Virtue Ethics, Bioethics and the Ownership of Biological Material

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This doctoral thesis consists of an introduction and the following five articles:


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Abstract


The overall aim of this thesis is to show how some ideas in Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics can be interpreted and used as a productive way to approach a number of pressing issues in bioethics. Articles I-II introduce, and endorse, a social constructivist perspective on rights (as opposed to the more traditional natural rights idea). It is investigated if the existence of property-like rights to biological material would include the moral right to commodification and even commercialisation. Articles III-V discuss similar questions and more specifically champion the application of an Aristotelian virtue ethics perspective. The articles are preceded by an introductory essay on some of the central themes in the Nicomachean Ethics. This section also includes a very brief account of what the connection between virtue ethics and a theory of social construction, including rights, could look like. The thesis seeks to show that if read somewhat creatively many of the ideas in the Nicomachean Ethics make for a highly useful approach to modern moral problems. It should be noted, however, that this thesis in no way claims to be an exegetic, or a complete, study of the Nicomachean Ethics.

Article I deals with ownership of biological material from a philosophical, as opposed to a legal, perspective. It is argued that a strand in liberal political theory that treats property relations as socially constructed bundles of rights, as developed by e.g. Felix Cohen and Tony Honoré, is well suited for discussions on ownership of biological material.

Article II investigates which differences in biological material might motivate differences in treatment and ownership rights. The article draws on the social constructivist theory of ownership which was developed in Article I.

Article III employs virtue ethics to explain why it is morally permissible to donate but not to sell organs such as kidneys. It is suggested that the former action will bring the agent closer to a state of human flourishing.

Article IV argues that virtues like philia, justice, beneficence and generosity — traditionally all seen as other-regarding — contain strong self-regarding aspects. The central claim is that these self-regarding aspects of the other-regarding virtues are necessary components of complete virtue and thus that the fully virtuous agent has to act virtuously both in her dealings with herself and others.

Article V applies the ideas that were developed in Article IV to the case of living organ donations to next of kin. It is proposed that such an act, although noble and fine, is supererogatory, rather than obligatory, as the donor is morally entitled to be partial to herself. This argument is made against the backdrop of a discussion on some Aristotelian ideas on philia and partiality.

Key words: Biological material, ownership, rights, organ, donation, property, commodification, kidney, virtue ethics, natural rights, transplantation, transplant, social organisation, other-regarding, self-regarding, Aristotle, supererogation.

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All errors that remain in the following material are of course my own responsibility.

Hermance  Barbro Björkman

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1. Aim and scope

This thesis seeks to show how a number of ideas in Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics can be interpreted and used as a productive approach to some pressing issues in bioethics. That said, this is not intended to be an exegetic, or in any way complete, reading of the Nicomachean Ethics but rather a pragmatic and perhaps slightly modernised one. This task is of special interest as it is sometimes suggested that the new reality brought about by e.g. biotechnology demands a new ethic. Clearly, this contribution defends the opposite claim – namely that Aristotelian virtue ethics can help to create a framework capable of handling the ethical problems that arise in modern bioethics.

The thesis consists of five articles all of which, albeit in different ways, examine the rights and obligations that we have with regards to human biological material. The discussions, addressing the issues from a philosophical perspective, as opposed to a legal one for example, deal both with biological material originating from our own bodies and from the bodies of others. On a more detailed level Articles I and II introduce, and endorse, a social constructivist perspective on rights. It is investigated if the existence of property-like rights to biological material would include the moral right to commodification and even commercialization. Articles III-V discuss similar questions but more specifically champion the application of an Aristotelian virtue ethics perspective. Concrete examples of issues would be: organ selling, under which circumstances (if any) an agent could be said to be morally compelled to donate an organ, and if the virtuous agent has strong moral obligations to herself. The articles are preceded by an introduction where I present and defend my reading of the Nicomachean Ethics. Due to the format of this thesis, if nothing else, many of the discussions have had to be cut short. None the less, I hope that it contributes both to the overall balance between theory and applied ethics in this thesis and, in a wider sense, to showing how this might be a fruitful approach.

In the philosophical tradition rights and obligations are often analyzed from a natural rights perspective which, very broadly, states that ownership is based on rules that are independent of social choices and conventions (see e.g. Locke and Nozick). As previously indicated, however, this thesis favours a radically different approach, here referred to as the social constructivist theory of property. On this view ownership is said to be the result of a series of social choices and processes that could well have been different. From this account it follows that society is free

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1 For a discussion see 1.2 Ownership of biological material.
to choose the system of property rights that best promotes social good. Articles I and II draw on
the work of Felix Cohen and Tony Honoré, both of whom developed the theory of property
rights in a utilitarian tradition. This, however, does not in any way imply that the model does not
fit in with a virtue ethics framework. As mentioned above the gist of the social constructivist idea
of property is that ownership is to be arranged such that it promotes social good. There is no
reason why this cannot be specified as virtuous behaviour rather than economic productivity for
example. As explained in Articles I and II this is an efficient way to approach property in human
biological material as it can take very different forms ranging from patents and other forms of
intellectual property to traditional ownership of material objects. Such a model is flexible enough
to account for how different agents can have legitimate interests in the same object for example.
Admittedly, it is far from clear (even for the convinced virtue ethicist) that the fact that people
ought to lead virtuous lives also implies that society actively should facilitate and encourage such
behaviour. Indeed, as liberal political ideas have gained in popularity the conviction that society
should be neutral on such issues has become widespread. Aristotle, on the other hand, argued in
favour of such a connection and, in the same vein, Rosalind Hursthouse has defended what she
calls “a eudaimonia-based account of rights”. She sketches what the step from a virtue-based idea
of social organisation to a theory of rights could look like and explains that the construction of
the just society (to be understood as the properly functioning society) is prior to rights.² (This will
be discussed more in detail below). To carve out a strong position on social organisation is clearly
not the purpose of this thesis - my point here is simply that such a connection can, and has, been
legitimately made.

1.1 Applying virtue ethics to bioethics

As stated above this thesis is committed to showing how some of the central ideas in Aristotle’s
Nicomachean Ethics can be used to address a number of ethically challenging issues in bioethics.
This section offers a short background introduction to virtue ethics, including some of its history
and a few comments on how it differs from other popular ethical theories. Subsequently, a brief
sketch of one possible way to connect virtue ethics to social organisation and a theory of rights is
provided. As previously mentioned it follows Hursthouse’s “eudaimonia-based account of rights”.

