

The Utility of Contemplation in Aristotle's *Protrepticus*

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Aristotle's lost *Protrepticus*, of which today we possess only fragments, was a popular work in which Aristotle sought to exhort his audience toward a life organized around philosophical contemplation. Various arguments survive from the *Protrepticus*, preserved primarily in chapters 6-12 of a work of the same name by the Neoplatonic philosopher Iamblichus. Two of these arguments are especially noteworthy. In one Aristotle attempts to meet the charge that contemplation is valueless because it is useless. He thus offers what I call an 'aristocratic defense' of contemplation, an argument according to which contemplation's uselessness for the sake of higher ends—its leisurely freedom—is consistent with its supreme final value, i.e., its supreme choiceworthiness for its own sake. The other especially interesting argumentation has Aristotle offering what I call a 'utility argument': he exhorts his audience to pursue contemplation on the basis of its usefulness for deriving 'boundary markers' (*horoi*) of the human good, standards by reference to which Aristotle asserts that practical agents can judge well.

Aristotle's first protreptic argument—the aristocratic defense—is familiar enough: Aristotle offers similar arguments in defense of the supreme choiceworthiness of contemplation in *Metaphysics* i 2 and *Nicomachean Ethics* x 7. Yet the utility argument, in the explicit form in which it appears in the *Protrepticus*, is novel, and I want to examine it more closely for two reasons. First, in the light of D.S. Hutchinson and Monte Ransome Johnson's recent (2005) authentication of the *Protrepticus* fragments that appear in Iamblichus, the utility argument promises to give us a fuller understanding of Aristotle's reasons for valuing the contemplative life as highly as he does. Second, the utility argument gives rise to thorny interpretive problems. On the one hand, the argument seems to conflict straightforwardly with the aristocratic defense, and so its presence in the *Protrepticus* calls into question the consistency of that work's overall protreptic strategy. If the utility argument is sound, then contemplation would seem to lack aristocratic leisureliness (in which case the aristocratic defense would appear to fail); if the aristocratic defense is sound, then contemplation would seem to lack usefulness (in which case the utility argument would appear to fail). On the other hand, Aristotle's utility argument is unclear about exactly how contemplation is useful for deriving such boundary markers of the human good, especially if humanity is not the object of the best sort of contemplation. In other words, even if we can respond to the first problem and show that Aristotle's two protreptic arguments are mutually consistent, Aristotle's utility argument leaves the exact nature of contemplation's utility awaiting further explication.

In what follows, I examine Aristotle's views on the utility of contemplation in the *Protrepticus*, and I respond to some of the worries I have just articulated. In parts 1 and 2, I begin by elucidating the aristocratic defense and the utility argument. In part 3, I appeal to a distinction between two kinds of usefulness that I believe is implicit in Aristotle's *De anima*. I argue that if we can grant Aristotle this distinction in the *Protrepticus*, then we can show how Aristotle's utility argument is actually consistent with his aristocratic defense, so that there is no reason to think that the *Protrepticus* offers an incoherent exhortation to the contemplative life. In part 4, I point out the hurdles Aristotle faces in showing how contemplation can possess the utility that he attributes to it. Nevertheless, I argue that Aristotle provides us with clues within the *Protrepticus* for identifying how the best sort of contemplation can be useful for deriving boundary markers of the human good.

I. The 'Aristocratic Defense' and the Objects of Contemplation

In the *Protrepticus*, Aristotle is concerned to exhort his audience toward a life organized around the activity of contemplation. In a moment, I shall have more to say about the sort of contemplation that I believe Aristotle has in mind, but for now, suffice it to say that Aristotle needs to respond to the sorts of worries and concerns that he should expect his audience to have about *any* sort of contemplative activity. Most pressingly, Aristotle needs to respond to the objection—as common in Aristotle's day as in ours—that contemplation lacks value because it is useless and non-productive.¹ In what I am calling Aristotle's 'aristocratic defense', Aristotle highlights contemplation's uselessness—its leisurely freedom as opposed to its slavish servility to other goals—to raise doubts about one implicit premise to which many skeptics about contemplation's value subscribe.² This is the premise that contemplation's uselessness proves its valuelessness as an end of pursuit. In response, Aristotle wants to argue that even if contemplation is useless for producing further benefits, or for promoting higher ends, that does not count against contemplation's value. On the contrary, if contemplation is useless, then it meets at least one of the necessary conditions for being a *highest* end.

To show how Aristotle develops this response in the *Protrepticus*, I briefly examine two passages (from chapter 9 of the *Protrepticus*) where Aristotle presents this defense in a particularly clear form. In the first, *Protrepticus* 9.52.16-28/B42, Aristotle distinguishes between two kinds of goods:

To seek from all knowledge something else to be generated [other than itself] and to require it to be useful (χρησίμην) is [characteristic] of one altogether ignorant of how much from the start good things and necessary things (τὰ ἀγαθὰ καὶ τὰ ἀναγκαῖα) are separate; for they differ completely.³ (52.16-

¹ See, e.g., the remarks of Callicles in Plato, *Gorgias* 484c-485e; Isocrates, *Antidosis* 261-269.

² Nightingale 2004, ch. 5, esp. 195, 226-227 correctly emphasizes the 'aristocratic' features of Aristotle's defense.

³ I use Pistelli's (1888) Teubner edition of Iamblichus's *Protrepticus*. I cite passages primarily

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Here, when Aristotle distinguishes ‘necessary things’ from ‘good things’, I take him to be distinguishing between *instrumental goods* that are choiceworthy because necessary for the sake of higher ends and *final goods* choiceworthy for their own sakes. Necessary goods—which Aristotle calls ‘the things loved on account of something else and without which living is impossible’ (52.20-21)—are valuable because they result in or produce final goods, the goods he says ‘are loved on account of themselves, even if nothing else comes to pass’ (52.22-23). So for final goods, Aristotle says, it is foolish necessarily to expect some ‘other benefit beside the thing itself’ (ὠφέλειαν ἑτέραν παρ’ αὐτὸ τὸ πρῶγμα: 52.26-27). Thus, Aristotle concludes that in certain cases, it is misguided to ask “‘What then [is] the profit (ὄφελος) to us?’” and “‘What [is the] use (χρήσιμον)?’” (52.27-28).

