

EXPLANATION AND METHOD IN *EUDEMIAN ETHICS I.6*

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Abstract: I discuss the methodological passage in the beginning of *Ethica Eudemia* I.6 (1216b26-35), which has received attention in connection with Aristotle's notion of dialectic and his methodology in Ethics. My central focus is not to discuss whether Aristotle is prescribing and using what has been called the method of *endoxa*. I will focus on how this passage coheres with the remaining parts of the same chapter, which also are advancing methodological remarks. My claim is that the method of *Ethica Eudemia* I.6 is in agreement with many features of Aristotle's theory of explanation as presented in the *Posterior Analytics*: Aristotle's main concern is a warning against misuses of explanatory arguments.

Keywords: methodology; explanation; ethics; endoxa; Aristotle.

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I. INTRODUCTION

My aim is to discuss the methodological passage that opens *Ethica Eudemia* I.6 (1216b26-35). The passage has been recently examined in connection with Aristotle's notion of dialectic and Aristotle's method of *endoxa*. The passage has also been compared with other methodological passages from the ethical treatises, such as *Nicomachean Ethics* VII.1¹. My discussion will have consequences on these broader issues too, but from a different approach. Instead of asking what the expressions "*phainomena*", "*martyria*" and "*paradeigmata*" mean in this context, I will discuss how the initial paragraph of *Ethica Eudemia* (henceforth, *EE*) I.6 relates to the (equally important, but often neglected) next paragraphs of the same chapter. This approach will help us to attain a better understanding of Aristotle's points. Many of my results will be congenial to recent approaches that deflate the supposed peculiarity of the method². After all, the method is in agreement with many features of Aristotle's theory of explanation as presented in the *Posterior Analytics* (henceforth *APo*).

II. THE TEXT AND THE PROBLEM

Aristotle starts *EE* I.6 with the following methodological remark:

TI: "(i) About all these matters, we must seek conviction through argument, (ii) using people's perceptions as evidence and example" (1216b26-28; Kenny's translation).

The Greek is this:

“πειρατέον δὲ περὶ πάντων τούτων ζητεῖν τὴν πίστιν διὰ τῶν λόγων, μαρτυρίοις καὶ παραδείγμασι χρώμενον τοῖς φαινομένοις” (1216b26-28).

Woods’s translation employs a different terminology, but goes in the same direction (call it Version 1 of *T1*)³:

T1: “(i) We must try, by argument, to reach a convincing conclusion on all these questions, (ii) using, as testimony and by way of example, what appears to be the case” (1216b26-28).

The interpretation conveyed by those translations has the following features. First, from the standpoint of their structure, these translations either put the central element in step (i), with step (ii) adding an important qualification to the central point, or put steps (i) and (ii) on the same level as presenting claims that are equally important. Secondly, from the standpoint of their content, these translations suggest that Aristotle is recommending the use of arguments to settle the issues at this juncture of his discussion. There is an important remark about the way in which one must appeal to arguments, but there still seem to be a strong recommendation to employ them in order to reach conviction. It is not by chance that Barnes 1980, p.506, says that *T1* “invites us to *rely on arguments*, and to use the phenomena [...] to support [...] the arguments” (my italics). Barnes understands that steps [i] and [ii] of *T1* introduce *two claims at the same level*, namely, that we must rely on *arguments* to reach conviction on practical matters, and that we must use

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the *phainomena* to control the correctness of the arguments.

But is this an accurate translation of what Aristotle means?

III. THE STRUCTURE OF ARISTOTLE'S CLAIM

Is it so obvious that steps (i) and (ii) are at the same level and introduce two coordinated claims? Or is it so obvious that, as the second best option, step (i) of the passage is the central core of Aristotle's claim, while step (ii) only adds important qualifications?

Is it not possible to have a different parsing of the claim? For instance: isn't possible to take step (ii) as conveying the central core of the claim, with step (i) just setting the framework that the claim presupposes?

Consider two alternative translations that contrast with each other (Version 2 below elaborates on Wood's translation, but a similar result can be attained from Kenny's or Inwood-Woolf's translation):

Version 2: "(i) *It is by argument that* we must try to reach a conviction on all these questions, (ii) using, as testimony and by way of example, what appears to be the case" (1216b26-28).

In this translation, the use of the expression "it is ... that" emphasises a specific way of reaching conviction. The expression actually selects *the* way for reaching the target, as if dismissing alternative ways. The desideratum of reaching a conviction takes the place of a background presupposition, and

Aristotle is emphatically saying that, in order to reach a conviction, one must use *arguments*. Part (ii) of the passage adds an important qualification: even using arguments, one must pay attention to what appears to be the case. But that one must appeal to arguments in order to reach a conviction is still the central claim.

To go straight to my proposal, consider a third option for the translation:

Version 3: “(i) About all these questions, *when* we try to reach a conviction through arguments, (ii) we must use what appears to be the case as evidence and example” (1216b26-28).

In this translation, step (i) is setting the background presupposition, while step (ii) introduces the main contention.

I will discuss in a moment how Version 3 allows a better understanding of the passage 1216b26-35 as a whole – not only of its argumentative structure, but also of its connection with the ensuing passages in the same chapter. But first let me explain how Version 3 is acceptable from a linguistic standpoint.

Consider this sentence:

(a.1) “(i) you must go to San Francisco (ii) by car”.

Suppose someone uses this sentence to talk with his friend in Los Angeles. The normal interpretation is that part (i), “you must go to San Francisco”, is setting the scene with what is presupposed by the most

important part, which comes in (ii): *drive a car* to San Francisco, instead of going by train, airplane or boat (or walking).

Now, the expression “by car” can be easily replaced with “driving” with the same effect:

(a.2) “(i) you must go to San Francisco (ii) driving”.

(Note that there is no comma between “San Francisco” and “driving”).

Again, your LA friend is not giving you advice about going to San Francisco (instead of not going), as if you had doubts about going or not; nor is she emphasising her preference to San Francisco (as if she were recommending you to go to San Francisco instead of going to Sacramento or to San Diego). That you are going to San Francisco is a settled matter. The point of the sentences (a.1) and (a.2) is to recommend a specific way of transport to San Francisco: drive a car, my friend, instead of boarding an airplane, or a train, or a boat etc.