Virtue ethics has its origin in ancient Greece where it was developed by thinkers like Socrates,
Plato and Aristotle among others. They were primarily interested in studying and elaborating on
the virtue – the driving force – rather than considering the action as such. Very broadly speaking

229-245.
they approached ethics by asking ‘what traits of character makes one a good person?’, which stands in stark contrast to the core question asked in most modern moral theories, i.e. ‘what is the right thing to do?’. Virtue ethics is thus concerned with what kind of persons we should be, what kind of characters we should have, and from that it follows how we should act. This is an underdeveloped theoretical perspective in bioethics and I believe that such an approach has the advantage of being more in line with most people’s strong moral intuitions (by this I mean that they are well considered, stable and withstand the test of time – those formed in the “cool, calm hour” as Butler put it). Arguably, the purpose of normative ethics is to help us bring some order to and explain our reflective moral intuitions. Thus it is important to take into consideration that virtue ethics gives a more plausible account of our intuitions. In fact, given the nature of the issues addressed here it is, arguably, all the more important to develop an ethical framework which can help capture the moral concerns of both lay-people and specialists.

Aristotle recognized that ethics is not a science and that it had to be approached differently – the scientific method would not help us in teasing out these moral truths nor capture the essence of ethics. This has lead many readers to assume that Aristotle was deeply sceptical about rules, even that he rejected rules all together. Such an interpretation appears unfortunate and it is often used as a basis for claiming that virtue ethics lacks action guiding capacity. It is sometimes said that the theory fails to offer substantive normative advice to vacillating agents and consequently is too weak for being a stand-alone normative theory. I do not agree. In fact it can well be argued that there are a number of rules in virtue ethics, e.g. “always act virtuously” and the virtues themselves. Although by no means fully explored here, this thesis contains a brief discussion of the role of *phronesis*, the doctrine of the mean, deliberation and situation sensitivity in virtuous decision-making in part 3.5. For now it suffices to say that Aristotle recognized that moral decision-making is hard and that it takes a mature moral agent to know what the right thing is when faced with a difficult situation.³

Virtue ethics gained a renewed momentum in the latter half of the 20th century. It is often suggested that the virtue ethics project was resuscitated by Elizabeth Anscombe in 1958 in her well-known article “Modern Moral Philosophy”.⁴ Her contribution marked the beginning of what is referred to as “the aretaic turn” in moral philosophy – essentially a return to the ancient emphasis on human excellence and virtue. In the text she attacked the concept of moral law (central to most ethical theories e.g. utilitarianism and Kantian ethics) by questioning how there

³ For more on this see section 3.5.6 of this introduction.
could be said to exist an objective moral law at the same time as it was argued that there was no lawgiver, i.e. no God. This is a core problem in secular ethics – where does the moral law come from? Is it something we all agree upon? Do right and wrong exist independently of us? Are they culture independent? Anscombe claimed that the whole idea was non-sensical and called for a return to the Aristotelian approach seeking to leave the focus on duty, rightness and obligation behind.

Although virtue ethics is primarily occupied with what kind of person one ought to be, that is not to say that it is incapable of competing with e.g. utilitarianism as a theory of the right action. As pointed out above I believe that a strong case can be made that virtue ethics can be an action guiding, stand-alone theory. That said, virtue ethics does not (at least not in its modern form) easily lend itself to clear-cut theories for social organisation. In the following I shall attempt a very brief sketch of what seems to me a possible way of connecting virtue ethics and a modern view of property rights. Clearly, the belief that humans ought to lead virtuous lives does not automatically imply that the surrounding state should seek to bring about such behaviour. According to Aristotle, however, there is most certainly such a connection. “It is evident that the best politeia is that arrangement according to which anyone whatsoever might do best and live a flourishing life.”5 In modern times we have, on the other hand, witnessed a call for the neutral society partly as a result of liberal political ideas gaining popularity. It is argued that in order to open up for individual choices what is seen as state coercion has to be kept to a minimum, a conviction which does not sit well with the Aristotelian priority of the good.6 That said there are contemporary proponents of virtue ethics as an appropriate theory for social construction. One of these is William Galston who advocates not only the compatibility of liberalism and virtue theory but also maintains that “…liberalism needs an account of goods and virtues that enables it to oppose the extremes of both unfettered individual choice and unchecked state coercion.”7 Further to this point he argues: "Sustaining these institutions [of the liberal society] and practices, in turn, requires of liberal citizens specific excellences and character traits: the liberal virtues. These virtues are by no means natural or innate. Liberal communities must, then, be especially attentive to the processes, formal and informal, by which these virtues are strengthened or eroded”8.

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A way of linking virtue ethics to social organisation is to shift the focus to rights; an example would be Rosalind Hursthouse’s argument that the construction of the just society (to be understood as the properly functioning society) is prior to rights - that ethics is prior to politics.\(^9\) Hence, the starting point should be *eudaemonia* and the rights (as codified e.g. in laws) in the just society should be those rights that allow the members of that society to achieve a state of *eudaemonia*. Taking the cue from G. E. M. Anscombe’s papers on rights, promises and justice, Hursthouse champions a *eudaemonia*-based theory of rights and the just society, thus rejecting the priority of the right in favour of that of the good.\(^10\) Anscombe calls rights ‘naturally unintelligible’, since “a right is not a natural phenomenon that can be discerned and named as a feature found in some class of creatures by, say, a taxonomist.”\(^11\) Pushing for an analytical understanding of what a right is Anscombe uses a certain set of stopping modals, i.e. “a set of ‘you cannots’ which surrounds, fixes and protects a ‘can’ on the part of the one who is thereby said to have a right”.\(^12\) These stopping modals work as linguistic instruments designed to teach us how to react in different situations and to follow rules. One of Anscombe’s own examples is when a child is told that it cannot do x, e.g. not cheat when playing a board game, although it is obvious to the child that s/he is perfectly able to physically do x. On this view all rights, promises, rules etc. are prescriptive in the sense that they are based on custom and as a result they are naturally unintelligible. Hursthouse takes the idea one step further and writes “The logically prior concept is that of a properly functioning society; justice is then specified as the virtue or excellence of such a society, and the laws of justice as those which are in place in such a society; and rights come last, as those things which such laws establish as mine and thine (and ours and theirs). This is the point of saying that a right is ‘naturally unintelligible’; it is intelligible (only) via the concept of a law or convention (nomos).”\(^13\)

Although Aristotle put a heavy emphasis on the virtue of justice when it comes to social organization it should be noted that he is does not argue that it is all that is needed. Indeed, he insists that friendship is necessary too. “Further, if people are friends, they have no need of justice, but if they are just they need friendship in addition; and the justice that is most just seems to belong to friendship. But friendship is not only necessary, but also fine.” /NE1155a27-30/.

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It goes without saying that the above is in no way seeking to give an exhaustive account of whether or not society ought to be organised in such a way that it promotes, or encourages, virtuous behaviour. However, I hope to have made the point that there are sensible ways to construct a eudaemonia-based view of social organisation. Looking at the pace at which biotechnology is developing one cannot help but suspect that the ethical questions will not become easier or fewer in between. Quite on the contrary it seems reasonable to assume that bioethics, and with that hopefully virtue ethics, will come to play an even bigger role in the future.

