



# The Meaning of Height in Aspiration, Responsibility, and Higher Education

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STEVEN G. SMITH

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## The Meaning of Height in Aspiration, Responsibility, and Higher Education

“Steven Smith offers an original and creative ‘take’ on the phenomena of aspiration and responsibility, seeking to show their potential interdependence. Through an essentially phenomenological analysis, human aspiration is presented as reaching for what is perceived as ‘higher’, engagement with others being typically integral to this and necessitating prioritisation. Initially the required choices are localised within given roles and goals, but human experience testifies to a widespread aspiration for that which transcends these, to ‘heights’ or ideals which place such social givens in perspective. But we find that living in terms of such heights requires taking some responsibility for their conditions of possibility, a requirement mythologised by Plato in his fable of the cave. It is argued that, in ‘descending’ from ideals to implementation, one’s understanding of aspiration for the ‘higher’ can guide that of one’s responsibility for righting the world in which one lives, for ‘righting continually receives diverse prompts from reaching’. The fundamental structures of righting are indeed diverse, as for example with respect to the ideals of wakefulness and of beauty with respect to contemporary engagement with one’s cultural heritage. On this account for every strong value there is a turnaround from reaching to righting, for a value is a stable conjunction of desirableness and norm. One crucial element of righting in order to facilitate reaching is education, hence the importance of higher education in a healthy society whose proper ideals are accordingly interrogated. This is a thoroughly worthwhile contribution to contemporary debate about values, impressive both in scope and in detailed analysis.”

—Martin Warner, Department of Philosophy,  
University of Warwick, Coventry, UK

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*To my inspiring colleagues  
at North Carolina Wesleyan and Millsaps*

## PREFACE

*The Meaning of Height* revives a theme and to some extent a kind of argument that was of great interest a hundred years ago, in the heyday of “philosophy of life” and “philosophy of value.” How then does *The Meaning of Height* belong to the present?

We still worry about dehumanization, but now the biologically inspired life-philosophies of Nietzsche and Bergson and the quasi-scientific value-philosophies of Scheler and Hartmann seem less helpful—the life-philosophies because of their entanglement with questionable forms of materialism, the value-philosophies because of their questionable spiritual certainties. In what manner, then, could a philosophical discourse on higher life persuasively establish anything?

Since World War II the discourse of human rights has made a great effort to establish a *floor* of decent human life. The issue of height is present in the key question of how high that floor should be (literacy for all? what degree of literacy?) or how high it can be as a matter of economic and political feasibility. But the emphasis is on protection from oppression, not on aspiration to the highest possible heights of life.

An acute concern in my own country, the USA, is the current state of higher education. We have a political problem of fair access to higher education and an intellectual problem in defining and evaluating *higher* education as such. The principles of democracy and high culture, which never sit together easily, seem to be more estranged than usual, and the academic interests in appreciation and critique are completely out of sorts.

*The Meaning of Height* is limited and humble in comparison with many older discussions of human fulfillment. It isn't framed as a comprehensive anthropology or ethical argument or metaphysical "world-view." It doesn't examine all forms of "meaningful" life. It fastens on a nerve—a linked pair of motives that can be decisive in many contexts of choice, action, and satisfaction. I follow these motives insistently but with a wide view of opportunities and demands, pressing upward in courses of human reaching and downward in courses of righting. The reward, I think, is usefully realistic models of human aspiration and responsibility. These models come into focus philosophically as landing places for reflection on meaningful life; how they relate to life experience is also a matter for social-scientific investigation along multiple lines.

There are times when we find our bearings by telling ourselves to keep our eyes on the prize. What *is* the prize? I don't claim to see the one best version of human fulfillment, but I think we can recognize a number of trails that connect us with fulfillment, guided by the idea that our fundamental directions of progress are two: the ascent of reaching and the descent of righting.

Jackson, MS, USA  
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Steven G. Smith

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Portions of the Righting section are derived from my article "Moral Sense in Different Senses," *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 37/4 (2023) 545–563.