The use of the expression “driving” in (a.2) is important for my purposes. I wish to stress that the most important part of the message conveyed in the sentence does not come with what seems to be the main verb, but with something that a superficial examination might regard as peripheral.

Now, I claim that the Greek passage for *T1* is structurally similar to sentences like (a.2): the most important part of the message is conveyed in the participial

sentence, while the infinitive *is only setting the scene*. I will parse its structure in this way:

“[i] πειρατέον δὲ περὶ πάντων τούτων ζητεῖν τὴν πίστιν διὰ τῶν λόγων [ii] μαρτυρίαις καὶ παραδείγμασι χρώμενον τοῖς φαινομένοις” (1216b26-28).

The core of the passage is the verbal adjective “πειρατέον”, “we must try”. But what exactly should we try? The comma the editors put between “λόγων” and “μαρτυρίαις” is misleading in making the reader hover on step [i] as if it were the most important one or as if it were delivering a complete message on its own. But this is not so. Step (i) does not convey the most important part of the sentence, but is only setting the stage with what is presupposed by the most important part; step (ii) is the most important thing Aristotle says. Thus, from the point of view of its structure, the most appropriate translation is Version 3 above:

“(i) *When* we try to reach a conviction about all these questions through arguments, (ii) we must use what appears to be the case as evidence and example”⁴.

Why is this difference in structure so important? Because Aristotle’s message is – right from the start – presupposing both a distinction and a recommendation that will be explored later. The distinction is clearly made at 1216b35-39 (*T2* below) and 1217a10-17 (*T6* below): on the one hand, there is the proposition targeted as conclusion of an argument: it is what one tries to establish or to explain by the argument; on

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the other hand, there is the argument itself, which tries to establish or to explain the proposition that works as its conclusion. Aristotle is very explicit in saying that the appraisal of each of these must be separated. One thing is to accept the targeted proposition, which happens to be the conclusion. Another thing is to accept the explanation or proof offered by the argument. Besides, there is also another recommendation: a warning against the use of inappropriate arguments (in 1216b35-1217a10, *T5* below).

I will examine later how my construal of *T1* fits better both the recommendation made at 1217a10-16 (*T6* below) and the warning made at 1216b35-1217a10 (*T5* below). For the time being, let me proceed with showing how my construal also delivers a more coherent understanding of the initial paragraph of *EE* I.6.

IV. ARGUMENTS, FACTS AND EXPLANATIONS

I start with the distinction itself, which is a very familiar one from Aristotle's theory of scientific knowledge (*APo* II.1-2)⁵. On the one hand, there is the fact (or, in ethics, whatever it is that is fact-like, i.e., is taken as explanandum). On the other hand, there is the explanation of the fact. Since explanations are structured as arguments, the fact to be explained or established is also taken as the conclusion of the argument. The distinction is presented in *EE* I.6 in this way:

T2: "In every discipline, there is a difference between philosophical and unphilosophical ways of argument. For this reason, even about political matters one should not regard as irrelevant the inquiry that makes clear not only the *that* but also the *why*⁶. For that way of proceeding

is the philosopher's, in every discipline" (1216b35-39; the translation starts from Kenny's and Wood's, but modifies many of their options).

It is not very clear what, exactly, Aristotle is talking about when he mentions arguments about political matters. There are many options, but my proposal would not be affected by how this issue is settled (for I hope my proposal will prove useful for any of them). One option is that the fact-like target of the explanation is some basic practical proposition that a good agent accepts, whereas the explanation itself is the reasoning through which the agent justifies her acceptance of or her acting on that proposition. (For instance: fact-like proposition: "one should be generous"; explanation: "because being generous is an achievement of our practical reasoning" or "because being generous paves the way to becoming richer and richer"). Another option is that the fact-like target of the explanation is some basic proposition in the systematic philosophical enterprise Aristotle is developing, whereas the explanation itself is the reasoning through which Aristotle, or another philosopher, might justify his acceptance of that proposition. (For instance: fact-like proposition: "*eudaimonia* is the best activity of reason"; explanation: "because *eudaimonia* should be the primary good and must explain why every other good thing is good"). There is also the question about reputed opinions (as opposed to facts) as the supposed starting-point in ethical investigation. But I will not explore these interpretive issues because my proposal does not depend on them. It is enough for my purposes to stress that both items involved in the distinction are objects of conviction

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(*pistis*): any one has beliefs or convictions about facts (or practical propositions) as well as about explanations (see *APo* 89a15-16)⁷.

Now, the distinction is useful because there are three situations that Aristotle takes into consideration in the chapter. The First situation is the highest desideratum: one accepts the right fact (or fact-like practical proposition) and also explains it through an appropriate explanation. The Second situation is when one accepts the right fact (or fact-like practical proposition), but does not explain it through the appropriate explanation (see 1217a14-17): he gives an explanation through an incorrect reason. The Third situation is when one uses an inappropriate argument to support a fact-like practical proposition which should not be accepted. Examples will be given in Section V. (A supposed fourth situation, in which one would use an appropriate argument to defend a fact-like practical proposition which should not be accepted, is impossible for Aristotle – as impossible as to conclude a falsity through a syllogism with true premises).

These situations have their analogues in the theoretical field: first, appropriate explanations delivering scientific knowledge correspond pretty much to the First situation; second, attempted explanations in which the explanandum is true, but the explanation is either false or is not the most appropriate one, correspond to the Second situation; third, valid arguments leading to a falsity correspond to the Third situation.

It is important to remark that the Second situation is such that the fact does not *need* to be established by the argument (even if one *can* use an argument to

establish it). It is already accepted as a fact, and the proposition expressing it is already taken to be true. What is unsatisfactory is the explanation of why the fact holds. Now, this situation contrasts with the Third one, in which an argument makes someone jump from premises to a false conclusion. In the Third situation, the conclusion the argument seems to establish is not one about which there was a previous conviction, independently of the argument: the targeted conclusion deals with a matter on which acceptance is not yet settled.