1.2 Ownership of biological material

When discussing ownership a clear distinction needs to be made between a legal and a philosophical approach. This contribution is about ethics and it focuses on the moral rights we may, or may not, have to biological material both from our own body and other people’s bodies. The purpose of an ethical discourse on property rights is to contribute to the discussion on how such rights should ideally be constructed in a legal system. The actual implementation of ethical principles in law gives rise to a number of more technical legal claims that will not be covered here.

Most people believe that they have a reasonably accurate grasp of what is meant by ownership. By and large it would be the type of relationship one has to one’s shoes or one’s computer, i.e. an all-or-nothing approach to property rights. This entails that a legitimate owner has a full set of rights with regards to the object; the right to rent it, sell it, destroy it, and so forth. The only real limitation would be the violation of the rights of another. This might well be true in an everyday sense of the word but if we opt for that definition it becomes quite difficult to account for immaterial objects such as patents and copyrights. In those situations there are several parties with vested interests who all have different types of rights with regards to the object. One such example would be this text – being the author the copyright belongs to me at the same time as you, the reader, might own the very copy of the booklet you are holding. Another challenge to such a take on what it means to own something is posed by the type of biological material which cannot be shared between different users. This type of goods is called rivalous and good examples are most of our organs e.g. livers, kidneys and hearts. Traditionally the rights we have to such types of biological material take a different form than property rights. They are considered inalienable - or simple - rights and are legally impossible to part with. Yet, organ donation is not only allowed but seen as highly praiseworthy. It appears that our relationship to
organs such as parts of the liver, a kidney or a section of a lung indeed is such that they might be given up under certain circumstance.

The nature of property in biological material is a highly contested topic and intense debates on issues ranging from national DNA banks to organ selling are flaring up all over the globe. As even the briefest introduction to the philosophical underpinnings of the concept of ownership reveals, we are struggling with quite a perplexing matter. This thesis presents an approach to property in biological material which is subtle, yet powerful, enough to account for these different types. An additional dimension is of course whether or not these relationships really ought to be labelled ownership at all or if that only creates more confusion given the manifold interpretations of the term. The theories behind property rights are discussed more in detail below.

2. Two traditions regarding property rights

In the broadest sense there are two major, rivaling, schools of thought in political philosophy with respect to property rights. Whereas the first is generally referred to as the natural rights theory the second lacks an established name. In the essays included in this thesis I have simply referred to it as the social constructivist theory of property. For example, I choose to call Felix Cohen’s view a social constructivist theory of ownership since it stipulates that ownership is the result of a series of social choices and processes that could well have been different. This standpoint can be contrasted with the natural rights theory of ownership, according to which ownership is based on rules that are independent of social choices and conventions. It follows from the social constructivist account of property that society is free to choose the system of property rights which best promotes social good. Indeed, according to this view it is one of the chief tasks of any government to issue positive laws that create and define ownership.

Natural rights theorists tend to think of property as a relation between the owner and the owned object.\textsuperscript{14} In the Lockean, and perhaps most traditional, sense natural rights theory claims that the right to own is God-given. Greatly simplified the argument is the following: Man has an obligation to God to preserve His creation (including ourselves). Our chances of being successful

in this venture are thought to increase greatly if we are allowed to secure exclusive rights to land and other goods. Without this possibility of private ownership we would be far more likely to fare badly, starve and miss out on the good in life. On this story ownership precedes, and is indeed a precondition for, the state. The primary role of the state is to create and uphold laws which safeguard the right to private ownership. To exchange part of one’s freedom in return for security in this manner is assumed to be in the best interest of most people and thus the choice that rational individuals would make. There are also numerous modern proponents of the natural rights theory, although their takes tend to be secular. A prime example would be Robert Nozick who, in his groundbreaking *Anarchy, State and Utopia*, presented a theory of rights rooted in a libertarian framework.\textsuperscript{15}

Although the natural rights model provides criteria to determine whether or not a certain person legitimately owns a particular object, it lacks the power to determine the exact nature of the property rights in question. Property in biological material can take very different forms, from patents and other forms of intellectual property to traditional ownership of material objects. Because of this I argue that we require an account of property that is better equipped than traditional natural rights theory in the sense that it can provide guidance about the appropriate form of property rights.\textsuperscript{16}

In a famous essay Felix Cohen (1907-1953) elaborated on the social constructivist approach to property.\textsuperscript{17} On this view, property rights have their origin in the law and historically laws express the interests of those who write and promulgate them. Ethically, on the other hand, the merits of any law or legal arrangement should be judged according to how well it promotes the good life of those affected by it. Felix Cohen pointed out that for a detailed analysis of the nature of property rights, it is more useful to perceive them as sets of legal relations between the owner and the non-owners of an object. A persons’ ownership of a piece of land includes rights which entitle her or him to exclude others from entering the land, rights to charge them for doing so, rights to sell the land and so forth. On this view, ownership is made up of a bundle of relations between the owner and the non-owners. Although Cohen developed this theory of property rights in a utilitarian tradition this does not in any way imply that it does not fit in with a virtue ethics framework for example. As mentioned above the gist of the social constructivist idea of property is that ownership is to be arranged such that it promotes social good. There is no reason why this


\textsuperscript{16} This argument is expanded in Article I.

cannot be specified as virtuous behaviour rather than economic incentive for example. Several proponents of the social constructivist theory of ownership have provided a systematic explanation of the components of the bundles of rights that constitute ownership. The most famous of these so called dimensional analyses is Tony Honore’s list of eleven legal relations that he considers to be the major components that make up ownership. Some examples of central components would be: the right to possess, the right to use, the rights to income, the right to capital, the right to security and the instance of transmissibility. Interestingly the list also includes components that are negative for the owner such as a duty to prevent harm and a liability to execution. In other words this is an account not only of the owner’s rights but also of her or his obligations. Note, however, that the rights and obligations that make up the bundle vary depending on the nature of the object in question. Honore emphasized that some combinations of less than eleven components are sufficient for full ownership.

3. Some key aspects of Aristotelian virtue ethics

The overall purpose of this section is to show how some aspects of Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics could be understood and how these ideas can be a productive way to address a number of pressing issues in bioethics. Naturally many of the discussions are all to brief as the format of this thesis does not allow for anything else and I can only hope that that I will manage to make a reasonably convincing case.

It should be noted that this is not intended as an authoritative, or exegetic, reading of Aristotle. The contribution this thesis seeks to make is to show that if read somewhat creatively many of the ideas in the Nicomachean Ethics make for a highly useful approach to modern moral problems. I do believe that this interpretation falls within the Aristotelian spirit but as pointed out by Roger Crisp “Aristotle’s Greek is compressed, and his meaning frequently indeterminate”. Taking the cue from Aristotle it seems that he would approve of such an attempt (admittedly not perhaps this particular one). “This, then, is a sketch of the good; for, presumably, we must draw the outline first, and fill it in later. If the sketch is good, anyone, it seems, can advance and articulate it, and in such cases time discovers more, or is a good partner.

