

# Aristotle on Activity “According to the Best and Most Final” Virtue

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## Abstract

According to *Nicomachean Ethics* I 7 1098a16–18, *eudaimonia* consists in activity of soul “according to the best and most final” virtue. Ongoing debate between inclusivist and exclusivist readers of this passage has focused on the referent of “the best and most final” virtue. I argue that even if one accepts the exclusivist’s answer to this reference question, one still needs an account of what it means for activity of soul to accord with the best and most final virtue. I examine the nature of this accordance relation and defend a novel inclusivist reading of the whole passage.

**Keywords:** Aristotle, Eudaimonia, Happiness, Virtue, Nicomachean Ethics

## I

In recent decades, debate has focused on the meaning of Aristotle’s claim that *eudaimonia* (happiness) consists in ‘activity of soul according to virtue (κατ’ ἀρετήν), but (δέ) if there are many virtues, then according to the best and most final (κατὰ τὴν ἀρίστην καὶ τελειοτάτην)’ (*EN* I 7, 1098a16–18).<sup>1</sup> This passage, which I here call ‘the disputed passage’, is open to both exclusivist and inclusivist readings. According to exclusivist readers, Aristotle is committing himself to the view that *eudaimonia* consists solely in the exercise of one highest virtue, which *Nicomachean Ethics* X 7–8 will eventually identify as the intellectual virtue of *sophia*, or contemplative wisdom. By contrast, inclusivist readers of the disputed passage believe that *eudaimonia* consists in the exercise of a wide range of virtues.

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<sup>1</sup> Although I have consulted various translations, translations in this paper are my own. Given the philosophical issues at play, I have sought to translate literally.

So far, participants in the debate over inclusive and exclusive interpretations of the disputed passage have focused on what I call *the reference question*, viz., what is the referent of ‘the best and most final’ virtue? Exclusivists identify ‘the best and most final’ virtue with *sophia*. Inclusivists, by contrast, offer broader readings of Aristotle’s reference to ‘the best and most final’ virtue.

In this paper, I challenge the assumption that an exclusivist answer to the reference question shows Aristotle to be an exclusivist about *eudaimonia* as such. I argue that even if we accept an exclusivist answer to the reference question, an inclusive reading of the disputed passage as a whole is both possible and supported by the text. As I argue here, participants in the debate over the meaning of the disputed passage have neglected to consider what it means for activity of soul to accord with ‘the best and most final’ virtue. A shift of focus to what I call *the accordancy question* reveals new resources for an inclusive understanding of Aristotle on *eudaimonia*.

## II

In this section, I explain why the exclusivist answer to the reference question is probably correct. From there, I perform the preliminary task of showing that the disputed passage as a whole is at least *consistent* with an inclusive reading.

According to Ackrill’s classic inclusive reading of the disputed passage – which I call *the composite virtue reading* – ‘the best and most final’ virtue is *total* virtue, a second-order composite containing the complete set of first-order virtues.<sup>2</sup> Thus, on the composite virtue reading, Aristotle concludes that *eudaimonia* consists in activity according to the complete set of intellectual and ethical virtues.

Although a few commentators have defended the composite virtue reading, most have rejected it.<sup>3</sup> While their criticisms vary on specifics, the basic objection is that Aristotle’s reference to ‘the best and most final’ virtue is most naturally read as possessing exclusionary force. Exclusivists find support for this exclusionary reading in the opening lines of *Nicomachean Ethics* X 7, which echo the disputed passage: ‘But if *eudaimonia* is activity according to virtue (κατ’ ἀρετῆν), [it is] reasonable [for it to be

<sup>2</sup> See Ackrill (1974) 1980, 26–9.

<sup>3</sup> For an overview of the debate (as of 1998), see Purinton 1998, 261n9. Against the composite virtue reading, see, in particular, Cooper (1987) 1999, 222–4 and Kraut 1989, 241–4.

activity] according to the best (*κατὰ τὴν κρατίστην*). But this would be [the virtue] of the best (*τοῦ ἀρίστου*)’ (1177a12–13). Aristotle’s language in X 7 suggests that he refers not to some simple *composite* of all the virtues, but rather, to a certain particular virtue or kind of virtue. He has in mind the *best and most perfect* sort, the proper virtue of the highest human capacity.

Responding to this criticism of the composite virtue reading, other inclusivists have proposed that ‘the best and most final’ virtue is the excellence of the whole rational element of the soul. Proponents of this *rational virtue reading* – such as Roche (1988a) in passing and Purinton (1998) in full – argue that it succeeds where Ackrill’s fails. For on this reading, the disputed passage refers to the *best kind* of virtue, the virtue of the rational element of the soul, which has both intellectual and reason-responsive elements, and whose excellent activity is better and more final than the excellence of either the perceptive or nutritive elements. This reading of ‘the best and most final’ virtue has exclusionary force: it rules out the virtues of the lower parts of the soul. Yet the reading is still inclusive since rational virtue *includes* both intellectual and ethical virtue. Thus, the rational virtue reading allows *eudaimonia* to contain more than the exercise of just one of the rational virtues (one of the intellectual virtues).

Yet this rational virtue reading encounters problems of its own. In particular, it is reasonable to think that if Aristotle can identify a highest virtue of the rational element of the soul – i.e., if he can identify a best and most final virtue among the class of rational virtues – then Aristotle should hold *eudaimonia* to be activity of soul according to this *very best virtue*.<sup>4</sup> Further, Aristotle eventually suggests (in *Nicomachean Ethics* X 7) that this best virtue *is* one very specific kind of virtue, viz., *sophia*, or contemplative wisdom (see 1177a24). And so, Aristotle’s remarks in X 7 imply that Aristotle intends to identify ‘the best and most final’ virtue of I 7 with the highest of *all* the (rational) virtues.

