

Introduction

This book examines Aristotle's method in ethics. Let me be clear that I do not think that Aristotle has an ethical "method" in the sense of a mechanical decision procedure for seeking ethical knowledge that eliminates the need for creative insight and judgment. In fact, his reliance upon judgment in his ethical inquiries, and philosophical inquiries more generally, is a major theme of this book. What Aristotle *does* have are considered views about how ethical inquiry ought to be conducted. *They* are the main subject of this book. When I speak of Aristotle's ethical "method" or his "method" in ethics, one should take me to be referring collectively to his views about how to inquire properly into ethical phenomena, his *norms* of ethical inquiry.¹

I am especially interested in Aristotle's views of the proper starting points, ending points, and structure of ethical inquiry. He expresses these views in methodological remarks throughout his ethical treatises. Those remarks receive ample attention in this study, but they are not its sole focus. Aristotle has views about how philosophical inquiries quite generally ought to be conducted. In keeping with my stipulated usage of "method" I shall refer to these views collectively as his "philosophical method." I believe that Aristotle's philosophical method informs his ethical method: his views about how to conduct philosophical inquiries influence his views about how to conduct ethical inquiries. Thus, in my view we cannot fully understand his ethical method without at least some knowledge of his general philosophical method. That is why I first develop an account of Aristotle's philosophical method (in Part I) and then proceed to discuss his ethical method (in Part II). Before I say more about the current study, I would like to situate it in the vast literature on Aristotle's ethical methodology.

¹ In speaking of Aristotle's "norms of inquiry" I follow Lennox 2011.

The Dialectical Orthodoxy

John Burnet launched the dominant view of twentieth-century scholarship on Aristotle's method in ethics when he claimed that the *Nicomachean Ethics* is "dialectical throughout" (Burnet 1900, v; cf. xxxix–xlvi). By this Burnet meant that Aristotle's conclusions are founded upon claims "of the most shifting character, taken as they are at one time from the opinions of ordinary people, at another from popular Platonism" (Burnet 1900, v–vi). Because he thought that Aristotle's arguments were based upon such claims, Burnet held that he did not really endorse their conclusions. As one might expect, this proposal met with heavy criticism. Burnet's critics took to task both his view of the way in which the *Nicomachean Ethics* is dialectical and the extent to which it is dialectical.² However, they would rarely question his presumption *that* the treatise is dialectical.

Burnet's impact resonates in these remarks by John Cooper some seventy-five years later:

[E]ven where the "opinions of the wise," what we all say or think, and the other hallmarks of dialectic are not emphasized in the text, there seems no doubt that Aristotle conceives of his procedure as for the most part dialectical. (Cooper 1975, 69)

These remarks are influenced by Burnet.³ But it is important to note that G. E. L. Owen's work, especially his article "*Tithenai ta phainomena*," is also responsible for Cooper's confidence that Aristotle's ethical methodology is dialectical.

Owen's article is motivated by an apparent incongruity between some of Aristotle's methodological remarks and his argumentative practice in the *Physics*.⁴ Very briefly, *APr* I.30, 46a17–22 suggests that scientific inquiries proceed by acquiring empirical observations and then subsequently explaining them (cf. *PA* I.1, 639b5–10; 640a13–15; *Cael* III.7, 306a5–17). However, when we turn to the *Physics*, Owen thinks, we find detailed conceptual analyses, not an attempt to explain empirical phenomena.⁵ In order to solve this puzzle Owen first distinguishes Aristotle's method in empirical contexts (his "empirical" method) from his method in philosophical contexts (his "dialectical" method). He then makes a further

² For criticisms of Burnet's interpretation, see Greenwood 1909, 132–44; Hardie 1980, 39; Joachim 1951, 30.

³ See Cooper 1975, 69n.94. ⁴ Owen 1961, 84–5.

⁵ In viewing the *Physics* as a conceptual or a priori treatise Owen was influenced by Mansion (1946, 211). This view, in turn, influenced Wieland (1962) and Nussbaum (1986, 240–63), though it has recently – and rightly – fallen out of favor.

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distinction between the *Physics* proper and other empirical treatises like the *De Caelo* and *Meteorology*.⁶ Owen ultimately solves the previous puzzle by arguing that the *Physics* is a philosophical treatise and, consequently, observes Aristotle's dialectical method.

