

The Metaphysics of Goodness in the Ethics of Aristotle

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Abstract: Kraut (2011) and other neo-Aristotelians have argued that there is no such thing as absolute goodness. They admit only *good in a kind*, e.g. a good sculptor, and *good for something*, e.g. good for fish. What is the view of Aristotle? Mostly limiting myself to the *Nicomachean Ethics* [NE], I argue that Aristotle is committed to things being absolutely good and also to a metaphysics of absolute goodness where there is a maximally best good that is the cause of the goodness of all other things in virtue of being their end. I begin (in Section 2) by suggesting that the notion of *good as an end*, which is present in the first lines of the NE, is not obviously accounted for by *good in a kind* or *good for something*. I then give evidence that *good in a kind* (in Section 3) and *good for something* (in Section 4) can explain neither certain distinctions drawn between virtues nor the determinacy ascribed to what is good “in itself.” I argue (in Section 5) *contra* Gotthelf (2012) that because several important arguments in the *Nicomachean Ethics* rely on comparative judgments of absolute value—e.g. “Man is the best of all animals”—Aristotle is committed to the existence of both absolute goodness and an absolutely best being. I focus (in Section 6) on one passage, Aristotle’s division of goods in NE I 12, which presupposes this metaphysical picture.

Keywords: Aristotle, absolute goodness, *Nicomachean Ethics*, teleology, value, God

1. Introduction

Moore (1903, §17) argued that the best action is the one that maximizes absolute goodness. Kraut (2011) and other neo-Aristotelians have denied the existence of absolute goodness, arguing instead that there is only *goodness in a kind* and *goodness for something*.¹ Life, on their view, is not absolutely good—good because of what it is—but only good *for something*.²

What is the view of Aristotle? Mostly drawing on evidence from within the *Nicomachean Ethics* [NE], I argue that Aristotle is committed to things being absolutely good. Moreover, I argue that that if Aristotle’s comparative evaluations of substances—e.g. “Man is the best of all animals”—are to be compatible with his philosophy, he must subscribe to a metaphysics of goodness where there is a maximally best good that is the cause of the goodness of all other things, in virtue of being their end. I clarify in what way this best good can be the end of other substances, and I close by noting how this metaphysical picture is presupposed at different points in the NE.

¹ For example, Thomson (1997; 2008) and Foot (2003). Many would of course include Geach (1956), but I do not think this was his aim in drawing the distinction between attribute and predicative goodness.

² E.g. Kraut, (2011, Ch. 21).

2. Absolute Goodness and the Good as End

The *Nicomachean Ethics* begins:

[*NE I 1, 1094a1-3*] Every art and every inquiry, and likewise action and decision seem to aim at some good [ἀγαθοῦ τινὸς ἐφίεσθαι δοκεῖ]. And so they aptly declared the good to be that for which all things aim [οὗ πάντ' ἐφίεται].³

Aristotle then moves rather freely between speaking of “the end of something” and “the good of something.” How should we understand the use of “good” in the passage above?

Richard Kraut (2011, 210) has suggested that the first sentence could be glossed as “every craft, inquiry, action, and decision aim at something that is assumed to be *advantageous for someone*.” To support this, Kraut notes that the *NE* claims that it is a contribution to political wisdom (cf. *NE I 2* and *X 9*) and that the political community came to be and aims at advantage (*sumpherontos*) for the whole of life (*NE VIII 9, 1160a11-23*). He would thus seem to be offering a strategy for interpreting Aristotle’s language of “the good of something” in terms of what is good for, i.e., advantageous for, something.

I will not canvas all possible readings of these first lines of the *NE*, but consider the following alternative. If we understand the first two sentences together, Aristotle would seem to be noting that craft, inquiry, action and decision all inherently aim at goods, and in light of this observation he endorses the view (perhaps of the wise) that the good is that which is aimed at. From what follows it is clear that Aristotle understands this more precisely as: *to be a good is to have the character of an end*.⁴ For he immediately makes a division among ends, and notes that when an activity issues in a product beyond the activity (as housebuilding issues in a house beyond the activity of housebuilding) that product is better *by nature* (*pephuke*, 1094a6) than the activity. It is better insofar it has more the nature of an end (cf. *Metaphysics* [*Meta.*] Θ 8, 1050a27-28). Aristotle then claims that when one end is subordinated to another, the latter is better and more end-like, and that the best good is most of all an end (cf. *NE I 2, 1094a18-22* and *I 7, 1097a30-34*). Now if one interprets the opening lines of the *NE* as I suggest, one can also hear its claim as applying beyond the practical domain. To the extent that ends are found in the universe, ends are found in the universe. This is suggested by the neuter form of “all” (*panta*, 1094a3) and it also seems to be the view we find in Aristotle’s theoretical philosophy, where he speaks of “the good, i.e. that for the sake of which”

³ All translations are my own, though I have been influenced by existing translations, especially those found in Irwin (1999), and Barnes (1995). I use the Oxford Classical Text edition of Aristotle’s Greek. I make some small use of the *Magna Moralia* [*MM*], and for a defense of its Aristotelian pedigree see Cooper (1999).

⁴ So interpreted, the definition should be understood as manifesting what is anterior by what is posterior: the fact that all things desire the good makes evident the fact that to be a good is to have the nature of an end. Cf. Aquinas (1969, lectio 1, 148-158).

(*Meta.* I 2, 982b10; cf. *Physics* II 3, 195a23-24) and affirms that “everything that is good in itself and on account of its own nature is an end” (*Meta.* B 2, 996a23-24).⁵

Good as an end is not at all obviously reducible to *good in a kind* or *good for something*, but could it really be absolute goodness? You might think not because *good as an end* always seems relative to a kind: thus, Aristotle speaks of “the good of the eye” or “the good of the doctor.”⁶ However, as we will see in section 5, Aristotle seems to think that there is one good end that is not relative to anything. Moreover, the question is whether the goodness of these different ends consists in being relative to something, and I do not think it does. The difference in interpretation becomes clear when one considers apparently bad ends: for example, the end or “good” of the thief. If goods are merely relative, then one speaks properly when one talking of both “the good of the thief” and “the good of the doctor.” However, if ends are somehow absolutely good, then the so-called “good of the thief” would not be an end but a pseudo-end. I address this in what follows.

