Introduction

0. The Commentary

That a reader benefits from a commentary on Aristotle's dense writing should be obvious to anyone who has tried to read Aristotle. Precisely because there exist excellent commentaries on the *Nicomachean Ethics* already (on which, see the Preface), why have a commentary on Book X? First, many readers rightly regard Book X as the pinnacle of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. It is here that he puts the coping-stone on the edifice so artfully constructed in EN I–IX. Other readers, by contrast, find Book X incongruent with the rest of the EN because it seems to propagate an amoral ideal, that of a thinker who flies high above the common run of people and is not subject to their human concerns. So Book X is controversial and will, for this reason, benefit from a fresh discussion.[1]

Second, none of the commentaries I have consulted are comprehensive in the sense that they aspire to comment on the whole of the text of Book X. Usually, they leave out the bits that seem too clear, too boring, or too obscure. While I also do not comment on every single word or line, I nevertheless try to be comprehensive, insofar as I divide the whole text into units of thought, and then go through every unit in the corresponding entry of the commentary. I call the entries by their traditional name, *lemma* (plural *lemmata*, from the Greek *lêmma*: assumption, premise, or argument). Dividing the text comprehensively into lemmata, however, yields more than mere comprehensiveness. It also allows the commentary to trace the flow of Aristotle's thought, to emphasise the continuity of his arguments, and to show how the smaller units feed into the larger structure. So, the commentary tries not only to illuminate *what* Aristotle thinks in each lemma, but also *how* he thinks.

[1] I use the traditional acronym 'EN' (which stems from the Latin *Ethica Nicomachea*) instead of the now common 'NE'.

But how do we find out what he thinks? What would help us to understand the point of each unit of thought? One influential line, adopted by many of the ancient commentators, is to explain 'Aristotle through Aristotle'. That is, we adduce other passages from the same author to illuminate the passage over which we puzzle. However, whether, and to what extent, a commentary should rely on this time-tried hermeneutical principle depends on how we understand it. I have eschewed the version employed by many of the ancient commentators, because it seems to rest on shaky ground. In particular, I reject inferences of the type 'Aristotle must mean … in this passage in the EN, because he says XYZ in the *Physics*.' This approach seems to presuppose a more or less rigid system of thought in which one can simply use the building-blocks from one work to patch up apparent holes in another. But his thinking seems more flexible and interesting, as the many signs of reworking the material show (cf. §4). A more promising approach takes into account some flexibility in Aristotle's thought, but nevertheless assumes that the foundations of Aristotelian philosophy remain intact throughout his works. This approach, too, suggests that he expected his readers to know his non-ethical treatises well enough to understand the points made in the EN – even if the transferred building-blocks may need to be cut to size to make them fit. If his ethical philosophy is built in part on non-ethical foundations, it would be the task of the commentary to guide the reader to the relevant passages in the non-ethical works. But there is also an alternative that rejects the common assumption of the first two approaches, namely that the EN rests on principles that are justified in works other than those concerning ethics. This more circumspect approach derives some support from the methodological claim in EN I.3 that an ethical enquiry has its own kind of precision, differing from mathematics and, though not stated here, from first philosophy (what we would call 'metaphysics') and natural science. Indeed, in the same chapter, Aristotle makes demands on the character and age of a suitable audience, but he does not seem to require previous knowledge of Aristotelian logic, natural philosophy, or metaphysics. This might indicate that he takes the latter qualification to be irrelevant to the successful study of ethics.[2]

The goal of this commentary is to bring Aristotle alive as a thinker. To this end, each lemma raises and discusses what seem to me philosophically the most pertinent questions. Usually this requires having an eye on what went

[2] Scholars differ over the three hermeneutical approaches. For the latest examples of approaches one and two, see the introduction in Henry and Nielsen 2015. For a trenchant critique, and a staunch defence of the separability of ethics, see Polansky 2017.