Accordingly, exclusivist readings rightly identify ‘the best and most final’ virtue as one particular highest virtue, and therefore, their answer to the reference question is correct. Nevertheless, if we ask what it means for activity *to accord with* this virtue, we shall see that the disputed passage as a whole is at least consistent with an inclusive, rather than an exclusive, reading.

The *kata* (‘according to’) + accusative construction in Aristotle’s reference to activity ‘according to the best and most final’ virtue is open to both *restrictive* and *directive* construals.<sup>5</sup> On a restrictive reading of the

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Lear 2004, 45n74, in response to Purinton.

<sup>5</sup> Irwin 1991, 390–1 distinguishes between ‘prescriptive’ and ‘regulative’ senses of activity ‘according to’ virtue. For Irwin, activity *prescriptively* according to virtue is ac-

*kata*, some activity of soul *A* is *kata* some virtue *V* only if *A* constitutes the exercise of *V*. On a directive reading, however, *A* is *kata V* if *A* constitutes the exercise of *V* or if *A* is directed by the exercise of *V*. However we parse the notion of direction here, a directive reading of *kata* allows that while the exercise of ‘the best and most final’ virtue can very well count as one mode of psychic activity *kata* ‘the best and most final’ virtue, activity of soul *kata* this virtue can also include the exercise of other virtues as well. Such activity can include the exercise of the other virtues to the extent that such exercise is *directed by* the exercise of ‘the best and most final’ virtue.<sup>6</sup>

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tivity that fully exercises a virtue; activity *regulatively* according to virtue is activity regulated by virtue, even if it does not fully exercise a given virtue. (Hence, to use Irwin’s example, a virtuous person’s leisurely stroll may accord with courage regulatively, even if it does not accord prescriptively.) In proposing this distinction, Irwin responds to the general worries of Kraut 1989, 238n31, who (like Lawrence 1992, 20n23, 25) doubts that Aristotle could understand virtue in any sense other than a prescriptive one. Irwin’s distinction is similar (though not necessarily identical) to that which I draw between restrictive and directive senses of *kata*. Yet Irwin does not extend his insight to Aristotle’s remarks on activity according to ‘the best and most final’ virtue. I say more about Irwin’s proposal about how to understand Aristotle’s reference to ‘activity according to virtue’ in section III.

<sup>6</sup> In the works cited above, Kraut and Lawrence believe that an activity can count as *kata* some virtue *V* only if it is an exercise of *V*. I see no reason to accept this proposal, however. For in *Nicomachean Ethics* VI 13, Aristotle apparently agrees with those who maintain that virtue is a state ‘according to correct reason’ (κατὰ τὸν ὀρθὸν λόγον), and so, by extension, ‘according to practical wisdom’ (κατὰ τὴν φρόνησιν: 1144b23–5). Hence, all the ethical virtues (including, e.g., temperance) accord with *phronēsis*. But they are not themselves kinds or instances of *phronēsis*: indeed, it was Socrates’ mistake, Aristotle says, to identify all the virtues with *phronēsis* (1144b28–30). If this is the case, however, it seems natural to say that temperate appetitive activity also accords with *phronēsis* (or the exercise of *phronēsis*), even if it is not itself an exercise of *phronēsis*.

To be sure, Aristotle maintains (at VI 13, 1144b26–8) that virtue is not only a state of soul ‘according to correct reason’ (κατὰ τὸν ὀρθὸν λόγον), but one ‘with correct reason’ (μετὰ τοῦ ὀρθοῦ λόγου), where ‘correct reason’ is *phronēsis*. In making the claim that virtue is ‘with correct reason’, however, Aristotle does not retract the thought that ethical virtue *directively* accords with *phronēsis*; rather, he clarifies how ethical virtue so accords. As Gottlieb 2009, 99–102 suggests, the virtuous person’s dispositions are ‘with correct reason’ in the sense that they (unlike the dispositions of the merely enkratic agent) are fully integrated with correct reason (such that they do not conflict with correct reason’s prescriptions). Thus, when Aristotle maintains that virtue is a state not only ‘according to correct reason’, but ‘with correct reason’, I take Aristotle to say that virtue not only accords with correct reason, but accords *fully*.

So, to be clear, Aristotle *could* be (i) identifying the 'best and most final' virtue with one highest virtue and (ii) making the claim that *eudaimonia* consists exclusively in the exercise of this virtue. After all, in the abstract, one *can* construe activity 'according to the best and most final' virtue as simply identical to the exercise of that virtue. But if one can identify broader senses of the *kata* relation – and I have just indicated how one might – then one can identify correspondingly broader ways for activity of soul to accord with 'the best and most final' virtue. In other words, even if Aristotle identifies 'the best and most final' virtue with one highest virtue to the exclusion of other virtues, an inclusivist can argue that nothing rules out a broad range of life-activity from constituting *eudaimonia*, as long as that activity accords directly with the highest virtue.<sup>7</sup>

### III

The accordance relation in Aristotle's reference to activity of soul 'according to the best and most final' virtue is open to a directive construal, and is at least *consistent* with an inclusive reading. In what follows, I defend the stronger claim that the textual evidence actually supports this directive reading. Since the disputed passage provides the conclusion to the function argument that Aristotle develops in *Nicomachean Ethics* I 7, we should examine earlier steps in that argument more closely. As I argue in this section, attention to the way Aristotle uses *kata* directly earlier in the function argument provides us strong reason to conclude that he uses *kata* directly in the disputed passage, especially in his reference to activity of soul 'according to the best and most final' virtue.

