COLLOQUIUM 5

Commentary on Szaif

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Abstract

In this response I consider the implications of Jan Szaif's suggestion that there is a tight "conceptual affinity" between Books I and X of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (EN). I argue against one view which could claim such a thesis as an ally: the view which maintains that the *Nicomachean Ethics* is based upon the kind of conceptual cohesion supplied by a supposed metaphysical foundation for claims about happiness.

Keywords

acceptable premisses – goods – ἔνδοξα – *eudaimonia* – metaphysical foundation

1

Jan Szaif (hereafter J.S.) has given us a paper with a clear exegetical thesis. He argues that the brief discussion of *eudaimonia* in *Nicomachean Ethics* I.12 within a three-fold division in the hierarchy of goods—goods which are prized, those which are praised, and powers—plays a larger role in the overall argument of the *Nicomachean Ethics* than previously appreciated. In particular he argues that there is a "conceptual affinity" between *Nicomachean Ethics* I.12 and X.6–8; and that I.12 prepares the ground for the famous claim in X.8 that θεωρία (the activity of contemplation) is the highest human good and the realization of *eudaimonia* in a complete form (EN X.8, 1178b7–8). There is little to add to the very detailed analysis of I.12. The claim that this passage is related to X.7–8 also seems evidently correct. Clearly, the term "prized" is (as J.S. notes) salient in both contexts, which share an occupation with the problem of the proper ordering of goods within a teleological framework. In the framework invoked in these two contexts, *eudaimonia* is first established formally as the highest good, and then successively filled in through an account of the virtuous human activities and their relationship to the highest human good. As J.S.

observes, the placement of *eudaimonia* in a proper ordering of goods is a feature of the 'architecture' of argument in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*.

In my comment on his paper, I wish to focus on the implications of this 'architecture' and how we should understand it. I will make a case against one particular understanding of the architecture metaphor, one which J.S. might accept without explicitly defending or endorsing it. It is an understanding based on an influential interpretation of Aristotle's ethics according to which his ethics are built on a metaphysical foundation which is itself not to be found in the ethics.[1] The background assumptions of such an interpretation are that Aristotle's ethics require such a metaphysical foundation to be philosophically well-founded, that Aristotle believes that his ethics require such a foundation, and that he actually has such a foundation in other works.[2] These assumptions form part of a wider claim regarding Aristotle's philosophical methodology. The claim is that Aristotle's methodology must go beyond the narrow coherence achieved through 'dialectical' procedures, that is, procedures based on ἔνδοξα, and achieve a wider coherence with metaphysical first principles.

This interpretation and the scholarly debate concerning it are relevant to this, and any other, exegetical thesis that takes a view on the metaphysical level of a given argument in Aristotle's ethics. As other interpreters have pointed out, it might be possible for Aristotle to invoke metaphysical principles dialectically—because they are accepted or acceptable (and not *qua* grounding or foundational metaphysical principles). This would not constitute a 'grounding' of ethics in metaphysics in the relevant sense required by those who support the thesis of the metaphysical founding or grounding of Aristotle's ethics.[3] Statements about what is prized and statements about what is praised stand in strong relation to what is often called the basis of 'dialectical' method in Aristotle—ἔνδοξα, or acceptable premisses.[4] Thus the invocation of normative assumptions concerning goods and what is good by pointing out what is prized

1 See Irwin 1980.

2 These assumptions are critically discussed in Roche 1988.

3 This seems to be the position of Roche 1988, who defends the thesis that Aristotle's method in the *Nicomachean Ethics* is dialectical. He bases his arguments against Irwin, i.a., on a premiss about the nature of the audience of Aristotle's argument: that they are properly morally habituated, and thus already share the most important background assumptions necessary for accommodating his ethical theory.

4 In fact, it would be more appropriate to distinguish between dialectic and argument from ἔνδοξα, and this for two reasons. First, dialectic, as Aristotle understands it, is a specific form of rule-governed interpersonal argumentation in which one interlocutor attempts to refute the thesis defended by an answerer. Aristotle's own texts do not meet this description (at least not straightforwardly). Second, as Aristotle himself states in *Topics* 1.1, not all argument from

and what is praised is, *prima facie*, a likely candidate for a form of argumentation which is not grounding in a metaphysical sense, but rather in the rhetorical sense: for example, in the sense of grounding a thesis that is under discussion in another one, which requires no further justification for the audience in question because it reflects the basic practices of moral evaluation in which Aristotle's audience is regularly engaged and concerning which there is no significant disagreement. This would be the "weak coherence" criticized by the proponents of the grounding thesis; but it would be an appropriate sort of coherence if the aim of Aristotle's argument is directed to those who do not need to be convinced of the truth of metaphysical principles, but rather of the authority of certain normative claims (whether we choose to call such a form of argument "dialectical" or, as I prefer, "rhetorical").