Since final goods need not be choiceworthy for any higher or more final ends, Aristotle thinks that it is reasonable to expect at least some final goods in a human life to lack instrumental value for the sake of higher ends in that life. In particular, it is reasonable to expect the *highest* (or most final) end in a human life to lack such instrumental value. But since to lack instrumental value for the sake of a higher end is in some sense to be *useless*, Aristotle thinks that it is reasonable for at least some final goods, viz., the highest ends of human lives, to be useless. Therefore, Aristotle thinks, even if contemplation is useless, it does not follow that contemplation lacks choiceworthiness for its own sake. Rather, contemplation’s uselessness is consistent with its potential status as the highest end of a human life.

Notice that Aristotle is *not* saying that uselessness is *sufficient* for being a highest end. After all, being useless is insufficient by itself to confer final value (or choiceworthiness) to all sorts of weird activities. Thus, *ceteris paribus*, Aristotle can agree that amassing giant piles of straw or counting the number of times the letter ‘b’ appears in the works of Anthony Trollope are simply not worth one’s engagement. Still, even if these useless activities are not worth pursuing, their uselessness in no way rules out other useless activities, viz., highest ends, from being worthy of pursuit. So Aristotle’s aristocratic defense emphasizes contemplation’s leisured uselessness to show that contemplation meets at least one of the necessary conditions for being a highest end, viz., that it lacks choiceworthiness for the sake of ends higher than itself.⁴

In the second passage from chapter 9 of Iamblichus, *Protrepticus* 53.15-26/B44, Aristotle appeals even more directly to contemplation’s leisured useless-

by reference to the Pistelli chapter, page, and line number, and then by the ‘B’ numbering used in Düring’s (1961) reconstruction. Although I have consulted various translations, translations unless otherwise noted are my own. Given the philosophical issues at play, I seek to translate as literally as possible.

⁴ Unlike Nightingale 2004, 230-231, who thinks that Aristotle is identifying uselessness as a good-making feature of contemplation, I assume, like Kraut 1989, 194 that Aristotle thinks that uselessness is merely a necessary condition of contemplation’s counting as a highest end.

ness in defense of that activity's status as a final good:

[It is] nothing bizarre, then, [if contemplation] does not show itself being useful (χρησίμη) or profitable (ὠφέλιμος). For we say not that it is profitable (ὠφέλιμον) but good, and [that] it should be chosen not on account of something else, but on account of itself. For as we travel to Olympia for the sake of the spectacle itself (αὐτῆς ἕνεκα τῆς θέας), even if nothing more were to follow from it (for the contemplation itself is better than much money), and as we contemplate the Dionysia not in order to take something from the actors but as spending [on them], and [as] we would choose many other spectacles (θέας) instead of much money, so also the contemplation of the universe (τὴν θεωρίαν τοῦ παντός) is to be honored [more than] all the things thought to be useful (χρησίμων).

Once more, Aristotle wants to undermine the thought that contemplation's uselessness and failure to be profitable are necessarily problematic features of the activity. It is not 'bizarre' that contemplation fails to be useful or profitable, Aristotle says, for contemplation is not an instrumental good choiceworthy for the sake of bringing about other results. Rather, like the contemplation of excellent Olympic athletes and of dramatic performances at the Dionysia, philosophical contemplation is a final good choiceworthy for its own sake. Indeed, to hold goods such as wealth as higher than such contemplation is to reveal mistaken priorities: instrumental goods are choiceworthy for the sake of contemplation.

What does the *Protrepticus* mean by 'contemplation', however? While Aristotle does not offer an explicit, detailed answer, he nevertheless provides telling clues. In the second passage above from chapter 9, Aristotle refers (at 53.25/B44) to 'the contemplation of the universe'. And earlier in chapter 9, he appeals to the reputable views of Pythagoras and Anaxagoras concerning the end for the sake of which human beings exist. Aristotle quotes Pythagoras as saying that this end is 'to contemplate the heavens' (51.8-9/B18); similarly, he quotes Anaxagoras as saying that human beings live 'to contemplate the heavens and stars and moon and sun' (51.13-15/B19). Although Aristotle goes on to say that the question of contemplation's proper object (or objects) is one to address more fully at a later point, he adds that he has provided enough information to suffice for a preliminary discussion (52.8-11/B20). On this basis, it is reasonable to think that the Aristotle of the *Protrepticus* understands 'contemplation' to be a certain sort of speculative cosmology, with celestial phenomena serving, at least to some extent, as its proper objects.⁵

Nevertheless, we need to be clear about what Aristotle should expect 'the contemplation of the universe' to include. In a passage from *Eudemian Ethics* i 5 that parallels *Protrepticus* 51.13-15/B19, Aristotle again approvingly quotes Anaxagoras's claim that human beings live for 'the contemplation of the heavens

⁵ I owe this suggestion to D.S. Hutchinson.

and the order of the whole cosmos' (τοῦ...θεωρῆσαι τὸν οὐρανὸν καὶ τὴν περὶ τὸν ὅλον κόσμον τάξις: 1216a13-14). But later, in *EE* viii 3, Aristotle holds that the ultimate end for human beings is the contemplation *of the god* (1249b17; b20-21).⁶ To reconcile these two apparently different accounts of the end of human beings, it is important to recall that (i) Anaxagoras holds that a separate and eternal intellect (νοῦς) is the source of order and motion in the cosmos (DK59B12-14), and that (ii) Aristotle praises Anaxagoras for this view: 'when someone [viz., Anaxagoras] said intellect to be present, just as in living things, also in nature as the cause of the cosmos and of the entire order (τὸν αἴτιον τοῦ κόσμου καὶ τῆς τάξεως πάσης), he seemed like one of the sober in comparison with those speaking at random earlier' (*Meta.* i 3.984b15-18; cf. *Phys.* viii 5.256b24-27). Aristotle most fully appropriates Anaxagoras's view in *Metaphysics* xii, where he maintains that the intellectual activity (νόησις) that is God, or the so-called Prime Mover, plays the role of cosmic ordering principle and inspires motion as an unmoved object of love. Hence, when the Aristotle of the *Eudemian Ethics* agrees with Anaxagoras that 'the contemplation of the heavens and the whole order of the cosmos' is the goal of human life, but goes on to identify this goal with 'the contemplation of the god', Aristotle may well think that the latter sort of contemplation constitutes part of, and completes, the former.