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in discovery. This is also how the crafts have improved, since anyone can add what is lacking [in
the outline].” /NE1098a22-26/. I find this task especially interesting given that it is sometimes
suggested that the new reality brought about by e.g. biotechnology demands a new ethic. In what
follows I will attempt to show that would not be necessary as I believe that an Aristotelian
account of the virtues could be very helpful when facing the ethical aspects of, e.g., the new
biotechnology.

In some aspects my reading of the Nicomachean Ethics diverges from the standard one and I
would like to mention two such instances already here. These issues will be discussed at some
length in part 3.1 and part 3.8 respectively.

The first case regards the contested issue of whether or not the happy life is a possibility for
many or just a few (or indeed no one). Very briefly my argument is that the combination of (i)
statements such as ‘a lot of people can be happy’, (ii) Aristotle’s dialectical method, and (iii)
Aristotle’s usage of paradigm cases which are deliberately extreme in order to be as clear as
possible, speaks in favour of the idea that *eudaimonia* might not be conditional on complete virtue.
To illustrate this position I introduce a model which I call The Happy Zone. It is intended to
show that an agent who is above a threshold level, and is committed to improve herself, can
reasonably be seen as leading a happy life.

The second case is a discussion of the self-regarding and the other-regarding aspects of some of
the character virtues. My key point here is that in order to be fully virtuous an agent needs to
master the self-regarding aspects of the virtues just as much as the other-regarding. It is argued
that virtues like *philia*, justice, beneficence, even temper and generosity, traditionally seen as
other-regarding, all contain central self-regarding elements and moreover that the self-regarding
aspects are basic components of having the (full) virtue. Consequently, the fully virtuous agent
has to act virtuously both in her dealings with herself and others. The theoretical aspects of this
argument are elaborated on in Article IV whereas the application of it to bioethics takes place in
Article V.

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20 Unless stated otherwise I have used Irwin’s translation of the NE. Aristotle (1999). *The Nicomachean

21 See Book 1.9 of the NE

22 See section 3.1.11 of this introduction.
Before setting off it is perhaps worth mentioning that even Aristotle realized that the virtuous life was an acquired taste. This life can occasionally appear both hard and demanding and it might take time to grasp that this is the best life available to us and consequently the only rational choice. As a result, the quality of our upbringing and the society around us (and the laws) are of the essence, this is what will help us to see the light. As Aristotle points out in Book 9 (for example) “It is difficult, however, for someone to be trained correctly for virtue from his youth if he has not been brought up under the correct laws; for the many, especially the young, do not find it pleasant to live in a temperate and resistant way. That is why laws must prescribe their upbringing and practices; for they will not find these things painful when they get used to them.” /NE1179b32-37/. Through this process of habituation we become better and more reliable moral agents. Notably, however, we need to continue our moral workout even as virtuous agents. In order to stay ethically fit and keep our moral dispositions trim and reliable the virtues must be exercised. To embark on the path of the fulfilled and happy life is a big commitment but it is also the happiest and most enjoyable life for any human being.

For pragmatic reasons I have tried to provide some practical examples involving three health professionals. In the text the reader will encounter; Professor A (a bio-chemist with a long-standing interest in bioethics), Dr. B (a medical doctor committed to the clinical application of bioethics) and Nurse C (trained as a family counsellor with regards to the ethics of organ donation).

3.1 Aristotle’s conception of eudaimonia

Very broadly speaking, when writing the Nicomachean Ethics (henceforth NE) Aristotle sought to make a strong case for the following four main points; first of all he had to explain why the fulfilled human life is *eudaimonia*. Second, he had to define the true nature of humans in order to show what *eudaimonia* consists in. Third, he had to define *eudaimonia* and provide a convincing account of the virtues. Last, but certainly not least, he had to show the connection between the virtues and *eudaimonia*, i.e. why any rational agent ought to behave virtuously (and indeed aspire to *eudaimonia* at all).\(^{23}\)

\(^{23}\)Rational should often be understood as egoistically rational in the Greek texts.
This section introduces a number of key concepts, e.g. the dialectic method, the function argument and *ergon*, after which it moves on to a critical discussion of the two accounts of human fulfillment. Arguably it seems that Aristotle is talking about two very different lives and the NE has been read as both inclusivist and exclusivist. The inclusive view is where human fulfillment is a combination of the virtues, practical wisdom and *Theoria*, and the exclusive view is where fulfillment means engaging solely in *Theoria*. In the final sections I present the Happy Zone argument where I defend the idea that the happy life is indeed a life many of us could lead. But as it should be, I shall start off with the true nature of *eudaimonia* – the best life for any human being.

### 3.1.1 Eudaimonia

Aristotle argued that the supreme human good is *eudaimonia*. This is the happy and fulfilled life for any human being. Regardless whatever else one might want out of life, whatever one’s preferences, this is the best available life. Further to that point Aristotle held that this is something that all rational humans would understand. Although he did not say it explicitly it would be fair to assume that Aristotle would have agreed that the desire to lead a fulfilled life is implanted in us by nature. It is far more than just an option among other equally good alternative lives, and in the NE he sought to show the reader what kind of a person she needs to be in order to lead this happy life.

*Eudaimonia* is the ultimate justification for living in a certain way. It is rational to want *eudaimonia* as Aristotle conceived of it because it is only then we flourish, i.e. realize all our capacities and are fully human. A fulfilled life is not just a set of actions - it is a set of actions performed by someone who does them because she correctly sees the point in doing them. Moreover, the eudaimon life consists of all intrinsically worthwhile actions and as such it is always the best life available to us. Adding something to such a life will not mean an improvement because it necessarily includes all the activities that are valuable for humans. Arguably this might strike the reader as a bit odd, let us imagine the following scenario; Professor A is leading a fulfilled life when she learns that she has been awarded the Nobel Prize in chemistry. Now, is it plausible that this really would add nothing in form of fulfillment to her life? One way of interpreting Aristotle would be the following; it is the theory of happiness that has to be complete and self-sufficient. Even so, the fact that *eudaimonia* is the best possible life does not explain what sort of life it is nor which activities we should engage in to fulfil this end. The answer has to do with our nature and mans’ so called *ergon*. To reach fulfilment we need to perform those skills / capacities which are special to humans and we need to perform them well. (More on this in section 3.1.3 below).
So what is this good then? As Irwin points out Aristotle held that if we believe that rational agents indeed would pursue a final good, that in itself, can give us information about what such a good might be. “He [Aristotle] believes we can infer enough about the content of the final good to show that any final good that is the reasonable object of pursuit by a rational agent is the sort of good that requires the Aristotelian virtues”.24 In the NE happiness for a human being is said to be the “…activity of the soul in accord with virtue, and indeed with the best and most complete virtue, if there are more virtues than one.” /NE1098a17-20/. Recognizing that there might be a dispute as to what such a good is Aristotle said that any candidate for the good must be completely self-sufficient; therefore it cannot be e.g. wealth, pleasure or honour (his three main examples) – as they are all means to an end. This is of course a normative account of the final good and those who do not agree have mistaken desires according to Aristotle.

