



What is Theoria? Nicomachean Ethics Book 10.7–8

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NOTES AND DISCUSSIONS

WHAT IS *THEORIA*? *NICOMACHEAN ETHICS* BOOK 10.7–8

Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* Book 10.7–8 has sparked an apparently intractable debate among scholars: is this passage, with its extraordinary praise of the theoretical life, compatible with the rest of the work? In 10.7.1177a17–20 Aristotle says that “complete happiness” (τελεία εὐδαιμονία) is the actualization of the “supreme” (κρατίστη) virtue, which in turn is the work of what is best in us, namely “mind” (νοῦς).¹ He describes such work as “theoretical” (θεωρητική), and argues that it is the most continuous, pleasant, self-sufficient, and leisurely activity available to human beings. (My reasons for avoiding the more familiar “contemplation” and its variants as a translation of *theoria* will emerge below.)² Furthermore, it “alone seems to be liked because of itself” (1177b1), for it supplies no benefit other than itself.³ Finally, theoretical activity actualizes what is most divine in us and allows us best to approximate the gods, whose “activity is superior in blessedness” and is itself “theoretical.” As a result, Aristotle demotes practical virtue, a life spent in ethical and political—that is, distinctly human—activity, to a secondary status.

This demotion, as well as some of the features attributed to the theoretical life, seem to conflict with earlier descriptions of ethical virtue. As Martha Nussbaum puts it, Book 10.7–8 seems to be “at odds with the general anthropocentrism of Aristotle’s ethical method. . . . In the other books of the *EN*, activities according to the excellences of character are explicitly said to be valuable or choiceworthy for their own sake.”⁴ J. L. Ackrill says something similar: “most of the *Ethics* implies that a good action is—or is a major element in—man’s best life, but eventually in Book 10 purely contemplative activity is said to be perfect *eudaimonia*; and Aristotle does not tell us how to combine or relate these two ideas.”⁵ The problem is exacerbated by the fact that 10.7–8 seems to invoke an “exalted” form of contemplation (a notion to be explained below), which Nussbaum characterizes as more Platonic than genuinely Aristotelian.⁶ As a result, she judges Book 10.7–8 to be “incompatible” with earlier stages of the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

1. The Greek text of the *Nicomachean Ethics* is Bywater’s Oxford edition (1962). All translations are my own.

2. Derived from *contemplor*, “to gaze at,” “to view attentively,” the English “contemplation” has the obvious virtues of tradition and etymological correspondence with the Greek θεωρία, derived from θεωρέω, “to look at” or “to view.” My complaint against it is directed at its connotations as it is used in contemporary English.

3. Because μόνῃ at 1177b1 renders the meaning of the sentence somewhat ambiguous, Irwin (1999) offers two translations: “study seems to be liked because of itself alone” and “it is the only virtue” liked because of itself. His translation of *theoria* as “study” is, as will be shown later in this paper, an excellent choice.

4. Nussbaum 1986, 373.

5. Ackrill 1980, 15.

6. Nussbaum 1986, 375.

To formulate this point in standard terminology, Book 10.7–8 seems to express an “exclusivist” or “dominant” account of happiness that is at odds with the prevailing account found in the rest of the work. As Roger Crisp explains, “the dominant thesis [is] the view that there are several intrinsic goods, only one of which constitutes *eudaimonia*.”⁷ The one of course is theoretical activity.

There are different versions of the dominant reading. John Cooper, for example, argues that the happy person leading the best life need not be ethically virtuous: “in his final account of happiness in Book X of the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle so elevates the value of intellectual activity of the highest kind that he leaves no room at all . . . for morality as ordinarily understood and as analyzed by himself in earlier books.”⁸ Andrea Nightingale makes a similar claim: the “theoretical wisdom” praised in Book 10.7–8 “is essentially amoral.”⁹ Richard Kraut, by contrast, while embracing the exclusivist interpretation, nonetheless insists that “the philosophical life is the life of a good person, that is, someone who has and exercises the ethical virtues.”¹⁰ Explaining how “the apparent contradictions” of the *Ethics* “are merely apparent,”¹¹ while maintaining an exclusivist view of happiness, becomes the major task Kraut and like-minded commentators (such as Gabriel Richardson Lear) set for themselves.¹²

This paper cannot resolve this intricate debate. It cannot explain how Book 10.7–8 is, or is not, compatible with earlier books of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, or how theoretical virtue is related to practical virtue, or exactly what “complete happiness” really means. (See Kraut, Nightingale, and Richardson Lear for extensive bibliographies.) Instead, it addresses only an odd feature of it. Commentators who enter it generally say little about what “theoretical activity” itself actually is. On the one hand, this is unsurprising, for Aristotle himself says so little about it. Trond Eriksen puts the point strongly: “Aristotle,” he says, “has no clear-cut conception of *theoria*.”¹³ On the other hand, some conception of theoretical activity is surely required in order to grapple seriously with the notorious problem sparked by his comments in Book 10.7–8. The purpose of this paper is to take a small step toward filling this gap.

THE EXALTED CONCEPTION OF *THEORIA*

Aristotle never explicitly articulates what *theoria* is, but he does provide clues. Most important, it is regularly characterized as the actualization of knowledge.¹⁴

7. Crisp 1994, 111.

8. Cooper 1999, 216. Cooper changed his mind on this issue. This quotation is actually from his later work when he is describing his earlier view; see also Cooper 1975, chap. 3.

