

NOTES ON *NICOMACHEAN ETHICS* 1173^a2–5*

In *Nicomachean Ethics* (= *Eth. Nic.*) 10.2, Aristotle addresses Eudoxus' argument that pleasure is the chief good in his characteristically dialectical manner. The argument is that pleasure is the chief good, since all creatures, rational (ἔλλογα) and non-rational (ἄλλογα) alike, are perceived to aim at pleasure (1172^b9–11).¹ At 1172^b35–1173^a5, Aristotle turns to an objection against Eudoxus' argument. For some object (οἱ δ' ἐνιστάμενοι) to the argument by questioning one of its premisses, namely that what all creatures aim at is the good (1172^b12–15). Instead, they claim that what all creatures aim at is not good (ὡς οὐκ ἀγαθὸν οὐδὲ πάντ' ἐφίεται, 1172^b36). This claim is reasonably taken to mean that not everything that all creatures aim at is good. But, as we shall shortly see, Aristotle dismisses it in a way suggesting a less charitable interpretation. At any rate, the significance of this objection is that it challenges the strong claim that what all creatures aim at is *the* good with an argument against the weaker claim that what all creatures aim at is good (or *a* good). For if the weaker claim is refuted, then the strong claim is refuted as well. Aristotle takes issue with the argument against the weaker claim, but without committing himself to the strong claim.

It is not clear whom οἱ δ' ἐνιστάμενοι refers to.² But it is clear in the subsequent defence of the weaker claim at 1172^b35–1173^a5 that Aristotle intends to refute the objection, thus defending this premiss in Eudoxus' argument. Aristotle dismisses as absurd the claim that what all creatures aim at is not good. Those who make the claim 'are talking nonsense' (μη οὐθὲν λέγουσιν, 1172^b36). So, on this point, Aristotle is in agreement with Eudoxus, and he is not merely reporting a rebuttal of the denial of the weaker claim. This is not uncommon in his dialectical approach. For it is precisely in reporting the exchanges between different participants of a debate that he carves out his own stance by defending, and embracing, some of the positions canvassed.

Moreover, in defence of the weaker claim, Aristotle even appeals to the authority of common opinion (1172^b36–1173^a2):

ἅ γὰρ πᾶσι δοκεῖ, ταῦτ' εἶναι φασιν· ὁ δ' ἀναιρῶν ταύτην τὴν πίστιν οὐδὲ πάνυ πιστότερα ἐρεῖ.

For what everyone thinks, that we assert to be the case, and a person, who abandons this conviction, will have nothing more convincing to say.

* I am grateful for the generous and helpful comments provided by the journal's referee.

¹ The argument is notoriously inconclusive and, starting with Aristotle (1172^b15–16), much questioned. For an overview, see J. Warren, 'Aristotle on Speusippus on Eudoxus on pleasure', *OSAPh* 36 (2009), 249–81, at 252–65.

² A. Grant, *The Ethics of Aristotle* (London, 1874), 2.318 and R.A. Gauthier and J.Y. Jolif, *L'Éthique à Nicomaque* II, 2 (Louvain and Paris, 1970²), 822 assume, without much argument, Speusippus to be the adversary.

By appealing to common opinion in this way ('that we assert to be the case'), Aristotle is hardly just reporting a strand in the debate. Instead, he seems wholeheartedly committed to it. So, despite the fact that *Eth. Nic.* 10.2 is a heavily dialectical chapter, Aristotle is committed to the defence of the weaker claim against this objection.

We may wonder why Aristotle takes this common opinion to have such authority, and we may doubt that laymen have any strong views on the issue in the first place. But be that as it may, my concern in these notes is the argumentative significance of the succeeding four lines (1173^a2–5), which I give in Bywater's edition:

εἰ μὲν γὰρ τὰ ἀνόητα ὀρέγεται αὐτῶν, ἦν ἄν τι λεγόμενον, εἰ δὲ καὶ τὰ φρόνιμα, πῶς λέγοιεν ἄν τι; ἴσως δὲ καὶ ἐν τοῖς φαύλοις ἔστι τι φυσικὸν ἀγαθὸν κρεῖττον ἢ καθ' αὐτά, ὃ ἐφίεται τοῦ οἰκείου ἀγαθοῦ.