Further, the thought that the contemplation of the universe includes the contemplation of the god (construed as something like divine intellect) has a Platonic pedigree. In the cosmology of the *Timaeus*, for instance, to understand the order of the cosmos, we need to make reference to the role of the Demiurge, which the character Timaeus identifies as the god (e.g., at 30a2, 30b8, 30d3). Further, Timaeus claims that the Demiurge wishes all things to resemble himself as much as possible (29e), and that the Demiurge wishes the cosmic order to possess intellect (30b). But if the cosmic order, in possessing intellect, mirrors the Demiurge, then the Demiurge too will be a kind of intellect.

Of course, there is no reason to think that the Aristotle of the *Protrepticus* agrees point for point with Pythagorean, Anaxagorean, or Platonic views; nor need we assume that this Aristotle is committed to all the details of *Metaphysics* xii's theology. Nevertheless, there is good reason to hold that what the *Protrepticus* calls 'the contemplation of the universe' will include, and will be somehow completed by, the contemplation of a certain intellect (or intellectual activity) as a cosmic ordering principle. Moreover, there is good reason to hold that the Aristotle of the *Protrepticus*, like Aristotle in other works, identifies this intellect as a god, for, indeed, the *Protrepticus* explicitly identifies the god and intellect (8.48.9-13/B108-48.16-17/B110).⁷

⁶ With the manuscripts, I retain θεοῦ in b17 and θεόν in b20. On the OCT's emendation to θείου and θεῖον, see Kenny 1992, 99n26.

⁷ See also *Protrepticus* 5.35.14-18/B28 (discussed in n25), if it is indeed authentically Aristotelian. On the Prime Mover's pervasive role in Aristotle's teleology throughout the corpus, see Kahn 1985. In *Against the Mathematicians* ix 20-23, Sextus Empiricus reports Aristotle's views on the origin of belief in the gods, and suggests that, for Aristotle, the search for comprehensive under-

Thus, in the *Protrepticus*, Aristotle thinks that if you devote your time to a properly elevated kind of philosophical activity—i.e., to the contemplation of the universe and its ordering by (divine) intellectual activity—then you can respond to the critics of philosophy. You can point out that contrary to their assumption that uselessness is necessarily a bad-making feature of contemplation, uselessness is actually a necessary condition for something's being the very best of goods. Since the apparent uselessness of contemplation provides a central reason to reject the contemplative life, it is important for Aristotle to present his 'aristocratic defense' as part of an overall strategy toward exhorting his audience toward contemplation.

II. The 'Utility Argument' and Boundary Markers of the Human Good

In *Protrepticus* 9.52.16-28/B42 and 53.15-26/B44, Aristotle uses the aristocratic defense to defuse the charge that contemplation's uselessness reveals its lack of choiceworthiness. But in *Protrepticus* 10.54.10-56.12/B46-B51, Aristotle appears to recognize that he has to show that contemplation possesses some sort of functional utility if he is to be successful in turning his audience toward philosophy. Hence, in chapter 10, he exhorts his audience to pursue contemplation on the basis of its utility for guiding our actions.

Given what Aristotle has said up to now about contemplation's uselessness, his claims for contemplation's practical benefits are striking. He maintains that although contemplation is not productive, it offers a background perspective that promotes the best practical judgment. Since the chapter 10 passage is unfortunately not better known, I translate the entire chapter:

For just as doctors and [experts] about athletic training, so far as [they are] refined, all pretty much agree that it is necessary for those going to be good doctors and athletic trainers to be experienced about nature, so also it is necessary for good lawmakers to be experienced about nature, and much more, at any rate, than the former. For the [doctors and athletic trainers] are producers only of the virtue of the body, but the [lawmakers], being [concerned] about the virtues of the soul and claiming to teach about both [the] happiness and unhappiness of the city, are therefore much more in need of philosophy. [54.12-22]

For just as in the other crafts, the best tools are discovered by the producers from nature (such as, in building, [the] plumb-line and ruler and compass [for drawing circles]), with some [tools] obtained [by reference to] water, some [by reference to]

standing about celestial phenomena naturally leads us to make reference to the god: 'Seeing by day the revolution of the sun and by night the well-ordered movement of the other stars, they came to think that there was a god who is the cause of such movement and order.' (Here, I use Barnes and Lawrence's translation in the Revised Oxford Translation.) The role of the god as source of cosmic order also receives detailed discussion in the pseudo-Aristotelian *De mundo* vi-vii.

light and to the rays of the sun. By reference to these [tools], we discriminate what is, according to perception, sufficiently straight and smooth. [54.22-55.1]

In the same way also, it is necessary for the statesman to have certain boundary markers (τινᾶς ὄρους) from nature itself and truth, with reference to which he discriminates what [is] just and what [is] fine and what [is] advantageous (συμφέρον). For just as [in building] these tools [sc. the ones obtained by reference to nature] surpass all, thus also [the] finest boundary marker [is] the one laid down most of all in accord with nature.⁸ But this is not possible for someone not having philosophized or having recognized the truth. [55.1-7]

And in the other crafts, [people] do not come close to knowledge, obtaining both [their] tools and most exact reasonings from the first principles themselves; [rather, they obtain their tools] from [what is] second [hand] and third [hand] and distant, and they obtain [their] accounts from experience. But for the philosopher alone among the others is imitation from the exact things themselves; for he is a spectator (θεατής) of these [exact things], and not of imitations (μιμημάτων). [55.7-14]

So just as no one is a good housebuilder who does not use a ruler or any other such tool, but compares [his work] to other buildings, in the same way, too, perhaps, if someone either sets down laws for the city or performs actions by looking at and imitating with reference to other human actions or regimes, [whether] of Spartans or Cretans or some other such [people], [he is] neither a good lawgiver nor serious. For an imitation of [what is] not fine cannot be fine, nor [can an imitation of what is not] divine and stable in its nature [be] immortal and stable. But [it is] clear⁹ that for the philosopher alone among producers are there both stable laws and correct and fine actions. For [the philosopher] alone lives looking toward nature and toward the divine, and, just like some good steersman fastening the first principles of [his] life to eternal and steadfast things, he goes forth¹⁰ and lives according to himself. [55.14-56.2]

Contemplative indeed, then, is this knowledge (θεωρητικὴ ἦδε ἡ ἐπιστήμη), but it allows us to produce, in accord with it,

⁸ Accepting Düring's emendation (ὄρος) at 55.5; cf. the reference to ὁ ὄρος κάλλιστος at *EE* viii 3.1249b19. If we keep νόμος instead, the main point still holds: the law created by the philosophical legislator would be most in accord with nature. And so, contemplation remains useful for providing cognitive access to boundary markers of the human good, which would enable the lawmaker to judge well.