I begin with some uncontroversial remarks about Aristotle's discussion. In *Nicomachean Ethics* I 7, Aristotle identifies the function of an organism with the kind of soul it possesses and the sort of life-activity (*ζωή*) it exer-

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In section III, I identify apparently inclusive uses of *kata* elsewhere in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. I say more about *Nicomachean Ethics* VI 13 in section IV.

<sup>7</sup> Cooper (1987) 1999, 227 holds that the disputed passage 'does not mean to say that flourishing consists in the activity of some single virtue, but rather to emphasize the special need for the activity of the best virtue, as completion to the others, if one's life is to express the full perfection of human nature.' While the inclusive reading of the disputed passage that I propose in this section seems broadly consistent with the sort of reading Cooper suggests here, Cooper's apparently exclusive reading of the *kata* in the disputed passage makes this reading hard for him to defend. (For charges that Cooper's reading is in fact unmotivated, see Roche 1988b, 108 and Heinaman 2000, 174–5.)

cises. On this basis, Aristotle denies that the human function can consist in the life of plants, i.e., in the ‘nutritive and growth-oriented life’ (1098a1). Likewise, Aristotle rules out a ‘certain perceptive [life]’ (αἰσθητική τις: 1098a2) – sometimes distinguished by perception, sometimes by locomotion – since such a life is shared by every (non-rational) animal (1098a3). Through elimination, Aristotle identifies the human function with ‘a certain practical [life: i.e., ζωή] of that having reason’ (πρακτική τις τοῦ λόγον ἔχοντος: 1098a3–4).

In what activity, however, does such life consist? In the line immediately following his initial statement of the human function in 1098a3–4, Aristotle identifies two aspects of the rational element of the soul, i.e., ‘that having reason’. One aspect of this rational element, he says, has reason as ‘obeying’ (ἐπιπειθές) reason, the other as ‘thinking’ (διανοούμενον) (1098a4–5). In parallel passages from *Nicomachean Ethics* I 13, Aristotle describes the first aspect as rational in the way that a youth ‘listening’ (ἀκουστικόν) to his father is; the second aspect, by contrast, is rational ‘authoritatively and in itself’ (κυρίως καὶ ἐν αὐτῷ: 1103a2–3). Although the aspect that obeys thinking – viz., the reason-responsive desiderative aspect of the soul – lacks reason by itself, it nevertheless ‘shares’ (μετέχουσα) in reason (1102b13–14).<sup>8</sup>

Thus, when Aristotle claims at I 7, 1098a4–5 that one aspect of the rational element has reason as ‘thinking’ and that another aspect has reason as ‘obeying’ reason, Aristotle thinks that the human function consists in *two* modes of rational activity. First, it consists in noetic activity that is rational in its very exercise; second, it consists in activity that is rational just insofar as it is directed by – i.e., just insofar as it obeys (or shares in, or listens to) – the first, primary sort of activity. So the human function is not restricted to thinking, but can include rational activity in an extended sense. The human function can include the activity of the reason-responsive element, just insofar as such reason-responsive activity is directed by rational thought.<sup>9</sup>

It is against this complex picture of the rational element that Aristotle introduces a *kata* + accusative to which we need to pay special attention if we are ultimately to understand Aristotle’s later reference to activity ‘according to the best and most final’ virtue in the disputed passage. Having identified two aspects of the rational element, Aristotle restates his account of the human function and says that it consists in ‘activity of soul according to reason or not without reason’ (ψυχῆς ἐνέργεια κατὰ λόγον ἢ μὴ ἄνευ

<sup>8</sup> In these passages, Aristotle refers to ‘parts’ of the soul. In *Eudemian Ethics* II 1, where Aristotle also proposes the same division, Aristotle clarifies that by ‘parts’, he could mean powers, and is not necessarily committed to the view that the soul is divisible (1219b32–6).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. also *Eudemian Ethics* II 1, 1219b18–31: Aristotle divides the rational element into that aspect which orders (ἐπιτάττειν) and that which obeys (πειθεσθαι).

λόγον: 1098a7–8). In reading this restatement, however, we face two problems of interpretation. *First*, should we understand the *kata* here restrictively or directly? On a restrictive reading of the *kata* in 1098a7–8, some activity *A* is *kata logon* only if *A* is an exercise of reason in the authoritative sense, i.e., if it is an instance of thinking. On a directive reading of the *kata*, however, some activity *A* is *kata logon* if *A* is rational in either the authoritative or extended senses. Hence, while thinking could very well count as one mode of psychic activity *kata logon* in the directive sense, activity of soul directly *kata logon* could potentially include other activity as well, e.g., appetite, insofar as such activity is directed by reason in the authoritative sense. *Second*, should we understand the phrase 'activity of soul according to reason or not without reason' disjunctively or epexegetically? That is, is Aristotle *distinguishing* 'activity of soul according to reason' from activity of soul 'not without reason' (the disjunctive reading), or is he *clarifying* the notion of 'activity of soul according to reason' by re-describing it as 'not without reason' (the epexegetic reading)?

One's response to the first of these questions determines one's response to the second. If one reads the *kata* in Aristotle's reference to 'activity of soul according to reason or not without reason' restrictively, one will think that since Aristotle has just distinguished between authoritative and extended senses of rational activity, 'activity of soul according to reason' refers only to the former (i.e., to thinking), while activity that is 'not without reason' refers only to the latter (i.e., to reason-responsive desire, insofar as it is directed by thinking). In other words, by identifying activity that obeys reason as merely 'not without reason', Aristotle would not be committed to holding that such activity is also 'according to reason'.<sup>10</sup> So a restrictive reading of the *kata* commits one to a disjunctive reading of the phrase 'or not without reason', and vice versa.