With these remarks in mind, let us come back to Version 1 of *T1*:

T1: “(i) We must try, by argument, to reach a convincing conclusion on all these questions, (ii) using, as testimony and by way of example, what appears to be the case” (1216b26-28, Woods’s translation).

Now, as I have said, step (i) is a self-contained point in this Version. Even if step (ii) says that the use of arguments should be controlled by the appeal to *phainomena* as testimony and examples (whatever this might mean), step (i) implies that there is no convincing conclusion (or merely no conviction) on these questions. Thus, step (i) implies that arguments should be appealed to in order to settle the facts that deserve our conviction. And this suggests that what I have depicted as the Third situation is lurking in the background. Since there is no settled facts concerning all these questions, one must try to establish (or certify) facts through arguments in order to reach a conviction about them. But the appeal to arguments

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is dangerous: as there can be valid arguments leading to false conclusions, so there can be bad arguments that lead one to accept practical propositions which should not be accepted. Because of this danger, the corrective highlighted in step (ii) is needed: yes, the fact-like propositions in the domain should be established *by argument*, but under the control of the *phainomena* as testimonies and examples etc.

On the other hand, Version 1 of *T1* does not seem to accommodate the Second situation, in which the mistake in practical matters is subtler: one accepts the right fact (or fact-like practical proposition), but does not explain it through the appropriate explanation (see 1217a14-17). I argue that this tells against Versions 1 and 2 of *T1*. What we find in the text of *EE* I.6 is something different than the Third situation alone in the centre stage. There is an important mention of the Third situation (1217a13-14), but the Second situation is also (if not much more) important. In the ensuing sections, I will argue in favour of Version 3 of *T1* from the following reasons: (a) Version 3 can accommodate both the Second and the Third situation; (b) the two remaining paragraphs of *EE* I.6 seems to give much more importance to the Second situation, even if mentioning the Third situation too.

V. A SMOOTH ARGUMENT FOR THE FIRST PARAGRAPH OF *EE* I.6:

The first paragraph of *EE* I.6 continues as follows:

T3: “[iii] The best thing would be if everyone turned out to agree with what we are going to say; [iv] if not so, that

they should all agree in a way – which they might do with a change of direction; [v] for each man has something appropriate [*oikeion ti*] to contribute to the truth, from which it is necessary to explain in a way [*deiknunai pōs*] about these things. [vi] From things that are said with truth, but not in an enlightening way, there will be, as we proceed, what is also enlightening, with what is more perspicuous always superseding what is usually explained confusedly” (1216b28-35, my own translation, starting with Kenny’s and Wood’s).

(I have numbered the steps starting with [iii] because **T3** is continuous with **T1**). I will not discuss the details of the obscure step [iv] in **T3**. I will concentrate on three or four correlated points:

(1) in step [iii], “what we are going to say” refers to what Aristotle is going to develop in the ensuing chapters of *EE*, namely, explanatory accounts or arguments that seek to explain, e.g., why *eudaimonia* cannot be the Good Itself, or why *eudaimonia* must involve the virtues of character. Aristotle is not primarily concerned with agreement about “matters of fact”, but with agreement about appropriate explanations. And this concern will explain the connection between **T1** and **T3** in a much better way.

(2) The verb “*deiknunai*” in step [v] can be taken in the sense of *explaining* (cf. 1217a11, 15);

(3) The expression “*oikeion ti*” (“something appropriate”) is referring to the premises or principles from which an argument explains something; even if “*deiknunai*” in step [v] is not taken in the sense of *explaining*, “*oikeion ti*” must refer to premises or principles from

which an argument tries to prove (or establish) something. This entails that what Aristotle is designating as “appropriate for the truth” is not a bunch of basic fact-like propositions – for these propositions are rather what needs to be explained, not that *from which* an explanation is attempted. What each man has as appropriate for the truth are certain reasons or causes from which he gives *some* explanation for his explananda.

(4) Step [vi] might be taken as saying that ordinary explanatory accounts start with truths that are not enlightening because not sufficiently appropriate, but must end with truths that are enlightening because explanatorily appropriate.

In what follows, I will flesh out these points.

V.1. “WHAT WE ARE GOING TO SAY”

The expression “what we are going to say” in step [iii] in *T3* refers to what Aristotle is going to advance in the ensuing chapters of *EE*: the pieces of ethical theory he is about to develop. Being so, an important question is how step [iii] is connected with the previous one, that is, how step [iii] can be understood as offering an explanation or justification for what Aristotle has advanced in *T1*.

Some scholars take steps [iii]-[iv] as indicating that Aristotle “wish to win acceptance for the conclusions” (Woods, 1992, p.58), and the widest acceptance possible⁸. Now, this is still too vague: it means either that Aristotle wishes to win acceptance for the body of *that*-propositions found in his theory; or that Aristotle wishes to win acceptance for the body of *explanations*

that appropriately explain why the *that*-propositions within the theory should be accepted. On the first option, it is implied that most people in the audience do not accept the *EE* body of *that*-propositions. Philosophical understanding of the discussions in the *EE* would lead those people to accept that body of *that*-propositions. However, if this is the case, then step [iii] would hardly be squared with step [ii] in *T1*, for in the latter Aristotle says that, when trying to produce conviction through arguments, we should take “what seems to be the case” as evidence and examples. Aristotle insists on this because he expects his own theory to correspond to “what seems to be the case” (Woods, 1992, p.58): this translates “*phainomena*”, which stands for the explananda, i.e., *that*-propositions to be explained (I will explore later another option for understanding “*phainomena*”). Thus, “people’s perceptions” (as Kenny translates it) involve acceptance of at least a considerable body of *that*-propositions. But, this being so, Aristotle can be taken as saying something *prima facie* inconsistent: in order to win conviction about *that*-propositions in ethical matters, one must take *that*-propositions as evidences etc. In order to produce conviction about justice in (say) John’s mind, one must take the correct *that*-propositions about justice which John already accepts.