I think this latter interpretation will be more appropriate to the invocation of "moral facts" about what is praised and what is prized. To show this and explore what implications it might have for J.S.'s project if true, I will consider a further context in which Aristotle considers divisions of goods that feature what is praised or what is prized, and compare this to the argument in *Nicomachean Ethics* X.8. We can recognize a general feature in these contexts and the one from I.12: we are presented with ἔνδοξα or δόξαι as reflected in linguistic practice and conventional presumptions, accompanied by an interpretation of what these practices and presumptions tell us about the proper ordering of goods which they concern. Let us first consider the passage in the *Eudemian Ethics* with a view to the key text for J.S.'s 'architecture' claim, *Nicomachean Ethics* X.8.

II

As in *Nicomachean Ethics* I.12, in *Eudemian Ethics* I.7 Aristotle introduces the view that *eudaimonia* is the highest good as something which is already accepted: "It is agreed that this [*eudaimonia*] is the greatest and best of human goods" (1217a21–22). Aristotle explains the qualification "human" in remarking that there could be a *eudaimonia* of a higher entity (God), and that non-human animals cannot be said to partake in *eudaimonia*, since they have no share of the divine in their nature (a22–29). The importance of the predicate "divine" features thus also here, in the *Eudemian Ethics*. As J.S. rightly notes (26–27), Aristotle takes some argumentative pains in the *Nicomachean Ethics* to bind

ἔνδοξα is genuine dialectic; and as he states in *Topics* 8.6, not all dialectic is argument from ἔνδοξα in an unqualified sense.

this property to the further one of being intrinsically valuable. In *Nicomachean Ethics* X.8, he employs a similar inference as a "sign" for the claim that the activity of the god is contemplative, and that of all human goods the one most related to divine contemplation is the most blessed or happy (1178b21–23). The inference there is "it is a sign that contemplation is the happiest human activity that none of the other animals have a share in happiness, since they are completely deprived of an activity of this sort [i.e. contemplation]" (b24–25). In *Nicomachean Ethics* X.8, Aristotle goes on to argue, in part on the basis of these claims, that θεωρία and *eudaimonia* are co-extensive and directly proportional: as far as the activity of contemplation extends, just so far is one capable of *eudaimonia*. The final conclusion of this argument is that θεωρία is an activity "valued in and of itself" (αὕτη καθ' αὕτην τιμία, b30), and that therefore happiness must consist in some form of θεωρία (b31).

We may note that the most robustly 'metaphysical' assertion from *Nicomachean Ethics* X.8—that all non-human animals are incapable of *eudaimonia* precisely because they are bereft of a faculty for contemplation—is invoked as a "sign" (σημεῖον, b24). This is a piece of evidence unlike that of a principle. A principle would indeed be the ground through which happiness and contemplation are connected. But as Aristotle himself notes, the co-extension of happiness and the faculty of contemplation could be accidental. He notes this after he has established a "sign" for the correspondence between happiness and the faculty for contemplation in the exclusion of both in one particular class of entities, namely "all the other living things" (besides gods and humans):

> It is a sign, too, that the other animals have no share in happiness, since they are completely deprived of such an activity [contemplation]. For, in the case of the gods, each of their lives is blessed; in the case of humankind, each life is blessed insofar as it has something similar to this activity. But none of the other living things is blessed, since none has a share in contemplation in any way. In fact the faculty for contemplation extends just as far as the ability to be happy, and to the extent that an entity is capable of contemplation, to that extent is it also capable of being happy. This is not an accidental correspondence, but occurs because of the faculty for contemplation, for this is valued in and of itself. Therefore, happiness will consist in some form of contemplation. (NE X.8, 1178b24–31)
> σημεῖον δὲ καὶ τὸ μὴ μετέχειν τὰ λοιπὰ ζῷα εὐδαιμονίας, τῆς τοιαύτης ἐνεργείας ἐστερημένα τελείως. τοῖς μὲν γὰρ θεοῖς ἅπας ὁ βίος μακάριος, τοῖς δ' ἀνθρώποις, ἐφ' ὅσον ὁμοίωμά τι τῆς τοιαύτης ἐνεργείας ὑπάρχει· τῶν δ' ἄλλων ζώων οὐδὲν εὐδαιμονεῖ, ἐπειδὴ οὐδαμῇ κοινωνεῖ θεωρίας. ἐφ ὅσον δὴ διατείνει ἡ θεωρία, καὶ ἡ εὐδαιμονία, καὶ οἷς μᾶλλον ὑπάρχει τὸ θεωρεῖν, καὶ εὐδαιμονεῖν, οὐ κατὰ

