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THEORIA AS PRACTICE AND AS ACTIVITY¹

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Part One: Setting the Stage for Theoria

In Book X chapter 7 of *Nicomachean Ethics* (henceforth, *EN*), Aristotle reaches two decisive conclusions: first, the activity of our intellect which he terms θεωρία is the highest kind and comprises “complete happiness” (ἡ τελεῖα εὐδαιμόνια, *EN* 1177a19); second, a theoretical life, being divine, counts as the highest, and is the one to aim at (*EN* 1178a5-7). These are compelling claims, rightly generating much scholarly comment, particularly about the balance of excellent theoretical and moral activity in the best human life.² Yet the present paper proposes to follow a different standard, one with a broader, thematic approach to θεωρία. My overall aim is to place Aristotle’s discussion against a wider backdrop of θεωρία as a long-standing practice of the classical Greek period, one that consists in travelling to specific religious sites, including Delphi, Olympia, Delos, and Eleusis, to name but a few, to observe rituals and performances. A natural question then arises concerning the reason for which Aristotle employs the same term as the practice. To provide an informed reply, we need to recount the features of *theoria* we find in the literary and historical sources, and compare them with Aristotle’s conception of it as the highest intellectual

¹ The author wishes to acknowledge the organizers of the conference “*Aristotele e le sfide del suo tempo*,” held at Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore in Milan, November 9-11, 2016, for the invitation to present this paper. I wish to direct special thanks to Prof. Nicoletta Scotti, Professor, Department of Philosophy, for her assistance and support throughout; I also recognize the editorial staff of the present volume for their assistance.

² Among recent scholars, see, for example, Burger (1995), Ackrill (1980), Charles (1999), Cooper (1986), Hardie (1965), Kraut (1999), Richardson Lear (2004), Rorty (1980), Roche (1988).

activity in *EN* X 7-8. While we find clear differences between the cultural practice and Aristotle's use of the notion, we find specific features in common, such as that they involve visual spectatorship, and have a religious aim or a divine aspect.

Let me make a few preliminary notes about terminology within the present paper. In its application throughout *EN*, the term θεωρία is translated in English by "contemplation," or "study," which fail to reflect adequately the connection to the verb θεωρεῖν which involves visual perception—in contrast to the Italian term *teoria* which preserves the Greek root. So, throughout the paper I prefer using the transliterated term *theoria* instead of "contemplation." A glance at the lexical entries for θεωρία, θεωρεῖν show that in its active sense, the verb signifies the activity of looking at or viewing something—as, for example, used of spectators at the athletic Games or at theatrical performances. This sense in English is rendered by specific verbs of seeing, such as "look at," "behold," "gaze"—all of which signify the act of looking at something, not merely seeing. The examples in the Greek lexicon show the term refers to the activity of observing something significant like a religious ritual or event, which implies that the perceptual activity involved is not to be confused with simple sense-perception, mere seeing. Now let us examine a few examples from classical literature where the terms θεωρία or θεωρεῖν occur.

We begin with Herodotus, who, in giving an account of a journey that Solon made to Lydia and Egypt to learn about other cultures, describes his travels as a θεωρία (*Hist.* 1. 29-31). In this usage, θεωρία refers to the practice of travelling for the sake of sight-seeing or exploration which consists of one or more cities visited (Rutherford 2000, pp. 135-136; 2014, pp. 149-155). Another occurrence of *theoria*, one of the most frequently cited, is in connection to Alcibiades speaking before the Athenian assembly. According to Thucydides, Alcibiades makes the report that: "Through the brilliance of my θεωρία to Olympia, other Greeks were led to believe our city greater than she really was" (*Hist.* 6, 16, 2). Alcibiades goes on to describe his multiple victories in chariot-racing, and his display of magnificence in the ceremonies of the festival.³ This case of θεωρία has different characteristics than the first one. First, the event Alcibiades refers to as θεωρία – travelling to Olympia for the sake

³ One scholar argues that Alcibiades' actions of taking the state emblems and displaying them as his own at the festival was considered ostentatious and wholly improper (cf. Bill 1901, p. 200).

of attending the religious festival and athletic Games— is distinct from Solon's general sight-seeing activity, although both involve seeing something significant. And Alcibiades' case exemplifies the most common use of *θεωρία*, that of an established cultural practice in which a citizen of one city undertakes a trip to another as private citizen or as appointed ambassador for the sake of viewing some performance or spectacle. Thucydides gives us both kinds of travelling: the account of Alcibiades' trip reflects travel as a private citizen, and in another, he describes an official delegation of Ionians going to the Delian Festival (*Hist.* 3. 101), a kind of reference that is not uncommon in Plato's usage (e.g., *Crito* 43c9-d1, *Phd.* 58b1-5, *Rep.* 556c10).