3. Absolute Goodness and Goodness in a Kind

Aristotle seems to think that a good X is an X that possesses the virtue proper to an X (*NE* II 6, 1106a15-24). Thus, if we want to ask the question whether goodness in a kind is also somehow absolutely good, we should ask whether Aristotle thinks there is any further way in which one can evaluate virtues. He does of course. As we will discuss in section 5, the argument of the *Nicomachean Ethics* requires ranking virtues with respect to their goodness: the human good is a certain activity on the basis of the “best” virtue (*NE* I 7, 1098a17). Here, though, it is helpful to focus on another way in which Aristotle evaluates virtues.

While discussing friendship in *Eudemian Ethics* [*EE*] VII 2, Aristotle draws a distinction between what is simply good and what is good relative to something (1237a12). After assuming that the human is “among the things good/excellent by nature” (τῶν φύσει σπουδαίων, 1237a16), he states:

[*EE* VII 2, 1237a17-18] The virtue of something excellent by nature is simply good [ἀπλῶς ἀγαθόν], and the virtue of something not excellent by nature is [merely] good relative to that thing [ἢ δὲ τοῦ μὴ ἐκείνῳ].⁷

⁵ On a reading subscribed to by Anscombe ([1957] 2000, §21), Lear (2004, 15), Reeve (2014, 196) and others, Aristotle here discusses the highest practical good when he speaks of “the good” (*NE* I 1, 1094a3). However, this reading is not attractive. It presents Aristotle as arguing fallaciously, it misconstrues the progression of the text, which leads to and not from the notion of a best good (*NE* I 1, 1094a18-22), and it does not easily take account of the neuter plural *panta* (*NE* I 1, 1094a3), which suggests a claim beyond the practical domain.

⁶ The views of Judson (2005), Gotthelf (2012), and Henry (2013) suggest such an interpretation.

⁷ The relevance of this passage was drawn to my attention by Barney (2007, 310).

Aristotle here makes a distinction among virtues—some are simply good and some are not—and he explains that the simply good virtues are those of things that are “excellent/good [*spoudaios*] by nature.” The first thing to note is that when Aristotle calls the human and other things “good by nature,” he is certainly not doing so by reference to their respective kinds, but would instead seem to be bringing into play some notion of absolute goodness. When he then discusses the two sorts of virtues, it appears that the contrast is here between two kind-relative goods, one of which is also absolutely good.⁸ (To clarify this, I added the word “merely” in the translation above.) The virtue of a human, for example, is both good relative to the kind human and absolutely good, while the virtue of something “not good by nature” is good relative to its kind but not absolutely good. And though one might suppose that Aristotle is here contrasting the virtues of natural kinds with the virtues of artificial kinds, this does not square with the text. Aristotle does not speak of the virtues of things *by nature* and the virtues of things not *by nature*. He instead contrasts the virtues of things *excellent by nature* with the virtues of things *not excellent by nature*. Moreover, other texts suggest that Aristotle considers some artificial kinds to be, in some sense, absolutely good.

Consider *Metaphysics* Δ 16, which discusses the word “*teleion*” (“perfect,” “complete,” “end-like”). The term may designate...

[*Meta.* Δ 16, 1021b14-17] ...that which regarding its virtue and the well [τὸ κατ’ ἀρετὴν καὶ τὸ εὖ] cannot be excelled in its kind, such as a doctor is perfect or a flautist is perfect [τέλειος ἰατρὸς καὶ τέλειος ἀλλητήρ] when with respect to its form it lacks nothing of the proper virtue.

He then goes on:

[*Meta.* Δ 16, 1021b17-20] And thus we transfer the word to bad things [τῶν κακῶν], and speak of a perfect swindler and a perfect thief—indeed, we even call them good, i.e. a good thief and a good swindler [κλέπτην ἀγαθὸν καὶ συκοφάντην ἀγαθόν].

Here the idea seems to be that since thieves and swindlers are bad sorts of things (1021b18, cf. *Meta.* Θ 9, 1051a15), when we call them “perfect,” or “good,” we use these terms only in an extended sense.⁹ Conversely, it seems that when we use the terms “perfect,” “good [in a kind]” and “virtue” in their proper sense, we use them to designate properties that are absolutely good (not merely good relative to the kind in question), and

⁸ I am not proposing “absolutely good” as a translation for *haplōs agathon*, *spoudaios phusei* or any other phrase in Aristotle’s Greek. Rather, I think that what Kraut and others call “absolute goodness” is so engrained in Aristotle’s thought that it comes out by means of different terms and in different ways.

⁹ Thus, Aristotle would think that a correct analysis of normative terms could not straightforwardly be extracted from common usage. On this point, there is agreement with Kraut (2011) *contra* Thomson (2008) and Almotahari and Hosein (2015). Nevertheless, Aristotle could accept neither Kraut’s (2007, 269-271) revisionary account of “good thief” (on which either a good thief is morally good or there are no good thieves) nor Ross’s (1930, 65) assumption that “good” is used in the same sense when saying “good liar” and “good doctor.”

this would seem to require that the kind itself be absolutely good. Thus, humans (*EE* VII 2, 1237a16) as well as artificial kinds such as doctors and flautists (*Meta.* Δ 16, 1021b16) are included among the kinds that are themselves good. This would of course imply that while the end of a doctor is absolutely good, the end of the thief is not. In fact, Aristotle says that ‘theft’ (*klopē*) is intrinsically bad and thus cannot admit of excess, deficiency or intermediacy (*NE* II 6, 1107a9-14).¹⁰ It is rather a sort of apparent good, playing the role of a true good in relation to the kind in question. Moreover, if to be good is to have the nature of an end (*NE* I 1, 1094a3), it must be that the “end” of a thief is not an end but a pseudo-end. And since every expertise aims at an end (*NE* I 1, 1094a1-2; *Magna Moralia* [*MM*], I 1 1182a34-35), thievery is likewise a pseudo-expertise or knack (cf. *Gorgias* 462c2ff).¹¹