3.1.2 Aristotle’s method – a problematic approach?

Aristotle claimed that as widespread beliefs carry moral value the starting point of the discussion should be “things known to us” /NE1095b4/. 25 What then ought to be done is to test the theory against those beliefs and if they do not correspond it is bad news for the theory rather than for the common sense view held by good people. Irwin calls this the method of pure dialectics and defines it as the assumption that “…the common beliefs are true and simply need to be clarified”.26

This method is controversial as it makes the theory very vulnerable to attacks. Aristotle claims that his conclusions about ethics are objectively true but as the Skeptics (and others) pointed out it is far from obvious that any universal conclusions can be drawn from these initial common beliefs. Simply put the main problem of pure dialectics is that people have different opinions and an ethical theory that rests solely on common sense beliefs is easily attacked. To get out of this situation and silence the critics Aristotle had to show the following three things. Firstly, that people have other reasons (than what their views happen to be) for accepting what he claims in the NE. secondly, that there is a connection between the virtues and self-interest and why it is in my interest to do the fine and noble. Thirdly, that this proof is based on objective facts about why a rational agent should choose to act in accordance with the virtues.

25 In this section, and elsewhere when I address this issue, I will use Irwin’s terminology of “pure dialectic” and “strong dialectic”.
Fortified like this the method morphs into what Irwin labelled ‘the strong dialectic’. Here the theory is shown to rest on common sense beliefs and objective truths, e.g. facts of human nature, thus becoming more solid.\footnote{For a discussion on mature moral decision-makers see section 3.5.6 of this introduction.}

### 3.1.3 Human nature, the function argument and *ergon*

Aristotle’s whole system is firmly grounded in the study of human nature and human motivation. Very broadly speaking the way to know what to do, according to Aristotle, is to seek the judgment of a good man. Such a good man would know what the right thing to do would be for any agent in a given situation. This is highly relevant as his ethics are about being sensitive to situations, to what the circumstances require and then to be motivated to act in the right way.

To know what is good for us we need to know what kind of beings we are. For Aristotle humans, animals and plants all have souls. Not in the sense that they all have a conscious aim (*telos*), but more in the sense that they have an internal organization which explains how they typically behave, that “its organizational purposiveness governs all its activities”\footnote{Hughes G. (2001), Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Aristotle on Ethics, NY: Routledge, p. 34.}. But even though we might have different types of souls (as a result of being organized differently) we all share one thing; the well-being of any organism depends on how well it can exercise its capabilities as this is the *telos* of all. Hence our nature determines what fulfilment must look like for us, which brings us to the Function Argument.

The Function Argument is Aristotle’s favoured method for discovering what human fulfilment consists in. This is a normative account stipulating that facts about human nature should determine what is good for a human being. The counter argument would be a straight forward conative account claiming that a person’s desires should determine what is good for her. To reject the idea of any common human nature is a fairly radical position to take. That is not to say, of course, that a specific interpretation of what it is cannot be rejected but perhaps not the very existence of a set of features common to all humans. To discard the latter notion seems to be a bit more than to simply assert the freedom to choose ones moral ideals.

The description of the Function Argument is somewhat short but this was not a problem as the reader was assumed to have the necessary background e.g. from having read Plato’s Republic. In fact, Aristotle made a lot of assumptions about his students and he had a quite narrowly defined person in mind. Already at the beginning of the teaching the student would subscribe to a certain
set of values influencing the way they viewed the world. These values are called the first principles, or *archai*, examples would be laws of nature and basic intuitions of the kind that *eudaimonia* equals human good. That is not to say, of course, that this was the ethics of the Athenians only. Aristotle’s claim was far stronger than that – he argued that it is valid for all of mankind and anyone who is rational would see that. It deserves pointing out, however, that he never sought to convince those who had radically different views of life that this was the only path to happiness. Aristotle was not taking on the role of the moral missionary in that sense. (For more on this see section 3.5.4).

It should be noted that the Function Argument does not imply an argument of design. It is not narrow in the sense that a human being can be described as an instrument designed for a special purpose. Rather, the idea is that man has an *ergon* and as a result certain forms of life will be good for us and others will be bad.\(^{29}\)

*Ergon* is the distinctly human. It is either something that only humans can do or something that we can do better than all other animals and plants. It is by looking at the *ergon* that we judge the excellence of a person, an animal, a plant or a thing.\(^{30}\) Although mankind has *ergon* as a group for Aristotle, we all have the same ‘amount’, it seems reasonable to assume that he would have agreed that the more virtuous a person is the better she would be at fulfilling her *ergon*. Contrary to ‘essence’ and ‘nature’ *ergon* does not deal with identity aspects of change (physical or otherwise) but with activity – *ergon* always issue in action.

When humans function properly i.e. when in a state of *eudaimonia* they are exercising the capacities of the human soul – their *ergon* – in a good way. Aristotle writes that if there is more than one such capacity, i.e. that *ergon* is not a singular capacity but a bundle of virtues, then fulfilment is to perform that activity which is the best (\(\text{NE1098a17-20/ as quoted in section 3.1.1 above}\)). How should this be understood? Could, for example, “the best” really be a compound? This poses a major challenge for the advocates of the inclusivist theory, outlined in more detail in section 3.1.6. One reply might be that when Aristotle says that happiness equals *Theoria* he says nothing more than that *Theoria* is the *highest* form of happiness. This would then not imply anything about the other virtues and thus they could well be part of the ‘*ergon* bundle’.\(^{31}\)

\(^{29}\) It is my understanding that Roger Crisp would agree with this
\(^{30}\) Note, however, that only humans can be happy.
\(^{31}\) Roger Crisp holds this view.
This discussion feeds into the larger one regarding how we are to understand *eudaimonia* which is explored in more detail below.\(^3^2\)

### 3.1.4 Is ergon a compound of practical and theoretical reason?

Other matters aside, Aristotle’s account of the *ergon* states that it has to be something distinctly human. It then follows that it cannot be an ability which we share with the other animals e.g. the capacity to digest or to reproduce or sensation or desire. It seems we are left with ‘reason’ – but if we are only ‘reason’ then we would be gods which we most definitely are not (in spite of this divine element). Rather, it appears that what is special about us is that we are all these things and more at the same time. As Thomas Nagel put it, man has “a conjunctive *ergon* which overlaps that of Gods and that of dogs”.\(^3^3\) Following this line of thought it might be helpful to think of Mill’s higher and lower pleasures; just because a pleasure is base it does not have to mean that it does not count at all in the fulfilled life. Both the high and low constitute important parts of that unique compound that is the human *ergon*.