In these lines, Aristotle addresses a *prima facie* consideration in favour of the objection against the weaker claim that what all creatures aim at is good. But the precise drift of the argument is not obvious. In the scholarly literature, these lines are scarcely discussed, and it is mostly the translations that reveal the interpretation.³ I will return both to questions of translation, and to textual considerations. But for a start I give the following provisional translation, leaving the terms of my primary concern untranslated:

For if τὰ ἀνόητα desire them [pleasures], there would be something in what is said, but if τὰ φρόνιμα too [desire them], how could it make any sense? And perhaps ἐν τοῖς φαύλοις too there is something natural good, which is greater than what they are in themselves, and which aims at the proper good.

In what we may label the dominant interpretation, τὰ ἀνόητα and τὰ φρόνιμα are taken to parallel, in reverse order, the ἔλλογα and the ἄλλογα in the opening lines of the chapter (1172^b10). That is, τὰ ἀνόητα is taken to refer to non-rational animals, and τὰ φρόνιμα to rational animals, or human beings. In the dominant interpretation, Aristotle is taken to concede that, *prima facie* at least, there is something to the objection against Eudoxus' argument when it comes to non-rational animals.⁴

However, the secondary literature is not particularly forthcoming on the sense in which the case of non-rational animals supports the objection. In the dominant interpretation, the idea seems to be that the argument in 1173^a2–5 is that non-rational animals are not authoritative for determining what is good, and that, hence, their pursuit of pleasure does not provide reliable evidence for the assumption that pleasure is good. But in so far as rational beings too (καί) desire pleasure, there is compelling evidence for the view. So, although the case of non-rational animals on its own provides insufficient, or

³ For my limited purposes here, it will suffice to consult the following selection of paraphrases, commentaries and translations: the anonymous paraphrast, [Heliodor.] *In Eth. Nic. paraphr.* Heylbut; Michael of Ephesus, Mich. *In Eth. Nic.* Heylbut; Grant (n. 2); J.A. Stewart, *Notes on the Nicomachean Ethics of Aristotle*, vol. 2 (Oxford, 1892); J. Burnet, *The Ethics of Aristotle* (London, 1900); Gauthier and Jolif (n. 2); T. Irwin, *Nicomachean Ethics* (Indianapolis, 1992²); R. Crisp, *Aristotle Nicomachean Ethics* (Cambridge, 2000); S. Broadie and C. Rowe, *Aristotle Nicomachean Ethics* (Oxford, 2002).

⁴ Grant (n. 2), 318; Stewart (n. 3), 407; Gauthier and Jolif (n. 2), 822; Irwin (n. 3), 155; Crisp (n. 3), 185; Broadie and Rowe (n. 3), 431; Warren (n. 1), 261 agree that τὰ ἀνόητα refers to non-rational animals. Against the claim of Gauthier and Jolif (n. 2), 822, the anonymous paraphrast (n. 3), 211.30–6 is non-committal on the issue. Michael of Ephesus (n. 3), 538.2–7 considers this interpretation as an option.

perhaps misleading, evidence for the view, the evidence from rational animals is reliable.⁵ At 1173^a4–5, then, a way to accommodate non-rational animals is considered, by showing that in fact what they desire may be good. The conjecture is that perhaps in these inferior creatures too (ἴσως δὲ καὶ ἐν τοῖς φαύλοισι) there is something natural, which aims at what is good for them.

Let me start with pinpointing an obstacle to understanding the reasoning in 1173^a2–5. When Aristotle argues that there would be something in what is said (ἦν ἄν τι λεγόμενον) in so far as τὰ ἀνόητα desire pleasures (εἰ μὲν γὰρ τὰ ἀνόητα ὀρέγεται αὐτῶν), ‘what is said’ must refer to the denial of the weaker claim, that is, to the contention that what all creatures aim at is not good. The question, then, is in what sense the case of τὰ ἀνόητα pursuing pleasure is supposed to lend support for that contention. For how is the weaker claim that what all creatures aim at is good supposed to be challenged by the observed fact that τὰ ἀνόητα pursue pleasure? In order to challenge the weaker claim straightforwardly, Aristotle should instead have argued that *whatever* τὰ ἀνόητα desire and pursue gives unreliable evidence for what is good, leaving to the next step in the argument the observed fact that τὰ ἀνόητα pursue pleasure specifically.