There are at least three ways to avoid this inconsistency⁹:

(1) One might suppose that there are different groups of people accepting different bodies of *that*-propositions: one group accepts “what appears to be the case” and thereby does not need corrective, while another group does not accept “what appears to be the case” and

thereby needs to be convinced through arguments. In order to convince people like James about the right *that*-propositions concerning justice, one assumes the right *that*-propositions which John already accepts.

(2) One might argue that “*marturiois*” and “*paradeigmasi*” has nothing to do with evidences or examples that confirm the correctness of a theory, but should rather be taken as the rhetorical jargon: they are the forms of arguments employed in rhetorical speeches, which aim at persuading the audience (*Rhetoric* 1375b26 ff.; 1356b2 ff.; 1393a23-31)¹⁰. This implies that “what appears to be the case” has some connection with what is likely (*eikos*), and for this reason it will furnish the premises for rhetorical arguments aiming to produce conviction in the skeptic or divergent group.

(3) One might argue that there is a difference between steps [i] and [ii] within *T1*: step [i] is talking about conviction *concerning explanations*, whereas step [ii] is talking about “what appears to be the case” as the factual data that explanations should explain.

Proposal (1) has problems of its own¹¹, but it shares with proposal (2) a common difficulty. Both proposals must convince *us* that Aristotle had some hopes (or expectations) about the power of persuasion of his own theory. More than that: both proposals have to convince *us* that Aristotle’s project in the *EE* contemplates arguments meant to change people’s mind about ethical matters¹².

I am skeptical about this claim. Aristotle is very clear in many passages that the relevant conviction in ethical matters – the conviction that leads one to act

upon his correct policies – depends on habituation (besides other factors). The appeal to arguments alone would never be enough to instill the correct conviction in one person¹³. Furthermore, the passage that comes immediately before *T1* echoes the same idea: the main target of the philosophical enterprise developed in *EE* is not to produce knowledge about what things (such as justice and courage) are, but rather to show a route by which we can become just and courageous (1216b16-25).

Thus, I prefer proposal (3) to avoid the potential inconsistency. Besides, proposal (3) fits better with and provides further justification for Version 3 of *T1*: in step [i] of *T1*, Aristotle is just setting the scene in making explicit what is presupposed by his main point. The presupposition is that conviction *concerning explanations* in practical matters comes through *arguments*. And this is obvious, given that, for Aristotle, explanations take the form of arguments (in which the explananda are the targeted conclusion). What is most relevant is step [ii]: in employing arguments when seeking conviction concerning explanations about practical matters, one should take “what appears to be the case” (or people’s perceptions) as the explananda and, therefore, as the target that sets the pattern to judge the correctness of the attempted explanations¹⁴.

Thus, coming back to the connection between *T1* and its immediate continuation, steps [iii]-[iv] in *T3*, it is useful to ask: why on earth the best option is that “everyone should turn out to agree with what we are going to say”? And why this being the best option gives some support or justification for what was said in *T1*? I argue that Aristotle’s concern in step [iii] is

not to stress that everyone should turn out to accept the same *that*-propositions which are the correct ones. Neither is step [iv] saying that, if this universal agreement is not the case, ethical discourse should take pains in trying to make people change their minds through arguments. (The divergent ones probably deserve more punishment than argument, see *Topics* 105a3-7 as well as *EE* 1214b31-33, 1215a2-3, or at least more habituation than argument). Aristotle has said in *T1* that, when evaluating explanations through arguments on ethical matters, one should take “what appears to be the case” as setting the pattern to appraise the correctness of attempted explanations. Now he adds in *T3* the following reasoning: the best thing is that every man – within a restricted scope: every man concerned with explanations on ethical matters – turns out to agree with the *explanations* which will appear in the ensuing discussions. Thus, he is only focusing on philosophers attempting to explain the relevant data in the domain. I will argue that steps [v] and [vi] can be much better understood in their context with this proposal. (I will skip the vexing step [iv], because any discussion of it will lead me too far away).

V. 2: “DEIKNUNAI” AS “TO EXPLAIN”

The most accepted translation for “*deiknunai*” is “to prove”. It is beyond the limits of this paper to offer a full discussion of this issue. It is enough for my purposes to advance the fair proposal that “to explain” is also a reasonable translation in many passages of Aristotle’s works. “To prove” is more suited to contexts where the target of the proof is something unsettled or unwarranted: a proposition the truth-value of which is unknown, or a claim that has not been

certified by careful observation etc. However, in some contexts the conclusion targeted by the argument is not something unsettled or uncertified. The targeted conclusion is a proposition the truth of which is already taken for granted. The aim of the argument is to capture the cause that explains why it is true. In such contexts, “to explain” is a preferable translation. I believe that “to explain” is a better translation for most occurrences within the *Posterior Analytics*. And I argue that “to explain” is also a better translation in *T3*, for in the ethical domain the fact-like propositions must have been accepted through reasoned habituation rather than be established by argument alone¹⁵.

Furthermore, I submit that the adverb “*pos*” in 1216b32 must be taken with “*deiknunai*”, not with “*anankaion*” (or any other option). Aristotle is talking about arguments that deliver *some* explanation, but not the most appropriate one. An advantage of my interpretation is that I can account for this adverb, which has “disappeared” both in Wood’s and in Kenny’s translations (but not in Inwood-Wolf’s translation).

V.3. “SOMETHING APPROPRIATE TOWARDS THE TRUTH”

The expression “*oikeion ti*” is what is taken back by the expression “*ex hon*” (“from which”)¹⁶. I don’t believe it merely means “something of his own” (Wood’s and Kenny’s translations) or “some affinity with the truth” (Inwood-Woolf’s translation) in the sense of some “natural aptitude for grasping truth” (Barnes, 1980, p.508). It is rather related to the appropriate explanations (“*oikeious logous*”) mentioned in 1217a9. It is fair to say that the pronoun “*auton*” in 1216b32

refers to the domain of *that*-propositions about practical matters – which are the explananda. Now, if you are going to explain why *P*, you cannot take the same proposition *P* as your premise. Thus, if you are going to explain a *that*-proposition about practical matters, your explanatory premises must be different from the *that*-proposition you are trying to explain. Then, the expression “*ex hon*”, which takes back “*oikeion ti*” (“something appropriate”), cannot refer to *that*-propositions that everyone (or almost everyone) accepts. A better option is to take the expressions “*ex hon*” and “*oikeion ti*” as referring to the premises from which an argument explains its explanandum¹⁷.