> συμβεβηκὸς ἀλλὰ κατὰ τὴν θεωρίαν· αὕτη γὰρ καθ᾽ αὑτὴν τιμία. ὥστ εἴη ἂν ἡ εὐδαιμονία θεωρία τις. (NE X.8, 1178b24–31)

To put it in the language of the *Posterior Analytics*: there is a καθ᾽ αὕτο predication between contemplation and happiness, such that contemplation is contained in the account of happiness, which is why happiness must be some form of contemplation. This is supported primarily by the statement that contemplation (like happiness) is valued "in and of itself." The fact (if fact it is) that all other living beings are deprived of happiness and contemplation merely establishes a correspondence, which need not be a causal necessity. It is the *per se* valuation of contemplation that establishes the possibility for what is valued (or prized) to be predicated in itself to what is blessed or happy.

If we are searching for a metaphysical principle here, it is most likely to be found in the statement that the faculty of contemplation is not only predicated of all the things which participate in happiness, but that there is an essential relation between the two: "This is not an accidental correspondence, but occurs because of the faculty for contemplation, for this is valued in and of itself" (1178b30–31). What is valued in itself can lay claim to being a highest good. Happiness has been established as this kind of good. Contemplation is here established as another such good. Since there can only be one ultimate good, these two must be essentially related. It seems appropriate to call this a metaphysical claim, but in the argument as formulated, it is supported by "empirical" claims about what is, in fact, valued in itself.

Let us now return to the *Eudemian Ethics* 1.7 and compare the argument there. In *Eudemian Ethics* 1.7, we find no explicit mention of θεωρία, but we do find a division of goods which seems to seek to accommodate it. The division is a dichotomy: Aristotle distinguishes between those goods which are the object of human action, and those which are not (EE 1.7, 1217a30–32). The dichotomic division is justified in these lines: "we say this so, because some things do not partake in change and motion, and therefore do not belong to the goods realized by action. These are likely the best by nature. Other goods are practical, but only actionable by those more powerful than we are" (a32–35). Though there is no explicit mention of contemplation here, we might understand contemplation—and certainly divine entities—to belong to those things not subject to change (provided we can think of both as things not engaged in "action").

As many readers will recall, this passage directly precedes the part of the *Eudemian Ethics* (I.8) in which Aristotle trenchantly criticizes the Idea of the Good as a candidate for the highest good. The claim that what is prized should take precedence in the hierarchy of values is revealing in this connection, too. This claim provides a further reason for the rejection of the Idea of the Good,

because this is—at least as Aristotle portrays it in *Eudemian Ethics* I.8—not an object of value "in itself," but a posit. In particular, the Idea of the Good is a thing posited through which those goods which really are valued are supposed to obtain their value. The lesson one may draw from this is that what is posited and indeed even what is an object of praise cannot be a proper candidate for highest good, because the highest good must be something which is really valued in itself, as made evident in what motivates our actions. The particular virtuous actions which are praised cannot even be deemed as candidates for such a good, as they are performed in the pursuit of something which goes beyond them.

We can see a similar mode of argument at work in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. When for example in *Nicomachean Ethics* I.12 Aristotle considers the thesis of Eudoxus that pleasure is the highest good, he commends Eudoxus for having put his thesis in such a way as to make pleasure superior to the objects of praise. There we read:

> Eudoxus seems to have advocated well on behalf of the claim that pleasure belongs to the best things. For the fact that it is not praised as one of the goods indicated, he thought, that it was in fact something better than the objects of praise, and he thought that the god and the good were something of this sort. For the other things are related back to these.
> δοκεῖ δὲ καὶ Εὔδοξος καλῶς συνηγορῆσαι περὶ τῶν ἀριστείων τῇ ἡδονῇ· τὸ γὰρ μὴ ἐπαινεῖσθαι τῶν ἀγαθῶν οὖσαν μηνύειν ᾤετο ὅτι κρεῖττόν ἐστι τῶν ἐπαινετῶν, τοιοῦτον δ' εἶναι τὸν θεὸν καὶ τἀγαθόν· πρὸς ταῦτα γὰρ καὶ τἆλλα ἀναφέρεσθαι. (NE I.12, 1101b27–31)

I think, *pace* J.S., that this passage indicates a bit more than a partial agreement with Eudoxus in argumentative strategy. For the claim that the greater good and the divine are not proper objects of praise basically informs the theory of value at work in Aristotle's hierarchy of goods, and connects NE I.12 and NE X.8, as J.S. has convincingly shown. And this claim is attributed to Eudoxus here. More importantly for the interpretation of Aristotle's *Ethics*, however, we may see how the relativization of goods which are praised works together with Aristotle's theory of what is, as it were, the motivating value in the sphere of practical goods: those things which are valued in themselves. Aristotle's theory of such goods does indeed seem to be a foundational piece in the theory of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. It is based, however, not so much on a further metaphysical theory, but on a theory of value in which what is *actually* prized and praised is an important datum for theorizing the real hierarchy of practical goods. To

put it rather anachronistically: it is a theory of value which explicitly acknowledges certain particular existing values as a source of normativity.