In the dominant interpretation, this piece of reasoning is taken to be shorthand for arguing that τὰ ἀνόητα provide no reliable evidence for the *conclusion* of Eudoxus’ argument, namely that pleasure is the good. But, in that case, ‘what is said’ would have to refer to the denial of this conclusion, that is, that pleasure is not (the) good, rather than to the denial of the weaker claim. I submit that this is a possible construal of an elliptically phrased argument, and that it has the virtue of accommodating the fact that the conditional εἰ μὲν γὰρ τὰ ἀνόητα ὀρέγεται αὐτῶν actually refers to their pursuit of pleasure specifically (although the αὐτῶν [‘them’] is somewhat unmarked). Nevertheless, it assumes that Aristotle, without notice, has turned from a *prima facie* consideration in favour of a denial of the weaker claim to a *prima facie* consideration in favour of a denial of the conclusion that pleasure is a good.

But my main concern about the dominant interpretation is the assumption that τὰ ἀνόητα refers to non-rational animals. For it is difficult to see what argumentative role the case of non-rational animals is supposed to play in 1172^b35–1173^a5. The case of non-rational animals matters for Eudoxus, who argues for the hedonist view that pleasure is *the* good for all creatures. Although Aristotle sides with Eudoxus as far as the weaker claim is concerned, his first and foremost interest throughout *Eth. Nic.* 10.1–5 is the question in what sense pleasure, or at least some variety of pleasure, is a *human* good. So what really motivates Aristotle’s engagement with the objection against Eudoxus is whether it deals a blow to this view. But if Aristotle’s goal is to defend the view that pleasure is a human good against an objection, the case of non-rational animals just seems irrelevant in the first place. More precisely, the contention that non-rational animals provide unreliable evidence for what is good has no bite as an objection against the view that pleasure is a human good.

However, I do not think that this is the drift of Aristotle’s argument here. To repeat, the direct target of the objection Aristotle takes issue with is the weaker claim that what all creatures aim at is good (1173^b35–6). If the weaker claim falls, then the strong claim that what all creatures aim at is *the* good falls as well. And since the strong claim is a premiss in Eudoxus’ argument, it jeopardizes the conclusion that pleasure is the

⁵ This interpretation is explicit in the anonymous paraphrast (n. 3), 211.33–4, and in Michael of Ephesus (n. 3), 538.2–7.

chief good. But, although Aristotle remains non-committal to this conclusion, the weaker claim matters for Aristotle, since he thinks that it lends support for his own view that pleasure is a human good. So he has reason to defend the weaker claim. However, he has no reason to defend the weaker claim in the broad sense, including the pursuit of non-rational animals. What he does have reason to defend is the weaker claim in the narrow sense that what all human beings aim at is good. It is this weaker claim in the narrow sense that I take Aristotle to defend against the objection in 1172^b35–1173^a5.

In fact, although Aristotle opens the discussion in *Eth. Nic.* 10.2 with the report of Eudoxus' observation that both non-rational and rational creatures pursue pleasure, there is no immediate reason to think that this observation is Aristotle's main concern here. The opening lines may just report, perhaps even paraphrase, Eudoxus' sayings, as a way of introducing the question whether pleasure is *a* good. A paraphrase is indeed likely, since this is the only occurrence of the term ἔλλογα in Aristotle. So I think it is far from obvious that in 1173^a2–5 Aristotle harks back to these opening lines.

What is more, since I think that Aristotle is arguing in his own voice here, and not reporting, merely dialectically, moves by unspecified interlocutors, I think the dominant interpretation runs into further difficulties. In particular, even if we grant the dominant interpretation that Aristotle's target is the assumption that non-rational animals provide reliable evidence for the claim that pleasure is good, it is hard to see why Aristotle would take this evidence to be less reliable. In Aristotle's teleological outlook on the natural world, non-rational animals, if any, tend to be designed to desire, and successfully to pursue, their proper good.⁶ Aristotle could have argued that the fact that non-rational animals aim at certain kinds of pleasure has little bearing on the question whether pleasure of any kind is a human good. However, that is not what he argues for. Instead, he targets the objection against the weaker claim that what all creatures aim at is good. So the case of τὰ ἀνόητα is meant to give some *prima facie* reason to doubt the weaker claim.