One might wonder, though, whether Aristotle is attributing to humans some further property, when says that they are “good by nature” (*EE* VII 2, 1237a16; cf. *Protrep.* B16). But there is reason to think not. For the only way for this to make sense is to suppose that goodness is some universal property like “blue,” but Aristotle denies this in *NE* I 6 and *EE* I 8. Instead, we should take him to mean that the being that humans possess qua humans, is absolutely good, and this is so even for bad humans to the extent that they retain human nature.¹² Of course, the existence of bad humans might make one wonder whether Aristotle is right to say that human nature is absolutely good. However Aristotle thinks that the nature of a something is revealed by the excellent and not the defective instances of the kind (*Pol* I 5, 1254a34-b2).¹³ Thus, it is by reference to the excellent human, and not the defective human, that human nature is judged to be simply good.

Aristotle seems to hold this view because he takes virtue (and *not* vice) to be an end of our human nature. We do not have to acquire virtue in order to be human, but we have a natural inclination to acquire virtue (*NE* VI 13, 1144b6-7), just as we have a natural inclination to live in a political community (*NE* I 7, 1097b11), and this shows that

¹⁰ What would Aristotle say of someone who takes the property of another in order to stay alive? I believe he would more or less agree with Aquinas, who argues that such an action need not be theft properly speaking (*Summa Theologiae* II-II q.66, a.7).

¹¹ For a defense of *Magna Moralia*’s Aristotelian pedigree see Cooper (1999).

¹² Thus, *EE* VII 2 and *Meta* Δ 16 suggest a certain interpretation of Aristotle’s claim in *NE* I 6 that “good is said in as many ways as being: in what-it-is, as the god and the intellect; in quality, as the virtues, in quantity, as the intermediate amount...” (1096a23-25). First, Aristotle must here be speaking of goodness in some absolute sense. Second, as Lawrence (2005, 147) and Ackrill (1977, 23-24) contend, when Aristotle says that good is said in the category of substance as “the god and the intellect” he is not listing the only substances that are absolutely good but merely giving examples. Thus, *contra* Menn (1992, 551) I think the scholastic doctrine that good is convertible with being is in fact defensible as an interpretation of Aristotle, and moreover that the medievals were right to understand this passage as expressing the doctrine that goodness is a transcendental (i.e. not limited to any specific category or categories).

¹³ Aristotle would seem to hold this claim even for artificial kinds. Even though there are bad houses, a house is judged to be a good by reference to the good house. And so Aristotle would disagree with Moore (1902, §3), who assumes that the claim “Books are good” must be false because there are bad books. Books and houses are of course tools and so their goodness will be derivative from goods in themselves (cf. *NE* I 6, 1096b8-16), but they still seem to partake of absolute goodness.

it is an end for us. Aristotle understands virtue of an X to be a “perfection” (*teleiōsis*) of an X (*Meta.* Δ 16, 1021b20-21), and this implies a teleological orientation of the X towards the virtue (*NE* II 1, 1103a23-26).¹⁴ Human nature is thus called good because virtue (and not vice) is an end of our nature. Perhaps one might consider this only a reason to call human nature potentially good, not actually good. But here one must remember that according to Aristotle, a form has the character of an end in relation to matter: thus, matter “aims at and desires [ἐφίεσθαι καὶ ὀργέσθαι]” form, which is “good and divine” (*Physics* I 9, 192a16-25). This is why he elsewhere claims that being is better than non-being (*GA* II 1, 731b28-30; cf. *Meta.* Θ 9, 1051a4-5): matter qua matter is non-being, but since it aims at form, which is being, form is better than it. On this interpretation, the human being “in capacity” (ἐν τῇ δυνάμει)—just like any other informed thing—can still have the character of an end in relation to matter. This, of course, does not explain why the substantial form of a human being is any better than that of a slug, but we discuss this in Section 5.

4. Absolute Goodness and Goodness for Something

We have discussed the relation of absolute goodness to *good in a kind*, and now we turn to *good for something*. To this end, consider a passage from *NE* IX 9, where Aristotle argues that the happy person will need friends. One of these arguments involves looking at the question from “a more naturalistic angle” (1170a13), and there we read:

[*NE* IX 9, 1170a19-24] Now living is among the things that are in themselves good and pleasant [τὸ δὲ ζῆν τῶν κατ’ αὐτὸ ἀγαθῶν καὶ ἡδέων]; for [living] is determinate, and to be determinate is characteristic of the nature of the good [τὸ δ’ ὀρισμένον τῆς ἀγαθοῦ φύσεως]. The good by nature is also good for the decent person; that is why living would seem to be pleasant for everyone. But we must not consider a life that is vicious or corrupted, or filled with pains; for such a life is indeterminate [ἀόριστος], as are its attributes.

The context makes clear that Aristotle is speaking in particular about human living, in particular about human living in activity (ἐν τῇ ἐνεργείᾳ, 1170a18)—thus, not the sort of living that occurs while sleeping but while acting and thinking. Such living is “in itself good” (1070a20), which here seems equivalent to “good by nature” (1170a21). I take this to mean that it is good in virtue of what it is—i.e. “absolutely good.”

This interpretation seems to be confirmed by what follows. Aristotle gives reason to think (cf. *gar* 1070a20) that life is “in itself good” by noting that it is something “determinate” (*hōrismenon*, 1170a20) and that being “determinate” is characteristic of the nature of the good. This is not the only place where Aristotle characterizes “determinateness” as proper to the nature of the good (cf. *EE* VII 12, 1245a1-3 and *NE* II

¹⁴ Cf. Hursthouse (2006, 110-112) and Leunissen (2014).