on before, both in the immediate context, but also in the larger argument of the EN. So, I whole-heartedly endorse 'Aristotle through Aristotle' as long as the scope is confined to the EN. Of course, where relevant (and perhaps necessary), I also refer the reader to Aristotle's other works – but primarily by way of background illustration. While most lemmata are self-contained, in the sense that they do not rely on other texts to be intelligible, a number of lemmata come properly to life only when read in the light of the Platonic subtext. But does Plato really play this important role, given that the EN contains less than a handful of direct references to Plato? And if he did play that kind of role, why does Aristotle not say that his students must know Plato's philosophical writings? One way of answering the question is to assume that Plato's dialogues are aimed at a wider audience, and that one might expect that a student wanting to study with Aristotle should be sufficiently interested in philosophy to know at least the most important dialogues of Plato.[3] But perhaps one can modify the answer to dispense with the questionable assumption that dialogues such as the *Philebus* and the *Laws* were widely known, and do so in two ways. Very few of the lemmata are self-contained in the sense that they could be understood by just anyone. So, i), some training in, or experience with, philosophical thinking is clearly required. This training may suffice to 'get' the argument on the page. But Aristotle may also expect a specific type of philosophical training, ii), training that partly consists of familiarity with Plato's dialogues. Probably, like Plato, Aristotle wrote the EN for a 'mixed audience', one having some background in i) or ii). Those who discern the Platonic subtext will philosophically get more out of the text, but those who do not may still reach the goal of the EN (on which §3.3). So, to make reading EN X as rewarding as possible, the commentary provides the Platonic background where it is especially fruitful for understanding the philosophical point at issue.

Upshot. The commentary focuses on the philosophical issues that arise in the course of working through the text. Leaving aside philological niceties, the commentary will often explore several possible ways of reading the text to enable the reader to make up her own mind about the best interpretation of a given passage. It concentrates on conceptual questions, individual arguments, and clusters thereof, and their contribution to the overall arch of the argument in EN X. But the enquiry does not take place

[3] Robb 1994, 233 suggests that 'some of Plato's dialogues were read aloud with success to sophisticated groups of Athenians'. Cf. Harris 1989, 86 who notes that the works of Protagoras, Anaxagoras, and Isocrates were published in Athens, at least partially, by being read out loud. So, one could pick up some philosophy outside the specialised schools.

in a vacuum, conceptual or historical. To bring out the best in Aristotle's arguments, the commentary places Aristotle's thought in a wider framework. The philosophical framework of the EN on which the commentary relies is sketched in the introduction. The relevant background in Plato's philosophy is given in the commentary.

1. The Guiding Principle of the *Nicomachean Ethics*

The Nicomachean Ethics (EN) is a well-organised work on ethics. It begins, in Book I, with the fairly indeterminate notion of 'the highest good', which it subsequently spells out as happiness. How the highest good structures the whole treatise becomes clear from a postcard-sketch of the EN's content.

In an effort to spell out the highest good as happiness, Aristotle identifies living in accordance with excellence or virtue (*aretê*) as the key to a happy life. The concept of virtue dominates the subsequent discussion. Book II provides a general, almost abstract, treatment of virtue, while Books III and VII contain perceptive treatises on the conditions for acting virtuously. The individual virtues are discussed in Books III–VI; Books VIII–IX deal with the social aspect of virtue.

Book X returns more explicitly to happiness as the highest good. A) The discussion of pleasure (X.1–5) is geared towards connecting pleasure with the happy life, i.e. a life in accordance with virtue. B) The study of three prominent kinds of lives in X.6–8 seeks to determine, finally, the virtue in accordance with which we should live in order to live a completely or perfectly happy life. C) The end of the EN (X.9) examines how we ourselves and others may acquire virtue.

Since happiness as the highest good structures not only the whole EN, but also Book X in particular, I shall discuss both the highest good and happiness in some detail (§§1.1–5) before turning to a briefer sketch of virtue (§§2.1–2) and an outline of EN X (§§3.1–3).

1.1 The Highest Good

The *Nicomachean Ethics* centres on the notion of the highest good. More specifically, it deals with the highest practicable good, the highest human good, or simply *the* human good. Goodness, Aristotle maintains, plays a crucial role in all directed human endeavours, as the beginning of the EN illustrates: 'every craft and every enquiry, and similarly every action and planned undertaking seems to aim at some good' (1094a1–2).

Of course, the goods attained through the various undertakings and even the notion of goodness at play in different domains will differ. Nevertheless, all pursuits and their goods are organised into hierarchies. To take Aristotle's example, bridle-making and other crafts that produce gear for horsemanship do so for the sake of horsemanship. In turn, horsemanship and other pursuits belonging to war are subordinate to generalship. Although both bridle-making and horsemanship are subordinate to generalship, they relate to it in different ways. We can see this by considering how they relate to the goal of generalship, i.e. winning the battle. While bridle-making is purely instrumental in attaining the goal, excellent horsemanship can be more than an instrument. The latter can be part of winning the battle in the sense that excellent horsemanship can constitute (wholly or partially) winning the battle (I.1.1094a9–14). Although the cavalry is employed for the sake of winning the battle, they will not be mere instruments.