A related usage occurs in Aristophanes' play *Peace* in which we find a mute character called *Theoria* given back to the assembly as a gift of the character *Peace* (ll. 523 ff.). On one reading, the passage suggests that we see the character *Peace* as restoring the power of the *boule* to appoint ambassadors to the festivals that is broken by war, in which case the character, *Theoria*, represents the service of state delegates going to festivals (cf. Bill 1901, pp. 201-202). We also find *theoria* being used, in a more esoteric context, to describe the particular viewing activity of the ordinary follower of the Eleusinian mysteries—in distinction from the viewing activity of the Eleusinian initiate, which is called *epopteia* (Rutherford 2000, p. 139, n. 31). A further distinct reference to *θεωρία* arises from its mention in regard to the so-called *Theoric Fund*, which appears to have been established by Pericles for the purpose of allowing poor Athenian citizens to attend the Dionysia festival in Athens in 5th and 4th centuries⁴ (Rutherford 2000, p. 134, n. 8).

On the basis of the brief sketch of the various contexts *θεωρία* appears in apart from its philosophical contexts, we can compile a list of the following uses: (i) an individual travelling for sightseeing, or exploration; (ii) an individual travelling to a festival or sanctuary for religious rituals or performances;⁵ (iii) a state-appointed delegate or delegation travelling to festivals or sanctuaries for said aims; (iv) an uninitiated observer of Eleusinian Mysteries—to which list another scholar adds these lesser uses: (v) travelling to consult an oracle; (vi) travelling as an envoy to another city to

⁴ Dates of the Fund vary, but a reasonable suggestion is 450 BCE - 326/23 BCE; the fund is mentioned in Aristotle, *Constitution of Athens*. See Rutherford (2000), p. 134, n. 8, Bill (1901), 201- 202.

⁵ Those travelling to festivals may include women, children, and slaves, as well as male citizens (cf. Rutherford 2013, pp. 146, 160-161).

announce a festival; (vii) travelling as a magistrate regularly employed by one's city (Bill 1901, pp. 196-197). Although there exists a wide range of uses of *θεωρία*, let us consider whether some common features may not, after all, be found. The suggestion of taking the linked notions of viewing something significant and sacred duty as key features seems reasonable (Bill 1901, p. 197). These features are evident among the textual examples we find about individuals, or city-appointed ambassadors, travelling to festivals or shrines; however, they do not fare as well in those examples of sight-seeing or exploration, like what we find in Herodotus, where the notion of duty seems irrelevant. Thus, my proposal consists in modifying the two features to include the notion of viewing or spectatorship, with the object viewed being something highly significant or religious (e.g., an icon, ritual, shrine, or a foreign site). Taking this complex idea as the generic feature allows us to comprehend the various examples of *θεωρία* as practice including sightseeing and exploration as well as observing a sacred ritual, religious performances, athletic Games, visiting a shrine. And from these cases, we also see connections to the lesser uses, such as being sent by one's city to attend a festival, announce a festival, going to a site to consult an oracle.

However, one key feature of the cultural practice remains unremarked in the previous account. What the element of viewing leaves out is the idea of undertaking a journey from one's city to observe something significant and returning home, a feature that at least one recent scholar has found essential to the practice of *θεωρία* (Nightingale 2004, 40-71). The idea of this kind of travel suggests an analogy to pilgrimage (Rutherford 2014, pp. 12-16), an apt enough parallel if one allows for specific differences. For example, in the practice of *θεωρία*, one may be travelling for any of several ends, such as attending festivals, religious rites, consulting oracles, going to sacrifices, attending Games, seeking cures, or going sight-seeing. In contrast, travelling as pilgrimage comprises a narrowly defined end, say, travelling to a religious shrine or site with a single religious aim. Another difference with pilgrimage consists in the political aspect of *θεωρία*, namely, if one has been travelling as a city-appointed ambassador, one is expected to return to one's city, and make a report to the city council. This aspect may be reflected in Alcibiades' account of his trip to Olympia to the

Athenian assembly recounted in Thucydides (*Hist.* 6. 16. 2),⁶ and, at any rate, underscores the necessity to keep a certain conceptual distance between the ideas of pilgrimage and *theoria*.