⁹ Reading δῆλον at 55.24.

¹⁰ Reading ὀρμῆ at 56.2.

everything. For just as sight is creative and productive of nothing, (for [the] only function of it is to discriminate and to make clear each visible thing), but it allows us to act (*πράττειν*) on account of itself and aids us the most in relation to actions (*πρὸς τὰς πράξεις*) (for [we would be] almost entirely motionless [if] deprived of it), *so [it is] clear that with the knowledge being contemplative, we perform myriad [actions] in accord with it nevertheless, and we choose some things and flee others, and generally, we gain all good things on account of it.*¹¹ [56.2-12]

As in the aristocratic defense, Aristotle here contrasts contemplative knowledge with practical, productive knowledge. Yet the passage above stands out for arguing explicitly that contemplative knowledge is *useful*. Although contemplation is not itself ‘creative and productive’, and although it does not provide explicit decision procedures for action, Aristotle still thinks that it can guide our practical judgment at a dispositional level. While ‘contemplative indeed’, such activity provides us with insights by reference to which we can create well-wrought actions.

To see more clearly how contemplation can usefully guide practical judgment, I first call attention to *Protrepticus* 54.22-55.7/B47, where Aristotle observes that in arts such as building, the best tools (plumb-lines, rulers, and compasses) are discovered ‘from nature’ and help us to judge exactitude. While good builders use these tools to ensure that their measurements are exact—and thus to produce well-measured buildings—bad builders rely merely on other buildings to make their measurements. So, while seasoned craftsmen can often ‘eyeball’ proper measurements on the basis of experience, and while such inexact measurement may have its place outside the practice of craft, even good craftsmen still use plumb-lines, rulers, and compasses to make their measurements exact and to ensure fine works. Moreover, they do so as *part* of their craft-activity, and not as an alien, ‘rationalist’ imposition on it. By contrast, bad builders rely on unreliable measures; their works are apt to be disproportionate and poorly made as a result.

As Düring 1961, 215 notes, Aristotle here seems to be relying on a view that also shows up in Plato’s *Philebus*, viz., that the more some activity is guided by an exact measure, the more reliable that activity is. For instance, according to Socrates, flute-players determine their harmonies by hit-and-miss; as a result, ‘there is a lot of imprecision mixed up in [flute playing] and very little reliability’ (56a).¹² By contrast, Socrates says, building ‘owes its superior level of craftsmanship over other disciplines to its frequent use of measures and instruments’ (56b), among which he mentions the same instruments that the *Protrepticus* lists (viz., the plumb-line, ruler, and compass). At *Protrepticus* 55.14-23/B49, Aristo-

¹¹ Like Hutchinson and Johnson 2005, 264 and Bobonich 2007, 164, I take the italicized lines to be Iamblichus’s bridge text. Nevertheless, context suggests Aristotle was drawing a parallel between sight and contemplation in his original text.

¹² Translations of the *Philebus* are by Dorothea Frede, from *Plato: Complete Works*.

tle likens bad agents to bad craftsmen. Just as the latter rely on inexact measures, the former rely on inexact measures of *the human good* in making practical judgments. As situated agents and legislators, they imitate ‘other human actions or regimes’ *qua* actions or regimes (55.19). Such measures, however, are no better for agents seeking to perform excellent actions than other buildings are for builders seeking to create excellent structures. By acting in accord with them, bad agents produce actions that fail to be ‘immortal and stable’ (55.23), i.e., truly excellent.

According to Aristotle, however, contemplation plays a role in providing cognitive access to *exact* measures of the human good. Aristotle thus argues that by ‘looking toward nature and toward the divine’ (πρὸς τὴν φύσιν βλέπων...καὶ πρὸς τὸ θεῖον: 55.26-27/B50), contemplators are able to derive ‘certain boundary markers (τινὰς ὄρους) from nature itself and truth’ (55.1) for practical judgment. The word I am translating as ‘boundary markers’ is the plural of the Greek word *horos*. Now this word requires some commentary, but briefly, the word *horos* can also mean ‘norm’, ‘standard’, ‘benchmark’, or ‘delimitation.’ So in saying that we can derive *horoi* for practical judgment through contemplation, Aristotle is saying that through exercising contemplation, we can obtain *norms, standards, or benchmarks* for good practical judgment, a sense of that which *marks the boundaries* of such judgment, of that which *delimits* it.

Aristotle thus wants to say that through exercising contemplation, we somehow come to understand the nature of the human good, i.e., the norm of good judgment that sets the boundaries for or delimits excellent practical reasoning. By judging and acting by reference to this understanding of the human good, an understanding derived from sources more stable than mere fluctuating convention, contemplators most reliably achieve the intermediate in action and passion. On this basis, Aristotle identifies *the philosopher* as the agent possessing the most exact and reliable form of practical reasoning. In a passage that recalls *Republic* x 599a-e, he maintains that it is only the philosopher who takes his lead not from imitations, but ‘from the exact things themselves’ (55.12-14). Unlike other practical knowers, philosophers obtain ‘their tools and most exact reasonings from the first principles themselves’ (55.7-10). Accordingly, the philosopher’s boundary marker of the human good is ‘most of all in accord with nature’ (ὁ μάλιστα κατὰ φύσιν: 55.5/B47). And so the philosopher would seem to be the true *phronimos*: ultimately, for the philosopher ‘alone among producers (δημιουργῶν) are there both stable laws and correct and fine actions’ (55.24-25/B49). Although philosophers do not produce when contemplating, the insights they obtain through contemplation guide their production, i.e., their sculpting of fine actions and laws, in their non-contemplative moments. Therefore, contemplation is useful after all.¹³

¹³ Notice that although Aristotle begins chapter 10 by saying that *lawmakers* and *statesmen* will need philosophy, Aristotle is explicit at 10.55.12-14 and 55.24-25 that *philosophers* derive these boundary markers of the human good and produce the best actions and laws. Consistent with the evident influence of Plato’s *Republic* on this section of the *Protrepticus*, Aristotle seems to suggest that

III. The Consistency of Aristotle's Protreptic Strategy

So far, I have spelled out Aristotle's two-pronged strategy in the *Protrepticus* for exhorting his audience toward the pursuit of contemplation. First, he argues that the uselessness of contemplation does not show its valuelessness; rather, such uselessness is consistent with contemplation's status as the highest end within a life. Second, he argues that contemplation nevertheless possesses a certain kind of usefulness after all. Contemplation is useful for the cognitive access it provides to boundary markers of the human good by reference to which contemplators can judge well.