The example seeks to illustrate the general relationship between subordinate and superordinate pursuits: 'in all pursuits, the ends of all the ruling pursuits are more choice-worthy than the ends under them, because it is for the sake of the former that the latter too are pursued' (1094a14–16). The superordinate pursuit rules or controls the subordinate in either of two ways.[4] It can a) prescribe the norms internal to the pursuit. For instance, the practice of riding will determine what counts as a good bridle – which would seem appropriate, given the bridle's role as an instrument that facilitates riding. Alternatively, b), the superordinate pursuit can externally regulate the subordinate pursuit. A general need not tell the cavalry how to ride well. That is, the general does not pronounce on the norms internal to horsemanship. Rather, the general decides on how many riders comprise a unit, where to employ them, and when to send them into battle. In this case, the externally regulated pursuit has its own notion of excellence, whereas the internally regulated one does not. As the former has a goal worth pursuing for its own sake (from this pursuit's perspective), it occupies a higher place in the hierarchy of ends.

Introducing planned pursuits as nested hierarchies raises the question of what makes for a complete hierarchy of goals and pursuits. Aristotle argues that there must be end-points that complete the hierarchical structure. In the absence of suitable end-points, we would have to admit to unending hierarchies:

[4] Lear 2004, 17–19 distinguishes the two ways of subordination well. See Meyer 2011 for further illuminating discussion.

> If, then, there is some end in our practical pursuits for which we wish for its own sake, and we wish for the others because of it, and we do not choose everything for the sake of something else (for in this way, it will go on to infinity, making our desire empty and vain), it is clear that this is the good, i.e. the best good. (1094a18–22)

The goal that ends the regress is *the* good because the good subordinates all other goals. Aristotle takes care to posit a *single* good that subsumes all other goods. While 'the good' may plausibly refer to the good of a certain domain, the best good towers over and controls *all* other goods.

The proposal has wide-ranging consequences for Aristotle's thinking about goods. Of course, it does not follow from the observation that all planned pursuits aim at some good (1094a1–2) that every good is (to be) aimed at by some pursuit. There may be goods that cannot be attained through action. But, as the beginning of the EN makes clear, Aristotle focuses entirely on practicable goods. And here it is plausible to maintain that any practical good is the good of a practical domain that can be mastered by some kind of practical knowledge. So, corresponding to the hierarchies of goals, Aristotle posits a hierarchy of (kinds of) practical knowledge that govern the practical spheres. If so, the highest good will be the goal of the highest and most controlling kind of practical knowledge. He plausibly identifies the most controlling with the most authoritative practical knowledge. He uses examples to cast political expertise (*politikê*) in this role. Political expertise governs directly or indirectly all aspects of life in a city-state (*polis*): which crafts are needed, how many craftsmen for each, when to wage war; it also legislates what one should and should not do. So, the best practical good will be the goal of political expertise (1094a29–b6).

To identify the most controlling knowledge with political expertise raises the question of the EN's audience. Does Aristotle merely address aspiring politicians? Or does he cast his net more widely? The answer, as so often, is a qualified 'both'. The EN addresses those who seem to lack knowledge of the highest good. Since this knowledge belongs to political expertise, and since the *Nicomachean Ethics* seeks the highest good, it will itself in a way be political (*politikê tis*, 1094b11). However, Aristotle does not seem to address only would-be statesmen.[5] Achieving and preserving the highest good for the city-state is greater, more complete, finer, and more divine than doing the same for an individual. However, the latter

[5] *Pace* Bodéüs 1993.

should also be welcomed, because the goal is the same in both cases: the human good (1094b7–11). While he ranks the political expertise successfully exercised by the politician higher than the equivalent on the private level, Aristotle nevertheless seems to acknowledge the private equivalent of political expertise – without seeing the need to find a new name for it. Indeed, he spells out much later in the EN the sameness between political expertise and the expertise required to run a private life well (VI.8). For now, however, the important point is that *we* as private individuals can acquire a kind of knowledge, discussed in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, which aims at the highest good. This knowledge will have a great impact on our lives because, just as every pursuit in the city is subordinate to the highest good, so is every pursuit for a private individual.