Based on the foregoing discussion, let us consider two elements as central to the notion of *θεωρία*: first, the idea of viewing, or spectatorship, and second, that of undertaking a journey to observe something significant. At this point, we may ask whether there is some continuity with Aristotle's discussion in *EN* X 7-8, where he describes *θεωρία* as the kind of thinking using the intellect (*nous*) that comprises the highest, most complete activity, human or divine. At first glance, the similarity to the practice of *θεωρία* that we have been describing seems slight. For, Aristotle's description of *θεωρία* in *EN* X 7 does not involve travelling to a religious festival or site to view a spectacle. Yet if we make a distinction between two kinds of looking, between inner and outer looking—or better, between mental and visual perception—we may find a foothold for grasping the common feature. To mention the central one, Aristotle's *θεωρία* as intellectual activity reflects a kind of mental comprehension that implies a visual element, and in this regard, Aristotle's use can be seen as an extension of the classical notion involving spectatorship. Whether the other element of undertaking a journey to somewhere and returning home can be discerned in Aristotle is complex, and falls somewhat outside the confines of this paper, although in the last section of the paper I suggest a certain parallel.

Let us return to the main point: Aristotle's use of the noun *θεωρία* and verb *θεωρεῖν* covers a range of mental activities, as the English verbs in translation are seen to reflect: "contemplate," "study," "observe," "consider," "weigh," and "theorize," to name but a few. Additionally, there appears to be a difference in meaning between the noun and the verbal forms across his works. Specifically, the differences arise depending on whether the noun *θεωρία* or the verb *θεωρεῖν* is used: the noun always signifies the active exercise of intellectual vision, "contemplation", while the verbal forms refer to the process of observing or investigating something. Additionally, these two main uses—that of *θεωρία* to signify "contemplation" as well as *θεωρεῖν* to mean "to consider," "to observe" (etc.)—are not Aristotle's innovations but are inherited from Plato. In fact, Plato employs the term *θεωρία* in the older meanings, referring to the cultural practice of attending a festival, the festival

⁶ The evidence suggests that Alcibiades was not acting as a city-appointed envoy, but as private citizen (cf. Bill 1901, pp. 200-201).

itself, or the delegation to the festival, as well as referring to the act of intellectual apprehension.⁷ But where Aristotle makes his distinctive mark in regard to θεωρία is his refinement of the notion: specifically, his description of it as an activity (*energeia*) and an activity of a specific kind, what he terms a “complete” activity. It is to Aristotle’s conception of θεωρία that we now turn our attention.

Part Two: Theoria as Activity

As we have seen, Aristotle describes *theoria* in *EN* X as an “activity,” or *energeia*, and so, the term requires some explanation as it is textually-dependent. For example, in *Meta.*, Aristotle describes differences using the terms “activity” (*energeia*) vs. “motion” (*kinēsis*) whereas in *EN*, he chooses to contrast “activity” (*energeia*) vs. “disposition” (*hexis*).⁸ To begin, his description of *energeia* as being “at base motion” (*Meta.* IX 3, 1047a32) should be enlarged conceptually to accommodate an intellectual activity such as *theoria* since its essence is wholly distinct from motions, or incomplete activities, like building or walking. In *EN*, when he describes *theoria* as an activity (*energeia*), he means to distinguish it from a disposition (*hexis*) as well as from a potentiality (*dunamis*), a more remote state. In fact, in *EN* Aristotle’s preferred contrastive concepts are *energeia* and *hexis*, rather than the broader concepts, *energeia* and *dunamis*. One reason for the regular appearance of the specific contrast of *energeia* – *hexis* may be traced to an interest in refuting Speusippus who is thought to have defined happiness as “a complete disposition” (*hexis teleia*), and so set the terms of Aristotle’s exposition (Burnet 1900, p. 42). Whatever the reason, the contrast appears frequently in *EN*—as in *EN* I 1 and I 8—where Aristotle defines *eudaimonia* as an activity: it is “an activity (*energeia*) in accordance with virtue” (*EN* I 8, 1098b31). He explains that it mat-

⁷ For example, for Plato, *theoria* signifies variously: (i) contemplation, *Gorgias* 523e3-4, *Republic* 468a8; (ii) observation, *Laws* XII, 951c4; (iii) delegation, *Rep.* 556c10; (iv) festival, *Laws* I, 650a2; see E. Des Places (1970), pp. 252-253.