By contrast, a directive reading of the *kata* in 'activity of soul according to reason or not without reason' commits one to an epexegetic reading of the phrase 'or not without reason', and vice versa. For if one reads the *kata* directly, then 'activity of soul according to reason' includes rational activity in both the strict and extended senses. And so, on the directive reading, activity 'according to reason' turns out to be identical to activity 'not without reason': Aristotle is referring to the same kind of activity under different descriptions.<sup>11</sup> Thus, on this directive reading, 'activity of

<sup>10</sup> See, e.g., Stewart (1892) 1973, 100–1 (citing Heliodorus and Eustratius) and Irwin 1999, 184.

<sup>11</sup> Irwin 1991, 390n4 mentions this epexegetic reading of 'or not without reason' without committing himself to it. Both Schwarzenbach 1992, 245 and Nussbaum 1995, 114 seem to read the phrase in the manner I defend here.

soul according to reason' would consist not only in thinking, but in reason-responsive activity insofar as thinking directs it.

Two considerations support a directive reading of the *kata* in 1098a7–8's reference to 'activity of soul according to reason' and an exegetical reading of the phrase 'or not without reason'. The first consideration is that the directive use of *kata* follows naturally from Aristotle's account of the internal structure of the rational element. According to *Nicomachean Ethics* I 7 and I 13, the reason-responsive element takes its direction by thinking: it obeys, shares in, and listens to thinking (as a child, Aristotle says, listens to his father). Indeed, in the *Nicomachean Ethics* I 13 parallel passage, the thinking element is more 'authoritatively' (*κυρίως*) rational than the reason-responsive element (1103a2). Of course, with his use of *κυρίως*, Aristotle here calls attention to the way in which the thinking element is more strictly, or properly, speaking rational than the reason-responsive element. But Aristotle's references in *Nicomachean Ethics* I 7 and I 13 to the way in which the reason-responsive element takes its *direction from* thinking also call attention to the way in which the thinking element has more *authority* than the reason-responsive element, which is *subject to that authority*.<sup>12</sup> So even if the activity of the reason-responsive element is not rational in the authoritative sense, reason-responsive desire can nevertheless *accord with* reason insofar as thinking has authority over and directs such desire. Moreover, Aristotle suggests just this directive sense of the accordance relation in other passages that highlight how the reason-responsive element is subject to the authoritative direction of reason. In *Nicomachean Ethics* III 12, 1119b13–15, for instance, he insists that just as a child should 'live according to the order of [his] tutor' (*κατὰ τὸ πρόστιγμα τοῦ παιδαγωγοῦ ζῆν*), so too the appetitive element should live 'according to reason' (*τὸ ἐπιθυμητικὸν κατὰ τὸν λόγον*). Likewise, in *Eudemian Ethics* II 2, 1220b5–7, Aristotle insists that character (*ἦθος*) is an aspect of soul 'according to ordering reason, capable of following reason' (*κατὰ ἐπιτακτικὸν λόγον δυναμένου δ' ἀκολουθεῖν τῷ λόγῳ ποιότης*).

The second consideration comes from the surrounding context. Aristotle insists that the human function consists in 'activity of soul according to reason or not without reason' at 1098a7–8. Yet a few lines later, at 1098a13–14, Aristotle claims that the human function consists in 'activity of soul and actions with reason' (*ψυχῆς ἐνέργειαν καὶ πράξεις μετὰ λόγου*). Since activity 'with reason' here presumably includes rational activity in both the authoritative *and* subordinate senses, it would follow that activity

<sup>12</sup> My discussion has benefited from the helpful paper by Grönroos 2007, which argues that the reason-responsive element shares in reason by relying on reason as an authority.



'not without reason' should do the same. And so, the exegetical reading of 'or not without reason' at 1098a8 follows as a matter of course. Although Bywater brackets the passage that follows from 1098a12–16, that passage appears in the manuscripts and is not obviously an interpolation. If the passage is a later addition – though I see no reason to think that it is – then it captures at least one natural reading of 1098a7–8's reference to 'activity of soul according to reason or not without reason'. In this case, whoever added it evidently understood 'activity of soul according to reason or not without reason' as a broad sort of activity *with reason* – i.e., not without reason.<sup>13</sup>

On my proposal, then, Aristotle in *Nicomachean Ethics* I 7 identifies the human function with a complex of activities: one activity (thinking) offers authoritative direction, other activities (reason-responsive desiderative activities) are subordinate and follow. But *both* constitute the human function because *both* count as activity of soul that accords directly with the authoritative element, i.e., with rational thinking.

Having clarified how Aristotle uses *kata* in 1098a7–8's description of the human function as 'activity of soul according to reason or not without reason', I now turn to his use of *kata* in the disputed passage's conclusion about *eudaimonia*. Given Aristotle's directive use of *kata* in 1098a7–8's description of the human function as 'activity of soul according to reason', and given his claim at 1097b25–8 that 'the good and the well' of something is found in its function, it will be natural for Aristotle to use *kata* directly in his conclusion about *eudaimonia*. How he does so is a matter we shall need to examine carefully.

Recall that the disputed passage identifies *eudaimonia* as 'activity of soul according to virtue, but if there are many virtues, then according to the best and most final' virtue. So there are actually *two* appearances of *kata* in the disputed passage. Whereas the first *kata* governs the relation between activity of soul and virtue, the second *kata* governs the relation between activity of soul and 'the best and most final' virtue.