In his paper Owen drew attention to texts that have come to be central to the debate about Aristotle's philosophical method, including the following:

Furthermore, it is useful in relation to the first principles of each science. For it is impossible to say anything about them, reasoning from the peculiar principles of the proposed science, since the principles are first of them all; it is through the *endoxa* about them that we must discuss them. But this is peculiar or at least especially appropriate to the dialectical [craft]. For, being investigative it has a path to the principles of all studies. (*Top* I.2, 101a36-b4)

As Owen reads it, this passage asserts that “the first premises of scientific arguments can be established by methods which start from the *endoxa*” (Owen 1961, 92). This implies that for Aristotle there is a non-empirical route to scientific principles, one that does not start from or conform to empirical observations. In fact, many scholars believe that the following passage, which was also highlighted by Owen, provides “the clearest and best example . . . of what dialectical inquiry meant for Aristotle” (Cooper 1975, 69):

We must, as in the other cases, set the *phainomena* before us and, after first puzzling over them, go on to establish all the *endoxa* about these affections or at least most or the most authoritative of them; for if we both resolve the difficulties and leave the *endoxa* undisturbed, we shall have proved the case sufficiently. (*EN* VII.1, 1145b2-7)

Owen (1961, 88) argued that Aristotle's treatment of place in *Physics* IV employs the method in this passage. And scholars have since claimed to find applications of this “endoxic” method widespread throughout the corpus.

Owen's work was very influential. In addition to accepting his contention that the *Physics* is a dialectical work, many scholars came to believe that, for instance, the biological works – works that Owen himself would have considered empirical – are dialectical.⁷ In the realm of ethics, which is our main concern, Owen's conclusions allowed scholars to affirm Burnet's general line, i.e., that Aristotle's method in ethics is dialectical, without having to accept the latter's *ad hominem* interpretation of dialectic. Owen's

⁶ Owen 1961, 91. ⁷ Balme 1972, 127; Reeve 1992, 32.

Aristotle could reach the truth in ethics and even establish ethical principles by means of dialectical inquiry.

Toward a Scientific Reading of Aristotle's Method in Ethics

Owen's views still influence the debate about Aristotle's philosophical method, but they are steadily losing ground. Recent scholarship has begun to question his claim about the power of dialectic.⁸ Scholars often concede that dialectic has *some* constructive role to play in Aristotle's treatises, but they deny that it is his method for establishing first principles. For example, Bolton claims that peirastic dialectic helps accumulate the data by which scientific theories are tested,⁹ while Reeve maintains that dialectic's role in philosophy is primarily aporetic.¹⁰

Doubts have also been raised about the orthodox reading of Aristotle's method in ethics. Scholars have more recently questioned both the general presumption that Aristotle's ethical method is dialectical and the more specific proposal that the endoxic method of *ENVII.1* is his central ethical method.¹¹ Some scholars have also argued, positively, that the ethical treatises follow the method described in the second book of the *Posterior Analytics*.¹² In fact, this theme has been recently explored in a collection of essays edited by Devin Henry and Karen Nielsen,¹³ though not all of its contributors are equally sympathetic to a scientific interpretation of Aristotle's ethical project.

The strategy of appealing to the *Posterior Analytics* for methodological illumination is not solely used by scholars working on Aristotle's ethical treatises. It is a growing trend in Aristotle studies that began with work on Aristotle's biology¹⁴ and has now found its way to work on his method in psychology,¹⁵ metaphysics,¹⁶ physics,¹⁷ politics,¹⁸ and even poetics.¹⁹ In fact,

⁸ For criticisms of Owen, see Bolton 1987, 129–30; 1999, 85–9; Smith 1993, 351–4; 1997, 52–4; 1999, 50–3. Though departing from Owen on a number of details, Irwin's developmental interpretation of Aristotelian dialectic is clearly indebted to his work. I discuss Irwin's interpretation in sections 3.1 and 8.1.

⁹ See Bolton 1994a; 1999. Though he denies that dialectic establishes the principles of theoretical sciences, Bolton argues that it is Aristotle's main method in ethics in Bolton 1991a.

¹⁰ See Reeve 1998, 246–50; 2012, 61.

¹¹ Natali 2007; 2010; 2015; Frede 2012; Karbowski 2015a; Salmieri 2009; Zingano 2007.

¹² See the works by Natali, Salmieri, and myself in the previous note.

¹³ Henry and Nielsen 2015.

¹⁴ Bolton 1987; Charles 1990; Gotthelf 1987; 1997; Kullmann 1974; Lennox 1987a; 2001b; Leunissen 2010.