9. Nightingale 2004, 222.

10. Kraut 1989, 6.

11. *Ibid.*, 353.

12. In her recent work Richardson Lear (2004) has argued that Aristotle thinks that happiness is found in theoretical activity alone, but because it is the *telos* of human life, other subordinate, or “middle-level ends,” morally virtuous action in particular, are still worth choosing for their own sake. As she puts it, such ends approximate or imitate the highest end and “when one thing approximates another it inherits the kind of value possessed by the paradigm . . . so if morally virtuous activity is choiceworthy for the sake of contemplation as an approximation or imitation of that activity, it will not be merely instrumentally valuable. Rather . . . it will itself be worth choosing for its own sake” (85). Another possible take on the issue is to argue that all other virtues are instrumentally related to the attainment of the highest, theoretical virtue. See Kraut 1989, 178–79 for this line of thought.

13. Eriksen 1976, 89.

14. Eriksen (1976, 82–84) reviews discussions of this issue by John Burnet, Ingemar Düring, and Julius Stenzel. He also cites the following passages to support it: *Eth. Nic.* 1146b30, 1153a22, *Metaph.* 1048a34, 1072b24, *Ph.* 255a33–b5, *De an.* 412a9–22, *Protrepticus* B87, *Gen. an.* 735a9.

Consider *De anima* Book 2.1.¹⁵ Here Aristotle is gradually working his way toward a definition of soul. He begins by arguing that it must be a “substance” (οὐσίαν, 412a19). Specifically, it is substance in the sense of “form” (εἶδος, 412a20): it is the form of a natural body potentially having life. Since form in this context is “actuality,” soul is the actuality of a natural body potentially having life (412a27–28). Finally, “organic” is added to the definition (412b5).

There is, however, a wrinkle. Soul is not simply an “actuality” (ἐντελέχεια), but “the first actuality of an organic natural body” (412b5). To illustrate, Aristotle employs *theorein* as his example. “Actuality” is said in two ways. The first sense is as “knowledge” (ἐπιστήμη, 412a10); the second as *theorein* (412a10–11, repeated at 412a22–23). “Knowledge” here means “having” but not actively using, while *theorein* means “actively engaged in or working with” (ἐνέργειν, 412a26), the knowledge one has.¹⁶ These terms can be explicated through an analogy. While asleep, I am alive and my soul is the actuality of my body, but I am not engaged in, for example, seeing. While awake and with open eyes actively seeing things, my soul is working at a higher level of actuality. Having knowledge is to *theorein* as sleeping is to waking.

To elaborate, consider the example Aristotle uses at 417a32: I have knowledge of arithmetic. But I’m not doing a computation right now. (The “right now” reflects the phrase ἤδη θεωρῶν at 417a28–29.) When actually doing the computation, say adding 369 and 1215, I am “theorizing.” So too with another example Aristotle invokes, namely γραμματική (417a25), knowledge of one’s letters. A person may know how to spell, but not be spelling any word right now.

In *De anima* 2.1, Aristotle uses *theorein* to illustrate the salient feature of soul: it is living activity rather than a static thing. He offers two additional comparisons to illustrate what he means. (1) If an axe were a natural body, being an axe, that is, being able actually to chop wood, would be its soul. When an axe becomes so severely rusted that it can no longer chop, it is an axe only in name (412b11–15). (2) “If the eye were a living thing, vision would be its soul” (412b18–19). An eye that cannot see—say an eye in a painting or carved in stone—is an eye only in name. To sum up: the seeing eye, the chopping axe, and the person actually using his knowledge of arithmetic or his letters, namely, “theorizing,” are three examples of Aristotle’s conception of soul as the fullest actuality of a body.

Unfortunately these descriptions of *theorein* are ambiguous. Most important, what does it mean to use or activate one’s knowledge of arithmetic? Is such a cognitive activity best exemplified, as suggested above, by the task of adding 369 and 1215? We all know how to do it, but because we have not yet done it we do not know the answer. Or is theorizing more like gazing at a truth, such as $7 + 5 = 12$, that we already know and is immediately recognizable? (Recall that *theorein* has an original meaning of “to look at.”) In *De anima* 2.1 Aristotle does not tell us. The latter interpretation is, however, reinforced by a passage like *Metaphysics* 1087a20 where Aristotle states that “this ‘A’ that the man knowing his letters (ὁ γραμματικός) theorizes is an ‘A.’” Kraut, along with most commentators, endorses this sense of *theoria*, which he describes as “an activity that goes on whenever one brings certain truths to mind. . . .

15. The Greek text of *De anima* is Ross’s Oxford edition (1963).

16. The distinction between “having” and “using” knowledge was first suggested by Plato in the “aviary” image of the *Theaetetus* (196d–199c).