Since *eudaimonia* consists in the *good* exercise of the human function, the human function exercised *well*, virtue will possess a kind of authority over the human function. Hence, there is some reason for Aristotle to switch from talk about reason and its authority to talk about (i) virtue (in general) and its authority and (ii) the best and most final virtue (in particular) and *its* authority. Hence, given the surrounding context, there is

<sup>13</sup> In *Nicomachean Ethics* VI 13, 1144b25–27, Aristotle distinguishes between states 'according to correct reason' and states 'with correct reason'. As argued in n6, however, the *kata/meta* distinction in the context of VI 13 is best read as clarificatory, not a distinction of kind.

some reason to think that *both* uses of *kata* in the disputed passage will be directive. On this reading, *eudaimonia* consists in activity of soul that exercises or is directed by the exercise of virtue, but if there are many virtues, then in activity of soul that exercises the best and most final virtue or is directed by such exercise.

Since we might think that ‘activity of soul according to virtue’ must be simply identical to the exercise of virtue, it is important to see that the disputed passage’s first *kata* could indeed possess directive force. First, as Irwin 1991, 390–1 has suggested in a related context, Aristotle may wish to include such activities as the recreational amusements of virtuous agents within the scope of ‘activity of soul according to virtue’. Although such amusements do not paradigmatically *exercise* virtue, the exercise of virtue nevertheless limits and regulates these amusements. Second, Aristotle may even wish to include threptic activity, not *as such* (which is ruled out by *Nicomachean Ethics* I 13, 1102b11–12), but insofar (and only insofar) as it is authoritatively directed by the exercise of (ethical and intellectual) virtue.<sup>14</sup> At *Nicomachean Ethics* III 5, 1114a15–30, for instance, Aristotle suggests that certain modes of health are worthy of a sort of praise. More specifically, they merit praise to the extent that they reflect the influence of virtuous activity, viz., of the exercise of *sôphrosunê* (temperance). If Aristotle’s remarks in *Nicomachean Ethics* III 5 provide some reason for thinking that the human good can include *sôphrosunê*-directed healthy metabolic activity, then his remarks provide some reason to avoid the restrictive reading of the first *kata* in the disputed passage. Third, given the general and programmatic nature of I 7, which seeks to provide a rough sketch and outline of the human good (1098a20–6), Aristotle may have special reason to prefer a broad formulation that allows him to identify *eudaimonia* as activity *somehow* governed or directed by virtue. To be sure, Aristotle may use *kata* restrictively in other contexts where he makes reference to activity ‘according to virtue’. Yet contrary to the exclusivist, the restrictive reading of the first *kata* in the disputed passage is not obviously obligatory.

If the disputed passage’s first *kata* is directive, then it is easy to see how the disputed passage’s second *kata* is also directive. In Aristotle’s reference to activity of soul ‘according to the best and most final’ virtue, Aristotle allows that there exists a *hierarchy* of virtues, one of which will have a certain supreme value and finality. Such a virtue, however, would stand to be *authoritative over* the other less valuable and less final virtues subordinate to it (and the modes of psychic activity that accord with them). Such a virtue, in other words, would stand to possess a kind of *supreme authority* over activity of soul. It would be natural, then, for Aristotle to identify

<sup>14</sup> Here, I follow the similar remarks of Nussbaum 1995, 130n51.

activity of soul 'according to the best and most final' virtue not only with activity of soul that exercises the best and most final virtue, but also with activity *authoritatively directed by* the exercise of that virtue. *Eudaimonia*, then, would be an inclusive notion: it would consist in the wide range of activity of soul that *accords directionally with* the best and most final virtue.

So far, I have articulated an inclusive reading of the disputed passage that assumes that both uses of *kata* in the passage are directive. Nevertheless, the inclusivist need not make this assumption. Even if the disputed passage's first *kata* turns out to be restrictive, so that 'activity of soul according to virtue' refers simply to the exercise of virtue, the inclusive reading still makes sense. For Aristotle introduces the particle  $\delta\acute{\epsilon}$  ('but') following this first *kata*, arguably with adversative force. If we read the disputed passage with both this adversative  $\delta\acute{\epsilon}$  and the restrictive/directive accordance distinction in mind, it is reasonable to see Aristotle making the following point: speaking generally, *eudaimonia* consists in the exercise of virtue (and not just any particular virtue); *but* if there are many virtues, so that there exists a supreme virtue, then *eudaimonia* has a complicated structure: it consists in activity of soul authoritatively directed by, though not restricted to, the exercise of the supreme virtue. While reading the disputed passage's first *kata* as restrictive would require us to exclude *sôphrosunê*-directed threptic activity and the pleasant amusements of virtuous agents from *eudaimonia*, the resulting interpretation of the disputed passage would still cash out in inclusive terms.

Regardless of whether the disputed passage's first *kata* (in Aristotle's reference to 'activity of soul according to virtue') is restrictive, the second *kata* (in his reference to activity of soul 'according to the best and most final' virtue) is best read as directive. And so, regardless of how we read the first *kata*, we get the same broad sketch of *eudaimonia*. On this broad sketch, just as Aristotle's premises about the human function give us a picture of that function as a complex exercise of activities of soul, so too does Aristotle's conclusion about *eudaimonia*. Just as the human function consists in activity including and authoritatively directed by the exercise of thinking, so too *eudaimonia* consists in activity of soul including and authoritatively directed by the exercise of the best and most final virtue. Although some virtuous activities of soul will be subordinate to others in this scheme, this subordination does not entail that Aristotle restricts *eudaimonia* to the exercise of the best and most final virtue, any more than the existence of certain less authoritative modes of rational activity (viz., those that obey rational thinking) restricts the human function to the exercise of rational thinking (to the exclusion of reason-responsive desire).