6, 1106b28-35).¹⁵ While an adequate discussion of this point falls outside the scope of this paper, I will say that I think Aristotle wants (and needs) to cash out this talk of “determinateness” in terms of “end-likeness” since to be determinate is to be determinate to—or as—an end. Thus, an end is always more determinate than something that exists for the sake of that end. And a capacity is indeterminate insofar as it has not yet achieved its end. In any case, on any plausible reading of this passage, Aristotle does not here say that the goodness of life consists in being advantageous for or relative to something.¹⁶ Instead, it is good because of its intrinsic features, though it is *also* (*kai*, 1070a21) good for the decent person (cf. *NE* V 1, 1129b4-6).

When Aristotle clarifies, “we must not consider a life that is vicious or corrupted or filled with pains” because it is “indeterminate” (*aioristos*, 1170a24), he seems to rely on two related doctrines. First, the true nature of something is revealed by the perfect and not the imperfect instances of the kind (*Pol* I 5, 1254a34-b2). Thus, for example, to understand the nature of the body, we must look at the healthy and not the diseased body. Second and more fundamentally, “badness” or “evil” (*to kakon*) is not a positive being but a certain corruption or privation of positive being.¹⁷ Since good is the opposite of evil, and positive being has the nature of an end and is thus good, evil would seem to be most properly thought of as a privation of good. Thus, for example, sight is a good (*NE* I 6, 1096b28-29, *Meta.* A 1, 980a24-26), and blindness, which is an evil, is a privation of sight (*Categories* [*Cat*] 10, 12a36). A full defense of the interpretation would be complicated and so must fall outside the scope of this paper.

But if Aristotle does take an evil to be a privation of good, then when he says that the corrupted life is “indeterminate” (1170a24), he must mean that it is partially indeterminate. It could not be completely indeterminate or it would not be a being at all. Aristotle expresses this last thought in *NE* IV 5 when discussing “mildness” (*praotēs*), the virtue concerned with anger. It is by means of this intermediate and praiseworthy condition that one gets angry “about the things one should, towards the people one should, and moreover as one should, and when and for how long” (1125b31-32). After discussing the deficient condition, which has no name, he turns to the excessive condition and notes that though one can be excessively angry “in all ways: towards the people one

¹⁵ Mirus (2012) discusses a number of passages in the theoretical philosophy where Aristotle uses such language.

¹⁶ There is an ambiguity in the locution *agathon tini*, which is translated “good for something” that is perhaps worth registering. The dative *tini* (“for something”) can be grammatically classified as either a dative of relation or a dative of interest. If it is read as a dative of interest, the phrase should perhaps be understood as “good, that is, advantageous for something.” If it is read as a dative of relation, then the phrase should be understood as “good relative to something.” Cf. Lawrence (2009, 210-211). But on either reading, I contend that the goodness need not *consist* in being a good relative to or advantageous to a substance.

¹⁷ As Aristotle explains privation in *Cat* 10, the privation of X is the absence of X in that which naturally has it (12a30). Thus, blindness, which is the privation of sight, is the absence of sight in that which naturally has it, the eye. Blindness does not occur in a tree or a stone.

should not, about the things one should not [etc.],” it is impossible for the same person to go wrong in all these ways (1126a8-11). His explanation?

[*NE IV 5, 1126a12-13*] For evil even destroys itself [τὸ γὰρ κακὸν καὶ ἑαυτὸ ἀπόλλυσι], and if it is complete, it becomes unbearable [κἂν ὀλόκληρον ᾗ, ἀφόρητον γίνεται].

One might have expected Aristotle to say that all the defects with respect to excessive anger cannot occur in the same person because some defects are incompatible with others.¹⁸ Instead he states a general truth about the nature of evil (*to kakon*), which we should understand as follows: Since evil is a privation of being it must exist in a positive being, and so if evil becomes so great as to destroy that positive being, it likewise destroys itself. Sickness, for example, is a privation of health (cf. *Meta.* Λ 5, 1071a9-10) and if it becomes so great as to destroy the living body it exists in, it likewise destroys itself. In *NE IV 5*, the idea seems to be that if there were a man who got excessively angry in every possible way, he could not be “borne” either by himself or others (cf. *NE IV 5, 1126a25-26* and *1226a31*). Being thrust out of society, he would be unable to live the life of a human, and so he (cf. *Pol.* I 1, 1253a25-29) and his vice (cf. *NE VII 1, 1145a25-26*) would be destroyed, i.e., sink below the human level.¹⁹

NE IX 9 also augments the passages from *EE VII 2* and *Meta.* Δ 16: just as the human being is judged to be something “good by nature” (*EE VII 2, 1237a16*) by reference to the excellent and not the vicious human, so the end of a human being, which is the human activity of living is judged also “good by nature” (*NE IX 9, 1070a21*) by reference to the excellent and not the vicious activity of living. Moreover, because “the excellent activity is better and more honorable than the [excellent] potentiality” (*Meta.* Θ 9, 1051a4-5, cf. *NE I 1, 1094a1-3* and *Protrep B17*), the human activity of living is better by nature than the human being (cf. *NE I 8, 1098b30-99a7*); it has more the nature of an end and is more determinate.

5. Judging One Substance to be (Absolutely) Better than Another

We have found reason to think that according to Aristotle, some things—including the human nature, the human activity of living, and human virtue—are absolutely good. The picture becomes more complicated, though, when we note that

¹⁸ This is how Gauthier and Jolif (2002, 303) interpret the ‘impossibility’ claim. They note that the irascible (ὀργίλος) person gets angry too quickly but also soon stops, and so does not hold his anger too long, like the bitter (πικρός) person. However, Aristotle says the fact that irascible people’s anger soon stops is the “best” thing about them (*NE IV 5, 1126a15*), and so does not seem constitutive of the vice itself. Thus, if irascibility and bitterness are incompatible that is only because of an accident of irascibility, and no true explanations make reference to accidental causality.

¹⁹ Though the privation theory of evil is often considered platonic—mostly because of St. Augustine but to a lesser extent Plotinus—Plato did not obviously hold it. Indeed, in *Meta.* N 4 Aristotle argues that it is incompatible with Plato’s mature metaphysics: if all things are constructed out of the dyad and the one, “it follows that all beings partake of evil except one—the one itself” (1091b35-36).