By the same token, what would be the point of saying that non-rational animals have something natural, which is 'greater than what they are in themselves' (κρείττον ἢ καθ' αὐτά), and which aims at their proper good? This reading would suggest that non-rational animals are at a loss about their own proper good, and that the only way to accommodate them with the view that all creatures aim at good things is by postulating that non-rational animals have a nature, which somehow transcends what they are in themselves, and which aims at their proper good.⁷ But that seems weird, and not in line with Aristotle's, or anyone else's, outlook on the functioning of organisms.⁸

Now, although most scholars take τὰ ἀνόητα and τὰ φρόνιμα as parallel to ἄλογα and ἔλλογα, Michael of Ephesus considers an alternative interpretation of τὰ ἀνόητα. For having conceded that the objection makes sense as far as non-rational animals are concerned, he then argues that, if instead one had bad (φουλοῖ) self-indulgent people in mind, then the objection has less bite (538.7–10). But somewhat curiously, in

⁶ Cf. Warren (n. 1), 258–60.

⁷ Warren (n. 1), 263 speculates, unconvincingly, and *ad hoc*, to my mind, that Aristotle appeals to 'the natural good which aims them at the good appropriate to them' in order to accommodate the fact that non-rational animals cannot *deliberate* about what is good for them.

⁸ *Eth. Nic.* 7.13, 1153^b25–32 may seem to lend support for the view that non-rational animals indeed are at a loss about what they pursue. But, as Aspasius points out, διόκουσιν οὐκ ἦν οἶονται οὐδ' ἦν ἂν φοίεν at 1153^b31–2 refers to human beings exclusively, since non-rational animals do not believe and say things (Aspas. *In Eth. Nic.* 153.3–6 Heylbut).

Michael's explanation of why the latter case is weaker, he appeals to 1173^a4–5 as if it were the explanation of bad people specifically, pointing out that bad people have something naturally good, namely their reason (νοῦς), 'which by nature pursues the unqualified and primary pleasure, which is good' (ὅς φύσει διώκει τὴν ἀπλῶς καὶ κυρίως ἡδονὴν ἀγαθὸν οὖσαν) (538.11–12).

I have serious doubts about Michael's overall interpretation, and he too seems to think that Aristotle addresses the objection that non-rational animals provide less reliable evidence for the view that pleasure is good. But Michael is certainly right in so far as the term ἀνόητος may refer to unintelligent or unknowing or just silly humans. A glance at Bonitz's *Index Aristotelicus* confirms that Aristotle occasionally uses the term in this way (notice, though, that the Index gives the dominant interpretation of 1173^a2). Again, in the dominant interpretation, the term τὰ φρόνιμα refers to rational animals in general. But it may also refer to practically wise humans, and even to certain non-rational animals, which nevertheless exhibit intelligent behaviour. For instance, the deer and the hare are sagacious or clever (φρόνιμα) (*Hist. an.* 1.1, 488^b15), bees are more clever (φρονιμώτερα) than many warm-blooded animals (*Part. an.* 2.2, 648^a8), animals with memory are more clever (φρονιμώτερα) and apt to learn than those without memory (*Metaph.* A 1, 980^b21–2), and those animals are called prudent (φρόνιμα), which have forethought about their lives (*Eth. Nic.* 6.7, 1141^a26–8).