1.2 Happiness

Having identified political expertise as the knowledge of the highest practical good, Aristotle seeks to identify its goal more precisely: 'in name, it is agreed pretty much by the majority, for both the many and the distinguished call it "happiness" (*eudaimonia*), and they take living well and doing well to be the same as being happy' (I.4.1095a17–20).

The passage raises two important issues, one about happiness, the other about method. First, 'happiness' does not translate the Greek term *eudaimonia* perfectly. But it is preferable to 'flourishing' or 'well-being', or to leaving it untranslated. All of the translations fail to convey the connection to the divine, clearly present in *eudaimonia*. The word is after all the abstract composite of two words, *eu* and *daimôn*. The former is the adverb for 'good'; the latter means 'god' or 'deity', or, more barbarically, 'higher-than-human-being'. Aristotle cites the tragic playwright Euripides (ca 485–407/6 BC) to connect the two: a person is happy 'when the god gives well' (*hotan ho daimôn eu didô(i)*, IX.9.1169b7–8). While Aristotle and his contemporaries did not necessarily take the god to mete out happiness – this would have to be investigated (cf. I.9.1099b11–13) – the quote from Euripides indicates two points: a) a connection between the divine and human happiness, however ossified, and b) the absence of determinate content of happiness conceived abstractly.

Our concept of happiness, I think, captures the second aspect better than does 'flourishing' or 'well-being'. Like its Greek counterpart, 'happiness' does not have a fixed referent, nor a fixed range of applications. Ordinary people, Aristotle reports, equate *eudaimonia* with pleasure, wealth, or honour. Some do not even settle for a single goal, but adopt

a different goal depending on their circumstances. For instance, to those who are ill, health might seem to be happiness. By contrast, philosophers such as Plato distinguish between these ordinary goods and the highest good existing by itself, making the latter the cause of the former (1095a20–8). While we rarely speak about happiness abstractly outside of academic contexts, we do speak a lot about being or feeling happy. Although 'being happy' does not *mean* 'being in an elated mood' or 'feeling pleasure', this common usage fits the conception of happiness employed by the many. For them, being pleased *amounts to* being happy, because they take happiness to be pleasure. However, *eudaimonia* can also be understood as pointing to a more stable or enduring condition (than fleeting happiness). And while being happy may be conceived of as momentary, living well and doing well appear to be more enduring conditions – as if being *eudaimôn* is something more stable than an elated feeling. 'Flourishing' in particular seems more apt for catering for this aspect of the concept of *eudaimonia*, because doing well and living well can plausibly be understood in terms of prosperity – which we can readily capture as flourishing.[6] But 'happiness' and its cognates can also indicate a stable state. Think of the formulaic endings of fairy-tales. 'They lived happily ever after', usually because they have surmounted some obstacle, have found each other, have been rewarded with, say, half a kingdom, and are generally happy. 'Living happily' conveys the stability that being *eudaimôn* can connote, but it stresses the psychological dimension more than 'flourishing' does, for the Prince and the Princess naturally also *feel* happy when they prosper. So, our concept of happiness mirrors the versatility of the concept of *eudaimonia* with which Aristotle begins his enquiry.

Why should we not choose our translation of *eudaimonia* merely for its capacity to capture *Aristotle's* conception of it?[7] We can answer the question by attending to the second point that the passage from I.4 (quoted above) raises. It begins by noting how the word *eudaimonia* is used, and what people think about it. The case of happiness illustrates how Aristotle often operates in the EN. He raises a difficult question, notes either what people of repute and the many say about it (where relevant), and then examines more thoroughly where the existing opinions go right and wrong. He is not usually content with pointing out the mistakes of previous thinkers. In addition, he tries to diagnose what was (or is) attractive about the view,

[6] Indeed, this was a widespread use of the term: see Herodotus, *Histories*, V.28; cf. VII.220.