Aristotle makes comparative judgments of absolute value. As I mentioned earlier, Aristotle famously ranks the different human virtues with respect to goodness (cf. *NE* I 7, 1098a17; VI 13; X 7), and this in turn depends on a ranking of the parts of the soul as well as a ranking of the proper objects of the intellectual virtues. This latter ranking involves judging one substance to be better than another, and it will be my focus in this section.

My primary text here comes from *NE* VI [=EE V] 7, where Aristotle determines the nature of *sophia* (theoretical wisdom) and gives reason to think that it is distinct from *phronēsis* (practical wisdom) or *politikē* (political wisdom).²⁰ Aristotle begins by saying that because *sophia* is the most exact science, it must be science (*epistēmē*) plus knowledge-of-first-principles (*nous*) and with “the most honorable things” (τῶν τιμιωτάτων) as its subject matter (*NE* VI 7, 1141a19-20). He immediately adds:

[*NE* VI 7, 1141a20-22] For it would be odd for someone to think that political wisdom or practical wisdom is the most excellent science unless the best thing in the universe is man [εἰ μὴ τὸ ἄριστον τῶν ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ ἄνθρωπος ἐστίν].

Aristotle here assumes that in order for practical wisdom to be the best science, its proper object (which is in some sense “man” or “humanity”) must be the best object. Yet he also assumes that it is obvious that man is not the best object. He thus leaves the reader to conclude that political wisdom cannot be the best science, which is in fact *sophia*.

Aristotle then goes on to give two arguments, both of which aim to distinguish *sophia* first from practical wisdom (1141a22-28) and then from political wisdom (1141a28-33). After these, he adds:

[*NE* VI 7, 1141a33-b2] And if [the argument is] that the human is the best [βέλτιστον] of all animals, that does not matter—for there are other beings much more divine than the human with respect to their nature [ἀνθρώπου ἄλλα πολὺ θειότερα τὴν φύσιν], most obviously those beings composing the universe.²¹

Here he considers the possible argument that *phronesis* is the best science because its proper object, the human, is the best of all animals. Aristotle does not contest the human’s superiority to other animals, but notes that there are other beings better than humans. He says that these beings are “more divine” taking it for granted that if A is more divine than B then A is better than B. Aristotle then recapitulates that *sophia* is *epistēmē* plus *nous* concerning “the most honorable things by nature” (1141b3), and

²⁰ I should note that these translations do not translate what the words mean. If the words did mean “practical wisdom” and “theoretical wisdom” it would be ridiculous to argue that they are identical, and yet Aristotle supposes that someone could (non-ridiculously) make such an argument.

²¹ How does the claim that “the human is the best of all animals” reconcile with the claim at *Politics* I 2 that man is the best of all animals when virtuous but the worst of all animals when “separated from law and justice” (1253a32-33)? The answer is that Aristotle is again assuming that one must look to the non-corrupted instances in order to evaluate the goodness of that kind, as mentioned above (*Pol* I 5, 1254a34-b2).

clarifies a thought that ran through his two earlier arguments: the objects of *sophia* are not human goods because they are not achievable by humans. They are “high, amazing, difficult, divine” but “useless” (1141b6-7; cf. *EE* I 7, 1217a29-40).

In *NE* VI 7 Aristotle clearly does not explain the goodness of *sophia* and its proper activity by indicating how they benefit human beings. He does not, like Kraut (2011, Ch. 18), understand their goodness to consist in actualizing distinctively human capacities. Instead, he proceeds on the assumption that “the more valuable and honorable the object of a science, the more valuable and honorable the science itself is *in consequence*” (*Rhetoric* I 7, 1364b10, my emphasis; cf. *Meta.* K 7 1064b3-6). This is why it would be odd for anyone to call political wisdom the best science: its objects, while very good, are not the best, and the best science must have the best objects. Aristotle subscribes to this principle because he has a certain view about how the intellect works: it knows “by means of a certain likeness and kinship with its objects” (*NE* VI 1, 1139a10-11; cf. *DA* III 4, 429a13-18), and by this similarity the intellect partakes of the nature of the object. Consequently, the degree to which the object is good primarily determines the degree to which knowledge is good.²² Because Aristotle’s reasoning in *NE* VI 7 depends on this principle, there is no plausible deflationary reading of Aristotle’s judgment that one substance is better than another: e.g. that the human is the best of all animals (1141a33-34), but that stars are better than humans (1141a34-b2). Instead, we should interpret Aristotle as assuming that substances are in some sense absolutely good and that they can be ranked with respect to that goodness.

These judgments also do not occur in isolation. Aristotle relies on very similar reasoning when he ranks the goodness of perceptual and intellectual activities in *NE* X 4 (esp. 1174b18-19), and when he argues in *NE* X 7 that theoretically wise contemplation is “best [*kratistē*], since understanding [*nous*] is the best thing in us, and the objects of understanding are the best objects of knowledge (1177a19-21).” There is also *NE* VII 14, where Aristotle explains that a human does not always find the same thing pleasant because human nature is not simple (1154b20-22) while the god enjoys one simple pleasure because his nature is simple (1154b25-26). Because human nature requires such variation it is “base/inferior” (*ponēros*, 1154b30).

These judgments require an extraordinary metaphysics. To appreciate the oddness, consider that most scholars understand the good of a substance to be good merely relative to that kind of substance, and thus they should suppose that the good of one kind of substance is strictly incommensurable with the good of a different kind of substance. This, for example, is the explicit view of Allen Gotthelf (2012, 45-66), who set something of a precedent by his attempt to explain away Aristotle’s cross-kind

²² *De Anima* I 1, 402a1-4 says that the goodness of a science is determined both by its accuracy (*ἀκριβεία*) and by the goodness of its proper objects, but the implication of *De Partibus Animalium* I 5, 644b31-35 is that the goodness of the science is *primarily* determined by the goodness of its proper objects. Wolf (2010) and Adams (1999) both argue that the value of contemplative activities derives from the value of objects which are absolutely good, though they do not explain how this value transfer occurs.

evaluations. (He does not consider passages from the ethics, in particular those from *NE* VI 7, which as we noted, do not admit of a plausible deflationary reading.) However, when one agrees that Aristotle makes such judgments, one must likewise agree that the good of a substance is not good merely relative to that substance but also somehow absolutely good, and further that there is some external standard of absolute goodness by which substances can be measured.