The teacher who is preparing lectures . . . is consciously considering truths that he has already come to understand, and so he is contemplating.” He continues: “anyone who is actively reflecting on any proposition, whatever its content, may be loosely said to be engaged in *theoria* with respect to that proposition.”¹⁷

Kraut’s “loosely” and his ambiguous phrase “actively reflecting on” are apt, for the matter remains unclear. The notion that “looking at” the true sentence, $7 + 5 = 12$, best captures the sense in which a person “uses” his knowledge of arithmetic is not entirely satisfying, for a more obvious example would be working through and solving the problem, $369 + 1215 = X$. Nonetheless, one remark Aristotle makes in Book 10.7 seems to support the $7 + 5 = 12$ example. Arguing that the theoretical life is the most pleasant, it is, he says, “reasonable that the way of life (*διαγωγὴν*) of those who know (*τοῖς εἰδόσι*) is more pleasant than of those who seek” (1177a26–27). This leads Kraut to assert that *theoria* “is not the activity of searching for the truth within some field, but rather a process of reflection on a system of truths already discovered.”¹⁸ Again, he does not explain what “reflection” means.¹⁹

Another approach toward clarifying what *theoria* as actualization of knowledge means in Book 10.7–8 is offered by this statement: “For this [theoretical] activity is supreme (*κρατίστη*) since mind is supreme of that which is in us, and of knowable objects (*τῶν γνωστών*), those of mind are supreme” (1177a19–21). This characterization of the “objects” of theoretical activity as “supreme” suggests a reference to necessary, eternal and divine substances such as the stars.²⁰ In other words, to quote Kraut again, “the *theoria* Aristotle is talking about in X.7–8 . . . is the activation of theoretical wisdom.” It is “exalted” and represents “the activity of the understanding one has achieved when one has acquired *sophia*, theoretical wisdom”;²¹ that is, the virtue described in *Nicomachean Ethics* 6.7, which is associated with thinkers like Anaxagoras and Thales who “know extraordinary, amazing, difficult and divine (*δαιμόνια*) things” (1141b6).²² Nightingale (and most commentators) agrees: “Aristotle,” she says, “tends to associate *theoria* with supreme knowledge of the highest things.”²³ As Rorty puts it, “the conditions for something’s being contemplated is that it be necessary, unchanging, eternal.”²⁴

This conception of *theoria* might find support in the description of the unmoved mover in *Metaphysics* Λ 7 and 9. In order to cause the eternal motion of the heavenly bodies, the unmoved mover must itself be eternal as well as ceaselessly “being in actuality” (*ἐνεργεῖα ὄν*, 1072b8).²⁵ Its “mode of activity” (*διαγωγὴ*, 1072b14), in

17. Kraut 1989, 73.

18. *Ibid.*, 73.

19. In a similar vein, Amélie Rorty (1980, 386) describes *theoria* as a “single act of mind,” as opposed to an explanation or a demonstration. W. K. C. Guthrie (1981, 396) provides a useful corrective to this view, one with which I am sympathetic. He complains that “there is a recent tendency to exclude scientific and philosophical enquiry from [*theoria*], limiting its scope to the contemplation of truth already acquired. Those who do so rely, as far as I can see, solely on the sentence from the *Nicomachean Ethics* just quoted” [i.e., 1177a26–27]. He argues, as do I, on behalf of a wider conception of *theoria* that could embrace enquiry.

20. As Eriksen (1976, 87) notes, *theoria* was traditionally associated with astronomy.

21. Kraut 1989, 16 and 73.

22. “Theoretical wisdom” translates the Greek *σοφία*. The adjective “theoretical” is typically added to distinguish it from *φρόνησις*, “practical wisdom.”

23. Nightingale 2004, 238.

24. Rorty 1980, 379.

25. The Greek text of the *Metaphysics* is Ross’s Oxford edition (1970).

which it is permanently and continuously engaged, is like the best and the most pleasurable that we experience, albeit for a short time only. And this is thinking (νόησις). It is not, however, any sort of thinking. Instead, the unmoved mover thinks in a maximally actualized fashion: “thinking that is with respect to itself (καθ’ αὐτήν) is of an intelligible object that is best with respect to itself; and maximalized (μάλιστα) thinking is of that which is maximally best” (1072b18–19). It engages in “*theoria*, which is the most pleasant and best” (1072b24) form of activity.

This passage reiterates the standard connection between *theoria* and actualization, and also seems to “exalt” it in the way Kraut, Nightingale, and Rorty recommend. *Theoria* is the activity of “the divine” (ὁ θεός, 1072b25) as it thinks the maximally intelligible, the highest or “best” (κράτιστον, 1074b34), object. Eventually this object is described simply as “itself” (αὐτόν, 1074b33), and thus the divine is famously called the “thinking of thinking” (νόησις νοήσεως, 1074b34).

This sketch sheds only a bit of light on what *theoria* is: it is what the divine mind does as it thinks itself. This explains little, but it does suggest an answer to the question posed above: is *theorein* understood as the actualization of one’s knowledge of arithmetic better exemplified in the “contemplation” of the sentence $7 + 5 = 12$, or in the solving of the problem $369 + 1215 = X$? Because motion or change (κίνησις) is “the actualization of what is potentially, insofar as it is potentially” (*Physics* 201a12), and because the eternally actualized divine partakes in no bit of potentiality, it cannot move or change. As a result, it cannot change from a state of not knowing the answer to $369 + 1215$ to knowing it. It must know it immediately. The divine mind thus seems to “contemplate” the solution to even the most complex arithmetic problems as easily as we see that $7 + 5 = 12$.

THE MUNDANE CONCEPTION OF *THEORIA*

The exalted view of *theoria* as an immediate and maximally actualized apprehension of the highest intelligible object (that is, necessary and eternal) is complicated by a passage such this (*Eth. Nic.* 1139a6–8):

Let there be two aspects of the soul that have reason. One is that by which we theorize (θεωροῦμεν) those sorts of beings whose principles cannot be otherwise. The other is that by which [we theorize] those that can.