⁸ Of four key *Meta.* passages on activity (*ἐνέργεια*), i.e., *Meta.* IX 3, IX 6, IX 8 and XI 9, three (*Meta.* IX 3, IX 8, XI 9) connect activity to motion, as, for example: “the term activity (*ἐνέργεια*) which is connected to full actuality (*ἐντελέχεια*) has been extended to other things, especially from motions (*κινήσεις*), for activity (*ἐνέργεια*) seems especially to be motion” (*δοκεῖ γὰρ ἡ ἐνέργεια μάλιστα ἢ κινήσις εἶναι*), at *Meta.* IX 3 (1047a30-32).

ters a great deal whether happiness is displayed in act (*energeia*) or merely possessed as a disposition (*hexis*, *EN* I 8, 1098b31-33). For, if the latter, Aristotle argues, it might not produce a good result, as with someone is asleep or incapacitated; so, *eudaimonia* must be defined as an activity, not merely as a disposition, for virtue (1098b33-1099a3). In *EN* X 6, Aristotle repeats this line of reasoning: *eudaimonia* cannot be a dispositional state (*hexis*), for if it were, someone asleep or suffering deep misfortune could possess it (1176a34-35). As this conclusion is unacceptable (176a35-b1), he concludes that happiness must be counted as “a kind of activity” (*energeian tina*, 1176b1). So, happiness is placed in the category of activities. Yet we need to say more about activities (*energeiai*).

Aristotle notes that there are two kinds of activities: one kind is necessary and desirable for the sake of something else, and another kind is desirable in itself. He concludes that happiness belongs to the latter kind (*EN* X 6, 1176b1-4).⁹ Happiness must belong to the second kind, the sort which is desirable in itself, since “it lacks nothing and is self-sufficient” (*EN* X 6, 1176a5-6). As we know from Aristotle’s discussion of happiness in *EN* I 7, something that is called “self-sufficient” (*autarkes*) means “something which taken by itself renders life desirable and lacking nothing” (*EN* 1097b15-16). So, he concludes that happiness is just this sort of thing, desirable in itself, lacking in nothing—a conclusion that supports his prior reasoning about the finality of happiness in *EN* I 7. Since the capstone argument in *EN* X 7 showing that *theoria* is identical to complete happiness (*teleia eudaimonia*, 1177a17, 1177b24) relies in good measure on his argument in *EN* I 7, let us return for the moment to this argument in *EN* I 7.

The argument Aristotle makes in *EN* I 7 (1097a30-b6) about happiness centers on the notion of what makes something final, or complete (*teleion*). We may set out the argument in expository form consisting of the following steps. First, he states: (1) the highest good (*ariston*) is something final (*teleion*), and if there are several final ends, happiness will be the one that is most final (*teleiotaton*). Second, he adds a two-pronged qualification: (2a) something pursued as an end in itself is more final (*teleioteron*) than something pursued as a means to something else, and (2b) something never

⁹ In his note at *EN* 1176b1-3, Burnet (1900, 459) observes the distinction between activities desirable in themselves and for the sake of something else does not preclude activities being both desirable in themselves and for something else; cf. *EN* 1096b17.

chosen as a means to anything else is more final (*teleioteion*) than something chosen both for itself and as a means to something else.¹⁰ Next, he draws a preliminary conclusion: (3) something always chosen as an end, and never as a means, is “absolutely final” (*haplos teleion*), (*EN* 1097a33). He reasons that happiness seems to be just this thing, something chosen for its own sake and never as a means to anything else (*EN* 1097a34). In contrast, ends like honor, pleasure, and the virtues are chosen for themselves, but also for the sake of happiness (*EN* I 7, 1097b2-4). So, he confirms the conclusion from 1097a33: (4) since happiness is chosen for itself alone and never as a means to anything else, this is the most final thing, and it is final in the unqualified, or absolute sense (*haplos teleion*, 1097a33-1097b1). So, in the course of the “completeness” argument, we see that things may be chosen partly for themselves and partly for the sake of something else, but happiness stands alone in being always chosen for itself and not for the sake of anything else. Therefore, happiness alone deserves to be called “absolutely” (*haplos*) final (*teleion*). Using the logic of being complete, or *teleion*, that he has set down in *EN* I 7, Aristotle has secured part of what he needs to draw the conclusion in *EN* X 7 that establishes *theoria* as complete happiness (*teleian eudaimonia*). The other part of his argument is provided by his discussion of pleasure, and more specifically, about complete activities, in *EN* X 4 and X 5.