¹⁵ Achard 2005; Bolton 1978. ¹⁶ Bolton 1994b; 1996; Charles 2000, ch. 11; Code 1997.

¹⁷ Bolton 1991b. ¹⁸ Karbowski 2013. ¹⁹ McKirahan 2010.

the extension of this interpretive strategy to ethics is fairly recent and has had a mixed reception.²⁰

Skeptics may dismiss this scientific turn in Aristotle studies as a massive conspiracy borne of careless scholarship or a sheer accident on the part of Aristotle. But I will argue in Part I of this book that it is neither. Aristotle thinks that philosophy is essentially oriented to *epistēmē*. That is the kind of knowledge that philosophers as such seek. However, he does not think that dialectical reasoning is capable of yielding *epistēmē*. The method that, in his view, philosophers must follow in order to achieve *epistēmē* is described in the second book of the *Posterior Analytics*. That method is so widespread, I shall claim, for the simple reason that it is Aristotle's general philosophical method.

This study is primarily concerned with Aristotle's method in ethics. But I approach that topic from the vantage point of Aristotle's general conception of philosophy and its method. I believe that he has substantive and interesting views about what kind of enterprise philosophy is and how to do it and that they inform his ethical treatises. Consequently, I think that we cannot fully understand what Aristotle is doing in those treatises – what kind of knowledge he is seeking, how he is seeking it, and where he starts from – without a grasp of his general conception of philosophy and its methodological norms. By approaching Aristotle's ethical treatises in this top-down way, i.e., from the perspective of his more general view of philosophy, I hope to provide a novel defense for a scientific and non-dialectical reading of their methodology.

Aristotle on Philosophy and Its Method

In Part I of the book I examine Aristotle's conception of philosophy and its method. Generally speaking, I aim to clarify his view of the enterprise of philosophy, the structure of philosophical disciplines, philosophy's relation to dialectic and demonstrative science, and the norms of philosophical inquiry. Chapter 1 discusses Aristotle's conception of dialectic. Chapter 2 investigates his view of philosophy proper. Chapter 3 investigates Aristotle's general philosophical method.

The stance I defend on these matters differs considerably from that adopted by Owen. Recall that Owen finds *two* methods in Aristotle:

²⁰ Lukewarm reviews of Henry and Nielsen 2015 are offered in Mann 2016 and McDavid 2015. Doubts about a "scientific" interpretation of Aristotle's ethical project are also expressed in Scott 2015, 171n.5.

a dialectical method and an empirical method. The former, he contends, is Aristotle's philosophical method. It governs the inquiries conducted in his philosophical treatises, whereas the empirical method governs the inquiries in his empirical treatises. On Owen's interpretation, philosophy is intimately associated with dialectic and distanced from empirical science. In Part I of this book I will argue, on the contrary, that Aristotle distances philosophy from dialectic and intimately associates it with demonstrative science.

Dialectic and Philosophy

In my view, Owen's interpretation goes wrong in at least two ways. First, it misrepresents Aristotle's conception of the relation between dialectic and philosophy. Unlike Plato, Aristotle consistently distinguishes dialectic and philosophy. What is more, his view of the epistemic standards by which dialecticians and philosophers reason implies that dialectical and philosophical reasoning are incompatible. The philosopher, who is relentlessly devoted to truth, has no use for dialectical reasoning; for as I argue in Chapter 1, dialectical reasoning proceeds exclusively according to belief, whereas philosophical reasoning proceeds according to truth.

Though dialectical reasoning has no place in truth-oriented philosophical inquiries, Aristotle concedes that mastery of the dialectical craft can make the detection of truth easier. For example, its constituent strategies enable an individual to form valid arguments on both sides of a debate. One of these arguments will be sound. So, once the opposing arguments have been set out, the task is simply to select the sound one. Interestingly, however, Aristotle does not think that the dialectical craft helps with this second task. In his view, its techniques do *not* enable us to distinguish sound from unsound arguments because they are not truth-detecting. Consequently, though Aristotle admits that training in dialectic can be helpful to the philosopher, he thinks the help it offers is limited and, ultimately, optional, like ballet training to professional athletes.

Philosophy and Science

The second problem with Owen's interpretation is that it attributes an anachronistic distinction between philosophy and science to Aristotle. *We* distinguish philosophy from science, but Aristotle does not. Physics, mathematics, metaphysics, and ethics are all considered branches of philosophy by him; and insofar as they are branches of philosophy they share certain features and aspirations. First and foremost, they seek the truth

about their respective domains. Coupled with certain metaphysical and epistemological assumptions, philosophy's concern with truth spawns additional features. I discuss these in Chapter 2. For my purposes in this book, philosophy's most important feature is its aspiration to *epistēmē*, demonstrative scientific knowledge.

