing in roughly $100 million a year (Pereira 2023). Though the authors admit, "we're not sure we could stay healthy as a business without growing at least as fast as inflation. But as a company seeking to be responsible, we treat a high rate of growth as a risky option not a necessity" (Stanley and Chouinard 2023, 72). For Patagonia, all of the company's aims are constantly balanced, again, as interconnected and co-constitutive of each other; environmental aims are never subordinated to economic prosperity. To give another example, Patagonia telling customers (on Black Friday) to not buy what they do not need in their famous "Do Not Buy this Jacket" campaign (urging consumers to instead buy used or repair what they already have) is not only a testimony of their commitment to intrinsic value in practice. It is a testimony of the fact that corporate sustainability works when grounded in an earnest commitment to intrinsic value; safeguarding intrinsic value shines because, as argued in Section 2, it is something we in fact all desire. The company knew that discouraging the sales of their products could pose a risk to their economic bottom line, vital to the existence of the company, but customer loyalty prevailed. Although the campaign reinforced customer loyalty, that was not their aim. Their aim was to promote environmental well-being by urging

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consumers to reflect on and limit wasteful consumption practices. As Stanley and Chouinard (2023, 99–101) write:

> But the balance sheet still counts. The word is apt. Unbalanced business leads to distracted managers who flail about with a runaway firehose rather than productively meeting the company's needs and developing its opportunities … Are you investing in product innovation? This question is key for companies seeking to improve their social performance and reduce their environmental impact. You can't do what lazy companies do—bleed suppliers for cost reductions to achieve greater efficacy or use cheaper but more environmentally harmful, often labor-exploitative materials to put more money in the bottom line. You and your people must figure out the right thing to do in the right way and then go about it, gradually if you must, but never losing sight of the endgame which is to keep the quality of your products high while satisfying your stakeholders, one of whom is the earth … Doing the right thing made money, just not the next day.

The essential takeaway here is that Patagonia truly walks the talk of virtue, which requires *theorein*, and exemplifies an economically prosperous company grounded in management that understands, embodies, and then pays forward the virtuous life of pleasure *because it is good in itself*.

When Stanley and Chouinard realized how toxic and unsustainable the textile industry was (in particular, the production of cotton), they knew Patagonia had no choice but to transform, investing in a very hands-on "enviro team," closely inspecting production methods on-sight, as well as clean processes (e.g., regenerative agriculture) that refuse to compromise the health of the planet. Quoting the authors:

> It dawned on us that our purpose was now driving the business model. There was no separation. The constraints we placed on ourselves had forced us to stay awake and innovate when most companies pursued ruthless—relatively mindless—efficiency, reducing costs year by year until the world moved on. We found the world moving our way. Innovation led to new and better products (Stanley and Chouinard 2023, 128).

The same logic governed Chouinard's decision to make the earth the only shareholder in the company rather than allow it to become "one of those irresponsible companies" that are pressured to maximize shareholder returns above everything else (Gelles 2022).

Patagonia is a paradigmatic example of the way in which a steadfast commitment to intrinsic goods as constitutive of the good of the whole undergirds the paradox perspective on corporate sustainability, thereby leading to the kind of sustainable innovations required to keep us within planetary boundaries. This can and in fact does lead to an amplifying effect within and beyond the company itself (Cameron and Winn 2012; Sison and Ferrero 2015). Patagonia has provided sustainability-oriented counsel for a host of other companies, including publicly traded companies, like Walmart, and has also sought sustainability-oriented counsel from companies with higher B-corporation scores than them, like Dr. Bronner's, to learn from their "We're All-One or None!" company philosophy (Stanley and Chouinard 2023). Echoing the authors, economic prosperity requires environmental integrity. They are co-constitutive. But the only way to meaningfully pursue economic prosperity is to

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understand that environmental integrity is intrinsically valuable: the preservation of which is non-negotiable. As Stanley and Chouinard write, "Eventually, the business world will recognize the economic and environmental equivalent of the astronomical truth that the Earth rotates around the sun, not the other way around. Our economy revolves around nature, not the other way around. As we destroy nature, we destroy our economy" (2023, 120–21).

The case of Patagonia is not meant to overlook or simplify the industry-specific challenges that companies face in an earnest attempt to shift toward a paradox perspective on corporate sustainability. Cost-effective and familiar path dependencies, for example, that companies have relied on for decades require substantial resources to overhaul (Troje 2023). Organizational structures like public ownership often bind organizations to short-term thinking (Kaplan 2018). And the complexity of deep, international supply chains discourage leadership from imitating what Patagonia has done—that is, investigating the reality of what they do abroad in the name of their brand and sending people to the frontlines to monitor and enforce responsible practices (Stanley and Chouinard 2023). The *how* dimension of meaningful corporate sustainability efforts requires contemplative understanding, ingenuity, and the courage to commit to being responsible, which is a tall order within an economic system that prioritizes utility above everything else. But as Stanley and Chouinard stress, "Whether a business is owned by an individual, a family, a joint-stock company, or the Earth, it can, if it chooses, work in concert with all sectors of society in the interest of the common good and nature" (2023, 167). Structural changes within organizations cannot happen overnight, but for them to happen at all requires a motivation to preserve non-financial ends as ends in themselves, and as co-constitutive of economic prosperity, which *theorein* provides.

4. CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have sketched an answer to the call for a normative foundation for the paradox perspective on corporate sustainability and enriched an understanding of firm objectives that ought to be otherwise than profit by offering a rendering of Aristotelian virtue ethics, what I call the virtuous life of pleasure, that highlights how *theorein* cultivates, and is essential to, virtue and *eudaimonia. Theorein* grounds our understanding and expression of virtue and allows us to experience the type of pleasure—the blissful experience of being in communion-with, rather than individuated-from the whole—that makes life meaningful. *Theorein* also involves the simultaneous disruption of self-interested and outcome-oriented desires, and recognition and appreciation of ends in themselves beyond, albeit interconnected to, ourselves. It is ultimately the style of thinking and attitude or mood that integrates the hedonic into the eudaimonic.