The second use of “theorize” (θεωροῦμεν) is implicit but unmistakable. Practical reason is a capacity to apprehend, to see accurately, to *theorize* a contingent state of affairs. (It is described as a kind of perception at *Eth. Nic.* 1143b5 and elsewhere.) For this reason, Rorty is mistaken in her explication of this passage. In saying that to be “contemplated” an object must “be necessary, unchanging, eternal,”²⁶ she ignores the implicit θεωροῦμεν, which clearly suggests that there is some sort of “theorizing” of the contingent.

In this vein, consider how Aristotle begins his treatment of practical wisdom: “let us consider practical wisdom (φρόνησις) in the following way: by theorizing (θεωρήσαντες) those who we say are practically wise” (1140a24–25). A bit later he mentions Pericles (1140b8–10):

26. Rorty 1980, 379.

We believe that Pericles and men like him are men of practical wisdom because they are able to theorize [θεωρεῖν] what is good both for themselves and for human beings.

Two senses of *theorein* are at work in these passages. The first expresses the activity of the author and reader of the *Nicomachean Ethics* themselves: we must “theorize,” take a good look at, those men we call practically wise. The second expresses the activity at which Pericles excelled: in exercising practical wisdom he was able to theorize, to see, what was good. As Richardson Lear puts it, such cognitive activity “is a sort of contemplation in action.”²⁷ Pericles was able to navigate effectively through the particular circumstances that confronted him, and to do so with moral virtue. Clearly, in neither of these two cases is *theorein* restricted to “contemplation” understood as an immediate recognition of eternal and immutable substances. For this reason, Rorty again is mistaken in saying “that men like Pericles are thought to possess practical wisdom because they have contemplative understanding of what is good.”²⁸ For her, Pericles engages in *theoria* only because he contemplates the species “Humanity.”²⁹ The passage, however, invites a wider, more mundane, conception of theorizing.

Finally, consider this passage from Aristotle’s discussion of “moral weakness” (ἀκρασία) in *Nicomachean Ethics* Book 7 (1146b31–34):

We talk about knowing [ἐπίστασθαι] in two ways: for both the one who has but is not using his knowledge and the one who is using it are said to know. There is a difference between someone who has knowledge of what he ought not to do but is not theorizing it [μὴ θεωροῦντα] and someone who theorizes it.

Aristotle concludes that the person who is “theorizing,” fully actualizing, his knowledge that he should not do something, will not in fact do it. Moral weakness does “not seem to occur in the presence of knowledge in the strict (κυρίως) sense” (1147b15–16), for such knowledge has become part of the knower; it has “grown into him” (συμφυῆναι, 1147a22). By contrast, the person who merely “has” a bit of ethical knowledge and so can utter the sentence, “I know I should not do it,” but who, when overcome by desire, is unable to actualize it fully, might well do what he shouldn’t. He is “not theorizing.” Again, this sense of the word is neither exalted nor captured well by the translation “contemplation.”

Kraut and Nightingale would respond to the above by correctly noting that Aristotle regularly uses critical terms in both a narrow, technical sense, and a broad sense. For example, he states that there is a “precise” sense of the word “knowledge” (ἐπιστήμη) and a looser, more general sense. “If it is necessary to speak precisely and not just to use words,” then ἐπιστήμη is restricted to knowledge whose objects exist “by necessity” (1139b19); in other words, it is “demonstrative science.” By contrast, at the beginning of the *Nicomachean Ethics* he mentions medicine, navigation, generalship, and economics, all of which he later describes as kinds of “knowledge” (τῶν λεγ-θεισῶν ἐπιστημῶν, 1094a18).³⁰ In a similar fashion, “mind” (νοῦς) is restricted in *Nicomachean Ethics* 6.6 and *Posterior Analytics* 2.19 to apprehension of the first

27. Richardson Lear 2004, 4.

28. Rorty 1980, 377.

29. Ibid., 379.

30. Another example of this pattern is from *Metaph.* 1026a22: “the theoretical forms of knowledge are more choiceworthy than the other forms of knowledge (τῶν ἄλλων ἐπιστημῶν).”

principles of demonstrative science (*ἀρχαί*, *Eth. Nic.* 1141a7–8; *An. post.*, 100b15), while in *De anima* 3.4 it is characterized much more broadly as “that by which the soul thinks and judges” (429a23).

Nightingale maintains that this same pattern applies to his use of *theorein*: “Aristotle often uses the verb *theorein* to signify ‘seeing’ or ‘observing’ in the most general sense, and occasionally uses the noun *theoria* to identify any sort of observation or investigation.”³¹ Kraut agrees: “*Theoria* . . . does not always designate the activity in which one exercises theoretical wisdom. One can be said to be engaged in *theoria* whenever one closely observes or studies something—whatever that something is.”³² Nonetheless, both he and Nightingale insist that the *theoria* Aristotle is talking about in 10.7–8 is not the study of just any objects or truths. It is the “activation of theoretical wisdom.”³³ It is *theoria* in the narrow, “exalted,” or what Nussbaum would call the “Platonic” sense, and for them the word “contemplation” fits it well.

These commentators have discounted the possible philosophical connection between Aristotle’s ubiquitous use of inflections of the verb *theorein*, whose meaning is mundane, and its appearance as a noun, where its meaning will sometimes, but not always, be more “exalted.” If this connection can be established, then even the theoretical activity described in Book 10.7–8 may not be as radically separate from ordinary forms of thinking and knowing as commentators tend to believe. And if this is so, the interpretive project of coherently integrating this notorious passage into the rest of the *Nicomachean Ethics* will face one less obstacle.³⁴

The key to establishing the philosophical basis of this connection is to show that what differentiates the intellectual work of a Pericles from the thinker described in Book 10.7–8 is not the nature of the activity itself—both are theoretical—but the nature of the object studied. To explain, I turn to *Metaphysics E*.