I should also note that “*aletheian*” in 1216b31 must not be taken as alluding to the truth-value of the *that*-propositions in the domain. Aristotle has some difficulties with expressions properly applicable to relations between propositions – including explanatory relations between propositions. Sometimes he uses the word “*oikeion*” as applied (or properly applicable) to the explanation itself, which involves a relation between the proposition to be explained and the propositions encapsulating the explanatory factors. But sometimes words such as “*alethes*” and “*pseudos*” are applied to explanations: the “true explanation” is the right or correct explanation, the one which, besides involving true propositions, captures the most appropriate explanatory factor, while “false explanations” are those that miss the most appropriate explanatory factor (even if they consist in a set of premises that are themselves true as bare propositions)¹⁸.

Thus, what each human being has as appropriate towards the truth is some grasp of premises *from*

which acceptable explanations can be worked out. A first explanation from these premises might not be the most appropriate one, but is on the right track¹⁹.

V.4. “TRUTHS THAT ARE NOT ENLIGHTENING”

Step [vi] is one of the most famous of the *EE*, if not of Aristotle’s works. The interpretation of the text, though, is far from being easy. At least a great progress was made with Kenny’s translation, which uses the notion of *being enlightening* – instead of the notion of *being clear* – to translate “*saphôs*” (1216b33)²⁰. There is no reasonable sense in saying that someone grasps the truth of a given proposition which he does not understand clearly. The clarity about what a proposition means is required if one really grasps its truth (apart from metaphorical usages of the expression “grasping the truth”). Thus, the non-sense is avoided with Kenny’s translation. But there are still too many options, and to decide which one is to be preferred is a very challenging procedure.

A first option is the following:

(a) what is said with truth but is not enlightening is the explanandum itself (because its formulation lacks the explanatory factor), whereas what is enlightening (and more intelligible, or more perspicuous) is the explanans. This is promising, but then we should explicate how the same explanandum, which is taken to be true but not enlightening, seems to be described as something “said confusedly” (1216b34-35). The risk of non-sense is back: one grasps the truth of the explanandum, but one does not clearly understand its meaning because it is confused.

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A second option is the following:

(b) what is said with truth but is not enlightening is a certain description of the explanandum, whereas what is enlightening (and more intelligible) is either a more accurate description of the explanandum or the explanans itself. The original description of the explanandum is said to be non-enlightening because its lack of accuracy (in attempting to isolate the most characteristic feature of the explanandum) does not promote or does not facilitate the search for the explanatory factor. In this case, it makes sense to report the original description of the explanandum as something “usually said confusedly”. The next step towards full enlightenment need not be the explanans itself: a more accurate description of the explanandum would be enough to put the search for causes on the right track.

There is still a third option:

(c) what is said with truth but is not enlightening is a certain explanation, which is not yet the most appropriate one, whereas what is enlightening (and more intelligible) is either the most appropriate explanans or an explanans that is at least more appropriate than the original one. The original explanation is said to be non-enlightening because it is not the most appropriate one – because it lacks the most appropriate explanatory factor and, consequently, is less enlightening than the ultimate explanation. In this case, it makes sense to report the original explanation as something “confusedly explained”, at least if “confusedly” can be understood as pointing to an explanatory factor that delivers an unsatisfactory (and incomplete) explanation not only of

the targeted explanandum but also of other explananda of a similar sort. (More on this below).

It is hard to decide which interpretation should be preferred about step [vi] of *T3*. I will argue below that the next paragraph of *EE* I.6 suggests the third option as the central one. However, my aim in this paper is a modest one. A reasonable decision on this issue should take into consideration how the methodological chapter *EE* I.6 as a whole fits with what has been said previously *and* with what is going to follow in the *EE*. There is no room in this paper for pursuing this careful examination. I will argue that the evidence *inside* *EE* I.6 seems to favour the third option. But I will point out that other passages are compatible with the second option as well.

Take what Aristotle says before starting the examination of what virtue of character is. The text runs as follows:

T4: “As in other matters, all researchers start with something already at hand, so in conducting our search we must make use of statements that are true but not enlightening to try to achieve an outcome that is both true and enlightening. At present we are in the same position as if we knew that health was the best condition of the body, and that Coriscus was the swarthiest man in the marketplace, without knowing what or who they are. Such a position may be helpful as a step towards the knowledge of each of the two” (1220a15-22, Kenny’s translation modified).

Now, the proposition that health is the best condition of the body can be taken either as a starting-point

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for the inquiry into what health is or as a candidate premise to explain (for instance) why health should be given priority in most circumstances. If the proposition is taken as a starting-point for the inquiry into what health is, then health itself is (so to speak) the explanandum – at least in so far as a definiendum can be taken as equivalent to an explanandum, which is something suggested by Aristotle's contention that to know what it is amounts to knowing why it is (see *APo* 90a14-15, 31-32, 93a4)²¹. Thus, the target will be the most important explanatory factor to be encapsulated inside the ultimate definition of health. To use one of Aristotle's favoured examples in *APo* II, the target will be something like the extinction of fire as the explanatory factor that completes the definitional account of thunder (93b8-12, 94a3-5). And the proposition that health is the best condition of the body can be taken as a true but not enlightening description of the explanandum – not enlightening because it does not capture the most important explanatory factor, and perhaps also because it does not determine a clear path to the search for the complete definition²².

This interpretation is also favoured by the other example employed in *T4*, namely, the proposition that Coriscus is the swarthiest person in the market. The only difference is that there is no definition of Coriscus, but Aristotle seems to suggest that being fully acquainted with Coriscus will be the analogue of grasping the essence of health.