Theorein helps us habituate overcoming the utility-seeking bias of *homo economicus* for the sake of *eudaimonia*, as we experience ourselves and our activities as constitutive of a greater ecological whole rather than radically detached from it. It does so by leading to a *principle of enough* that insists that ends in themselves, integral to the good of the whole, ought to be cherished and preserved as such. The

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virtuous life of pleasure is the most suitable normative foundation for the paradox perspective because it offers a more viable and accurate conception of who we are and what we desire (and why) than *homo economicus*, which grounds both utilitarianism and the business case. Contrary to the utility-maximizer, *homo contemplativus* recognizes that the hedonic is but one motivating reason for action, one that must be balanced with intrinsic goods—above all, *eudaimonia.* What is required for the paradox perspective is an understanding of, and motivation to protect, environmental ends as ends in themselves and as co-constitutive of economic prosperity, which the virtuous life of pleasure provides. It does so by insisting that an essential dimension of *eudaimonia* is the deep appreciation and pursuit of intrinsic goods, which is nurtured by the habituation of *theorein.*

Theorein is the rational activity that inspires this crucial individual-level understanding that is both essential to *eudaimonia* and that can foster meaningful change at the organizational level. In order for organizations to embody the paradox perspective, leaders within those organizations need to be motivated to balance and integrate competing goals by understanding, appreciating, and safeguarding the intrinsic goods that fortify the common good. Patagonia provides a paradigmatic example of this, illustrating that being a responsible company requires change agents who are committed to innovating in light of the fact that intrinsically valuable environmental ends cannot be subordinated to or sacrificed for the sake of economic prosperity—they must be understood as co-constitutive. Economic prosperity is interconnected with and interdependent on environmental integrity. Every decision that Patagonia makes is motivated by the insight that *theorein* provides—namely, that we are not isolated individuals in a vacuum—and, likewise, companies are not entities disconnected from their environment, but an integral and dependent part of it.

But again, the case of Patagonia does not mean that the implementation of the paradox perspective goes without challenges. Patagonia is a values-driven company, through and through, and as a private company, the change agents within the company have never been beholden to anything other than their values, which their employees happen to wholeheartedly share. My argument here has focused on providing a normative foundation for the paradox perspective, as actualized by company leaders (on top) who think and make decisions on behalf of the company, but this presumption comes with limitations. Corporations and their cultures are of course complex aggregates of individuals and relationships that do not always follow a top-down decision structure (Bright, Winn, and Kanov 2014), and individual values cannot always be straightforwardly applied to organizations (Moore 2016; Quinn and Wellman 2012). The relationship between individual and organizational responsibility is dynamic, ever-changing, and muddled by the fact that organizational conditions influence individual values and behavior—and vice versa (Painter-Morland 2011; Constantinescu and Kaptein 2020; Bromiley and Rau 2016). Beyond this, the groups of individuals that make decisions on behalf of the company can and often do have conflicting values, and there can also be value conflicts among individuals across different levels of the organization.

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These complexities raise the following questions: given various institutional strictures, is it always possible to work according to our personal values? How can common values be negotiated in the face of conflicts within and beyond governing entities in corporations? What is the role of *theorein* in facilitating the negotiation of common values? And how might organizational value change happen from the bottom-up—or from different levels within the organization?[5] I hope to have provided a normative justification for pursuing the paradox perspective on corporate sustainability, but these are all critical questions that have not been answered here and that deserve careful theoretical and empirical analysis in the future. With these questions in mind, the conclusions in this paper could productively be put into conversation with research in management on systems theory (Carmine and De Marchi 2023) and positive organizational scholarship (Cameron and Spreitzer 2012; Sison and Ferrero 2015; Constantinescu and Kaptein 2020). It would also be fruitful to gather qualitative empirical data from companies embodying the paradox perspective to better understanding the concrete ways in which *theorein* is an integral part of their corporate culture.

It is important to stress that companies choosing to embody a principle of enough by cherishing and thus protecting environmental aims does not mean that the competitive wheels of capitalism need to stop turning altogether (Gladwin, Kennelly, and Krause 1995), or that pecuniary motives entirely fade from view. It means that a long overdue ideological shift will begin to take place within a system that prioritizes utility-maximization at a disastrous ecological price for every member of the ecosystem. This will no doubt change economic progress and the pace of economic prosperity as we understand it today, albeit in a way that is more attuned to what we truly want and need to flourish on this planet—and to keep this planet flourishing for its own sake (Hickel 2020). This should not be understood as an ethical shift involving sacrifice but rather a vital, evolutionary step toward living more excellent, meaningful, and pleasant lives by understanding and paying tribute to what is essential to our well-being and to the well-being of the whole, of which we are an integral part. This is not only required for the type of ecological conversion that we ought to take to protect all life on earth but it is also necessary to better understanding who we *really* are, which is not merely *homo economicus*, but also *homo contemplativus*—and ultimately, *homo ecologicus.*

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MELISSA FITZPATRICK (melissa.fitzpatrick@lmu.edu) is an assistant professor of business ethics and sustainability in the College of Business Administration at Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles. Chief among her research interests is understanding how to foster a more sustainable community within and beyond the human world, and, as a vital foundation for that, how to overcome production and consumption-oriented values. She received her PhD in philosophy from Boston College, her MA in philosophy from Loyola Marymount University, and her BS in communication from Boston University. She is the co-author of *Radical Hospitality: From Thought to Action.*

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