Aristotle states that physics is a form of “theoretical” knowledge (θεωρητική ἐπιστήμη, 1025b26). It is so because it is neither a practical (πρακτική) nor a productive (ποιητική) form of knowledge (or of “thought,” [διδάσκειν], 1025b25). In turn, this is because of the “kind of being that it happens to be about” (τυγχάνει οὕσα γένος τι τοῦ ὄντος); in other words, its object. Productive knowledge is about “things produced,” and these have their *ἀρχή*, their origin, in the producer. The object of practical knowledge is “things done,” and their origin is in the rational choice of the doer. By contrast, the object of physics is natural beings whose origin of change and rest is in themselves (*Physics* 192b12), not in an external human agent. Without here explaining why, Aristotle assumes there are only these three forms of knowledge. (He does the same at *Topics* 145a15.)³⁵ Therefore, he concludes, physics must be theoretical.

Three features of knowledge in general emerge from this succinct argument.

(1) Knowledge has a *περί τι*, an “about something,” structure. The subject has an object; for example, physics studies that kind of being that has the origin of motion

31. Nightingale 2004, 6.

32. Kraut 1989, 15.

33. *Ibid.*, 16.

34. A computer search will quickly supply the evidence that inflections of *theorein* are ubiquitous and often mundane. Two somewhat random examples: the “magnificent” man is able to “theorize” (θεωρῆσαι) what is “appropriate” to give (*Eth. Nic.* 1122a35); and in *The Parts of Animals* Aristotle asks whether the student of anatomy should begin with what is common in a genus and then “later theorize (θεωρητέον) the particulars” (639b5).

35. In this passage θεωρητική, πρακτική, and ποιητική each unmistakably modifies ἐπιστήμη at 145a5.

and rest in itself (and as Aristotle goes on to explain, is not separable from matter). The “about something” structure characterizes all three forms of knowledge. Indeed, it even characterizes “metaphysics.” Rather than “circumscribing” (περιγραφόμενα, 1025b8) some specific kind of being, it is “about being simply, that is, qua being.”³⁶ Similarly, at *Topics* 145a14 Aristotle characterizes all three kinds of knowledge as being πρὸς τι, “relative to something,” namely, their objects.

(2) As a consequence of (1), while the three adjectives—“theoretical,” “practical,” and “productive”—literally modify the noun διάνοια at 1025b26 (or ἐπιστήμη at *Topics* 145a15), they are actually better construed as modifying the object of the three forms of knowledge. “Practical” in the phrase “practical knowledge” describes a kind of being; the rationally chosen actions of human beings. “Productive” describes another kind: things that are produced by human beings. Similarly “theoretical” also names a kind of being. This one is illustrated by the three examples of mathematics, physics and theology (1026a20). The three examples do not form a single kind, but share the feature of having objects that are independent of human intention and so “cannot hold otherwise,” that is, that are necessary.

(3) An important consequence of (2), unstated in this passage but frequent elsewhere, is that the goals of the three forms of knowledge are different. When it comes to practical knowledge, Aristotle says the following (*Eth. Nic.* 1103b26–29):

The present inquiry is not for the sake of theory [θεωρίας] as are the others. For we investigate not in order that we might know what virtue is, but in order that we might become good, since otherwise there would be no benefit to it.

The goal of theoretical knowledge “is the truth, while of practical [knowledge] it is action” (ἔργον, *Metaph.* 993b20–21). The goal of productive knowledge, or as it is officially designated in *Nicomachean Ethics* 6.4, “art” (τέχνη), “is something other than the producing” (1140b6); it is the well-made object. Aristotle takes pains to differentiate this from practical knowledge (*Eth. Nic.* 1105a26–33):

When it comes to the arts and the virtues the situation is not similar. For the things that come to be from the arts contain their merit in themselves. It is sufficient if these things come to be having this quality. By contrast, what come from the virtues are not done justly or moderately if they are of this quality, but only if the one doing is in a particular condition: first, if he knows what he is doing; second, if he rationally chooses the action; third, if he acts from a firm disposition that’s hard to budge.

The product of an art speaks for itself. It does not matter if the producer is a bad person. By contrast, when it comes to practical knowledge, the action does not speak for itself. Simply performing a just act does not make someone just. For that, one must have a just character.

What links together practical and productive knowledge is the region of being they study: namely that which is constituted by human agency and is therefore contingent. As a result, those who possess these forms of knowledge can alter the object they know. After all, the student of ethics is, in essence, studying himself (qua political being), and the student of productive knowledge may be able to write better tragedies after reading the *Poetics*. But the objects of theoretical knowledge either

36. I suppress another notorious problem: the relationship between ontology and theology.

have their origin of motion and rest in themselves and so cannot be altered by human intervention, or are immutable. The only change such knowledge can effect, therefore, is in the knower, not in the object. For this reason such knowledge “alone seems to be liked because of itself” (*Eth. Nic.* 1177b1), rather than for any external benefit it might bring.

Two other attributes distinguish the various forms of knowledge: their precision and their rank (*Eth. Nic.* 1094b23–27):

It is characteristic of the educated man to seek the degree of precision in each kind [*γένος*] that the nature of the object allows. For it seems to be equally mistaken to accept merely probable arguments from a mathematician as it is to demand demonstrations from a rhetorician.