However, there is no a priori assurance that both examples, the one about health and the one about Coriscus, should be taken as exactly equivalent. Aristotle might have used Coriscus to point to this

situation, whereas using health to allude to a different situation. Suppose one wishes to explain why health should be pursued by most people in most circumstances over and above other practical aims. Now, it might help to say that health is the best condition of the body: one can easily understand that, this being so, it is highly desirable to be healthy etc. However, suppose a circumstance in which a general must decide whether to take a given strategy which will be very important to settle the war but will put in risk the health of his soldiers (such as passing through a field full of contaminated ticks, from which the soldiers might contract spotted fever). Appealing to the proposition that health is the best condition of the body would never explain why the strategy should or should not be adopted at the end of the day. My example involves deliberative reasoning, but I submit that the same story would work for an attempted explanation of the practical value of health over other goods. The proposition that health is the best condition of the body would be taken as a candidate premise to explain why health should be given priority in some circumstances²³. As an isolated proposition, it is true; but, as an explanatory premise, it does not seem enlightening, even if it might help to find the best explanation.

VI. *INAPPROPRIATE EXPLANATIONS*

It remains – while arguing in favour of option (c) – to discuss how my construal of *TI* fits better both the recommendation made at 1217a10-17 and the warning made at 1216b35-1217a10.

First, the warning – which might be taken to be against “false philosophers”:

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T5: “Now, great caution is needed here. Since it seems that a philosopher should never speak at a venture, but always with reason, some people offer reasons [= explanations, *logous*] that are inappropriate or empty, and often get away with it. (Some people do this in error; others are sheer charlatans.) By such arguments even people of experience and practical ability can be caught out by people who lack even the capability for practical or strategic thinking. This comes about through want of culture: for want of culture is the inability to distinguish between explanations [arguments, *logoi*] that are appropriate, and those that are inappropriate, to a given explanandum” (1216b40-1217a10, Kenny’s translation modified).

Philosophical enterprises on practical matters also aim at explanations: this is what defines them as philosophical²⁴. But caution is needed here. Many take advantage of the fact that explanations are always expected and always aimed at: they introduce explanations that are irrelevant for the issue at stake or, what is even more dangerous, explanations that, even being inappropriate for the explanandum at stake, sound appealing to people without philosophical training – without a training in searching for and discussing explanations²⁵.

Now, one might argue that “*allogotrioi logoi*” (in 1217a2 and 9-10) are not inappropriate explanations, but only arguments that are “extraneous to the subject” (Inwood-Woolf) or “foreign to the inquiry” (Woods) or foreign to the subject-matter (Irwin, 1988, p.28), while their counterpart, the “*oikeioi logoi*”, would be the arguments appropriate to the subject. A lot depends on what “subject” means here. Most take “subject” to mean subject-matter (Kenny, 2011, p.9) or the broad notion of a domain of inquiry. Thus, arguments foreign

to the subject-matter would pass undetected by men experienced in the practical domain. Well, it might be plausible to say that arguments with premises from medicine or geometry would deceive the practical experienced man when applied to practical matters. But I find it hard to believe that someone really experienced and capable of action would not do what his experience tell him to do because a charlatan or an ignorant person imposes on him a different conclusion from geometrical premises. If they are duped by such charlatans, they do not deserve to be called “experienced and usually competent in the domain of actions”. Thus, a much better interpretation results if “subject” is taken not as subject-matter, but as the exact explanandum that is at stake in each argument. As I have argued in other occasions, “explanandum” is a good translation of what Aristotle means in some occurrences of “*pragma*” – and 1217a9 is one of those occurrences (and “*pragmateia*” in 1217a3 can be translated as “explanatory enterprise” or something like that).

Suppose someone asks why *eudaimonia* must include virtue of character (1216a38-b2): this question is his *pragma*. Suppose the bad philosopher (or the charlatan) answers that *eudaimonia* must include virtue of character because *eudaimonia* is the Good Itself. This might be true, but is not enlightening (as it is not enlightening to receive the answer “vegetables!” when, transported by the smell in a restaurant, you ask your next table friend “what are you eating?”). This might pass undetected as bad philosophy even by human beings who are experienced and fully competent in practical matters. Again, suppose someone asks why *eudaimonia* must include temperance and the bad philosopher (or the charlatan) answers with

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an argument saying that it is because *eudaimonia*, being the best of the goods, must include being wealthy, whereas being intemperate might lead one to lose his wealth. This might also pass unnoticed as bad philosophy by those who are experienced and fully competent in practical matters. Now, bad philosophy (or charlatanry) might even lead people to accept the wrong *that*-propositions in the practical field. Suppose another bad philosopher starts saying that *eudaimonia* is ataraxy, then argues that one should be undisturbed by mundane needs, ending with the ultimate conclusion that one should *not* be generous (as being generous implies disturbance with other people's needs or poverty and, thus, spoils ataraxy). This last example illustrates the Third situation (from section IV), in which arguments lead people astray from the right *that*-propositions. But the other examples illustrate the Second situation, in which the attempted explanations for *that*-propositions rely on inappropriate premises. The worry about experienced practical people being led astray by bad philosophers seems to lurk in Aristotle's mind too, but I submit that he is mainly worried with inappropriate explanations on the level of a philosophical enterprise such as the one he is undertaking in the *EE*. He is concerned with the appropriateness of the explanations in his philosophical enterprise. When he says that people experienced and capable of action can be "caught out" by bad philosophers or charlatans, he is not suggesting that those people can be misled into abandoning the right policies that experience and practical competence has consolidated in their lives. He is just saying that those people will be unable to detect the bad philosopher and the charlatan *as such*. When the latter present their inappropriate arguments, the experienced people will

be unable to tell that *this is bad philosophy or charlatanry*. This is suggested by the last part of *T5*, namely 1217a7-10: the experienced people lack the proper training in philosophical discussions and, because of this, they will be unable to judge which explanations are appropriate and which are inappropriate ones. But nothing in this passage suggests that bad philosophy or charlatanry will win their acceptance to the point of making them change their lives.