One may still justly ask, however, whether the entire thesis is nothing but a philosopher's conceit. Are we really to believe that what all people really want is to live a life of contemplation? Empirical support for this, in our time and Aristotle's, would be hard to find. But the link between contemplation and happiness is not established this way, as J.S. aptly shows; and the claim which Aristotle seeks to defend is not empirical, even if part of his argument involves a claim about what is actually most valued (or "prized"). As we see in both the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Eudemian Ethics*, contemplation and happiness most clearly co-occur in the lives of the gods; and hence the importance of the property "divine" in those contexts, such as *Nicomachean Ethics* I.12 and X.8, where Aristotle is at pains to establish the relationship between contemplation and happiness. We find their co-occurrence in the *Eudemian Ethics* for example, where Aristotle mentions in passing that the good in the category of substance is "mind and god" (EE I.8, 1217b30–31), and in the argument of *Nicomachean Ethics* X.8, which establishes the co-occurrence of happiness and contemplation with a view to humans and gods. The (thoroughly Platonic) notion that contemplation is the activity which we share with the gods, and which is most divine, together with the conventional notion that the gods are the ultimate reference in terms of happiness, seem to be the two driving assumptions in the background of Aristotle's argument. They could be construed as metaphysical propositions, but they seem—above all—to function in the argument of the *Nicomachean Ethics* not as principles, but as acceptable premisses for the audience/readership of the *Ethics*.

III

By way of conclusion, two caveats are in order. First, I should note what follows from my criticism of the metaphysical foundationalist reading of Aristotle's *Ethics*, and what does not. In arguing that *Nicomachean Ethics* I.12 and its pendants in *Nicomachean Ethics* X.8 and *Eudemian Ethics* I.8 are rhetorical-dialectical, I am not arguing that ἔνδοξα or δόξαι are the epistemic foundation for Aristotle's ethics. Acknowledging certain propositions as acceptable but defeasible in a context of persuasive argumentation is different from saying that such propositions are the basis for our moral knowledge, or explanatory of moral truths. I think Aristotle often does the former in his ethical works without committing himself to the latter. And even if he should, under certain circumstances, do both, this need not be (and in my view indeed should not be)

interpreted as an indication of 'method' writ large, a consistent or prevailing tendency. In this I am of a mind with the deflationary take on the 'endoxic method' espoused by Scott 2015. One acute observation from Scott's valuable study is that the *Nicomachean Ethics*, like Plato's *Republic*, is circuitous in its procedure: it begins with established norms and values, proceeds to reflect on them by philosophical means, and then returns to these conventional starting-points in order to explain something about them through the propositions won through reflection. Scott appreciates this feature of the *Ethics* while denying that, for Aristotle, the route thus taken is exact in the sense of a foundational or axiomatic procedure. This seems right to me, and J.S.'s interpretation of the relationship between goods which are prized and goods which are praised is a case in point. As J.S. shows, the linguistic practices of praising and prizing occasion a reflection on the ordering of goods, which such practices presume. This gives occasion to the discussion of a non-conventional notion, that namely *eudaimonia* consist in wisdom as exercised in a form of θεωρία. Obviously, convention and the views of a majority do not directly support such a view, but as Aristotle thinks, such a view can not only cohere with, but even make sense of, norms presumed by convention.

Secondly, it should be noted that we have elided a large and contentious issue in the interpretation of the very passages with which J.S. is concerned. The issue concerns the question of whether morally virtuous activity is necessary or even sufficient for attaining *eudaimonia*, and whether θεωρία is both necessary and sufficient (as the passage NE X.8, 1178b24–31, cited above, seems to suggest). The discussion of this question cannot be entered upon here. But it is only fair to register that in a more recent discussion of this very question, Irwin did not bring the metaphysical foundationalist position to bear on it (Irwin 2012). In presenting a case for a 'pluralist' conception of happiness, Irwin weighs the textual evidence from within the *Nicomachean Ethics* and considers many passages which might also tell in favor of the view that Aristotle held happiness to consist in only one specific good ('monism'). But he does not cite *Nicomachean Ethics* I.12, which would seem to be evidence in favor of monism. The close connection which (as J.S. has shown) *Nicomachean Ethics* I.12 bears to *Nicomachean Ethics* X.6–8 thus could have wider implications for our understanding of the account of happiness in Aristotle's *Ethics*.