EXPLANATION AND METHOD IN 

EUDEMIAN ETHICS I.6

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Abstract: I discuss the methodological passage in the beginning of Ethica Eudemia I.6 (1216b26-35), which has received attention in connection with Aristotle’s notion of dialectic and his methodology in Ethics. My central focus is not to discuss whether Aristotle is prescribing and using what has been called the method of endoxa. I will focus on how this passage coheres with the remaining parts of the same chapter, which also are advancing methodological remarks. My claim is that the method of Ethica Eudemia I.6 is in agreement with many features of Aristotle’s theory of explanation as presented in the Posterior Analytics: Aristotle’s main concern is a warning against misuses of explanatory arguments.

Keywords: methodology; explanation; ethics; endoxa; Aristotle.
I. Introduction

My aim is to discuss the methodological passage that opens *Ethica Eudemia* I.6 (1216b26-35). The passage has been recently examined in connection with Aristotle’s notion of dialectic and Aristotle’s method of *endoxa*. The passage has also been compared with other methodological passages from the ethical treatises, such as *Nicomachean Ethics* VII.1\(^1\). My discussion will have consequences on these broader issues too, but from a different approach. Instead of asking what the expressions “*phainomena*”, “*martyria*” and “*paradeigmata*” mean in this context, I will discuss how the initial paragraph of *Ethica Eudemia* (henceforth, *EE*) I.6 relates to the (equally important, but often neglected) next paragraphs of the same chapter. This approach will help us to attain a better understanding of Aristotle’s points. Many of my results will be congenial to recent approaches that deflate the supposed peculiarity of the method\(^2\). After all, the method is in agreement with many features of Aristotle’s theory of explanation as presented in the *Posterior Analytics* (henceforth *APo*).

II. The text and the problem

Aristotle starts *EE* I.6 with the following methodological remark:

**T1**: “(i) About all these matters, we must seek conviction through argument, (ii) using people’s perceptions as evidence and example” (1216b26-28; Kenny’s translation).

The Greek is this:
Woods’s translation employs a different terminology, but goes in the same direction (call it Version 1 of T1): 

\[ T1: \] “(i) We must try, by argument, to reach a convincing conclusion on all these questions, (ii) using, as testimony and by way of example, what appears to be the case” (1216b26-28).

The interpretation conveyed by those translations has the following features. First, from the standpoint of their structure, these translations either put the central element in step (i), with step (ii) adding an important qualification to the central point, or put steps (i) and (ii) on the same level as presenting claims that are equally important. Secondly, from the standpoint of their content, these translations suggest that Aristotle is recommending the use of arguments to settle the issues at this juncture of his discussion. There is an important remark about the way in which one must appeal to arguments, but there still seem to be a strong recommendation to employ them in order to reach conviction. It is not by chance that Barnes 1980, p.506, says that T1 “invites us to rely on arguments, and to use the phenomena […] to support […] the arguments” (my italics). Barnes understands that steps [i] and [ii] of T1 introduce two claims at the same level, namely, that we must rely on arguments to reach conviction on practical matters, and that we must use
the *phainomena* to control the correctness of the arguments.

But is this an accurate translation of what Aristotle means?

**III. The structure of Aristotle’s claim**

Is it so obvious that steps (i) and (ii) are at the same level and introduce two coordinated claims? Or is it so obvious that, as the second best option, step (i) of the passage is the central core of Aristotle’s claim, while step (ii) only adds important qualifications?

Is it not possible to have a different parsing of the claim? For instance: isn’t possible to take step (ii) as conveying the central core of the claim, with step (i) just setting the framework that the claim presupposes?

Consider two alternative translations that contrast with each other (Version 2 below elaborates on Wood’s translation, but a similar result can be attained from Kenny’s or Inwood-Woolf’s translation):

Version 2: “(i) *It is* by argument *that* we must try to reach a conviction on all these questions, (ii) using, as testimony and by way of example, what appears to be the case” (1216b26-28).

In this translation, the use of the expression “it is … that” emphasises a specific way of reaching conviction. The expression actually selects *the* way for reaching the target, as if dismissing alternative ways. The desideratum of reaching a conviction takes the place of a background presupposition, and