Thus, *T5* strongly suggests that step [vi] of *T3* should be preferentially taken according to the third option (c). A given explanation is said to be non-enlightening because it is not the most appropriate one for the explanandum at stake: it lacks the most appropriate explanatory factor and, consequently, is less enlightening than the ultimate explanation. The inappropriate explanation can also be said to be “confusedly explained” in the sense that it points to an explanatory factor that could also have been poured into some story accounting for different explananda. Again, suppose someone asks why *eudaimonia* must include virtue of character (1216a38-b2) and a philosopher answers that it is because *eudaimonia* is the best of the human goods. Now, it is true that *eudaimonia* must include virtue of character, as well as it is true that *eudaimonia* is the best of the human goods. However, the same premise that *eudaimonia* is the best of the human goods might deliver a similar (and equally vague) answer to the question why *eudaimonia* must include practical wisdom (or why it must include pleasures). None of these explanations will be the appropriate one. And part of their inappropriateness is that they are too general and miss the exact nature of the explanandum at stake. However, these explanatory stories, which are

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“confusedly explained”, involve true propositions and give at least some basis for someone to seek the right track to the appropriate explanations.

VI. CONCLUSION

I will finish with the recommendation made at 1217a10-16.

T6: “It is well to make a separate judgement about the explanandum [*deiknumenon* = what one is trying to explain] and the explanation of the cause, because of what was said before, namely, that there are often cases where one should attend not to the results of arguments, but rather to the people’s perceptions; (as things are, if people cannot refute an argument, they are constrained to believe in what has been said); and also because it often happens that what is taken to have been explained by argument is in fact true, but not for the reason offered by the argument.” (1217a10-16, Kenny’s translation modified).

I take “*deiknumenon*” in 1217a11 as standing for what one is trying to explain, i.e., the explanandum, which takes the place of the conclusion in explanatory arguments (parallel occurrences can be found in *APo* 74a5 and 75b38). On the same track, I take “*aitias logos*” as introducing the account of the cause or, more precisely, the argument that presents the cause or explanatory factor for a given explanandum.

Aristotle gives two reasons for separating the appraisal of the explanandum from the appraisal of the explanation. First, relying merely on arguments without paying attention to what appears to be the case might lead one

to accept a false conclusion. This seems to refer to what I have labelled the Third situation: one uses an inappropriate argument to support a fact-like practical proposition which nobody should accept. Second, sometimes the proposition which seems to have been explained through an explanatory argument is itself a true proposition, but the argument does not captures the correct explanatory factor. This seems to refer to what I have labelled the Second situation: one accepts the correct fact (or fact-like practical proposition), but does not explain it through the appropriate explanation.

Now, since the Second situation is present throughout the chapter, I suggest that it is more promising to take step [vi] of **T3** as referring to it as well: explanations might come in premises that are true propositions themselves without being enlightening enough, because the explanatory factor presented in them is not the most appropriate one. This sort of explanation is the main target of Aristotle's warning in **T5** (1216b40-1217a10).

Now, in **T1**, it might seem that the Third situation is the central one. In using arguments to seek conviction about explanations, one should employ people's perceptions as evidence, i.e., as the basic data that require explanation and set the reference to judge the successfulness of attempted explanations, for, without this reference, arguments might lead to false conclusions. In a way, I will be comfortable with such a result within the limits of this paper. However, the Second situation turns out to appear in **T1** too if "*phainomena*" can be taken as referring to explanatory accounts. Indeed, there is no reason precluding the expression "what appears to be the case" from covering explanations as well: e.g., "it seems to be

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the case that crops have increased because it rained more than expected". The *phainomenon* in this sentence is an explanatory claim. More importantly, Aristotle does use "*phainomenon*" in this sense in at least two passages in the *Corpus: de Caelo* 288a2 (perhaps 291b25), and *Parts of Animals* 645a5 (which refers back to the *de Caelo* passage). The point of *T1* would be the following: in using arguments to seek conviction about explanations, one should employ what seems to be case as witnesses and examples in order to avoid the emptiness of inappropriate explanations: in this context, "what seems to the case" would refer to the explanation that most competently delivers its explanatory service, i.e., most appropriately sticks with the exact explanandum at stake.

Even if my reader is not inclined to accept this suggestion as the conclusion of my discussion, I stress the chief claim I started with, namely: Aristotle's point in *T1* is not that conviction about the issues at stake should be attained by arguments, as if the *that*-propositions on the field were still unsettled (or uncertified) and were going to be settled (or certified) by appealing to arguments (instead of being instilled by habituation). Nor is Aristotle expecting that the employment of arguments will be the most powerful method to make people change their minds on ethical matters. Aristotle is most concerned with the warning against the charlatans and the bad philosophers, who venture to attempt explanations that do not appropriately explain their explananda²⁶.

NOTES

1 See Devereux (2015); Karbowski (2015b); Zillig (2014); Cooper (2009). The discussion invariably reacts to the interpretive trend started with Owen (1961) and strengthened by

Barnes (1980) and Irwin (1988): Aristotle's ethics relies on a different method which starts from opinions etc. I will not discuss directly either the trend or the reaction to it, but of course my claims will have consequences on that debate.

2 My interpretation is close to Karbowski (2015b, p.205-6), who approaches *EE* and *APo* II in terms of the methodology for the discovery of principles. However, my proposal has many differences with Karbowski's: unfortunately, there is no room in this paper to develop them.

3 The same is true about Inwood-Woolf's translation. What concerns me here is something that these three translations have in common about the structure of the text, even being different in their terminological choices.

4 Similarly, (a.2) "you must go to San Francisco *driving*" can be taken as equivalent to (and as 'translatable' into) "since you are going to San Francisco, drive a car to get there". If sentence (a.2) were taken according to Version 2 for the *EE* passage, it would be equivalent to the following: "*it is* to San Francisco *that* you must go; besides, drive a car to get there" or "it is absolutely necessary for you to go to San Francisco; besides, drive a car to get there".

5 See Karbowski (2015b, p.203-5); and Natali (2010), who explores this distinction for the *Nicomachean Ethics*. For a full exploration of the distinction itself, see Charles (2000, p.69-71) and Bronstein (2016, p.74-83).