Part Three: Complete and Incomplete Activity

Aristotle employs the idea of happiness as being something “absolutely complete” (*haplos teleion*) in *EN* I 7 to argue toward his conclusion that *theoria* is complete happiness in *EN* X 7. He reaches this conclusion by means of two pivotal conclusions from *EN* X 4 and X 5. The first proposition involves drawing a distinction between “complete” and “incomplete” activity. The second results from the first: *theoria* is placed in the category of “complete” activity. To begin, let us sketch the differences between complete and incomplete activity: an incomplete activity has its end external to the activity, as in the case of building something or healing a patient. In the case of healing, Aristotle tells us, the end of heal-

¹⁰ I suggest we call the proposition the “Principle of Finality” (*PF*); it is used here in relation to ranking ends we desire and choose, but it also crops up in *EN* X 7 in ranking kinds of activities, moral and intellectual.

ing as an activity is health (cf. *EN I 1*, 1094a8). So, its constitutive elements—using a cutting or purging procedure, for example—are done for something different from the procedure, namely, for the sake of health. We have a similar analysis, he claims, in building a temple: the constitutive elements—such as laying the foundation, fluting the stone, and fitting the columns (cf. *EN X 4*, 1174a23-27)—are done for the sake of the temple, not for their own sake. Although we might agree that in regard to specific parts of the activity, such as fluting a column, the activity and the end seem to coincide. However, considered as a part, the fluting activity is done for the sake of making the temple, not for its own sake. So, in we see that such kinds of activity, the end of the activity is external to the activity itself. And Aristotle tells us that such activities are called “motions” and are “incomplete” (*ateles*, *EN X 4*, 1174a22). As Aristotle states in *De Anima* II 5, “motion is a form of activity, but incomplete” (*DA 417a16-17*).¹¹

There is also another kind of activity, however, and this sort is termed “complete” (*teleia*). This kind has its end contained in the activity itself, not in anything outside the activity—as we saw with healing or building a temple. As examples of this kind, Aristotle specifically mentions the activity of *seeing* or any of other four modes of special sense-perception (hearing, smelling, touching, tasting): each one comprises “complete” (*teleia*) activity (*EN X 4*, 1174a15). In fact, Aristotle mentions three central features of “complete” activities in *EN X 4*. First, the activity contains its end—just in the sense that the activity itself constitutes the goal of the activity. We may grasp this feature by contrasting it with the example of building a temple: the activity of building is done for the sake of something else, a temple. The second feature of “complete” activity is that it lacks temporal duration: such activity is not extended in time, but something whole (*holon*) at each moment. The third feature concerns that the form specific to defining the activity is fully present, and needs nothing to complete it (*EN X 4*, 1174a15-18).

But what does it mean to say that an activity (*energeia*) is “formally” complete? We may grasp this feature best by considering the activity of special sense-perception as it is described in *De Anima* II 5 and II 12. First, the activity of sense-perception in general is defined as the active exercise of a sense capacity (*DA II 5*, 417b16-19). And in *DA II 12*, he argues that sense-perception consists in “apprehending the form of the sensible thing without the matter”

¹¹ Also *Phys.* III 2, 201b31: “... motion appears to be an activity (*energeia*) but incomplete” (*ateles*).

(*DA* 412b17-18). For example, in the case of seeing, the sense of sight grasps the sensible form of some colored object present (cf. *DA* II 7, 418a29-31); as a result, we can say that we are visually aware. The act of visual apprehension—say, seeing a shade of blue—is not temporally extended but takes place all at once. We apprehend the sensible form, a ratio, of a particular sensible in its entirety. In this respect, one may say that the activity of sensing is “complete in each moment.” In fact, any specific episode of active perceiving, namely, seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, or smelling, is “complete” in the sense that its essential feature is present at each moment, and so, it is a whole. This account from *DA* (and *DS*) is in full agreement with the passage in *EN* X 4 where he characterizes seeing as a “complete” activity: seeing is non-temporal, taking place in a moment (cf. *EN* X 4, 1174b8).