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## CHAPTER 1

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# Introduction

No bird that has learned only one single word cries out this word more unceasingly, and no crow its own name more unceasingly, than culture is always crying out *the highest*.

—Kierkegaard<sup>1</sup>

A valued mode of living may be represented as *high*. For example, in his speech at the Lincoln Memorial on August 28, 1963, Martin Luther King Jr. said:

We must forever conduct our struggle on the high plane of dignity and discipline. We must not allow our creative protest to degenerate into physical violence. Again and again, we must rise to the majestic heights of meeting physical force with soul force.<sup>2</sup>

The appeal to a “high” ideal and “rising” to an occasion is a familiar way of soliciting serious attention and proffering guidance. What does the vertical appeal assume about us and our situation? What makes for

<sup>1</sup>Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 59. As readers of Kierkegaard well know, he too is fixated on “the highest”—what is truly highest.

<sup>2</sup>Transcript at <http://www.analytictech.com/mb021/mlk.htm>

“majestic height”? How do King’s majestic heights relate to the thrilling heights of an eagerly desired “high life”? What do we already know or sense about higher life, such that the rhetoric of height seems an apt way to order our desires and scruples, and the actuality of our life—including the “struggle” part of King’s equation—seems to cooperate?

Perhaps it all starts when babies look up at their mothers.<sup>3</sup> They must be raised to be closer. Or perhaps it starts with the primal play impulse to leap, noted by Plato.<sup>4</sup> Or perhaps there is a primal achievement-impressiveness in piling things up high.<sup>5</sup> Certainly there is a natural desire not to be held *down* or to recover from being beaten down. Be that as it may, any observant member of Western culture knows that the Western imagination is deeply imbued with a hierarchical verticality. Divine beings have watched over us from heaven; prophets have come down from mountaintops; philosophical ladders of access to truth have been hung down from transcendental rafters; royals, aristocrats, and schoolmasters have dined at high tables; even ordinary people can be respectable and looked *up* to. A practical significance of these placements is that the high figures are accepted as being above our disputing with them or deriding them. They’re not on the same level as most of our refiguring intentions. Critics of the hierarchical realm see its “heights” as bastions of privilege, but its loyal subjects think that they perceive highness in greater worth and proper command. The rhetoric of height purports to reflect well-founded differences of admirability and authority. Its imaginative power, placing us in relation to the superior as though at the foot of a great mountain, makes moral discriminations feel more secure and at the same time more dramatically enlivened, a matter of high stakes.

A Platonic interpretation of King’s appeal to height would associate height with mental participation in Being. King’s implied argument would be that nonviolent action is the most coherent expression of the eternal good order grasped by a reason-governed soul or society. Union with

<sup>3</sup>Peter Sloterdijk, *You Must Change Your Life*, trans. Wieland Hoban (Cambridge: Polity, 2009), pp. 113–114.

<sup>4</sup>Plato, *Laws* II, 653e, 673d.

<sup>5</sup>For more suggestions on the physical basis of associations of height with vitality, see George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1980), pp. 14–18. On the psychology of the compelling imaginative appeal of height, see Gaston Bachelard, *Air and Dreams*, trans. Edith R. Farrell and C. Frederick Farrell (Dallas: Dallas Institute Publications, 1988).

permanent being is what we stand to gain or lose. As competent surveyors of land must make constant reference to geometry, worthy political agents must make reference to the most perfect forms of human living. In doing this, their mental location is high on the ladder of being where substance and principle are found.<sup>6</sup> Such agents don't lower themselves by giving in to momentary pressures of worldly existence that would break their contact with pure being.

I'm sure that the practical thinking of King and his hearers was affected by our Platonic heritage, but I doubt that many of them would have invoked Platonic metaphysics in justifying a course of action. Moderns tend to find an explicit Platonism incredible in its dualistic opposition between an immaterial real world and a confused material world. Even those willing to consider Platonism's intellectual merits would be wary of its political application, and justifiably so, given the totalitarian cast of Plato's model state.