6 There is no need of accepting the emendation of '*to ti*' to '*to hoti*' with Kenny (2011, p.151). See Karbowski (2015b, p.204, n.30). The expression '*to ti*' is clearly working in the way Aristotle has ascribed for '*to hoti*' in *APo* 89b24 ff. The shift from one expression to another seems natural (see 90a3-4) and the meaning in *EE* I.6 is guaranteed by the contrast with '*to dia ti*'. Passages like 90a3-4 shows that Aristotle is not regimenting his own terminology.

7 On 89a15-16, see Fine (2010, p.148), and Angioni (2013, p.257-8).

8 See Barnes (1980, p.507); Cooper (1999, p.289, n. 13); Devereux (2015, p.136: "still the goal is something approaching a

consensus omnium"); Frede (2012, p.211); Karbowski (2015b, p.201-2).

9 Woods (1992, p.58) does not seem to detect the inconsistency because he has a different grasp of how the distinction *hoti/ dioti* works here: he says that the conclusions should be "systematic developments of ordinary intuitions". When he fleshes out this idea, he attributes to the "ordinary opinions" not only "inaccuracies" and "defects of formulation", but also "lack of certainty". But this is a loose way to relate the *phainomena* to the *hoti*: the latter usually refers to the basic and assured facts in the domain. Another option is found in Irwin (1988, p.46-7, 347): arguments should prove that *this is so* concerning what people merely believe to be so. Again, I don't think this squares with the appeal to the *hoti/ dioti* distinction.

10 For the discussion of "examples" as arguments of a specific sort, see Karbowski (2015b, p.208-210).

11 E.g., it depends on a peculiar interpretation of the verb "*metabibazomenoi*" in 1216b30. See Mendonça (2015, p. 109-110).

12 See Devereux (2015, p.140-147), on the methodological differences between *EE* and *EN*. If I have understood him correctly, he believes that the *EE* discussion has those high expectations.

13 On this, I follow Karbowski (2015, p.124-5). See *Nicomachean Ethics* 1098b3-4; 1095b4-6; 1105a28-b9. A potential problem would be that, as Devereux (2015, p.146) points out, the *EE* is not so fond of the claim that character determines evaluative beliefs. But this would not go too far as implying that the *EE* rejects the claim that habituation is required for our access to the *that*-propositions.

14 See *Generation of Animals* 760b30-33: one should trust arguments only if they explain things that agree with the *phainomena*, but one should never trust arguments over and above the facts.

15 For a different view, see Devereux (2015, p.135). A potential problem would be "*deixai*" in 1217a17: if it were taken in the sense of "explaining", it would clash with *Prior Analytics* 53b8-10, where Aristotle says that it is impossible to explain

the *why* from false premises. But I can cope with this potential objection. Aristotle sometimes applies “false” and “true” not to elemental propositions but to explanations (besides other complex sentences). Consider the syllogism: “Every human is mammal; every mammal is mortal; therefore, every human is mortal”. Both premises are true propositions in themselves. Even so, they do not deliver the most appropriate explanation of the conclusion. We might say that the syllogism conveys a “false explanation”. I argue that some uses of “*pseudēs*” in Aristotle can be understood in this way – including 1217a17. The reference in 1217a17 to the *Analytics* might be to the passage 74b27-32.

16 It does not matter that “*hon*” is plural and “*oikeion ti*” is singular. I agree with Karbowski (2015b, p.202, n.25). Barnes (1980, p.506), thinks that the antecedent of “*hon*” must be the *phainomena* in 1216b28, but he gives no argument for that.

17 My contention depends on my previous point about “*deiknūnai pos*”. One might object that, if “*deiknūnai pos*” is not taken in the way I propose, the expression “from which” can then be taken as pointing either to that-propositions which will be purified from inconsistencies etc., or to ordinary credentials that might support premises from which to explain the *that*-propositions (see note 19 on Karbowski 2015b). However, the concern with explanations in the chapter strongly suggests that the expression “from which” must be taken as pointing to premises that attempt an explanation, for this is how Aristotle usually employs the expression in his theory of scientific explanations in the *APo*.

18 I have explored the issue in Angioni (2014, p.75-83). Woods (1992, p.59), seems to flirt with my contention when he says that “the possibility alluded to here is [...] that even a valid argument with true premises may not give the correct reason”.

19 A more fine-grained proposal is found in Karbowski (2015b, p. 210-213): the expression ‘something appropriate [...] from which’ refers not directly to the premises of explanations, but to *phainomena* (covering “universal agreement, empirical observation and ordinary life experience”) that give support to formulating the premises for the explanations. On the whole, my proposal is very congenial to his, even if diverging in details about the interpretation of the passage.

20 See Lesher (2010) for the uses of “*saphôs*” and cognates indicating accuracy or even the highest form of knowledge.

21 See Charles (2000, p.213-220), for the interdependence between explaining and defining in *APo*.

22 Zillig (2012, p.308-315), develops such an approach about the refinement in the definition of what *eudaimonia* is in *EE* I.7-8. See also Karbowski (2015b, p.206-7) and Mendonça (2017).

23 Zillig (2014, p.228), seems to go in a similar direction: the proposition that *eudaimonia* is the best of the human goods is true but not enlightening because its role as a principle in further specifications of what is good for us might be ineffective. Zillig suggests that the proposition is not enlightening because, being too vague and when accompanied by inadequate additional information, it allows (in a level of further specification) an incorrect application of the term to something that is not *eudaimonia*.

24 Aristotle sometimes uses the word “*philosophos*” and cognates to point to those who really love knowledge itself and thereby pursue the causes. See *Parts of Animals* 645a10 (also *de Caelo* 291b27).

25 For a different interpretation, see Woods (1992, p.59): Aristotle is relying on the idea that good philosophers must comprehend that explanations are not needed for the principles.

26 I am grateful to Raphael Zillig and Fernando Mendonça for comments on a previous draft of this paper. I also thanks Raphael Zillig, Inara Zanuzzi, Rodrigo Guerizoli, Felipe Weinmann and Breno Zuppolini for many discussions on *Ethica Eudemia* I.6 and correlated issues. Discussions with Raphael Zillig and Fernando Mendonça about “the method of *endoxa*” have undoubtedly framed my mind on the issues developed in this paper, including when both have presented papers dealing with the same passage in Campinas and Porto Alegre.

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