[7] Most scholars focus on Aristotle's own conception of *eudaimonia* and assess its affinity to our conceptions. See especially Kraut 1979.

and often he acknowledges that the other thinkers got *something* right. It would otherwise be a mystery why he would engage with his predecessors at all. So, by dwelling on the views of others, and distilling what truth they contain, he can develop his own view while keeping an eye on the desiderata the examination of others has revealed. This technique seems sensible for anyone who tries to answer difficult philosophical questions – and philosophers still employ it today. But many scholars see an 'endoxic method' in Aristotle's approach, articulated at EN VII.1.1145b2–7, which serves to justify ethical propositions.[8] However, the passage in Book VII seems tailored to its specific context and should not be generalised.[9] And examining how he in fact proceeds in the EN outside of the Book VII passage casts further doubt on the assumption that a set endoxic method is used throughout the EN.[10] In any case, it is clear that Aristotle sees himself in a tradition of theorising about *eudaimonia*. Even when he corrects the mistakes of others and advances his own substantial account, he nevertheless takes himself to be talking about the same thing, *eudaimonia*. Therefore, the translation should be sufficiently wide to accommodate the various accounts, even if only Aristotle's is the correct one.

He begins to think properly about the highest good as happiness by discussing, briefly, three prominent contenders for happy lives in EN I.5: i) the life of consumption (*apolaustikos*), ii) the political life (*politikos*), and iii) the reflective life (*theôrêtikos*). He does so because one's conception of happiness (articulated or not) does influence how one lives – after all, it *is* the overarching goal of all one's pursuits. The first two lives are plausible candidates because of their wide support. The life of pleasure is compelling because living happily requires pleasure and thus goes hand in hand with living a pleasant life (VII.11.1152b6–7). The political life becomes a serious contender if we do not understand it merely as living the life of a citizen in a Greek city-state, but as a more elevated kind of life. Indeed, Aristotle posits honour as the highest good pursued by people living this kind of life (*timê*, 1095b22–3). This goal suggests that the political activity in question should go beyond the ordinary political participation in the assembly or in the jury. Since so many citizens engage in an ordinary way in politics, no one will be especially honoured or deemed especially happy for doing only that. Citizens merit honour only in high office, and it is no accident that offices which involve ruling others (*archai*, e.g. like

[8] For a clear statement and defence of this view, see Kraut 2006.
[9] Cooper 2009.
[10] See Frede 2012 for a nice corrective to this assumption.

those of military leaders) were also called 'honours' (*timai*, e.g. *Politics*, II.8.1268a21; III.5.1278a20; III.10.1281a31). The happy political life envisaged in I.5 will, therefore, be a life of political distinction, not merely one of political participation.[11] Both lives home in on important values, but they assign to them a role too important. By judging the life of pleasure as fit only for cattle, Aristotle intimates that pleasure is not a suitable goal for political expertise, the knowledge that enables us to strive at the *human* good (I.5.1095b19–20). By contrast, honour seems all too human, because it requires other people to honour us (I.5.1095b23–6). It is really what people are honoured for, their virtue, that people want. So, neither of the accounts posits a good suitable as the object of a branch of *knowledge*,[12] nor does either one capture the elevated status of the highest good as something divine. Both pleasure and honour should be concomitants of happiness, but fail to capture its essential character.

As it turns out, the discussion of lives only provides a preliminary assessment – evident not least by the choice not to discuss the philosophical life in Book I. Book X fittingly contains the final discussion of potentially happy lives. Having re-examined the life of frivolous pleasure in X.6, Aristotle assesses the happiness of the life in accordance with theoretical wisdom vis-à-vis a thoroughly practical life. Although these lives do not come with the labels 'political' and 'philosophical', they seem to correspond to the lives sketched in I.5, as a close reading of the relevant text (provided in the commentary) suggests.

1.3 Happiness as the Highest Good

Having discussed what people say about happiness in I.4–6, Aristotle turns in I.7 to establishing happiness as the highest human good on less dialectical grounds. In particular, he stresses two criteria for the highest good.

i) The highest good must be *teleios*. The Greek word forms the adjective of the more familiar *telos*, which we can render as 'goal' or 'end'. The adjective conveys 'endyness' (or, better, 'finality'), but also 'perfection' and 'completeness'. We can use *teleios* to rank goods in a hierarchy. A higher good will be more *teleios* (complete/perfect/final) than a subordinate good. The highest good, naturally, will be most so, or, as Aristotle puts it, it will be *teleios* 'without qualification', because it is not subordinate to anything

[11] Happiness based on political engagement stems from a sustained and successful effort to shape the city-state's fortunes. Although the offices often lasted only for a year at a time, those who excelled nevertheless managed to be re-elected and to shape the state through their political activity.

[12] Establishing this conclusion is an important task of Plato's *Gorgias*.