According to Aristotle, reality divides into independently intelligible domains. Each domain has its own unique set of foundational principles, but all domains of reality have a common structure. They are broad causal networks. For this reason Aristotle thinks that knowing the truth about any domain is not merely a matter of having a reasonable justification for one's claims about it; it is a matter of grasping the causal relations between its constituents and representing them in explanatory syllogisms ("demonstrations"). The latter achievement is *epistēmē*. So, in addition to being truth-oriented, all philosophical disciplines are *epistēmē*-oriented and their finished theories take the form of demonstrative sciences. Importantly, not all demonstrative sciences are equally precise. Some, e.g., natural philosophy and, arguably, Aristotle's finished ethical theory, contain claims that are true only for the most part, as opposed to invariably. But they still have the sort of axiomatic structure described in *APo* I and yield a qualified form of *epistēmē*.

Aristotle's General Philosophical Method

Since philosophical disciplines are *epistēmē*-oriented, their practitioners must follow norms that promise to take them to *epistēmē*. The techniques constitutive of the dialectical craft do not meet this constraint; they do not enable one to discern truth, let alone causal relations. Consequently, I believe that Aristotle's general philosophical method is not contained in the *Topics*. Instead, in Chapter 3 I argue that it is described in the second book of the *Posterior Analytics*.

The most direct piece of textual evidence for thinking that the second book of the *Posterior Analytics* describes Aristotle's general philosophical method is a remark in *EE* I.6 in which he refers to seeking causal definitions as the "philosophical approach" in all areas of inquiry (1216b35-9). His most extensive remarks about such causal definitions and how to seek them are contained in *APo* II, and his way of referring to them in *EE* I.6 – as definitions which make clear not only "the what" (*to ti*) but "the why" (*to dia ti*) – is strikingly reminiscent of the main lesson of *APo* II.2: what something is (*to ti estin*) and why it is (*to dia ti estin*) are the same. When one further observes that traces of the method of the second book of the

Posterior Analytics (the “*APo* II method”) are widespread throughout the corpus, it becomes difficult to deny that Aristotle conceives that method as his general philosophical method.

In Chapter 3 I suggest that Aristotle preferred the *APo* II method to dialectic as his general philosophical method because he thought it better suited to the acquisition of *epistēmē*. The method has many bells and whistles, but what, ultimately, gives it a leg up over dialectic is that it is truth-oriented from the very beginning. The starting points of the *APo* II method are not beliefs (even reputable ones), but facts (*to hoti*). Briefly, facts are known truths acquired from reliable epistemic sources such as perception, experience, and induction. They serve as starting points for *epistēmē*-oriented philosophical inquiries, not merely because they are true, but also because the attributes and relations they depict are systematically related to the first principles of the relevant domain: the latter are the causes of the former. *Epistēmē* comes by way of knowing (having *nous* of) first principles.²¹ So, the *APo* II method promotes the acquisition of *epistēmē* by directing philosophers to seek the causes of the initial facts.

Local or Domain-Specific Norms

I think that the *APo* II method is Aristotle’s general philosophical method; its norms govern all philosophical inquiries as such. But they are not the only kind of norms that he thinks constrain philosophical inquiry. Aristotelian philosophy is compartmental. It has various branches, and each branch studies a different domain of reality. Aristotle was fully aware that domains differ in all sorts of methodologically relevant ways. For example, some domains contain kinds whose instances undergo change, while others have kinds with unchanging instances. These differences impact how one ought to seek *epistēmē* of them and how precise our *epistēmē* of them can be. Consequently, in addition to general philosophical norms Aristotle acknowledges the existence of what, following Lennox (2011), I will call “local” norms.

Local norms do not govern all philosophical inquiries. They are restricted to specific branches of philosophy, because they reflect methodologically

²¹ Aristotle recognizes two kinds of *epistēmē*: (i) demonstrative *epistēmē* of what follows from the first principles and (ii) non-demonstrative *epistēmē* of the first principles. He often refers to (ii) as “*nous*.” Frequently in this book, I will speak of “*epistēmē*” indiscriminately. Generally, it will be clear from the context which type of *epistēmē* is at issue, and, in any case, it is not possible to possess one type of *epistēmē* without the other. So, I will only distinguish these two types of *epistēmē* when it is absolutely crucial for my point or argument.