We may chart the possible interpretations of τὰ ἀνόητα and τὰ φρόνιμα in the following way:

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| τὰ ἀνόητα | (a) | non-rational animals |
| | (b) | unintelligent non-rational animals |
| | (c) | unintelligent humans |
| τὰ φρόνιμα | (i) | humans |
| | (ii) | practically wise humans |
| | (iii) | practically wise non-rational animals; |

τὰ φρόνιμα in the sense of (iii), which is metaphorical anyway, is not instrumental in the context of exploring pleasure as a good in human life specifically, and even if Aristotle distinguishes some non-rational animals as more intelligent, there is no suggestion on his part that less intelligent animals differ from the former ones by failing to aim at good things. Consequently, since (b) makes good sense only as a contrast to (iii), we may dismiss both (iii) and (b) as reasonable interpretations in this context. Of the four remaining combinations, (a) + (i) is the dominant interpretation discussed above. (a) + (ii) is close to the dominant interpretation, but by specifying practically wise humans as the authoritative case, this option is curiously incomplete, since it leaves one wondering about the case of human beings, who are not practically wise. The contrast in (c) + (i), again, is somewhat insignificant, since the contrast is between human beings specified in a certain way, and human beings in general.

I shall now argue that the remaining option (c) + (ii) makes best sense of the reasoning in 1173^a2–5. For, elsewhere in the *Ethics*, Aristotle concedes that bad people (οἱ φαῦλοι) aim at what they think is good, or what appears good to them, such as base pleasure, although it is not good (*Eth. Nic.* 3.4, 1113^a33–^b1). The reason bad people go wrong in their pursuit is that they are ignorant (ἀγνοεῖ) about what they ought to do (*Eth. Nic.* 3.1, 1110^b28). In that sense, they are unintelligent, or not understanding. So the case of bad people provides straightforward *prima facie* support for questioning the weaker claim that what every creature aims at is good. Hence, in the expression ἐν

τοῖς φαύλοις at 1173^a4, τὰ φαῦλα would have its most frequent sense in the *Ethics*, that is, bad *human being*.

The neuter plural τὰ φαῦλα, just as τὰ ἀνόητα, may support the view that non-rational animals are at issue, although τοῖς φαύλοις may be the dative case of οἱ φαῦλοι (cf. Michael of Ephesus [n. 3], 538.8). The employment of the neuter plurals in this collective sense, which goes for τὰ φρόνιμα as well, may be coloured by the slightly biological slant of Eudoxus' argument, without, of course, suggesting that practically wise people, or bad unintelligent people, are biological species.⁹

The point of 1173^a4–5, then, would be that even in bad people there is something greater than what they are in themselves, that is, *qua* bad or vicious, which aims at what really is good for them, their proper good (τοῦ οικείου ἀγαθοῦ). What Aristotle probably has in mind here is that the rational part of the human soul has a desire of its own, namely wish (βούλησις), which is for the good (τὰγαθόν). The idea is that, even if bad people fail to achieve their proper good, they still, in virtue of being human beings, desire it. But they fail to form a successful action-guiding conception of their proper good and, on account of failing to fulfil their wish for the good, bad people are miserable (*Eth. Nic.* 9.4, 1166^b11–28).

Admittedly, there are some textual details that speak against my suggestion. To begin with, the καί in καί τὰ φρόνιμα on line 1173^a2 lends support to the dominant interpretation. For the καί deflects the attention from the defence of the weaker claim, and it instead puts emphasis on the question whether the testimony of τὰ ἀνόητα lends support to the view that pleasure is good. That is, in this interpretation, the fact that τὰ ἀνόητα desire pleasure gives insufficient support to the view that pleasure is good. But if we can observe that τὰ φρόνιμα *too* (καί) desire pleasure, then we seem to have solid evidence for the view. Notably, this interpretation does not rule out that even what τὰ ἀνόητα desire is in fact good. In my interpretation, by contrast, the target is the weaker claim that what everything aims at is good. The case of τὰ ἀνόητα, then, is to give *prima facie* counter-evidence against this claim. So my interpretation actually requires that what τὰ ἀνόητα pursue is not good.

Here I conjecture that the καί is a later addition, perhaps motivated by the dominant interpretation. The καί is omitted in multiple MSS.¹⁰ Admittedly, the dominant interpretation is compatible with both options, whereas my interpretation more or less requires that the καί is excised. For then the point is that, whereas the case of bad people actually gives *prima facie* support for the objection, and calls for an explanation, the objection is absurd when it comes to practically wise people's pursuit. And it is the explanation of bad people specifically that 1173^a4–5 is concerned with.