Because of the nature of its object, namely abstract magnitudes, mathematics can achieve a high level of precision. Rhetoric, by contrast, is about human beings in their capacity to persuade and be persuaded. Here there is variation and contingency from which the study cannot abstract. Hence, only a rather low level of precision is possible. The same is true about ethics.

When Aristotle discusses the intellectual virtues in *Nicomachean Ethics* 6, he insists that practical wisdom (*φρόνησις*) is lower than wisdom (*σοφία*), for the latter is of the “most honorable things.” It would be absurd, he says, if someone were to construe practical wisdom as “the most serious” (*σπουδαιωτάτην*) of all forms of knowledge. This would be true “only if human beings were the best of all things in the cosmos” (1141a20–22), and they are not. The heavenly bodies, for example, are composed of a material that “is more divine than and prior to” the four elements of the sublunar world (*On the Heavens* 269a33).

To sum up: there is a basic similarity in theoretical, practical, and productive forms of knowledge. They are all “theoretical” in the broad sense identified by Kraut and Nightingale. They are a looking at, a cognitive apprehension of some region of the world. They are a taking up of different kinds of beings that present themselves to the discerning mind. In this sense, as Eriksen puts it, *theoria* need not be “tied to special objects.”³⁷ To put this point imagistically: Pericles and the theoretical man of 10.7–8 are both active “lookers.” One is looking straight ahead at the affairs of fellow citizens, while the other may be looking upward at the stars, but both are at work looking. To put this point linguistically, the fact that Aristotle uses inflections of the verb *theorein* throughout his corpus, regardless of whether the treatise is theoretical, productive, or practical, is meaningful, for it suggests that in this important sense all his treatises are theoretical.

Kraut, Nussbaum, and Nightingale are not wrong in construing the *theoria* of Book 10.7–8 as a narrow instance of the more general activity of theorizing. But they have not paid sufficient attention to what binds together the narrow instance with the broader phenomenon.³⁸ They have dismissed the linguistic connection between the many forms of the verb *theorein* sprinkled throughout the corpus, and what Aristotle says about *theoria* in 10.7–8, as philosophically irrelevant. This is a mistake. Simply

37. Eriksen 1976, 86.

38. Richardson Lear (2004) does a much better job of this with her argument that morally virtuous actions “approximate” or “imitate” what she calls “contemplation.”

put, theorizing is a basic human activity. Aristotle suggests as much when he famously begins the *Metaphysics* with the line, “all human beings by nature strive to know,” and then immediately offers as evidence for this the fact that “human beings enjoy the senses for their own sake, and the sense of sight above all the other senses. . . . This is because the sense of sight makes us know things and reveals many distinctions” (980a22–26). Recalling the original meaning of *theorein* as “to look at,” we can infer that human being is by nature theoretical. We are cognitive animals who look at the world, work hard to see it as it is, and then talk about it. This is true whether what we are looking at is our fellow human beings, or the stars.

Consider the following two passages:

The theorizing of truth [ἡ περὶ τῆς ἀληθείας θεωρία] is in one sense difficult, in another easy. This is shown by the fact that whereas no one person can obtain an adequate grasp of it, we cannot all fail in the attempt; each thinker makes some statement about the natural world and as an individual contributes little or nothing to the inquiry; but a combination of all conjectures results in something considerable. Truth is like the proverbial door that no one can miss. In this sense our task will be easy; but the fact that we cannot, although having some grasp of the whole, grasp a particular part, shows its difficulty (*Metaph.* 993a20–b10).

For it belongs to the same capacity both to see [ἰδεῖν] the true and to see what is like the true, and at the same time humans have a sufficient natural disposition with respect to the true and hit upon the truth more often than not (*Rhetoric* 1355a7–10).

The truth is seen, and these passages suggest that human beings are by nature “truthing” animals.³⁹ We are capable of seeing things for what they are. Furthermore, as Aristotle asserts in *De interpretatione* 16a3–8, because ordinary language “symbolizes” those “mental affections” that are accurate representations of beings in the world, it is capable of articulating the truth about the world.⁴⁰ In short, for Aristotle, human beings are capable of both seeing and saying the world for what it is. We are, in other words, theoretical by nature whether we are “truthing” a practical situation or the stars. In this sense, despite being a special case, the *theoria* praised in Book 10.7–8 is anything but special. It is the basic activity of human beings, albeit undertaken at the highest possible level.

This close link between the exalted and mundane senses of *theorein* can even be extracted from *Metaphysics* Λ, the description of the unmoved mover whose *theoria* is “the thinking of thinking.” Consider the fact that its “actualization” is pleasure (*Metaph.* 1072b14–18):

Since its actualization is pleasure, its mode of being—which it engages in forever—is like that which is best for us during a short time. (For us this would be impossible.) And on account of this, wakefulness, perception, thinking are most pleasurable, and hopes and memories are as well.

The unmoved mover ceaselessly actualizes and “is” (rather than “feels”) pleasure. But in order to characterize what this pleasure might be Aristotle points to “us” (ἡμῖν, 1072b15). Its pleasure is like what we experience if only incompletely and for

39. “Truth” as a verb translates ἀληθεύει at *Eth. Nic.* 1139b15.

40. See Modrak 2001 for a thorough account of the *De interpretatione* passage.

a short time. And for us, being awake, perceiving and thinking are the most pleasant of actualizations. To clarify, a short digression is required.