Ackrill argues that although mans’ *ergon* is our ability to reason, our ability to thought, it is not obvious that it is only theoretical and not practical reason that is intended by Aristotle. He holds the very controversial view that there are no good reasons for believing that “the best and most complete virtue” means only Sophia (i.e. the intellectual virtue that enables us to engage in the activity of *Theoria*).\(^3^4\) In fact Ackrill writes that what Aristotle is talking about here is complete or comprehensive virtue which then would be a compound of all the virtues. Mans’ *ergon* would thus be complete virtue rather than a single virtue. But if that is true then it is odd that Aristotle did not spell that out more in the NE (as he did in the Eudemian Ethics for example). Ackrill suggests that it could have been the case that Aristotle had come to realize that talking of different virtues as part of a whole virtue is a bit more complex than he had initially anticipated. Now, if this is the case that seems to support the inclusivist view outlined below, i.e. that human excellence consists of an array of intellectual and non-intellectual, physical and spiritual capacities that humans have.

Someone like Kathleen V. Wilkes would reject the Akrillian understanding. She argues that to grasp what Aristotle is really saying when he talks of the human *ergon* we need to look at what he

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\(^{32}\) For Aristotle’s view on human psychology see his *De Anima*.


\(^{34}\) A claim which is rejected by Roger Crisp and many other scholars.
had to say about human psychology in *De Anima*. There we will find, she says, “…that the capacities of the psuche are not all on par but are hierarchically structured; some faculties are there primarily or solely to subserve others, to make their exercise possible. The above objection [the inclusivist case] misleadingly suggests democracy, whereas in fact we have a monarchy; reason, in man, is at the top of the pyramid of capacities.”. 35

Regardless of how plausible one finds Ackrill’s view above it is at least clear that anyone who wants Aristotle’s argument to make sense has to stretch it a bit. As the original is so patchy and filled with repetitions some creative reading might be called for on occasion.

3.1.5 The two accounts of *eudaimonia*

From Book 1 and more or less all the way to Book 10 of the NE Aristotle appears to promote an inclusive doctrine of *eudaimonia*. But then towards the end of Book 10.7 he somewhat unexpectedly concludes that rather than being both a practical and a theoretical activity *eudaimonia* is only *Theoria*, i.e. theoretical or contemplative thought.

“Besides, study seems to be liked because of itself alone, since it has no result beyond having studied. But from the virtues concerned with action we try to a greater or lesser extent to gain something beyond the action itself.” /NE1177b3-6/. Another sentence in this section which is often paraded out to show that Aristotle held that intelligence equals *Theoria* is the following. “And what we have said previously will also apply now. For what is proper to each thing’s nature is supremely best and most pleasant for it; and hence for a human being the life in accord with understanding will be supremely best and most pleasant, if understanding, more than anything else, is the human being. This life, then, will also be happiest” /NE1178a5-10/.

The ambiguity in the text has caused a massive, and occasionally heated, debate. Broadly speaking two very different answers to the question ‘what does human fulfilment consist in’ or ‘why do we do the things we do’ are championed;

a) The inclusivist (also called the comprehensive) account. Here *eudaimonia* is said to be *Theoria* and the character virtues and *phronesis*. On this view human nature is seen as a composite of the many-faceted activities which make up the life of a good and active citizen - a mix of reason, emotion, perception and action.

b) The exclusivist (also called the dominant or the intellectualist) account. On this view \textit{eudaimonia} is realized in one single activity. This activity is of course \textit{Theoria} (theoretical contemplation), the most noble and fine activity of man. One should not, however, be led to believe that the appropriate subjects of contemplation would only be refined matters such as mathematics, philosophy or physics. The idea is that the agent should use her knowledge for constructing different arguments and the topic is only secondary. There are indeed examples in other texts of lowly things such as bathrooms and animal secretes, both matters which merit quite lengthy contemplation as it turns out.\footnote{See the passage on Heraclitus in the kitchen in Parts of Animals I.5.}

3.1.6 The inclusivist case

Championing the inclusivist account Ackrill begins by asking what it is about an action that makes it virtuous. He listed a number of possible answers only to reject all of them. Some examples would be; it is the noble and right thing to do, it is what a man of practical wisdom would do, it is seen as good by other good men, and that \textit{phronesis} promotes Sophia (in the minor end sense) which then promotes \textit{Theoria}. Indeed, he continued, if the best life is the eudaimon one (understood as \textit{Theoria}) and the right action is that which brings you closer to such a state it sounds like the virtues are purely instrumental, as opposed to, intrinsically valuable activities which then would be problematic.

A possible reply at this stage would be to say that activities can be both ends in themselves and means to an end. That there is no contradiction between “having a well-defined aim” and “doing something for its own sake” e.g. to play golf to have a nice holiday, here we would play both because we enjoy it and because it contributes towards a nice holiday.\footnote{Ackrill J L. (1974), Aristotle on Eudaimonia. In, \textit{Essays On Aristotle’s Ethics}, ed. A O. Rorty, 1980, University of California Press, p. 19.} Ackrill explained that there are two different types of ends. Firstly there is the most \textit{teleios} end, the very final end which in this case is \textit{eudaimonia}, and secondly there are minor ends, ends which we value and desire both for their own sake (they are final in that sense) and because they form a part of the most \textit{teleios} end. Aristotle might have said that for him human happiness consists in two things; the exercise of the intellectual virtues and the exercise of the character virtues. They are of course irreducible but that is not to say that they cannot be traded against one another. For example the happy life for a person who is highly gifted with regards to politics but has little capacity for philosophical
contemplation would consist of a very substantial element of character virtues and very little *Theoria* whereas for a person like Plato it would be the other way around.

Consequently, when Aristotle says that “A is for the sake of B” he should not be read as saying that “A is subsequent to B” but that “A contributes as a constituent to B”. Thus, statements such as “good actions are for the sake *eudaimonia*” should not be read as saying that the virtues are purely instrumental but rather that they are final ends in themselves (of the minor kind of course). “…there may be plenty of things (such as pleasure and virtue) that we value for themselves, but yet we say too that we value them for the sake of *eudaimonia*, whereas nobody ever aims at *eudaimonia* for the sake of one of them (or, in general, for anything other than itself.”

Sometimes the inclusivist camp is accused of championing an arbitrary, “mere heap” notion instead of a unified whole. Largely this seems like an unfair allegation. They certainly argue that the Swiss Army knife is a better metaphor than a pyramid when it comes to trying to understand the internal organization of man’s capacities, but to hold that there are many sub-erga clearly does not mean that what is intended is an arbitrary collection.

To summarize this position; Aristotle thinks that theoretically the best life for man is *Theoria*, unfortunately this is not an option as man’s *ergon* involves so many ‘un-godlike’ features. As a result a human life has to be a combination of actions, i.e. virtues, *phronesis* and *Theoria*, but the problem is how these components are to be combined. What is the recipe for the best possible human life, e.g. should one choose the life of the statesman or that of the philosopher? Ackrill’s question is then if we really have to choose as these two roles seem to have many of the more practical actions in common. However that may be humans need to strike a balance between these components. On the one hand Aristotle cannot say that we should do everything to promote *Theoria*, to give it absolute priority, because that would turn even the most hideous action into a virtue, nor can he say that all other actions only are valuable as promoters of *Theoria*. To claim that everything else is instrumental would be too counter-intuitive.