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relevant features of their particular subject matters and/or aims. However, they still have a fairly broad scope because they apply to all inquiries in the relevant branch of philosophy. *DA* I.1, for example, contains local norms of psychology.²² The norms presented there are not directed at all philosophers. Instead, they are narrowly targeted at philosophers inquiring into the soul, and they provide advice about, for example, what questions about soul must be answered in order to achieve *epistēmē* of it, the order in which they should be answered, and what format the definitions of psychological attributes must take. Moreover, these norms do not apply only to one or two lines of inquiry conducted in the *De Anima*. Aristotle mentions them at the beginning because they encompass *all* of the lines of inquiry in that treatise.

Judgment in Philosophical Inquiry

General philosophical norms set constraints upon the overall shape of philosophical inquiries. For example, they dictate that all philosophers must seek definitions that explain the initial facts. Local norms offer further guidance to philosophers examining specific domains by informing them, for instance, about what modes of causation are most pertinent, what questions about the subject matter merit attention, and how one should evaluate competing claims about the first principles of the domain. However, neither general philosophical nor local norms micromanage. They do not dictate that particular lines of inquiry in particular branches of philosophy must have *this* structure as opposed to *that* structure. For example, one cannot derive a concrete strategy for examining particular psychological phenomena from the norms described in *APo* II or *DA* I.1. General philosophical norms and the norms local to specific branches of philosophy leave philosophical inquirers space to devise unique argumentative strategies for each particular item on their agenda.

This last observation is important because scholars often characterize Aristotle's philosophical method as "aporetic" and then explain what this means by saying that he tends to proceed by raising and solving puzzles about the immediate subject of inquiry. Now, I have no objection to calling his method "aporetic." Aristotle does often use puzzles or *aporiai* in his inquiries. What I do wish to combat are the impressions, first, that he *always* raises puzzles and, second, that when he does, he does so *in the same way*. Aristotle does not always generate puzzles about the subject of investigation. Nor, when he does, does he do so in the same way. Sometimes he raises

²² For discussion of these norms, see Lennox 2011, 41–4.

puzzles at the beginning of the inquiry, but sometimes he only does so at the middle or the end of the investigation. Moreover, the puzzles he raises have various sources and serve different functions.

Instead of presuming that specific uses of puzzles and *endoxa* are written into his philosophical method, I think it preferable to view the appeal to puzzles and *endoxa* as instruments or “tools” in his argumentative repertoire that he uses as he sees fit in individual contexts. On my interpretation, no general philosophical or local norms dictate whether, when, and how Aristotle makes use of *endoxa*, puzzles, and the other items in his vast methodological toolbox, e.g., fresh-starts, analogical arguments, examples, etc. His use of such strategies in particular cases is ultimately a judgment call on his part, informed by reflection about what, he thinks, is necessary for achieving insight in the case at hand.

Topic-Specific Norms

The lines of reasoning informing Aristotle’s decisions about particular tools in his argumentative repertoire are seldom explicitly stated. In fact, sometimes he goes about his business without commenting at all upon his decided strategy for investigating a topic. Other times Aristotle speaks up, and in these cases he offers normative remarks that express his decisions about how best to investigate the particular topic at hand. These remarks can be more or less expansive. Here is a very brief example from *EE* II.10: “let us next discuss choice, after first raising some puzzles about it” (1225b18–19). This claim is not a general philosophical norm nor a local ethical norm. It does not say how all philosophical or all ethical inquiries must proceed. It expresses a normative judgment about how to investigate choice and choice alone. I shall call norms like this, which are restricted to specific subjects or lines of inquiry in a treatise, “topic-specific norms.”

The so-called endoxic method of *EN* VII.1 is often hailed to be Aristotle’s general philosophical or ethical method. But I think that it is neither. On my reading, the procedure described in *EN* VII.1 (quoted above) is in fact a rather elaborate topic-specific norm restricted to *EN* VII.1–10. It describes the concrete strategy that Aristotle thinks ought to be followed in seeking definitions of *akrasia*, *enkrateia*, etc. But there is no presumption that all philosophical inquiries, or even ethical inquiries, should have the same format. Admittedly, other lines of inquiry in the corpus have a similar structure to that of *EN* VII.1–10, but, upon closer inspection, they are not the same. Since I believe that it is a topic-specific norm whose application is narrowly restricted to a particular line of inquiry