Yet how should Aristotle think this? He famously denies the existence of Plato's separate form of the good in *NE* I 6 and *EE* I 9. Nevertheless, he is careful not to deny the existence of any separate good, and there are textual reasons to think he believes there is such a thing (see *Meta.* A 10, 1075a11-15; A 1, 982b4-10).²³ Nevertheless, what I here contend is that if Aristotle considers cross-kind evaluations in *NE* VI 7 to be compatible with his own philosophy, he must assume that one substance is the standard of goodness for all other beings. This standard would have to be the maximally best being—for if a being is not maximally best, it can be judged by reference to a standard of goodness, and so could not be that standard itself.²⁴ Now if this being were distinct from its proper good, it would not be the best good but something else (cf. *MM* II 5, 1200b14-15). And so the best being—alone of all beings—“is its good” (*EE* VII 12, 1245b18-19; *Meta.* A 7, 1072b26-30) and thus “simple” (*NE* VII 14, 1154b26).

Moreover, in order for the comparative judgments to be legitimate, any being that is not the maximally best being must essentially aim, as a being, at the maximally best being. This is because the only way to serve as a standard of goodness, according to Aristotle, is to be, in some sense, an end. To see this, consider some examples. (1) I can judge an eye to be defective as an eye because it sees poorly. My judgment is legitimate because the end of the eye is seeing. (2) Similarly, I can judge one eye to be better than another because one eye sees better than the other. My judgment is again legitimate because each eye has as its end seeing. (3) However, I might judge every horse to be defective as a horse because it is not a unicorn and does not have a horn in the middle of its forehead. However, my judgment is illegitimate because horses are not “trying to be” unicorns—they are not aiming at unicorn nature. (4) Similarly, I might judge a horse to be better than a cat because it better approximates the nature of a unicorn. But again my judgment is illegitimate because neither a horse nor a cat is aiming to be a unicorn.

²³ With Aquinas (1969, lectio 6, 87-96), Menn (1992, 548-549) and Shields (2015, 86-87), I take the attack *NE* I 6 to attack the existence of the Form of the Good and not the Good Itself. Unfortunately, Irwin (1999), Rowe (2002) and others suggest that the Good Itself is a target by inserting the phrase “Good Itself” in their translations (at *NE* I 6, 1096b3-4) where no explicit subject is present in the Greek. Aristotle does ask how knowing “this Good itself” (*NE* I 6, 1097a9) might help a craftsman, but the context makes it clear that he is speaking “the Form” (1097a10). Thus, there seems available a more charitable interpretation of this passage than that offered by Barney (2007).

²⁴ Compare here *Meta.* a 1, 993b19-31 but more especially the following bit of reasoning from Aristotle's lost dialogue *On Philosophy* as apparently preserved in Simplicius' commentary on the *De Caelo*: “In general, where there is something better there is also something best. Since, then, among things-that-are [τοις οὐσις] one is better than another, there is also something that is best, which will be the divine [τὸ θεῖον].” This is part of the fragment F16R in Barnes (1995, 2392).

Consequently, if Aristotle thinks that it is legitimate to judge human nature to be as such defective, he must think that human nature essentially aims at something beyond itself with which it can therefore be appropriately compared. And if Aristotle judges humans to be better than all other animals but the stars to be better than humans, that must be because he thinks that all these things essentially aim at a common end—the maximally best good.

Yet this requires clarification. First, I am arguing for a metaphysical and not an epistemological priority. That is to say, I believe one can accept the claim that man is the best of all animals without also believing that there exists a maximally best good. What I contend is that if Aristotle wishes to make such a claim compatible with his own philosophy, he must posit the existence of a maximally best good to which all other substances are ordered. Second, because natural substances must be essentially related to the maximally best being as to an end, this maximally best being cannot exist merely in our concepts. For if the maximally best being only existed conceptually the other beings could exist in relation to it only accidentally. A horse cannot be legitimately evaluated by reference to unicorn nature precisely because it bears no real relationship to unicorn nature. Third, in one way, the maximally best good—which Aristotle identifies as “the god” (cf. *Meta.* Λ 7, 1072b27-30)—could not be the end of any other substance. This is because the ends of all other substances must be achievable (cf. *DA* III 10, 433a27-30), but the god is not an achievable good (cf. *EE* I 7, 1217a30-40). Consequently, the achievable end that all other beings share must instead be “god-likeness.” Such a being will be good just to the extent that it is god-like, and one being will be better than another just to the extent that it is more god-like. Yet in another way, god would seem to be the end of all beings because all beings essentially aim at the god insofar as they essentially aim the achievable end of godlikeness. For the only thing that makes the end of godlikeness desirable is its essential resemblance to, and participation in, the goodness of the god.