Aristotle put an important twist on the moral perspective of Platonism by centering the good life on the activity of reasoning rather than contact with pure being. Humans are in their most excellent, most flourishing condition, *eudaimonia*, when they exercise their most distinctively human faculty, reason—that is, when they *rule* their worldly evaluations and practices according to rational discrimination, balance, and consistency.<sup>7</sup> There is a convincing high authority in the ruling function of reason and an appealing concreteness in Aristotle's applications of the principle. But his ideal can be fully implemented only by the socially privileged ruling class (in Athens, by free male citizens), and metaphysical contemplation is still its Platonist capstone.<sup>8</sup> These are troubling restrictions, possibly deal-breakers for modern adaptation.

What then could be the core sense, for moderns, of height? Would it be explained best in the modern idiom of utilitarianism, as a prospect of greater happiness?

Bentham's utilitarianism makes a decisive break with Platonic verticality and social hierarchy alike as it compares values strictly on the horizontal, referring only to intensities and durations and likelihoods of pleasure and

<sup>6</sup> Plato, *Republic* II, 375–376; IV, 428–429; V, 476–480; VI, 499–501, 505–508; *Laws* XII, 965–968.

<sup>7</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*.

<sup>8</sup> *Nicomachean Ethics* X, 1177a–1179a.

pain.<sup>9</sup> The technical advantage of this approach is to base all rational decision-making on a quantitative measurement of total happiness. Its modern political virtue is to allow everyone's experience equal weight; protecting the refined joys of the higher classes in the social hierarchy is not more important than relieving the common miseries of the lower. However, Bentham effectively withdraws from the highly meaningful discussion of which kinds of satisfaction are qualitatively superior—or he censors that discussion, steering us away from that kind of guidance. There is to be just one value that finally matters, pleasure, whether affirmed simply (no other values are independent) or in a second-order value judgment (pleasure is superior to other values).

In Mill's reformulation of utilitarianism, the issue of intrinsically superior experiences is taken seriously. Mill too wants to be a democratic hedonist, but he doesn't want to undercut the ambition and authority of pursuing satisfaction in a fully human way rather than in a comparatively stunted way, and so verticality rears its head:

It must be admitted ... that utilitarian writers in general have placed the superiority of mental over bodily pleasures chiefly in the greater permanency, safety, uncostliness, etc., of the former—that is, in their circumstantial advantages rather than in their intrinsic nature. And on all these points utilitarians have fully proved their case; but they might have taken the other, and, as it may be called, higher ground, with entire consistency. It is quite compatible with the principle of utility to recognize the fact that some *kinds* of pleasure are more desirable and more valuable than others.<sup>10</sup>

Mill solves, or finesses, the problem by appealing not to a fixed hierarchy of values but to the free preferences of human subjects who make unchallengeable determinations of the greater value in cases where they know from experience both sides of a value comparison. A “being of higher faculties” can make more such comparisons, and despite becoming vulnerable to more forms of suffering “can never really wish to sink into

<sup>9</sup>Jeremy Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* [1789], Chap. 4. For a discussion of Bentham's oversimplification of the pleasure concept see Martha Nussbaum, “Who Is the Happy Warrior? Philosophy Poses Questions to Psychology,” *Journal of Legal Studies* 37 (2008) s81–s113.

<sup>10</sup>John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, in *Utilitarianism and Other Writings*, ed. Mary Warnock (New York: New American Library, 1974), p. 258.

what he feels to be a lower grade of existence.”<sup>11</sup> (The apostle Paul claims to have *died to* the lower existence of living under the Law [Galatians 2:19]; a less drastic expression we commonly use is that we have *outgrown* ways of thinking or acting that can no longer be compelling for us.) The empirical pattern in such preferings, in which beings of higher faculties make proportionally more of the relevant comparisons, is the real basis of the generally accepted higher value of some objects of choice.