Furthermore, the ἴσως at 1173^a4 may seem to indicate that non-rational animals are at issue. For the cautious 'and perhaps' (ἴσως δέ) makes better sense when applied to non-rational animals, since it is less obvious that they have a nature, which somehow transcends what they are *qua* non-rational animals. But apart from the difficulty of making sense of the very idea that non-rational animals have such a nature, ἴσως δέ need not be taken that way. The δέ may be adversative, and the ἴσως may mean equally. Then 1173^a4–5 would give a

⁹ But see Brunschwig's comments on *Topics* 3.1, 116^a19 on the distinction between πάντες and πάντα in his Budé edition (*Aristote Topiques*, Tome I, ed. J. Brunschwig [Paris, 1967], 62 n. 1), and Alexander of Aphrodisias for the view that these lines refer to Eudoxus specifically (*In Top.* 226.16–18 Wallies).

¹⁰ According to Bekker, in Laurent. 81.11 (K^b), Marc. 213 (M^b) and Riccard. 46 (O^b), but Bywater reports it omitted only in K^b and M^b.

straightforward rebuttal of the *prima facie* consideration in favour of the claim that what all creatures aim at is not good. That is, having first raised the *prima facie* consideration concerning τὰ ἀνόητα, Aristotle at 1173^a4 asserts ‘But equally in bad people too ...’ (ἴσως δὲ καὶ ἐν τοῖς φαύλοις).

On the basis of these considerations, I suggest a slight emendation of Bywater’s text. The suggestion is not primarily based on text-critical considerations, but on what I take to be a reasonable reconstruction of the argument. In addition to excising the καὶ at 1173^a3, I have a preference for following Bywater (in the apparatus criticus) *et alios* in excising φυσικὸν ἀγαθόν at 1173^a4 as well.¹¹ φυσικὸν ἀγαθόν appears in the anonymous paraphrast (211.35), but it might be a paraphrase, and perhaps the source of the present variant. It is somewhat more likely that Michael actually read φυσικόν (538.22). I retain εἰ at 1173^a2 and 1173^a3, although admittedly ἦ (‘in so far as’) is tempting, making the argument even more straightforward.¹² This would give the following text:

εἰ μὲν γὰρ τὰ ἀνόητα ὀρέγεται αὐτῶν, ἦν ἂν τι λεγόμενον, εἰ δὲ τὰ φρόνιμα, πῶς λέγοιεν ἂν τι; ἴσως δὲ καὶ ἐν τοῖς φαύλοις ἔστι τι κρεῖττον ἢ καθ’ αὐτά, ὃ ἐφίετα τοῦ οἰκείου ἀγαθοῦ.

My preferred translation, based on (c) + (ii), then, would be as follows:

For if unintelligent people desire them [pleasures], there would be something in what is said, but if practically wise people [desire them], how could it make any sense? But equally in bad people too there is something, which is greater than what they are in themselves [*qua* bad], and which aims at the proper good.

On this interpretation, 1172^b35–1173^a5 is straightforwardly concerned with the defence of the weaker claim that what all creatures aim at is good.

Finally, this interpretation has rather far-reaching implications, and it is not confined to mere scholarly niceties. For it implies that even people who desire and pursue what they erroneously take to be good, still have a desire for, and in that sense aim at, what really is good. ‘Aiming at the good’, in other words, is ambiguous between ‘aiming at what is thought to be, or is represented as, good’ and ‘aiming at what (really) is good’. However, this is not the place to elaborate on this distinction further; I develop the details and arguments elsewhere.¹³

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¹¹ Stewart (n. 3), 407; Burnet (n. 3), 444; Gauthier and Jolif (n. 2), 822; Irwin (n. 3), 302.

¹² Stewart (n. 3), 407; Bywater, in the apparatus criticus; Burnet (n. 3), 444.

¹³ G. Grönroos, ‘Wish, motivation and the human good in Aristotle’, *Phronesis* 60 (2015), 60–87, at 74–81 and G. Grönroos, ‘Why is Aristotle’s vicious person miserable?’, in Ø. Rabbås, E.K. Emilsson, H. Fossheim and M. Tuominen (edd.), *The Quest for the Good Life: Ancient Philosophers on Happiness* (Oxford, 2015), 146–63, at 155–9.