Here it may help to consider the issue in a different way. After Aristotle in *NE* I 6 rejects that “good” is spoken of either univocally or by chance homonymy, he seems to leave two alternatives: analogy and focal meaning (aka “core-dependent homonymy”). “Good” does seem to be used by analogy when we speak of the relation of a capacity to its end: e.g. just as the power of sight is to seeing, which is sight’s good, so too the intellect is to active-understanding, which is the intellect’s good (cf. *NE* I 6, 1096b28-29). However, analogy does not seem to be able to explain the judgment that the intellect is better than the power of sight (cf. *NE* X 7, 1177a15-16) or the ranking of humans as better than all other animals. Instead these judgments of better and worse can only be explained by focal meaning. There must be a focal case of goodness—the maximally best being—and all other goods must be derivatively related to it.²⁵ In *Metaphysics* Γ 2,

²⁵ Cf. Menn (1992, 550) and Lawrence (2005, 156). Shields (1999, 126) and others argue that focal meaning requires asymmetrical account inclusion: x can be the focal case for y only if the account of x is

Aristotle explains focal meaning by noting that bodily health is the focal case health, while food is called healthy because it produces health in the body and urine is called healthy because it is a sign of health in the body, etc. In a similar way, there may be a state of the body that cannot be called “health” but can nevertheless be called healthier than another state insofar as it better approximates the state of health. When a sick person, who is no longer capable of health, nevertheless aims at the healthiest state available to him, it seems legitimate to say that in one sense health is his aim and in one sense not. Health is not the sick person’s aim insofar it is not an achievable end for the sick person, but it is the sick person’s aim insofar as the healthiest state available to the sick person is desirable just insofar as it has an essential resemblance to, and thus participation in, health. Thus, in the same way that the incurably sick person may aim at health in one way but not in another, so all beings aim at the good in one way but not in another (cf. *De Caelo* II 12, 292a22-b22).²⁶

6. The Metaphysics of Goodness in the Ethics of Aristotle: *NE* I 12

What further evidence do we have from the *NE* that Aristotle would explain such comparative judgments in the way I have suggested? Aristotle often calls something “divine” in order to indicate that it is extraordinarily good (e.g. I 9, 1099b13-18), and he regularly takes it for granted that if one thing is more divine than another then it is better than the other (e.g. I 2, 1094b7-10; VI 7, 1141a33-b2). He also seems to suppose that all things aim at godlikeness when he suggests, “perhaps [all animals] even do pursue the same pleasure, though not the one they think or would say, for all things by nature possess something divine” (VII 13, 1153b31-32). In closing, though, I focus on a passage that nearly articulates the picture I have sketched.

This is *NE* I 12 where Aristotle argues that happiness should be classed among the “honorable” goods (1101b11). He assumes a division of goods into capacities, honorable

cited in the account of y, and not vice versa. If this is correct, my proposal will not work because it seems possible to understand the goodness of any substance without understanding the goodness of God. Nevertheless, it is perhaps possible to interpret the spirit of Aristotle’s remarks on focal meaning as requiring only: x is the focal case for y only if the account of x belongs to *or is entailed by* the account of y but not vice versa. On the proposal above, the goodness of the god is entailed by the goodness of other substances. Cf. Aquinas (*Summa Theologiae* I 44, a.1 ad 1). The goodness of all other beings is essentially related to the goodness of the god but not vice versa (*De Motu Animalium* 6, 700b32-35). It also seems to me not improbable that Aristotle at *NE* I 6, 1096b27-28 included ἀπ’ ἐνός (“from one”) in addition to the more common πρὸς ἓν (“towards one”) in order to signal a more expansive notion of focal meaning.

²⁶ I take this explanation to answer adequately a hitherto inadequately answered worry articulated by Sarah Broadie and Jacques Brunschwig (1993) and Enrico Berti (2000; 2002; 2012). The main complaint is that god cannot be a final cause of the heavens since a final cause must be achievable, but the heavens do not achieve god. Berti (2012, 865) writes, “This good [mentioned at *Meta.* Λ 7, 1072a28] cannot be the unmoved mover of the heaven because—as follows from *De Anima* III 10, 433b15-16—that which moves desire is always a practicable good (*to prakton agathon*), i.e., contingent, whereas the unmoved mover of the heaven is in no way practicable or achievable by means of an action.” Broadie and Brunschwig (1993) give basically the same argument, and conclude that god can only be an exemplary cause, not a final cause.

things, and praiseworthy things (cf. *MM I 2*), but immediately rejects the idea that happiness is a capacity. He begins his first argument by noting that something is praised for having a certain character in relation to something else: thus, for example, someone is praised for being good or virtuous in relation to their possible actions and achievements (1101b15-16). The idea here is teleological: we praise virtue because it is for the sake of virtuous action. Interestingly, the gods can be praised, but such praise is comical (*geloion*, 1101b19) because the gods are praised in relation to us (1101b19-20). The gods are presumably being praised for benefiting humans by doing things like sending rain for the sake of crops. Such praise is strange because even though the gods may act for the sake of humans, they clearly do not exist for the sake of humans. Further, to praise the gods by reference to humans is to praise something better by referring it to something worse. In this introductory discussion Aristotle implicitly takes for granted two different domains of absolute goods: (1) goods achievable by humans, which include virtues, physical excellences and their respective achievements, and (2) total goods, by which I mean the goods achievable by humans as well as nonachievable goods such as the gods.

Aristotle continues to take for granted these two different domains as he continues:

[*NE I 12, 1101b21-27*] If praise is for these sorts of things, there is clearly no praise for the best things [τῶν ἀρίστων], but something greater and better [μειζόν τι καὶ βέλτιον]. Indeed this also seems to be so: for the gods and also the most godlike of men we deem blessed and happy [μακαρίζομεν καὶ εὐδαιμονίζομεν]. The same holds true of [practical] goods; for no one praises happiness as they praise justice, but they deem it blessed as something more divine and better [θειότερόν τι καὶ βέλτιον].

Aristotle here draws a conclusion: since when we praise something in relation to something better, the best things must somehow be beyond praise. He confirms this by noting that for certain goods there is a distinct verbal accolade: “deeming blessed” (*makarizein*) and “deeming happy” (*eudaimonizein*). In the domain of goods achievable by humans, happiness is honorable, and we deem it blessed (1101b25-27). In the total domain of goods, the gods and the most godlike of men are honorable, and we deem them blessed (1101b23-25). Aristotle’s reasoning seems to be again teleological: human happiness is deemed blessed as being something more divine than justice precisely because happiness has more the nature of an end than justice.