Yet one might reasonably wonder about the coherence of Aristotle's strategy. If Aristotle presses the utility argument, then Aristotle would seem to undercut the aristocratic defense of contemplation. For in allowing contemplation to be useful, Aristotle may appear to deny that contemplation is, after all, an end choiceworthy for the sake of nothing higher. Conversely, if contemplation is choiceworthy as a highest end, and if highest ends are, by definition, useless for the sake of any higher ends, then Aristotle's claims for contemplation's utility would seem to count against contemplation's status as a highest end. So, while Aristotle could offer either argument on its own to exhort his audience, the two arguments together would seem to cancel each other out. Hence, at least one recent commentator, Nightingale 2004, 196-197, claims that the *Protrepticus*'s overall defense of contemplation is incoherent. In this section, I respond to Nightingale's charge. I show that Aristotle's two arguments are mutually consistent, and that if the utility argument does not explicitly appear in Aristotle's other works, this is not because logic compelled Aristotle to abandon it.

To begin, I address—and eliminate—one initial response to Nightingale's worry, viz., that the inconsistency she observes is not necessarily problematic for Aristotle. On this initial response, if we think that the apparent inconsistency between the aristocratic defense and the utility argument poses a dilemma for Aristotle, that is because we overlook the protreptic aims of Aristotle's argument. The goal of philosophical protreptic is to turn the listener or reader toward philosophical activity. But the arguments that promote this goal need to take into account the listener's existing beliefs, interests, and commitments; they need to meet the listener where he or she stands. If so, however, we should expect a work like the *Protrepticus* to include a wide variety of arguments aimed at turning the audience toward philosophy—some arguments suitable for certain audience members, other arguments suitable for other audience members. Yet if the *Protrepticus* must rely on such a range of arguments to reach its full audience, then we should expect to find some internal tensions in the work. Thus, if we find a potential inconsistency between the aristocratic defense and the utility argument, it is not yet clear that the *Protrepticus* itself is an incoherent text—at least if we keep in mind the genre-specific goals of protreptic writing.¹⁴

philosopher-lawmakers are a possibility, and that the best lawmakers will be philosophers of a sort.

¹⁴ Gadamer 1928, 145-146 argues that one should not expect rigid doctrinal consistency in a

Nevertheless, we should not downplay the potentially serious problems that Aristotle's remarks on the utility of contemplation generate for the *Protrepticus* as a hortatory work. Given the internal aims of philosophical protreptic, it would be troublesome if two major arguments clashed in a straightforward fashion. Such a fundamental inconsistency would cancel out whatever particular reasons one would have for pursuing philosophical activity. So, although presenting a maximally consistent set of views need not be the ultimate aim of a philosophical protreptic, a consistency of basic argument would nevertheless be important for instrumentally promoting protreptic goals.

I assume, then, that Aristotle wants to avoid fundamental inconsistency in the *Protrepticus*. Therefore, the potential inconsistency of the aristocratic defense and the utility argument does threaten to pose a problem for Aristotle, and so, the initial response to the apparent inconsistency is insufficient. But there are other responses to the apparent inconsistency, and I turn my attention to them now.

A recent review of Nightingale, Hutchinson 2007, 484 points out that all that remains of Aristotle's *Protrepticus* is a collection of fragments, so that to charge its overall argument with inconsistency would require us (*per impossibile*) first to possess and evaluate the complete work. While I believe that Hutchinson's response suffices to meet Nightingale's objection, I think that it is possible to offer an even stronger reply. And we can do this by showing that the purported inconsistency between the aristocratic defense and the utility argument, even in the fragments that we *now* possess, is only apparent.

As a way of spelling out this reply, I take it that when Aristotle offers the aristocratic defense against the charge that contemplation is 'useless', he responds to the charge that contemplation is valueless because it does not *subserve a higher end*. Notice the language of Aristotle's aristocratic defense. At 52.26-27/B42, Aristotle denies that we should always expect some 'other benefit beside the thing itself' (ὀφέλειαν ἑτέραν παρ' αὐτὸ τὸ πρᾶγμα). Likewise, 53.17-18/B44 proposes that contemplation 'should be chosen not on account of something else, but on account of itself' (δι' ἕτερον ἀλλὰ δι' ἑαυτήν). And 53.20-21/B44 insists that contemplation is valuable 'even if nothing more were to follow from it' (καὶ εἰ μὴδὲν μέλλοι πλεῖον ἀπ' αὐτῆς ἔσεσθαι). Nor is such language unique to the *Protrepticus*. At *Nicomachean Ethics* x 7.1177b20, for instance, Aristotle says that contemplation appears 'to aim at no end aside from itself' (παρ' αὐτήν). At *Metaphysics* i 2.982b24-28, he says that we seek to exercise *sophia* 'on account of no other advantage' (δι' οὐδεμίαν...χρείαν ἑτέραν), for unlike a servant, contemplation 'exists for itself' (αὐτῆς ἕνεκέν).

But even if contemplation is useless for *subserving* higher ends, ends 'other' than or 'beside' contemplation, or ends that 'follow from' contemplation, I argue that *subservience* to higher ends is not the only way for an activity to be useful for Aristotle. Rather, for Aristotle, an activity can also be useful by *supporting*

philosophical protreptic, since such a work is intended to turn the reader toward philosophy as such, not toward any particular philosophical view.

the lower ends and activities upon which its very exercise depends. Aristotle, I suggest, believes that contemplation is useful in this second way. If so, Aristotle can consistently say that contemplation is useless in the sense required by the aristocratic defense, but useful in the way required by the utility argument. To explain how this can be the case, and to clarify the distinction that I am drawing between subserving and supporting, I turn to Aristotle's remarks on the relationship between the nutritive and perceptive functions of animal souls in *De anima* iii 12.