To sum up, in *EN* X 4, Aristotle distinguishes complete from incomplete activities. The latter kind include building, healing, moving from one place to another—all these comprise what he terms “motions” (*kineseis*, *EN* X 4, 1174a19). As he explains the notion in *EN* X 4: “All motion takes time, and is for some end, like housebuilding, and is complete only when it accomplishes what it aims at” (*EN* X 4, 1174a19-21). In other words, building a house or healing a patient are comprised of various subordinate activities, each one with a different nature. As he notes in *EN* X 4, building a temple consists in, among other things, laying a foundation, fitting the stones, fluting the columns, making the triglyph, and so on. And none of these individual components comprises the end: each one is only a part (*EN* X 4, 1174a23-26). So, the whole comprised of the component parts is incomplete (*ateles*) activity (*EN* 1174a22). As he explains, “these motions differ in form,” and “no motion is complete at any given moment” (*EN* X 4, 1174a21-22). So, although motions, like building a house or healing a person, are activities in the larger sense of being present exercises of an ability, they are “incomplete” activities in the three ways specified: (i) having an end outside the activity; (ii) possessing temporal duration; (iii) lacking a complete form. So, activities such as healing or building differ in kind when compared with perceptual activities like seeing or hearing, or with intellectual activities like *dianoia*-reasoning or *theoria*-thinking. To be more precise, the features pertaining to seeing also pertain to *dianoia* and *theoria*, namely: (i) being a complete activity, (ii) being something whole, (iii) having its form is complete at each moment, and (iv) lacking temporal duration (cf. *EN* X 4, 1174a14-19, 1174b5-7).

Part IV: Theoria as Complete Activity

Aristotle's idea of complete activity developed in *EN X 4* fits seamlessly with his notion of happiness as an activity in *EN X 6*: all of the conceptual connections from *EN I 7* remains fresh as he begins his discussion of *theoria* in *EN X 7*. What changes is that in *EN X 7* he brings the idea of a complete activity to its highest human expression—to its most elevated occurrence, namely, the activity of study, or *theoria*. In *EN X 7*, he begins the discussion of *theoria* by introducing it as the activity of our best, or highest, faculty (*ariston*), (*EN 1177a13*). He suggests it is our intellect (*nous*) or “the part that rules us and gives us ideas of what is noble and divine” (*EN 1177a14-15*). Next, he states: “whether this is divine or the most divine in us,” it is “the activity of this part in accordance with virtue that comprises complete happiness (*teleia eudaimonia*), (*EN X 7, 1177a15-17*), adding that this activity is to be identified with the theoretical kind (*he theoretike*), (*EN X 7, 1177a17-18*). At this point in the chapter, we see where Aristotle is heading with his equation of *theoria* and complete happiness (*teleia eudaimonia, 1177a17*), yet here he establishes the proof of the connection by appeal to human faculties without mentioning the gods directly. As was noted, the argument in *EN X 7* begins by stating that *theoria* is the activity of the “highest,” or “best,” part of us, our intellect, which is the part that “gives us ideas of the noble and the divine” (*EN X 7, 1177a13-15*). He then gives no fewer than six arguments recommending the activity of *theoria* as the highest activity, and thus, identical with happiness (cf. *EN X 7, 1177a15-b25*). But throughout *EN X 7* passage, he employs metaphysical arguments based on human—not divine—capacities and ways of knowing.

The arguments in *EN X 7* showing *theoria* to be the highest of human activities include: (1) *theoria* is the highest activity since it belongs to the highest part, intellect, and (2) this part apprehends the most knowable objects (*EN 1177a20-21*). *Theoria* is next argued to be complete happiness on the grounds that: (3) it is the “most continuous” activity (*sunechestate*), (*EN 1177a21*); (4) of all virtuous activities, that of *theoria* is the most pleasant (1177a23-25); (5) the activity of *theoria* is the most self-sufficient (1177a27-28); and (6) *theoria* alone is loved for its own sake, not for the sake of anything else (1177b1-2). These arguments provide us with the central features of *theoria*, including that: it is an activity of the intellect (*nous, 1177a14-15*); being theoretical, it comprises the highest activity (1177a19-21, 1177b19); it aims at nothing beyond itself;

it is continuous (*suneches*, 1177a21);¹² it is most pleasant (1177a23-25); it is self-sufficient (*autarkes*); it is leisurely (*scholastikon*); it is free from fatigue (*atru-ton*, 1177b21-22). It is worth pointing out that all the arguments in *EN X 7* are based on the nature of human *theoria*; none promote *theoria* on the grounds of it being similar to the gods' activity.¹³ However, his argument about *theoria* is not yet complete: he moves upwards, from considering human happiness in *EN X 7* to divine happiness in *EN X 8*.