Mill thinks it’s a vital concern of education to *elevate* the capacities of human subjects so that they can aim at and rejoice in more choiceworthy experiences.<sup>12</sup> He sees a great impairment of happiness in the oppressed classes being denied access to poetic, philosophical, and political experiences that Mill and his peers would not willingly forego, despite the troubles associated with those experiences. He thinks that “the present wretched education, and wretched social arrangements” must be improved to give access to choiceworthy modes of living,<sup>13</sup> but he also thinks that choices should not be dictated beyond morally necessary standards. Individual autonomy and self-development are essential to a Millian high society.<sup>14</sup>

It’s a telling point in favor of a scheme of life that the most articulate and persuasive citizens do actually prefer cultural assets that are fostered by that scheme. But we can always ask: *Why* do they prefer the kinds of satisfaction that they do? *What* can be effectively commended to human agents as ideally preferable? In *which* practical locations can agents understand and act on such priorities? What *would be* or *could be* higher or highest, that we perhaps have not yet adequately experienced, or that is still subject to dispute? Such questions will not be solely a matter of abstract curiosity when there are practical challenges to a culture’s organization of its assets; and such occasions will continually arise, sometimes earth-shakingly as in the time of the American Civil Rights Movement.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 259–260. Compare the Platonic version of this argument at *Republic* 581–583, where the worse-ordered soul’s incapacity to appreciate higher pleasures prevents it from making a valid comparison.

<sup>12</sup> “Human beings have faculties more elevated than the animal appetite” (Ibid. 258).

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. 264.

<sup>14</sup> Mill faults Bentham for not recognizing that “man ... is a being capable of ... desiring for its own sake the conformity of his own character to his own standard of excellence.” “Bentham,” in *The Six Great Humanistic Essays of John Stuart Mill* (New York: Washington Square, 1963) 25–70, p. 47. Mill endorses the Humboldtian value-ideal of personal “originality” in *On Liberty*, Chap. 3.



A different modern rationale for height makes *propriety* a central consideration in a way that doesn't depend either on ontological grading or on psychological fact. As noted, Bentham resolves the question of height strictly by measuring the pleasures and pains of individual subjects. On his approach, public interest generally takes precedence over private interest because whoever measures happiness rationally cannot stop with less than a fully inclusive measurement. But a rival approach represented by Rousseau and Kant sees in public interest a distinctly procedural priority. The governing consideration is not that we're capable of pleasure and pain but that we're obliged to make articulate and justifiable choices.

Rousseau tells a story of human development in which we're caught up in a different fundamental project once we pledge ourselves to living together in society.<sup>15</sup> Now our possible objects of choice appear to us more worthy or less worthy depending not only on the satisfaction they might give ourselves or others directly but also on what we take to be their acceptability to our consociates generally. There is now an overridingly important human fulfillment in the realization of "the general will."

Kant adapts Rousseau's political ideal to morality in his conception of pure practical reason as the universalizing legislator in every human mind. Possible courses of action are ascertained to be of an acceptable or unacceptable type by considering the general policies they imply.<sup>16</sup> Pure reason rises above our inclinations in requiring that all policies we follow be tenable for all agents.

In a situation like King's, the moral point of directing the audience's attention to a majestic height would be to affirm that nonviolent activism is generally acceptable in principle and violence is not. If it happens that a social majority doesn't agree, one can still claim that the commitment to nonviolence is shared by those able to exercise the procedurally authoritative capacity of pure reasonableness.

It seems that in the "heights" part of his speech King is appealing not to a fact or prospect of social agreement but to creativity versus degeneration. We're reminded that we look *up* to what has been built (from the ground) *up*, recognizing a cumulative accomplishment embodying significant discernment and effort, now standing *up* (against gravity and forces of dissolution) to the test of use. An image may come to mind of people standing *up* together peacefully as they couldn't if they were fighting or as

<sup>15</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract* I, Chaps. 6, 8.