There, Aristotle explains why animal souls must have the perceptive power (the *aisthêtikon*) by appealing, in part, to the role that this power plays in animal nutritive activity: 'If, then, all mobile body lacked perception, it would perish and would not reach [its] *telos*, that which is, from nature, [its] function. (For how will it be nourished?)' (434a30-434b2). Unlike plants, animals lack roots and so lack an immediate source of nutriment. Hence, if they lacked the perceptive power (and its functions, which include perception, appetite, and locomotion), they would fail in two ways to reach their end. First, immature, but still developing, animals would lack a means for obtaining nutriment in their youth. Perishing before they ever attained maturity, they would never get to lead the perceptive life that characterizes fully developed animals. Second, mature animals require a perceptive means by which to obtain nutriment lest they perish as well. But since nature does not characteristically produce organisms that are incapable of maintaining themselves as members of their kinds, animals require the perceptive power, which is useful for securing nutritive needs.

Initially, it might seem as though Aristotle is arguing that perception is subordinate to nutritive functioning, for in the passage, Aristotle points to an animal's need to possess perception if that animal is to nourish itself. But in *De anima* ii 4, Aristotle has already provided reason to think that the nutritive power (the *threptikon*) is for the sake of the perceptive power. On his account there, the nutritive power is a kind of craftworker (a carpenter) that uses nutriment to build the body's organs (416a35-b3).¹⁵ The nutritive power, then, meets the basic needs that its superior, viz., the perceptive power, requires to fulfill its higher, freer ends. And so, perception cannot be *for the sake of* nutritive functioning. On Aristotle's view, to hold that the perceptive power exists for the sake of the nutritive power would be to invert the proper teleological order of psychic functions in the animal soul.¹⁶

Thus, to make sense of *De anima* iii 12, we need to account simultaneously for *both* the reciprocity *and* the hierarchy that holds between the nutritive and perceptive powers. Given what Aristotle says, I think the best way to do this is to view perception's role in nutritive functioning as *ultimately* ordered toward the exercise of perception itself. In other words, on Aristotle's view, the perceptive power is useful for promoting nutritive functioning, but the perceptive power

¹⁵ Cf. *GA* ii 4.740b29ff. On the *threptikon* as a craftworker, see Menn 2002, 120ff.

¹⁶ For related points, see Nagel [1972] 1980, 11; Wilkes [1978] 1980, 345; Richardson unpublished.

does not *subserve* nutritive functioning. Rather, perception *supports* nutrition, not because nutritive activity is the highest function constitutive of animal life, but *because* fulfilling nutritive needs is required for the sake of perception, locomotion, and the like. In other words, perception extends *itself* through the support it provides nutritive functioning. Reciprocity holds between the nutritive and the perceptive powers, but this reciprocity is asymmetric and ordered *for the sake of* perception.

If subservience is how lower elements of a hierarchy can be useful for higher elements, then support is how higher elements can be useful for lower ones.¹⁷ For another example from Aristotle, though not from his psychology and perhaps problematic in various ways, consider his views on the relationship between master and natural slave. According to Aristotle, the natural slave *subserves* the master: that is, the slave works for the sake of the master and promotes the master's various projects and ends. Yet the master does not just passively receive the slave's service. After all, the master is a useful figure in the life of the slave: the master *supports* his slave in various ways, including by cultivating a certain level of virtue in the slave (*Politics* i 13.1260a33-b7). But the master's support for his slave does not imply that the master is somehow *subserving* or *working for* his slave. For the master's ultimate purpose in *supporting* his slave is to ensure that his slave will continue to be of service to him and to his ends (*Politics* iii 6.1278b32-37).¹⁸

If we keep the subservience/support distinction in mind, then we can articulate how the *Protrepeticus*'s utility argument can be consistent with the aristocratic defense. For Aristotle, perceptive activity is the highest end in the lives of non-rational animals: there are no higher functions than perceptive activity in which such organisms can engage. And so, there is a sense in which perception, unlike nutrition, is 'useless' for any higher sort of animal activity. Nevertheless, as *De anima* iii 12 suggests, perceptive activity still possesses a kind of utility in animals: it is useful not for subserving nutritive activity, but for supporting it.

Likewise, Aristotle can say that for human beings, contemplation is 'useless' insofar as it fails to subserve any higher human activities. Indeed, Aristotle can say that whereas nutrition and perception are both capable of subserving contemplation, contemplation is 'useless' in the richer sense that there simply are no higher psychic functions for the sake of which contemplation is useful: contemplation is the highest of all psychic functions without qualification. Yet if contemplation can be useful for human beings, not by *subserving* higher ends, but by

¹⁷ Higher ends can bear other relations to lower ends besides support. E.g., a higher end can bear an *ordering relation* to subservient lower ends, viz., by organizing lower ends into a hierarchy. But here I am concerned only with the sorts of *utility relations* that (at least some) higher ends can bear to such lower ends, especially—though not exclusively—where these ends are psychic functions. I thank Charles Griswold for raising a question on this point.

¹⁸ To cite another example that Aristotle discusses in this context, while non-rational animals (in some way) exist primarily for the sake of human beings (*Pol.* i 8.1256b15-22), the rule of the latter over the former benefits the former by preserving them (i 5.1254b10-13).

supporting lower ones that subserve it, then Aristotle can offer the utility argument in favor of contemplation while still insisting that contemplation is a ‘useless’ activity. That is, Aristotle can (i) deny that we should expect some ‘other benefit beside’ contemplation itself, and can insist that contemplation is valuable ‘even if nothing more were to follow from it’, while (ii) allowing contemplation to possess utility in supporting lower psychic functions. Contemplation, he can say, guides (and supports) the subordinate power of practical reasoning, which in turn supports virtuous patterns of reason-responsive desire. Contemplation’s support of lower psychic functions, however, is ultimately directed toward the extension and promotion of contemplation, and to this extent, contemplation can retain its supreme finality. That is, if contemplation supports actions according to virtue that subserve it, then contemplation is really just a means to (more of) itself as an end, and not a means to anything other than itself (that is not a means to contemplation itself).¹⁹ Indeed, Aristotle’s explicit comparison between contemplation and sight in *Protrepticus* 56.4–12/B51 suggests that Aristotle is foregrounding his belief that contemplation, like perception, *can* provide support to lower-level functions in the human soul. On this basis, Aristotle can avoid the charge that the *Protrepticus*’s utility argument undercuts the aristocratic defense.²⁰