In *Nicomachean Ethics* Book 10.4, Aristotle begins his discussion of pleasure by comparing it to vision.⁴¹ When I turn my head to the left and see the orange basketball on the floor, the experience of seeing is complete and whole, rather than being sequential and broken up into parts. Seeing is “complete at every moment” and it lacks nothing that, coming to be later, is required to complete “its form” (1174b3–6). Aristotle explains by means of a contrast, namely the building of a house. It is complete only when the house is finished at the end of the process. Each task beforehand—laying the foundation, constructing the walls, and so on—is both incomplete and different from the other tasks required for building the house. A house with only a foundation is not really a house, just a part of one. Only when the house has all its parts is it complete. By contrast, seeing is complete at every moment that the visual apparatus is fully activated.

This notion can be explicated grammatically, by reflecting on the relationship between the present and perfect tenses of verbs. Both are “primary” tenses, which means that “they denote present or future time.” They differ in that the present “represents an action as going on at the time of speaking or writing; as *Γράφω*, *I write* or *I am writing*.”⁴² The perfect, by contrast, “represents an action as already finished at the present time; as *γέγραφα*, *I have written*; that is, *my writing is now finished* . . . it implies the performance of the action in past time, yet states that it *stands completed* at the *present* time.”⁴³ In the case of an action like writing, the two tenses express something different. While “I am writing” the page is incomplete and I cannot yet read it. After “I have written” the page, which took me ten minutes, the writing is done and I can read it. The perfect tense differs from the aorist, which “expresses the simple occurrence of an action in past time.”⁴⁴ So, to continue the example, “I wrote” the page can refer to something I did yesterday or a year ago, and the page may not be before me now.

Aristotle links perception and thinking in precisely this way (*Metaph.* 1048b23–24):

One sees [ὁρᾷ] and one has seen [έώρακε] at the same time [ἄμα]. So too does one understand [φρονεῖ] and has one understood [πεφρόνηκε] at the same time, and does one think [νοεῖ] and has one thought [ενόηκεν] at the same time.⁴⁵

At each and every moment the activities of seeing and thinking are “complete” or “perfect,” both of which can translate τέλειον.⁴⁶ Such actions are neither developmental nor processes whose end point is distinct from the activity leading to that end point. Therefore, when they are formulated linguistically, the perfect and present tenses express the same activity. By contrast, “she learns” or “she is learning” (μανθάνει) means that she is now busy at work in the classroom studying, say, arithmetic,

41. As Pakaluk (2005) explains, there is a potential conflict between the account of pleasure found in *Eth. Nic.* Book 10 and that found in Book 7. See pp. 286–308 for his resolution.

42. Goodwin 1893, 8.

43. *Ibid.*, 13–14.

44. *Ibid.*, 16.

45. Ross brackets έώρακε and πεφρόνηκε, but he accepts Bonitz’s inclusion of them.

46. See the entry for τέλειον in *Metaph.* Δ (1021b12–1022a3), the metaphysical lexicon.

which she does not yet know. “She has learned” (μεμάθηκεν) means that she is now a knower rather than a student and so no longer needs to learn arithmetic (see *Metaph.* 1048b24–25). Instead, she can use her knowledge to solve a problem. The verbal phrase “she has learned” signals the termination of a process, or what Aristotle here calls a “change” or a “motion” (κίνησις, 1048b29). It is “incomplete” or “imperfect” (ἀτελής) and requires the passage of time to attain its goal. By contrast, seeing suffers no such distinction between process and end result. “She sees,” “she is seeing,” and “she has seen” describe one and the same ἐνέργεια (“actuality” or more literally “being in a state of work”).

Like seeing, feeling pleasure is complete at every moment, rather than being a process whose end result is distinct from it and which, once attained, signals the end of the activity. If writing a page or building a house is a “motion” that takes place “in time” (ἐν χρόνῳ, *Eth. Nic.* 1174a19), pleasure, like seeing, is an undivided experience that “is something whole and is in the moment” and as a result is not “in time” (μὴ ἐν χρόνῳ, *Eth. Nic.* 1174b8–9). Delightfully all-absorbing, the experience of pleasure takes us out of the flow of time. This cannot be meant literally because the duration of a pleasurable experience can be measured. The massage I received yesterday took place between 8:20 and 9:00 p.m. From the inside of the experience, however, Aristotle is certainly right. For if I am really feeling pleasure, I do not look at the clock at all and so am unaware of the passage of time. Each moment of the massage is complete.

This notion of the timelessness of pleasure helps to render the *theoria* of *Nicomachean Ethics* 10.7–8 less exalted than it may first appear. For such timelessness is mundane and thus available not only in acts of exalted contemplation, but even in ordinary sense perception. After all, seeing is an ἐνέργεια and so “I am seeing” and “I have seen” at the same time. So too is this the case in ordinary acts of thinking, including the act of inquiry. In trying to solve the equation $18X^2 + 54X - 162 = 36$, I actualize my knowledge of algebra and set myself to the task. I lose myself in the problem and as such take my eye off the clock. This is a “timeless” act of *theoria* as much as is the contemplation of the true sentence, $7 + 5 = 12$.

Theoretical activity can be more or less permanent, more or less fully actualized. At its maximal level, it is divine and immediate. For human beings, however, it is sporadic and available only for a short time. Furthermore, as explained above, it can be better or worse dependent upon the nature of its object. For these reasons it is again quite like sense perception (*Eth. Nic.* 1175b14–20):

All sense perception is actualized in relation to a perceptible object, and it is completely actualized when it is in good condition and is in relation to the finest of the perceptible objects. . . . With regard to each sense the best actualization is of that which is in the best condition with respect to the best of the objects that fall within its purview. And this is the most complete and the most pleasant.