<sup>16</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysic of Morals*, AA 4:420–421.

they wouldn't be if they were privately relaxing. It's possible that social consensus itself is the thing that has been admirably built up, solving hard problems of coordination. (The Civil Rights struggle was difficult partly because many of King's opponents thought that racial segregation was supported by just such a consensus.) But here what is probably in the foreground of our looking *up* is the figure of a particular well-developed "best practice" that enjoys or should enjoy social acceptance because of its greater reward. (King thought that the excellence of soul-force politics had been demonstrated by Gandhi.)<sup>17</sup>

If King had spoken of rising to "lofty" heights, his appeal would have been more purely aspirational; he would have been inviting his hearers to think ambitiously of building up their capacities, enlarging or more strongly asserting their souls, to the greatest extent, or climbing to the high position where one has the largest view and exposure—as though to the top of Mount Everest. But his reference to the "majestic" heights implies an already-constituted greatness to be respected, a higher power looking down on us with a paramount authority, as though from Mount Sinai. In calling on us to rise to the majestic heights, King makes our object of aspiration public as well as personal and a qualifier of power as well as of self-satisfaction. If we hold to the "discipline and dignity" of nonviolence we will estimably be acting on that plane of great moral authority. From that superior height, the soul force we wield will *over*-rule physical force.

The height to which King can appeal is thus at least sometimes a turn-around point where the most ambitious upward reacher begins to participate as a co-sponsor in the most authoritative right ordering of life in the world. The inspiring height to which you or I look up becomes the majestic height from which we all are overseen. The looker-up may have had the majesty always in view, thinking of the ascent the way an ambitious politician might look forward to bearing weighty responsibilities as a member of the government. Meanwhile the majestic overseer does well to hold in view all the capacities and hopes of those who are overseen; otherwise, they won't be done justice.

\* \* \*

<sup>17</sup> "I left India more convinced than ever before that non-violent resistance is the most potent weapon available to oppressed people in their struggle for freedom." "My Trip to the Land of Gandhi," *Ebony*, July 1959, 84–93, p. 87, available at [http://www.elegantbrain.com/edu4/classes/readings/depository/misc/mlk\\_ind\\_ebon.PDF](http://www.elegantbrain.com/edu4/classes/readings/depository/misc/mlk_ind_ebon.PDF)

I suppose that we all have *some* idea of what King means by “majestic heights,” and that while we share enough of an understanding to discuss the practical importance of nonviolence and comparable objects of choice, there are plenty of ambiguous and still-to-be-determined elements in what we might like to be able to say about “higher” life in explanation or justification, or developing our application of the height premise. You might be one of the acute thinkers who has a *very definite* conception of high life and can defend your view against rivals. In that case we should study your view. Or you might have dramatized a high life so powerfully that some of us will be moved to try living your vision. Or you might have a cogent critique of “higher life” and “uplift” ideologies that privilege a certain class’s self-serving values.

But imagine being someone who has *very little* conception of what the heights could be—one of the youth for whom parents and educators must make plans of guidance. We who are relatively mature may not be able to agree on any definite model of worthiest life, and given the multiplicity of appealing models, we may not expect to resolve the question finally even for ourselves as individuals; nevertheless we’ll need to grasp the essential points of reference for a discussion about cultural guidance well enough that we can provide responsibly for those who depend on us for a humane orientation to life.

My aim here is to identify the available avenues, handholds, and pole stars in such a discussion. I don’t want to establish a theory that would conclude the discussion; I want to open up a broadly revealing view to set the discussion up well. The setup is of compelling interest because the discussion of higher life *must* be had in a cultural democracy. Otherwise our unsavory alternatives are to discourage probing thoughts about human potential or to stay inside doctrinal silos, operating party-line schools, allowing public sharing only of noncontroversial technical education.

Discussion of higher life is necessary in an intrinsically preferable sort of society, a society that favors intelligent sharing of responsibility. In my own society, unfortunately, such discussion is often stopped short by clashes between directive commitments or by renouncing all moral direction—as though fanatical dogmatism and indifferent relativism were the only possible approaches.