V. *EN X 8: Theoria as Divine Activity*

Aristotle opens the connection between *theoria* and gods' activity in *EN X 8*. His move is predictable given what is in effect a theoretical line of ascent from *EN X 4* culminating at *EN X 8*. In effect, he moves away from considering *theoria* as a human *activity* to that of comparing two lives, one of moral virtue, the other of study. The authoritative argument for the superiority of *theoria* depends on showing what is proper to gods is the activity of study, not of moral virtue. In this way, he brings in the activity of the gods as a means of comparing *theoria* and excellent moral activity, then concluding that the latter comprises a secondary kind of happiness (*EN X 8*, 1178a9-10). And yet, the way in which he reaches the familiar conclusion deserves some note. Let us examine the argument more closely. In *EN X 8*, he argues in an eliminative fashion: the gods are active living beings but since it is not proper to them to engage in moral activity, the only activity remaining is *theoria* (*EN X 8*, 1178b21). And he concludes: "So, the activity (*energeia*) of the gods that is the most blessed (*makarios*) is theoretical (*theoretike*); and the human activity most akin to it is the happiest" (*EN X 8*, 1178b21-23). Furthermore, since the activities of *theoria* and *eudaimonia* are co-extensive (1178b28-29), the more theoretical

¹² On the "continuity" accorded study: "we are able to think more continuously (*sunechestate*) than we are able to perform any action" (*EN* 1177a21-22); the suggestion that *theoria* is "most continuous" concerns its being an activity of a non-composite faculty, the intellect, seems reasonable (Gauthier and Jolif, T. II, p. 879). As well, it may relate to the comment about activities being more and less complete depending on object and condition of faculty, *EN X 4*, 1174b21-23.

¹³ Although the first argument mentions *theoria* as being the highest due to the objects of thought being "noble and divine" (*EN* 1177a15), the term refers to a property of human ideas.

activity one engages in, the happier one will be (1178b29-30). So, for humans, “happiness is a kind of *theoria*” (*he eudaimonia theoria tis*, *EN* 1178b32). The argument may be expanded as follows:

(1) Among living things, only gods and humans share in the activity of happiness (1178b26-27).

(2) Among the activities comprising happiness, humans share in moral and in theoretical activity.

(3) The gods share in theoretical activity but not in moral activity (1178b20-21).

(4) The activity of the gods that comprises their happiness is theoretical (1178b21-22).

(5) The human activity most like divine activity comprises the highest human happiness (1178b23-24).

(6) Therefore, theoretical activity comprises the highest human happiness (1178b7-b32).

As a start, we need to examine the pivotal premise of the argument (premise 3) about the gods’ activities along with its supporting argument, given that the premise is crucial to inferring the conclusion (premise 6). Here it should be noted that the argument that Aristotle gives to support premise 3 (at *EN* 1178b8-b18) is indirect and contains rhetorical elements. First, this argument is indirect in the sense that it does not prove that gods do not engage in moral activity based on a premise about their nature: there is no reference to the essential properties of the gods here. Rather, the argument employs rhetorical questions to indicate that gods do not share in moral activity because they have no such needs. Specifically, after stating that gods are “most happy and blessed” (*EN* 1178b8-9), he asks:

But what kinds of actions are we to attribute to them? Acts of justice? Will they not seem ridiculous making contracts with one another, returning deposits and so forth? Perhaps acts of courage—withstanding fearful things and taking risks because it is noble to do so? Or generous actions? But to whom will they give? ... If we went through the whole list, we would see that a concern with actions is petty and unworthy of the gods (*EN* X 8, 1178b10-b18).¹⁴

In this way, he implies that the need to exercise a moral virtue is inconsistent with the gods’ natures and consequently with their happiness: more specifically, gods have no need for justice, courage, moderation or other moral virtues as they are “most blessed” (*EN*

¹⁴ Tr. M. Ostwald (1999).

1178b8-9). Being concerned with practical actions itself reflects a “smallness” that is “unworthy” of the gods (*EN* X 8, 1178b17-18).