*Nicomachean Ethics* I 7's discussion of the human function and the human good is rife with metaphors of ruling and subordination, authority and obedience. To this extent, Aristotle's discussion has a distinctly political ring to it, and it invites us to consider the ways in which *eudaimonia*,

like a city and a soul, is a complex organization (σύστημα).<sup>15</sup> Aristotle is clear that a complex organization is ‘most of all’ (μάλιστα) identifiable with its ‘most authoritative’ (κυριώτατον) element (*EN IX 8*, 1168b31–2). But to say that a complex organization is ‘most of all’ this ruling element does not imply that that organization is *exclusively* that element.<sup>16</sup> So, by parity of reasoning, while the exercise of the best and most final virtue is the most authoritative element in *eudaimonia* and perhaps ‘most of all’ what *eudaimonia* is, *eudaimonia qua* complex organization need not consist exclusively in the exercise of the best and most final virtue.<sup>17</sup>

In short, the textual evidence supports the inclusive reading of the disputed passage as a whole. And even if I am wrong, and it turns out that we should not accept the directive reading of ‘activity according to reason’ in 1098a7, it does not follow that Aristotle cannot be using *kata* directly later on in the disputed passage. For *Nicomachean Ethics III 12*, 1119b13–15 and *Eudemian Ethics II 2*, 1220b5–7 both provide independent evidence that Aristotle does use *kata* directly in certain contexts, e.g., those that articulate relations between subordinates and authorities. Thus, both of these passages provide positive (if less decisive) support for the view that Aristotle could indeed intend the accordance relation in the disputed passage, especially in its second half, directly.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup> For another interpretation of *eudaimonia* using a political analogy, see Richardson 1992, 350–1, who cites Alexander of Aphrodisias’ use of this analogy as an inspiration.

<sup>16</sup> See Whiting 1986, 86n36, who cites *Metaphysics VII 13*, 1039a19–20 and *Protrepticus VII 42.4* (Pistelli)/B62 (Düring) as passages that distinguish between being μάλιστα *X* and being μόνον *X*.

<sup>17</sup> Thus, when Aristotle calls the exercise of *sophia* – contemplation – ‘final happiness’ (*teleia eudaimonia*) at *Nicomachean Ethics X 7*, 1177a17, I take it that he means to emphasize contemplation’s status as the *most authoritative* component within *eudaimonia* as a whole, and to suggest that it is *most of all* (though not exclusively) what *eudaimonia* is as a whole. For in proposing that contemplation is final happiness, Aristotle calls attention to its status as the virtuous exercise of the contemplative intellect, which seems to be the *most authoritative* power in the human soul, i.e., that which ‘seems by nature to rule and lead the way’ (1177a14–15). Given my paper’s focus on the complexities of *Nicomachean Ethics I 7*, 1098a16–17, a detailed discussion of X 7–8 lies outside its scope. But for recent, similar proposals that contemplation (as final happiness) is simply the best of the many good activities constitutive of *eudaimonia* as a whole, see Shields 2007, 345 and Irwin 2007, 149–152. I say more about some of these issues in section V.

<sup>18</sup> One might wonder whether an even less restrictive ‘directive’ reading is possible, one according to which *eudaimonia* can include activity directed by *sophia* as instantiated by another agent. Thus, on this proposal, an agent lacking in wisdom could nevertheless be *eudaimôn* simply by following the orders of a wise agent. I see no reason to attribute this reading to Aristotle, however. For on Aristotle’s view, one who spells correctly ‘under the advice of another’ (ἄλλου ὑποθεμένου) is not necessarily gramma-

## IV

So far, I have argued that even if one grants that 'the best and most final' virtue refers to one particular highest virtue, viz., *sophia*, one can nevertheless offer a plausible inclusivist response to the accordance question. I have argued that an inclusive reading of the disputed passage as a whole is not only consistent with, but supported by the text. Activity of soul can accord directly with 'the best and most final' virtue if such activity either constitutes the exercise of that virtue or is authoritatively directed by the exercise of that virtue. So, on my proposed reading, the disputed passage is saying that *eudaimonia* consists in both (i) the exercise of *sophia* and in (ii) practically rational or reason-responsive activity of soul that takes *sophia*'s authoritative direction.

Yet my proposal faces a hurdle. One may be willing to grant that the virtuous agent's reason-responsive desire could be authoritatively directed by excellent practical reasoning, and so, could accord directly with the virtue of *phronêsis*. Aristotle's talk at *Nicomachean Ethics* I 13, 1102b34–3a1 of how the practical intellect admonishes, censures, and encourages the reason-responsive element makes this point clear enough. Although I have agreed that *sophia* is the best candidate for the title of most authoritative directing virtue, I have yet to show that the exercise of *sophia*, for Aristotle, can authoritatively direct both one's practical reasoning and one's reason-responsive desire. In what follows, I explain how the exercise of *sophia* can provide such authoritative direction.

To begin, when I say that Aristotle allows activity of soul directed by the exercise of *sophia* to constitute *eudaimonia*, there are actually *two* ways in which the exercise of *sophia* could authoritatively direct other activities of soul. First, the exercise of *sophia* could provide *active direction*. To say that the exercise of *sophia* actively directs the other activities of soul is to say that the exercise of *sophia itself* directs the other activities of soul, viz., by providing cognitive access to knowledge by which both practical thought and the reason-responsive element function well. Second, the exercise of *sophia* could provide *referential direction*. To say that the exercise of *sophia* referentially directs other activities of soul is to say that these other activities are performed well when they are performed with an eye toward securing the exercise of *sophia* or when the exercise of *sophia* otherwise regulates them (e.g., by limiting their pursuit). As it stands, I believe that Aristotle actually allows the exercise of *sophia* to offer authoritative

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tical; rather, one is grammatical only when one spells 'according to the grammatical [knowledge] in oneself' (κατὰ τὴν ἐν αὐτῷ γραμματικὴν: *EN* II 4, 1105a22–26; my emphasis). Similarly, I take it, for an agent to act virtuously (and to be *eudaimôn*), that agent must act according to virtues that he or she possesses.

direction in both ways. Yet it would require a separate essay to defend the controversial view that Aristotle believes that the exercise of *sophia* can actively direct the lower activities of the soul.<sup>19</sup> For the present, it will suffice to show that Aristotle thinks that the exercise of *sophia* at least provides referential direction for other activities in the soul, and hence, that practically rational and ethically virtuous activity can constitute *eudaimonia* by according directly with this guidance.