A man with twenty-twenty vision, looking at a medium-sized object placed at a good viewing distance away from his body in a well-lit room sees the object as well as any human being can. By contrast, someone near-sighted or who is trying to see in a poorly lit room, will see the object poorly. In the first case the capacity to see is fully and best actualized, and so will be most pleasurable. Clearly, then, Aristotle’s conception of pleasure is inseparable from his teleology. The *telos*, the purpose,

of the eyes is to see. Therefore, a person with excellent vision who sees a visible object in a well-lit room is engaged in the maximum actualization of a natural capacity. And this feels good. Furthermore, the better one's vision is—or more generally, the healthier a man is—the better he feels. So too with theorizing (*Eth. Nic.* 1174b26–30):

There is a pleasure for every form of sense perception, as there is also for every thought and *theoria*. And the most pleasant is the most complete. And the most complete is that which is in the sense that is in the best condition and is taking up the best of objects.

The divine, thinking itself, theorizes in a permanent and maximal sense, and because it suffers no change does so immediately. Because we have bodies, human beings can theorize only sporadically. Most important for the purpose of this paper, because we live on the earth and in cities, there is a wide range of objects—from the stars above to our fellow citizens standing before us—available for us to theorize. As we take up, as we study, all these objects we actualize our natural capacity. As such, we feel pleasure and so, at least experientially, we are taken out of time. For this reason, *theoria* in all its versions allows us to participate in the divine to the highest degree possible. This is true whether we are grappling with a complex equation, trying to theorize well the particulars of the practical situation in which we find ourselves, studying the stars, or simply contemplating the fact that $7 + 5 = 12$.

CONCLUSION

In *Nicomachean Ethics* Book 10.7–8 Aristotle describes theoretical activity as “divine,” “supreme,” and of supremely “knowable objects.” He says that it is “reasonable that the way of life of those who know is more pleasant than of those who seek.” Such statements suggest that *theoria* is “exalted” in the familiar sense Kraut and Nightingale champion and thus seem to beg for “contemplation” as an English translation. This move should, however, be resisted. The fact that inflections of *theorein* are ubiquitous throughout the corpus must be taken as more philosophically significant than it usually is. The word is ubiquitous because *theorein* is a fundamental human capacity that is actualized widely with a variety of hierarchically ordered objects. Some forms of *theoria* are higher than others. “Wisdom” (σοφία) is superior to “practical wisdom” (φρόνησις) because the latter studies human beings qua political animals and because human beings are not “the best of all things in the cosmos” (*Eth. Nic.* 1141a21). But practical wisdom is nonetheless a mode of theorizing. What Pericles did in thinking about the war against the Spartans was not fundamentally different from what Thales did when he studied the stars.

This notion of the hierarchically ordered continuum of theoretical activities can eventually be deployed as a tool with which to interpret the *Nicomachean Ethics* as a whole. For it too can be read as a comprehensive account of humanly virtuous activity that takes the form of an orderly ascent. Book 10.7–8 articulates the highest, the maximally actualized and therefore most pleasant human life. But on this reading neither this life nor the passage itself is radically separate from the earlier books that describe more practical sorts of lives.

This paper has been no more than a *prolegomenon* to the much larger argument that is required to flesh out the statement above and to defend the conceptual unity of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. At a minimum, its thesis has been cautionary. Before

entering the debate about the role *theoria* plays in Aristotle's conception of "complete" happiness, scholars should at least ask themselves what it is and what relationship it has to one of the most common words in his vocabulary: *theorein*.

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A MEANING FOR ΕΠΙΓΛΩΤΤΙΣ NOT CITED IN LSJ

The 1996 edition of LSJ cites as the meanings of ἐπιγλωττίς the "valve which covers the larynx" from Hippocrates and Aristotle and "of the vocal cords" from Galen.¹ The *Suda*'s entry rho 288, ῥυθμός, has a usage of ἐπιγλωττίς that does not concur with these meanings. The context is a description of the effect that the finger holes (τρήματα) exert on the sound emitted by an αὐλός (4.306 Adler):

καὶ ἔτι τῶν τρημάτων τὰ μὲν μείζονά εἰσι, τὰ δὲ ἐλάττωνα, καὶ τὰ μὲν ἐγγυτέρω τῆς ἐπιγλωττίδος, τὰ δὲ πορρωτέρω. καὶ τὰ μὲν στενότερα ὀξύτερά ἐστι τῶν εὐρυτέρων. διὸ καὶ αἱ τῶν παίδων φωναὶ καὶ αἱ τῶν γυναικῶν ὀξύτεραι· τὰ δὲ εὐρύτερα βραδύτερα, ὁμοίως καὶ τὰ ἐγγυτέρω τῶν πορρωτέρω ὀξύτερα.

Some of the holes are bigger and some smaller, and some holes are located nearer the *epiglottis*, and some farther away. The narrower holes are higher [in pitch] than the wider ones. (Accordingly, both the voices of children and those of women are higher.) The wider holes are deeper. Likewise the holes nearer [the *epiglottis*] are higher than those farther away.

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1. H. G. Liddell, R. Scott, and H. S. Jones, *Greek-English Lexicon*, rev. suppl., ed. P. G. W. Glare (Oxford, 1996), 627.