IV. Aristotle on Deriving Boundary Markers of the Human Good

By introducing a distinction between two kinds of utility—viz., subservience to higher ends versus support for subservient lower ends—I have sought to respond to the charge that Aristotle’s utility argument is inconsistent with his aristocratic defense of contemplation. On my reading, while Aristotle believes that contemplation is useless in subserving any higher ends, he nevertheless believes that contemplation can be useful for supporting subservient lower ones. I have also provided a preliminary sketch of the support role that Aristotle believes contemplation to possess, viz., utility for enabling contemplators to derive boundary markers, or standards, of the human good by reference to which these agents can guide their practical activity and reliably attain the virtuous intermediate. But the utility argument leaves us with one central unanswered question, viz., how exactly *is* contemplation useful for enabling contemplators to derive such boundary markers? In other words, just how is the derivation supposed to work? In this final section, I argue that although Aristotle faces certain hurdles in responding to this question, he nevertheless has the resources in the *Protrepticus* to do so.

The problem that Aristotle faces is this: Aristotle says that the philosopher

¹⁹ I owe this way of encapsulating my thesis to Michael Slote.

²⁰ One might question whether the subservience/support distinction was available to the (purportedly young) Aristotle of the *Protrepticus*. In response, one can find intimations of this distinction in Platonic psychology as well. Consider, for example, the relationship that obtains between spirit (reason’s obedient ally) and reason (which rules the soul and guides spirit aright) in the *Republic* (e.g., at iv 441e4–6). Cf. *Phaedrus* 246a–b and 253d–e (where Socrates’ myth represents spirit as an obedient white horse and reason as a guiding charioteer).

acquires boundary markers of the human good from ‘nature itself and truth’ and from ‘first principles’. As I have argued, however, Aristotle in the *Protrepticus* seeks to exhort his audience to the contemplation of the cosmos as ordered by divine intellectual activity. But it is very hard to understand how contemplation, so construed, could be useful for deriving boundary markers of the human good. After all, the objects that we contemplate when we engage in this activity are somehow above humanity.²¹

The matter of contemplation’s utility becomes more perplexing because, in *Protrepticus* 10, Aristotle actually insists that contemplation’s focus on the divine is a source of its usefulness. ‘For [the philosopher] alone lives looking toward nature and toward the divine (πρὸς τὴν φύσιν βλέπων ζῆ καὶ πρὸς τὸ θεῖον), and, just like some good steersman fastening the first principles of [his] life to eternal and steadfast things, he goes forth and lives according to himself’ (55.26-56.2/B50). So the contemplator will apparently benefit from looking toward the divine (πρὸς τὸ θεῖον).²²

Now, the issue of what Aristotle means here by ‘the divine’, like the issue of what he means by ‘contemplation’, is vexing. While it is reasonable to think that the ‘divine’ objects of contemplation include celestial phenomena, I have already argued in part 2 that Aristotle believes that contemplators will especially study the role of divine intellect as a source of cosmic order. And so, it is reasonable to conclude that Aristotle’s remarks in the *Protrepticus* on ‘the divine’ include references to some such divine intellect. In 55.26-56.2/B50, then, Aristotle would be maintaining that contemplating the universe as ordered by such divine intellect *does* guide agents in their navigating the swirling, choppy waters of practice. Nevertheless, he still leaves us wondering exactly *how*.²³

Aristotle has a problem if he believes that the contemplative derivation of boundary markers of the human good requires, say, the human essence or soul to be the proximate or direct object of the sort of contemplation toward which the *Protrepticus* seeks to exhort its audience. Aristotle can avoid this problem, however, if he has good reason to think that contemplating the divine is useful for one’s obtaining an *indirect* awareness of the structure and boundaries of the

²¹ In his other (mature) ethical works, Aristotle is clear that the objects of the best contemplation stand above humanity. For instance, in *NE* vi 7, Aristotle maintains that since *sophia* is the highest sort of wisdom, *sophia* must have for its objects the highest kinds of being in the cosmos. Yet since humanity ‘is not the best of the things in the cosmos’ (1141a20-22), *sophia*’s objects must be ‘far more divine in nature’ than human beings (1141b1-2; cf. viii 6.1158b36). Similarly, at vi 12.1143b19-20, Aristotle holds that ‘*sophia* will not contemplate the things from which [the] human being will attain happiness (for it is [contemplative] of nothing coming into being)’. Cf. Mara 1987, 382-383, who makes a similar point (in a related context) against the proposal that Aristotle’s philosopher will be primarily concerned to contemplate the human form.

²² Given the repetition of πρὸς, I see no reason to accept the proposal of Düring 1961, 222 that the first καὶ in 55.26-27 is epexegetic.

²³ Düring 1961, 205 finds the connection that Aristotle draws between contemplative insight and practical judgment in these passages ‘far from logically clear’. Cf. Hutchinson and Johnson 2005, 265.

human good. In this case, although the most perfect forms of contemplation would still possess divine objects, contemplation of divine objects would ultimately provide a special sort of cognitive access to boundary markers of the human good. To show that this is how Aristotle accounts for the utility of contemplation, I turn to a remarkable section of the *Protrepticus* (8.47.5-48.21/B104-110). As far as I can tell, the existing commentary on the *Protrepticus* has not mentioned this section in relation to the question of how contemplators can derive standards of the human good through contemplation. Yet I believe that this section provides the core of Aristotle's answer to this question.²⁴

On the one hand, Aristotle says that if human beings had suitable clarity about themselves—if like Lynceus, who could see through walls and trees, human beings could perceive themselves—they would realize 'the sort of bad things from which they are composed' (ἐξ ὧν συνέστηκε κακῶν: 47.15/B105). For he says that, in some sense, the finite, mortal human being is 'nothing' (47.10/B104). Accordingly, all the goods that appear 'great' to human beings—goods of the body such as strength, stature, and beauty (47.10/B104), as well as external goods such as honor and reputation (47.16)—are also, in some sense, valueless.