Here is the overall picture that I take Aristotle to present. To begin, one activity of soul – the exercise of the best and most final virtue, *sophia* – accords with *sophia* just by exercising that virtue. Excellent practical reasoning, however, shows *sophia*'s referential direction to the extent that it promotes *sophia*'s exercise. And ethically virtuous reason-responsive desire shows *sophia*'s referential direction to the extent it obeys virtuous practical reasoning that promotes the exercise of *sophia*. Hence, the exercise of *sophia* provides referential direction to other activities of soul both *directly* (to the practical intellect) and *indirectly* (to the reason-responsive element, via the orders of the practical intellect).

This picture appears most perspicuously in *Nicomachean Ethics* VI 13, where we learn that the various ethical virtues that Aristotle discusses in *Nicomachean Ethics* III–V are incomplete by themselves. Aristotle compares someone who possesses these virtues unperfected by *phronêsis* to a blind giant: without sight, he falls with all the more force, since he cannot direct himself (1144b10–12). These virtues are thus subordinate to *phronêsis* and require its direction. Hence, to possess any of these virtues in the authoritative (*κυρία*) sense, one requires *phronêsis* (1144b16–17). And so, authoritative (ethical) virtue, actively directed by *phronêsis*, is a condition of soul 'according to practical wisdom' (*κατὰ τὴν φρόνησιν*: 1144b25).<sup>20</sup> Yet the virtue of *phronêsis* is itself subordinate to the best and most final virtue, *sophia*: '*phronêsis* is authoritative (*κυρία*) over neither *sophia* nor the better portion [of the soul]' (1145a6–7). *Phronêsis* shows its subordination to – and referential direction by – the exercise of *sophia* by organizing one's practical affairs and by directing one's reason-responsive desires so that one might exercise *sophia*. Articulating this thought, the Aristotelian author of *Magna Moralia* I 34, 1198b9–16 compares the relation between *phronêsis* and *sophia* to one between a steward and a master: the former

<sup>19</sup> Passages that best support the view that contemplation can actively guide practical reasoning include *Metaphysics* I 2, 982a17–19, I 2, 982b5–6, III 2, 996b10–14, and, most explicitly, *Protrepticus* IX 54.10–56.12 (Pistelli)/B104–10 (Düring). On the *Metaphysics*, see Owens 1987, 9. I offer a detailed discussion of the *Protrepticus* passage in Walker 2010.

<sup>20</sup> On *Nicomachean Ethics* VI 13, see n6 above.

arranges the affairs of the latter so that the latter can pursue his ends freely.<sup>21</sup>

Another sketch of this same general picture appears in *Eudemian Ethics* VIII 3, 1249b6ff. There, Aristotle suggests that the soul consists of a ruling and a ruled element, and that one should live 'with reference to the ruling element' (πρὸς τὸ ἄρχον), which he says is twofold. By 'the ruling element' of the human soul, I take Aristotle to be referring to the authoritatively rational element, i.e., the thinking element, whose two 'parts' – viz., the contemplative and the practical intellect – Aristotle has already distinguished in *Eudemian Ethics* V 1 (= *Nicomachean Ethics* VI 1). Aristotle claims that the relation between contemplative and practical thought is analogous to the one that holds between health and medicine:

For medical science [is a] ruler (ἄρχῃ) in one sense, and health in another, but with the former existing for the latter. And so it holds with respect to the contemplative power (κατὰ τὸ θεωρητικόν). For the god [is] not an order-issuing ruler (οὐ γὰρ ἐπιτακτικῶς ἄρχων), but [is] that for the sake of which *phronêsis* issues orders (ἐπιτάττει). (1249b11–15; Cf. *EN* VI [= *EE* V] 13, 1145a9–11.)

Aristotle distinguishes between two ways of being a ruler: first, as a non-order-issuing end (that provides what I am calling 'referential direction'); and second, by issuing orders. While health rules medical science as a non-order-issuing end, medical science rules by issuing orders with an eye to health (e.g., by offering prescriptions). Similarly, while contemplative thinking – i.e., the exercise of *sophia* – referentially directs the other functions of the human soul as a non-order-issuing end, practical thinking actively directs (and issues orders to) the lower elements of the soul (in particular, reason-responsive desire), but with an eye toward securing the exercise of the contemplative intellect, so that it can contemplate its proper object, viz., the god.

Although both contemplative and practical thinking are aspects of the ruling part of the human soul in this passage, contemplative thinking is more authoritative than its practical counterpart, and thus, is the most authoritative element within the human soul. Indeed, the activity of contemplative thinking, i.e., the exercise of *sophia*, is that for the sake of which the exercise of *phronêsis* orders reason-responsive desire, including non-rational desire for external goods. Practical thinking and reason-responsive desire function well, then, insofar as their exercise is referentially directed by, and so directly accords with, the exercise of *sophia*.

<sup>21</sup> Even if the *Magna Moralia* is not by Aristotle, I take it to present Aristotle's views. On the work, see Cooper (1973) 1999.