Nevertheless, there seems to be an ordering even among honorable goods, and this is suggested in what follows:

[*NE I 12, 1101b27-31*] Indeed, Eudoxus seems [δοκεῖ] to have advocated the supremacy of pleasure in the right way [καλῶς]: for he thought [ᾤετο] the fact that pleasure is not praised, even though it is a good, indicates [μηνύειν] that it is better than the praiseworthy goods, and [only] the

god and the good is [εἶναι] this sort of thing since the other goods are referred [ἀναφέρεσθαι] to these.

Eudoxus apparently argued that since pleasure is a good but not praised, it must be “the good” (1101b30), i.e. the best practical good. Aristotle approves of Eudoxus’ way of arguing (cf. *kalōs*, 1101b28) because it presupposes the account of praise just given. When Aristotle agrees with Eudoxus that “the god” and “the [best] good” are beyond praise since all other things are referred to them (1101b30-31), he again assumes the two domains of absolute goods: just as the human good is best among goods achievable by humans, so “the god” is best among total goods. This of course implies that there will be some honorable goods that are nevertheless referred to other better, honorable goods: e.g. just as virtuous actions are referred to the human good, so the godlike men and gods are still referred to “the god.”²⁷

This reading also implies that all practical goods, even the best, will still be referred to the god, the best among total goods. To support this, note that when Aristotle says that we do not praise human *eudaimonia* “as we praise justice” (*NE* I 12, 1101b26), he seems to imply that one can appropriately praise human *eudaimonia*. To do so one would have to refer it to a better good, which could not be another practical good. Indeed, Aristotle appears to praise human *eudaimonia* as something “divine” (see *NE* I 2, 1094b9-10; I 9, 1099b16-18; and even I 12, 1101b26-27), thereby apparently referring it to “the god,” and he explains that the human activity “most akin to this [viz. the god’s contemplative activity] will most of all have the character of happiness” (ταύτη συγγενεστάτη εὐδαιμονικωτάτη, *NE* X 8, 1178b22-23).

Aristotle closes *NE* I 12 with these lines:

[*NE* I 12, 1101b35-1102a4] It is clear to us from what has been said that happiness is among the things honorable and perfect [τῶν τιμίων καὶ τελείων]. It also seems that this is the case on account of happiness being a first principle [ἀρχή]. For it is for the sake of this that we all do everything else, and we take the principle and cause of goods to be something honorable and divine [τὸ αἴτιον τῶν ἀγαθῶν τίμιόν τι καὶ θεῖον].

After concluding on the basis of his first argument that happiness should be considered among the things honorable, Aristotle adduces a second argument to think this is so. Happiness is a first principle (*archē*). In virtue of being the ultimate end of goods achievable by humans, it is the cause of goods, qua goods. I add “qua good” because as Aristotle explains at *EE* I 8, the efficient cause may be the cause of a good but not of a good, qua good (1218b20-22). Only the final cause may be the cause of the good, qua good, and that is what Aristotle is attributing to the best practical good. When Aristotle

²⁷ Would this turn honorable goods into praiseworthy goods? The answer is perhaps found in the parallel discussion of the *MM*, where Aristotle says that some goods may be considered praiseworthy and honorable but only when considered in different respects: thus, virtue is honorable insofar as it is a state achieved, but it is praiseworthy insofar as it is for the sake of some further end (I 2, 1183b25).

says that this cause of achievable goods is divine, that is because it approximates the causality of the god, who in virtue of being the end of all beings, qua beings, is the cause of all goods, qua goods (cf. *NE* I 4, 1095a26-28).²⁸

7. Conclusion

I have given a mere sketch of the metaphysics of goodness presupposed in the ethics of Aristotle, and there are important complications that I have had to sidestep. Yet if the sketch is good, I believe it is worth filling in. In closing, I offer two thoughts.

First, Thomson (2008) and others have argued that a rejection of absolute goodness leads to a rejection of consequentialism, and so one might wonder whether, as I interpret Aristotle, his commitment to absolute goodness might allow a consequentializing of his ethics. Now I think Aristotle would reject consequentialism for several reasons, but one falls out of the metaphysical framework we sketched. Simply put: goodness cannot be increased. Remember that the god is the focal case of goodness in the universe, and other things are called good in relation to him (by participating in his goodness). Similarly, just as bodily health is the focal case of health and other things (e.g. urine) are called healthy insofar as they are related to health in the body (e.g. as being evidence of health in the body). Now just as there is no more health in (1) the healthy body plus healthy urine than in (2) the healthy body alone, so there is no more goodness in (1) the god plus the rest of the universe and (2) the god alone.²⁹ Thus, in an important sense, Aristotle's metaphysics does not admit of better and worse possible worlds, which seems to be a necessary condition of consequentialism.

Second, scholars have often puzzled over what Aristotle might mean when he says that the virtuous person acts “for the sake of the fine [*to kalon*]” (e.g. *NE* III 7, 1115b12-13) but I think that Aristotle's account of absolute goodness gives us some insight. All natural ends are in some sense absolutely good, but the ends that express our rational nature partake of absolute goodness to a higher degree—just as human nature partakes of absolute goodness more than all other animals. And so to act for the sake of *to kalon* is to act for the sake of this high degree of absolute goodness. Because we have reason, we can also understand—though many may only intimate—that even this *kalon* is the faint approximation of a higher absolute goodness. If our virtuous action is ordered to a further end, then we will love that end more than our own virtuous action insofar as it is the cause of the goodness of our virtuous action. In fact, our virtuous action is ordered to the good of the community, and it is because of this that one can die virtuously in battle “choosing the fine over everything” (*NE* IX 8, 1169a32). One acts for the sake of this end not because it is beneficial but because it is absolutely good. Moreover, because all our

²⁸ *EE* I 8 says that to be “the good itself” is to be the first among goods and the cause of all other goods being good (1217b4-5).

²⁹ Aquinas (1969, lectio 9, 181-195) more or less makes this point when commenting on *NE* I 7, 1097b14-20.

virtuous activities are ordered to the common good of the universe, which is the absolutely best good, Aristotle counsels us in all seriousness to use that good as a target, and to “put on immortality as much as possible” (*NE X 7*, 1177b34).

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