Here, I take it that Aristotle means that human beings and human goods show up as relatively imperfect when compared against the standard of divinity. For Aristotle allows that we *can* obtain a sort of clarity about ourselves, i.e., about our mortality and our relative weakness and shortness of life (47.19-20/B105). We can obtain this clarity by 'beholding eternal things' (καθορῶντι τῶν ἀιδίων: 47.17-18/B105), i.e., by contemplating what is immortal and divine. In other words, Aristotle suggests that contemplating the divine brings to light the *upper limits* of the human good. In bringing to light our difference and separation from the divine, contemplation elucidates the way in which we, as all-too-mortal human beings, are akin to other animal life forms. Gazing upon the divine, we recognize the comparatively 'miserable and difficult' (ἄθλιος...καὶ χαλεπός: 48.14/B109) nature of human life. We recognize the dependence of our biological self-maintenance upon both the ongoing satisfaction of basic nutritive-reproductive needs and the acquisition of external goods that promise to provide us with a measure of security.

²⁴ Thus, when Bobonich 2007, 167—who sees 'a significant apparent difference' between Aristotle's conception of contemplation in the *Protrepticus* and the *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Eudemean Ethics*—says that 'it is at least plausible to think that in the *Protrepticus*, the knowledge that the philosopher uses in moving to judgments, e.g., about laws, is the highest kind of knowledge there is', we need to be careful. One can agree that the *Protrepticus* holds that (some of) the knowledge the philosopher uses in his political judgment *is* the highest sort of wisdom. Nevertheless, one need not think that the *Protrepticus* identifies this highest knowledge with *practical* wisdom. For again, on the reading I propose, Aristotle can allow that contemplative wisdom (exercised in understanding the order of the cosmos) *is* the highest wisdom, even in the *Protrepticus*. Part of such wisdom's special value, however, consists in its providing (in part) a *basis for* practically wise judgment. Cf. Gerson 2005, 66.

But this recognition of human finitude is not the only insight that contemplation provides. For on the other hand, Aristotle suggests that by ‘beholding eternal things’ (or by looking ‘toward the divine’), we would also discover the *lower limits* of the human good as well. In contemplating the intellectual activity that orders the cosmos, we would be contemplating intellectual activity in an eternal, paradigmatic form. Aristotle’s philosopher would also be contemplating a kind of activity for which he too has the power, albeit in a limited and imperfect way. Among all our human possessions, Aristotle insists, only our intellect seems immortal and divine (48.9-13/B108); indeed, ‘intellect is the god in us’ (48.16-17/B110). Hence, in contemplating the divine, Aristotle’s philosopher would be in a position to recognize not only his finitude in relation to the divine, but also his *relative kinship* with the divine. On this basis, Aristotle suggests, contemplators will recognize that ‘in comparison with everything else, the human being seems to be [a] god’ (48.15-16/B109).²⁵

I take these points to show, even within the *Protrepticus*, how contemplation of the divine can be useful for deriving boundary markers of the human good. In contemplating the divine, and in thereby grasping their intermediate place in the cosmos between beasts and gods, contemplators would obtain a grasp of how their good as human beings is *demarkated and delimited* from the good of other kinds of living beings. Consequently, contemplation would be useful for deriving *boundary markers* of the human good in a quite literal sense. And while the ethical mean is not a simple intermediacy between divine and bestial behaviors, knowing one’s intermediate place between the divine and the bestial would still be pertinent to grasping the ethical mean. For intellectual activities (which we share with gods) possess a value for human beings that they lack for beasts, i.e., perishable life forms whose activity is governed by perception and non-rational desire. Likewise, non-rational desires (which we share with beasts) possess a value for human beings that they lack for gods—i.e., disembodied forms of life whose activity is not dependent on the fulfillment of nutritive needs and the satisfaction of certain non-rational desires.²⁶

²⁵ A striking passage from *Protrepticus* 5.35.14-18/B28 also suggests the godlikeness of intellect: ‘Deprived, then, of perception and intellect, a human being becomes like a plant; and deprived of intellect alone, he is turned into a beast; but deprived of irrationality and abiding by intellect, he becomes like god.’ Düring attributes this passage to the *Protrepticus*, but the passage appears as part of a longer section (5.34.5-36.26) whose origin is disputed. See Allan 1975.

²⁶ Aristotle’s views on the place of the human good between the divine and the bestial are discussed in different ways by Nussbaum 1995; Achtenberg 1995, 29-36; Long 1999, 121-124. The *Protrepticus*’s answer to the question of exactly how contemplation can provide boundary markers for statesmen provides additional insight into Aristotle’s claim in *EE* viii 3.1249b16-23 that ‘the contemplation of the god’ can serve as ‘the finest boundary marker’ (ὁ ὄρος κάλλιστος: 1249b19) for statesmen seeking to determine the proper amount of natural goods for their citizens. As a boundary marker for the possession of natural goods (e.g., bodily goods, wealth, friends, etc.), ‘the contemplation of the god’ establishes an upper limit on the possession of such goods. It rules out excess (1249b20), for our possession of natural goods should not ‘hinder’ us (1249b20) in exercising contemplation (e.g., by focusing our attention on our lower functions, shared with other mortal life-forms, at the expense of contemplation, which we share with the god). At the same time, ‘the contemplation of the god’

Therefore, recognizing that they are higher than non-rational animals to the extent they have the power to contemplate, contemplators realize that their powers extend beyond the functions that they share with non-rational animals. Consequently, they will grant due weight to their contemplative powers and maintain their non-rational desires under appropriate control. In this way, they avoid vice in one direction. At the same time, in contemplating the divine, they recognize that they are lower than the immortals, for their contemplation requires them to fulfill their basic life-needs as perishable living organisms. Hence, contemplators will simultaneously grant their non-rational desires due weight and so avoid vice in another direction. Benefiting from the utility of contemplation, Aristotle can argue, such agents will be in a position most reliably to achieve the intermediate in action and passion and to create good laws.²⁷

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establishes a lower limit on the possession of such goods. It rules out deficiency in possession—literally, 'need' (ἐνδεῖα: 1249b19)—for, given the requirements of our lower mortal nature, a lack of natural goods also hinders our contemplation.

²⁷ For helpful discussion and comments, I am grateful to Michael Della Rocca, John Hare, Verity Harte, D.S. Hutchinson, Brad Inwood, Monte Ransome Johnson, Gabriel Richardson Lear, Ronald Polansky, Michael Slote, and audiences at the University of Miami and Boston University. I wish to give special acknowledgment to the University of Miami, where I worked on this article as a post-doctoral fellow.

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