The best solution for the inclusivist appears to be to argue that *Theoria* is the most important but not to the extent that it completely blows the virtuous action out of the water. But then we are

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40 We are compounds of animal features as well as godlike features.
41 These would be the two worthiest ideals.
faced with a new problem, namely how the divine (*Theoria*) sometimes can be traded off against the mere mortal (the virtuous action). In spite of all Ackrill’s (and other scholars) attempts it is, however, not immediately apparent from the NE that Aristotle would have been prepared to admit that *eudaimonia* has to be a compound theory. It seems we have now arrived at the very kernel of the inclusivists’ problem. To make matters even worse the contrary is in fact true - Aristotle wrote quite clearly that the highest from of activity is *Theoria*. Furthermore, he did not claim that any means to *Theoria* are permissible, possibly not even for someone like Plato. At any rate such a choice would require the utmost situation sensitivity on behalf of the agent.

### 3.1.7 A possible reply from the exclusivists

Thomas Nagel claims that the inclusivist view as described above is an absurd reading of the NE. Very briefly his argument is the following; let us imagine our capacities e.g. nutrition, perception and locomotion, as hierarchical. Yet at the same time they all feed into each other and the complex organisms that we are depend on all these capacities. Now, all these capacities are important but there seems to be something special about ‘reason’. This capacity is both involved in our everyday activity and on a higher level. In its purest form it deals with theory, “with reason man has become the only creature capable of concentrating on what is higher than himself and thereby sharing into it to an extent” Nagel writes.\(^{42}\) Reason is why we can take a step back, see ourselves from the outside and reflect on (though perhaps not answer) the question “what is life all about?”.

This higher level is the complete life that Aristotle praises in Book 10. When Aristotle writes that such a life is ‘higher than human’ he does not mean that it is unattainable or impossible for man but rather that it is so splendidly good that it is almost incomprehensible. It is important to recall that Aristotle held that we engage in divine activity when we do philosophy. “Such a life would be superior to the human level. For someone will live it not insofar as he is a human being, but insofar as he has some divine element in him. And the activity of this divine element is as much superior to the activity in accord with the rest of virtue as this element is superior to the compound.” /NE1177b27-31/. Hence, it is our capacity to think of things higher than ourselves that we should identify ourselves with, not our ‘whole’ selves. As we have the ability to contemplate such matters we must not waste time on getting bogged down in our lowly lives (apart from when not doing so might endanger our capacity for thinking e.g. if we forget to eat, live in a way that makes us sick, cross the street without looking…).

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To summarize; reason can be employed in two levels; (i) the practical employment and (ii) the higher, transcending, employment. Humans have this capacity of transcending themselves and approach the gods and it is in virtue of that capacity that we are capable of eudaimonia – this is our excellence, our *ergon*.

### 3.1.8 The problem

The two views yield very different visions of who the truly virtuous being is. Is it someone who both lives a fulfilled life and contributes to society (helps to run things) in a way that perhaps even enables others to lead morally admirable lives? Or is it a person in an ivory tower who sits in isolation and contemplates *Theoria*?

The problem with the former reading is that it becomes very difficult to explain the emphasis Aristotle puts on *Theoria* in the NE. That said the latter version is also controversial, the major problem here is that it threatens to corrupt society (a deep-rooted concern of Aristotle’s) as it appears to imply that the agent has a right to take all possible means, immoral or moral, to make sure that we have as much time as possible for *Theoria*. Adding to the complications any defender of this view would have to show that everything else is instrumental to *Theoria*. Also, the reasonableness of putting up such an unattainable moral ideal might be called into question. How plausible is it that Aristotle, given his dialectics, his views on politics and his ideas on social organization would advocate an intellectualist account?\(^{43}\)

### 3.1.9 Approaching the gods

An interesting explanation of why *Theoria* reigns supreme is given by Jonathan Lear in his book ‘Aristotle: the desire to understand’. He writes that Aristotle believes that all men have a desire to understand and to explore the world. Humans want to gain *episteme* (knowledge) to help us understand why things are the way they are. When we engage in this exploration we partly transcend our own nature and enter divine territory (as previously mentioned the gods are pure *Theoria*). This is our *ergon* at its finest, this is when we fully realize ourselves as human beings.\(^{44}\) As Aristotle points out; “Moreover, each person seems to be his understanding, if he is his controlling and better element. It would be absurd, then, if he were to choose not his own life, but something else’s.” /NE1178a3-5/. The life of *Theoria*, when man finally is self-sufficient and

\(^{43}\) For more on this see the comments on Aristotle and action-guiding in section 3.5.16 of this introduction.

fully understands himself and the world around him produces nothing – there is nothing beyond this.

3.1.10 The mixed life

When reading the NE it is then, arguably, clear that the highest form of activity is *Theoria*. When Aristotle writes that *Theoria* equals happiness he means ‘the highest form of happiness’ and that the most complete and most perfect of virtues is Sophia rather than a compound of all the virtues. “Besides, it would seem absurd for prudence, inferior as it is to wisdom, to control it [as a superior.] /NE1143b35-36/ (see also /NE1145a9-11/). All in all this makes a strong case for an exclusivist reading. Arguably, however, the analysis does not have to end there. Even though the human *ergon* is our capacity for reason, as opposed to a bundle, the conclusion can still be that it is the theory of *eudaimonia* that must be self-sufficient and lacking in nothing – that it must list all the goods there are. That is not to say, however, that being completely engaged in *Theoria* would be the only happy life for a human being. Rather, it is the exercise of all the virtue that makes for a happy life, as Aristotle wrote “makes life worthy of choice and lacking in nothing” /NE1097b14-14/. In addition, the conclusion of the Function Argument is of course that we should exercise all the virtues, both the character virtues and the intellectual virtues. In practice, the happy life for the vast majority of people will indeed be a mix of the practical and the theoretical, leaving ample space for exercising both the intellectual and the character virtues. What the exact balance between them ought to be would presumably depend on the individual’s capacity. Aristotle does not seem to want to leave anything good or nice for the vicious and as a result the inclusivist framework is perfectly acceptable provided that the things to be included are the virtues.45 As seen in Book 1.8 Aristotle, on establishing the Function Argument, seeks to contrast his vision with competing views of the happy life. He wants to show that his version includes all the good things, e.g. to exercise the virtues is true pleasure. Commenting on Aristotle’s wish to pack all that is good into the happy life Roger Crisp writes “By incorporating into his position the generally accepted view that wealth, power and so on are honourable in themselves, he advances his eudaimonistic aim of showing that the happiness constituted by virtue is ‘lacking in nothing’. Finally, it is clear that wealth, power, and indeed honour, have value only as elements within the virtuous life itself. It is the noble which really matters, though the noble will be partly manifested in the actively virtuous possession of great wealth and other external goods.”46

45 I would like to thank Roger Crisp for pointing this out to me.
On that note and in an attempt to reconcile the political and the philosophical, Kathleen V. Wilkes, suggested that even though we recognize man’s *ergon* to be “activity in accordance with the rational principle” we might interpret this rational principle as intelligence in a broad sense; “intelligence that may be applied to art, craft, science, philosophy, politics or any other domain”. It should be noted, however, that just because we could contemplate all kinds of things in *Theoria* (both high and low) that still does not open up for an array of practical activities.