My plan for exhibiting relevant questions and options is to model the “high life” realistically as a *heightening* life of human fulfillment seeking in two general progressions, two series of discernable phases of human fulfillment. The two progressions recall the classic Platonic ascent to the pure Good and descent from enlightenment into the actual world of troubles. Beyond this general structure I don’t commit to any particular view of the Good or the Problem. I orient the two series to the standard of height in recognition that the figure of height is an enduringly powerful device of guidance in Western cultures and apparently also (though I’m less able to gauge this) in other cultures. To see how this device works is to see a great deal about our conceptions of life and world, our ideals, and our motivations.

The aspirational ascent to the lofty heights of the most rewarding experiences and the fullest self-realization is conceived as a series of kinds of *reaching*, leveraging the basic premise that living beings are always reaching for more of what they think is good for them, and not only reaching *out* for more of known goods (on the horizontal) but reaching *up* for compellingly interesting new riches and challenges and vistas. The mental reaching that figures possibilities is *imagining*. Setting up and enacting life as we imagine it is *staging*. (In this usage of “reaching” we put the sense of reaching-*for* ahead of the sense of a successful culmination of reaching as in “She reached her goal.”)

The responsible descent from the majestic heights of the most adequately authorized, broadly and deeply beneficial guidance is conceived as a series of kinds of *righting* on the premise that responsible beings always feel called upon to bring good order to the situations they inhabit, not just trying to set things to rights in prefigured ways but sensitively seeking more fully benign relations. The mental righting that goes beyond simply registering degrees of satisfaction is *directing*. (Here too we put the sense of “righting” as endeavoring to right ahead of the sense of a successful culmination of righting as in “He righted the ship.”)

Obviously reaching and righting can go poorly and be unhelpful or harmful. But if they never went well human life would be appallingly flattened and frayed.

The phases in reaching and righting are correlated and interdependent but meet each other coming and going, so to speak, since their reliable

bases and elusive goals lie in opposite directions. To use the imagery of Plato's cave allegory, perennially eager reaching blinks into the sun of the ultimately-to-be-reached, and reflectively committed righting blinks into the darkness of the ultimately-to-be-righted.<sup>18</sup> Thus we gain the truest view of the two series of fulfillments by laying them out in the opposite orders of ascent and descent, though there are many linkages among their phases as they jointly inform concrete intentions and situations.

In a heightening life of serious reaching and righting, each advance leaves less fulfilling life behind as less desirable. Prospects and evidences of success in reaching and righting are eminently meaningful. We have ironic witness to the ideal of high life in our common use of the phrase "the high life" for frantic, expensive, damaging forms of living—consorting with "high society," "getting high," or "living high" in the sense of high consumption and conspicuous display. The irony is well recognized except by those in the grip of unfortunate compulsions. No sane person thinks "the high life" in any of those forms is really the best life, even if it would be better than some grim alternatives. By implication, then, there is a general allowance for asking what really constitutes high life, and most ears are open for substantially appealing answers to that question—even ears already captured by a doctrine concerning the best life.<sup>19</sup> Most would allow that there are important clues in the persons and groups we encounter who shine admirably—musicians who play beautifully, public servants who serve with honor, courageous advocates, and lovers who respect and support each other.

An account of reaching should follow the actual progress of reaching. We *discover* reasons for reaching as we do; as the growing result of our discoveries, reaching can be intelligent and accountable and can generate a functional, spiritually lively personal and group ethos. But if we're *obeying* given reasons or concrete prompts of responsibility then we're righting our lives, implementing norms or values. Thus, to be true to *reaching's* verticality I can testify to what I've aspired to and found fulfillment in and what I've seen others aspire to and find fulfillment in, while many *righting* directions must be argued for on the basis of accepted setups of

<sup>18</sup> *Republic* 514–517.

<sup>19</sup> The Christian apostle Paul opened a door to broad discussion in his letter to the Philippians: "Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things" (4:8, NRSV).

responsibility. Even granting this difference, righting as much as reaching is an adventure in the art of living; it isn't a lapse from reaching into stagnant deductivism.<sup>20</sup>

Reaching and righting are the arch-actions of aesthetically and morally sensitive life. By analogy with a piston engine we may imagine them as the constantly relaunching upstroke and downstroke of heightening life. Yet they're not as strictly channeled and predictable as pistons in an engine; their experimental *trying* aspect is inseparable from their surgent vital aspect. Reaching is *trying* to reach (i.e., to attain full exercise of a higher capacity); righting is *trying* to right (fully to have given good order).