## V

On the account I have just provided, the exercise of *phronêsis* and ethical virtue are in directive accord with *sophia* to the extent they promote the exercise of *sophia*. Hence, the exercise of *sophia* referentially directs the exercise of *phronêsis* and ethical virtue insofar as it serves as *their end*. But at this point, an opponent might argue that my account of *sophia*'s referential direction inadvertently commits me to a version of exclusivism. For if *eudaimonia* for Aristotle is *the* most final end (an uncontroversial point), and if the most final end of the various activities of soul is the exercise of *sophia* (as my account of *sophia*'s referential direction admits), then I might seem to be committed to identifying *eudaimonia* exclusively with the exercise of *sophia*.

To deal completely with this objection would require a full discussion of *Nicomachean Ethics* I 7's remarks on finality and self-sufficiency as criteria of *eudaimonia* – a discussion that lies outside the scope of this paper. Nonetheless, I suggest that an inclusive account of *eudaimonia* is consistent with the view that there exists a hierarchy of virtuous activities, one of which serves as the end of the others and directs their exercise. True, Aristotle thinks that the exercise of *sophia* serves as an end for the exercise of *phronêsis* and ethical virtue, and is, in *some* sense, the most final end of the various activities of soul. Yet the claim that the exercise of *sophia* is a 'most final' end confronts us with a crucial ambiguity.

Aristotle could be saying that the exercise of *sophia* is a most final end *absolutely speaking* or *without qualification*, so that *eudaimonia* is simply identical to the exercise of *sophia*. This is the reading that my opponent needs to assume. Yet Aristotle could also be saying that the exercise of *sophia* is 'most final' in a more modest *relative* and *qualified* sense. To be 'most final' in this sense is simply to be more final than any other activity *within* the complex system of activities constitutive of *eudaimonia*. Yet if the exercise of *sophia* is a most final end in the relative, qualified sense, exclusivism about *eudaimonia* does not follow. For if the exercise of *sophia* is a 'most final' end only in the qualified sense, it is not strictly identical to *eudaimonia*, which would be most final without qualification.

Aristotle has reason to deny that the exercise of *sophia* is a most final end without qualification. For insofar as the exercise of *sophia* is still part of a complex system of activities, it is ultimately only part of a greater whole. But on Aristotle's view, a whole has teleological priority over its parts (*Metaphysics* VII 10, 1034b28–32; *Politics* I 3, 1253a18–29). Hence, even if the exercise of *sophia* is the most final end *within* the system of virtuous activities constitutive of *eudaimonia* – i.e., even if it is the virtuous activity that the other component virtuous activities subserve – one can still point to an end even more final than it, viz., the whole complex system of which the exercise of *sophia* is ultimately only a part and to



which it is thus teleologically subordinated. So just as the most authoritative element *within* a complex system is at best 'most of all' (but not exclusively) what that system is, so too the most final end *within* a complex system is at best 'most final' in a relative and qualified sense, not absolutely or without qualification (as exclusivism about *eudaimonia* requires). Since my view holds that the exercise of *sophia* provides referential direction to less authoritative activities by serving as a most final end only in a relative, qualified sense, my account of *sophia*'s referential direction need not commit me to exclusivism about *eudaimonia*.

The Aristotelian author of *Magna Moralia* I 2 most clearly suggests the distinction that I am drawing between the relative and absolute senses of supreme value and finality:

Someone might say wisdom to be the best of all the goods, comparing them together individually (*καθ' ἑν συγκρινομένων*). But perhaps it is not in this way [that] one ought to search for the best good. For we are searching for the final good. But wisdom, taken on its own (*μόνη οὔσα*), is not final. This, then, is not the best for which we are searching, nor [do we search for] what is in this way best. (1184a34–8)

This passage supposes hypothetically that the exercise of wisdom (here, as in *Nicomachean Ethics* I 6, 1096b24, *phronēsis*) is the best member of a certain structure of goods (which presumably includes the exercise of the other virtues). Further, this passage allows that the exercise of wisdom may well be the best (and most final) of goods in a certain relative and qualified way – viz., if we compare the exercise of wisdom with other goods within the structure to which it belongs. But for the author of the *Magna Moralia*, this point does not show that the exercise of wisdom is the best (and most final) of all goods in the relevant sense, i.e., without qualification. For the exercise of wisdom by itself – 'taken on its own' – is too lacking in finality (and self-sufficiency) for us to identify it as the best (and most final) good absolutely speaking.

Hence, according to this passage, identifying the relatively best (and most final) good is not the proper way to identify *eudaimonia*. Rather, one needs to refer to the good that is best (and most final) without qualification, i.e., to the complete structure of goods of which wisdom is a part. And as I have argued in this paper, Aristotle identifies this good with the greater and more encompassing activity of soul directly 'according to the best and most final' virtue.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>22</sup> For a similar view, see the 'structured inclusivism' offered by Richardson 1992, 349–52, according to which Aristotle ranks contemplation as more final than other goods within *eudaimonia* (e.g., the practical virtues), but subordinates contemplation to the requirements of *eudaimonia* as a whole.

## VI

For Aristotle, then, the exercise of *sophia* provides referential direction for the various activities of the human soul, and such activities constitute *eudaimonia* insofar as they are so directed. Although the exercise of the best and most final virtue is the ruling element within the system of virtuous activity that comprises *eudaimonia* as a whole, virtuous practical reasoning and reason-responsive desire (as well as conduct issuing from such reasoning and manifesting such desire) also accord with this activity. Thus, given the terms of Aristotle's conclusion to the function argument, they also constitute *eudaimonia*. In closing, the reference question with which the disputed passage confronts us is an important question, but it is not the only question. Rather, I hope to have shown that understanding the disputed passage as a whole requires us to address the accordance question as well – and to answer it in a fashion that shows Aristotle to be an inclusivist about *eudaimonia*.<sup>23</sup>

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