We can also obtain the conclusion that gods have no need to engage in moral actions by reference to Aristotle’s distinction between complete and incomplete activities. Let us assume that in virtue of their essence, gods engage in complete activities only, and if there is more than one such activity, in the most complete. Recall that Aristotle’s baseline for an activity being complete concerns the end and the activity being the same, it being impossible to have a distinct end of a “complete” activity. However, excellent moral activity is desired for its own sake and also for the sake of something else. As Aristotle notes: “We derive a greater or smaller advantage from practical pursuits beyond the action itself...” (*EN* X 8, 1177b2-4), than offering examples of such advantages. First, in military actions that involve courage, the advantage is victory—for, as he notes, “no one chooses to wage war for the sake of war” (*EN* X 8, 1177b9-10). Second, in political actions, the advantage is political power or prestige; thus, all these actions are also performed for ends other than the activity itself (*EN* 1177b12-15). Although military and political actions surpass others in terms of nobility, they are un-leisurely, aim at ends outside themselves, not being chosen for their own sake (*EN* X 7, 1177b16-18). Since gods only engage in complete activity, or the most complete activity, it follows that gods do not engage in excellent moral activity. But if a more complete kind of activity exists, this would not be inconsistent with gods’ nature.

As we know, there is a more complete activity, namely, *theoria*. Contrasted with moral activity where we derive some advantage, he says: “we derive nothing from the activity of studying” (*to theoresai*, *EN* 1177b4). In the list of the familiar features of *theoria*, let me emphasize its *completeness*, its aiming at nothing beyond the activity. In contrast, excellent moral activity is chosen partly for its own sake, and also for the sake of some other end, e.g., a military or political end. Such an activity is not as final as one chosen for itself and not for the sake of anything else. Aristotle introduces this proposition—let me call it the *Principle of Finality* (PF)—in *EN* I 7. According to the text, from the perspective of completeness, one activity is more complete (*teleion*) than another if it is chosen for a single end. So, if there is an activity that is chosen for itself and not for the sake of anything else, this activity will be what is “absolutely complete” (*haplos teleia*). Aristotle tells us there is such an activity, and it is *theoria*, or study. Therefore, the activity the gods engage in must be *theoria* as this activity is the most complete, always be-

ing chosen for itself. And since happiness is initially agreed to be an activity, this activity will comprise the happiness that the gods are said to enjoy. While Aristotle is not unaware that looking to the gods for the best activity sets a high bar for us—as he concedes “such a life (*bios*) would be more than human” (*EN X 7*, 1177b26-27)—this admission does not diminish the uniqueness of the highest activity. From a perspective acknowledging our composite nature, he agrees that we cannot engage in *theoria* continuously: we cannot live a life of *theoria*. Nonetheless, he recommends *theoria* as an aspirational goal, stating in the next lines: “we should try to become immortal as far as possible, and to do all we can to live according with what is best in us” (*EN X 7*, 1177b33-34). So, Aristotle endorses *theoria* as the activity at which to aim, even if it cannot comprise a full human life—a life which, we should have no doubt, will include excellent moral activity and other good things.¹⁵

We have seen that Aristotle’s affirmation of *theoria* as the highest human activity is connected to his prior reasoning about pleasure and complete activities, like seeing, in *EN X 4*. This line of discussion describes an ascent, beginning in *EN X 4* and stretching to *EN X 7*, where Aristotle reaches the sub-conclusion that the highest human activity is *theoria*. This conclusion, in turn, provides a foothold for the highest point of his conception: an argument showing *theoria* is the activity of the gods in *EN X 8*. Having reached a pinnacle in his reasoning about the highest activity, he descends, the final passage comprising a rhetorical return to the starting point of the *Ethics*. In closing, he acknowledges “the end is not to study (*to theoresai*) and know (*to gnonai*) particular things to be done but to do them” (*EN X 9*, 1179a35-b2).¹⁶ Taking the whole work as an architectural model, we can conceive a circular shape formed throughout the *Ethics* in the sense that his final lines about the practical sciences and the art of politics return to the idea offered in *EN I 6*: that we seek the practical and not the theoretical good. We might imagine a parallel to the path of a classical Greek travelling on a *theoria*—moving away from and back to one’s home city—for the sake of seeing things occasioning wonder and leading to understanding.

¹⁵ In fact, the argument has been made that being a good person, or having moral excellence, is the only way in which one is able to perform complete activities, like study: see C. Olfert, 2014.

¹⁶ For the familiar claim about seeking the practical, not the theoretical, good, see *EN I 6* (1096b35-1097a13), *EN VI 7* (1141b5-23, *passim*).

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