Further, reaching and righting are bound to each other. This point is possibly the greatest lesson of Platonism. It may be that Plato's righting program too much dominates his vision of reaching; symptomatic of this is the severe censorship of poetry in his ideal state, enforcing a requirement that representation be based on knowledge of the truth.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, taking the *Republic* together with *Phaedrus* and *Symposium*, Plato makes us see the issue of the relationship. To understand the vertical liveliness of life, we must see how enthusiasm and respect combine.

It's obvious that imagining can distract from sober direction and that direction can cramp creative imagining or drive it "underground." But the partnership of imagining and directing, so far as an effective partnership can obtain, is of greater interest to us than either mode of living by itself, because the partnership promises a fuller human fulfillment.

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The target of this inquiry is that which makes for higher life, not that which is good or best overall. In attending affirmatively to heightening life, considerations of what is safe, comfortable, and economically advantageous are subordinated or set aside.

The inquiry isn't about how to attain higher life, except so far as we must imagine a range and a series of attainments to open a view of what higher life consists of. It's not (except indirectly and partially) a theory of

<sup>20</sup>Here I'm using the language of Alfred North Whitehead's *The Function of Reason* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1929) to push back against the low view he takes of practical reason in that argument. He is able to lower practicality from the higher heights because he ignores the motivation of responsibility.

<sup>21</sup>*Republic X.*

any of the high practices specifically, such as art or science or politics or religion. It's not about how to resolve disagreements about high goals. It doesn't establish a particular itinerary of development or hierarchy of values, except by broadly tracing a natural progression of concern from the interesting to the important and then to the transcendent.<sup>22</sup>

It doesn't try to apply or vindicate any sort of idealist or materialist intellectual program. It commits only to appreciating the options that reachers and righters think they have and the constraints they think they are under.

What is this sort of inquiry good for, then?

It will serve to elucidate, using mostly ordinary and generally acceptable premises, the vaguely commanding meaning of height to which we so frequently appeal in our claims about preferable ways of living, thereby securing an accessible main stage on which we can contemplate and explore our prospects for fulfillment—as opposed to being completely absorbed in ad hoc negotiation of pragmatic priorities or being lulled by a merely traditional praise of excellences.

It will serve as a lens that picks out the often-observed *issue of intrinsically preferable* ways of living. As such, it can clarify for us some of our best motives—for many of us, our favorite motives, the ones with which we can most wholeheartedly identify.

It will offer an organizing vision of the intricately interlinked upstroke and downstroke of our pursuit of the greatest fulfillments of aspiration and responsibility. In this way it will surpass the standard conceptions of

<sup>22</sup>More specifically, my inquiry doesn't generate a "positive psychology" of universally applicable standards of human well-being (though it does generate claims about motivation and fulfillment that have empirical correlates that can be scientifically studied). On relevant issues and achievements in psychology, see the papers in Joar Vittersø, ed., *Handbook of Eudaimonic Well-Being* (Cham: Springer, 2016). As many of these writers are aware, when desirable life is examined in the frame of empirical psychology it's forced to appear either as "subjective well-being" (a.k.a. "happiness," self-reported good feeling in one's life) or as "eudaimonic flourishing" (a.k.a. "living meaningfully" and self-improvingly) by objective standards, essentially by embodying socially approved virtues. Moreover, positive psychologists tend to be biased toward connecting subjective and objective well-being, missing the eudaimonic significance of Mill's preference for being Socrates dissatisfied rather than a fool satisfied (Sarah J. Ward and Laura S. King, "Socrates' Dissatisfaction, a Happiness Arms Race, and the Trouble with Eudaimonic Well-Being," in Vittersø, pp. 523–529).