3.1.11 The Happy Zone

As briefly mentioned above I too would argue that one can have a fulfilled life without engaging only in *Theoria* and to illustrate this I shall introduce the term ‘the Happy Zone’. It is intended to move the discussion towards a more pragmatic, and perhaps even convincing, understanding of the happy life. This is what I mean by it;

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unfulfilled</th>
<th>Virtuous</th>
<th>Fully virtuous (almost only <em>Theoria</em>)</th>
</tr>
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|             |          | I------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|l

these lives are all happy ones, this is the Happy Zone where one is *eudaimon*

In part I agree with the exclusivist; whatever else might be good for man *Theoria* always trumps. Strictly speaking the story in the NE is that man’s *ergon* is reason and therefore *eudaimonia* is *Theoria*. But what the picture above is intended to show is that although the theory of happiness is required to be self-sufficient and complete there are many different activities going on in the Happy Zone. So even though the highest form of happiness is indeed *Theoria*, most virtuous (i.e. happy) people have a life that is a balanced mix of practical activities and contemplation.

In practice the good life is more than contemplation, it is also about acting in accordance with the other virtues and participating in society. Consequently, the happy life is likely to involve a

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48 Note that just because I am defending the Happy Zone argument and the idea that people can be happy given that they are above a certain threshold that does not imply that I think that all of them also would be good role models. Hence, when the trainee is looking for a good example – trying to find out what the virtuous characteristically would do in that situation – she should look to Pericles and not to someone like me for example. The fact that I managed to squeeze myself into the happy zone and hang in there tooth and nail, does not make me a good role model.
49 In the Eudemian Ethics three candidates for the ‘good life’ are described the political, the philosophical and the voluptuary. See e.g. /EE 1216a27-28/.
mix of politics (i.e. practice) and philosophy (i.e. theory) and it is the balance of the different elements that decides where in the Happy Zone an agent finds herself.\textsuperscript{50} So in actuality there can be many different versions of the happy life (we can have the virtues to different amounts) but once we are above a certain threshold level we are in the Happy Zone. Here *eudamonia* consists in a package of worthwhile things and activities. One both needs to conduct one’s life well and interact in society and be able to stand by and reflect on oneself, life and the world and see how it fits in with the bigger picture. To stay in the Happy Zone the person has to work hard, recall that we must exercise the virtues, try to improve herself and seek to get more virtuous. Without opening the door to the incontinent it seems to me that an agent who possess a large number of virtues and is continent with regard to the rest can well be leading a happy life.\textsuperscript{51}

This is a heavily contested issue – it is true that Aristotle never says outright that a person who does not master the complete set of virtues could be called virtuous. On the other hand there is a passage in Book 1.9 where he writes that a lot of people could be happy, “Moreover [if happiness comes in this way] it will be widely shared; for anyone who is not deformed [in his capacity] for virtue will be able to achieve happiness through some sort of learning and attention.” /NE 1099b18-b21/. Now, if the criterion for happiness truly is complete virtue then it is very hard to see how that could be true. As pointed out by Roger Crisp “…there is a spectrum of moral character from this individual [the perfectly virtuous one] to that of the lowest, most bestial individual, and there is no reason to assume that someone who is not perfectly virtuous is not virtuous at all. As Aristotle points out, “the spheres of what is noble and what is just…admit of a good deal of diversity and variation” and “it is the mark of an educated person to look in each area for only that degree of accuracy that the nature of the subject permits” (EN 1094b14-16, 23-5). So we may assume that Aristotle accepted that, to be virtuous, a person’s actions and feelings had to fall into some imprecisely bounded range…”\textsuperscript{52}

That said he then goes on to contradict these statements in Book 6 and so on. Like many other issues in the NE it is not entirely obvious what Aristotle really thought. None the less, especially given his general outlook and philosophical method, it seems reasonable to assume that he would have agreed that happiness can be widely shared. Given that most people are not fully virtuous that would appear to imply that people can be happy without having internalized all the virtues

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\textsuperscript{50} I imagine that someone like Plato would be very far to the right where as a good politician might be more in the middle. I do not wish to imply that the further to the right, the happier the life.

\textsuperscript{51} See Part 7 of this introduction.

completely. To engage in and exercise the virtues willingly and with pleasure, for the sake of virtue, that is the best life for any human being.\(^{53}\)

### 3.2 The doctrine of the mean

In a very general sense the doctrine of the mean could be describes in the following way. An excellence (i.e. a virtue) is the intermediate within an ethical triad framework. The virtue lies between two vices and the excellence issues in actions which neither go too far nor fall short. One vice symbolizes how to go wrong through excessive behaviour and the other through deficient behaviour. The doctrine of the mean is a central concept in the NE and as such also a contested one. Only some of the critique, for example that the continuum that Aristotle sketches is misleading as such a quantitative model fails to capture the different dimensions which the idea presupposes, will be discussed here.

In Book 1.13 of the NE Aristotle tells the reader that there are two types of (moral) virtues. First, there are intellectual virtues – they belong to that part of the soul that has reason. Second, there are virtues of character – they concern the part of the soul that has feelings and desires but which can listen to reason\(^ {54}\). On the Aristotelian account the moral virtues do not come through nature, we are not born with them nor can we learn them purely from teaching.\(^ {55}\) Rather, they have to be acquired through habit. Consequently, ethical education is about re-organizing people’s desires - about getting things straight in the soul - so that one gets pleasure from noble acts and pain from bad.\(^ {56}\) In order to do the right thing in a given situation the agent needs both the motivation (i.e. the desire) to act in that way \textbf{and} the situation sensitivity to see what the right action is in that particular circumstance.

#### 3.2.1 Actions and feelings

\(^ {53}\) Because the exercise of the virtues is both means and ends in themselves. The virtues themselves, on the other hand, are arguably to be understood as pure means to the noble act.

\(^ {54}\) For a discussion see / NE1102b30-34/. Sometimes a distinction is made between moral virtues and eudemonic virtues. With regards to Aristotle I believe this to be confusing, for him all moral virtues were eudemonic virtues.

\(^ {55}\) Aristotle recognises that some people have natural virtues to a higher extent than others and thus it might be easier for them to acquire the relevant moral virtues but those agents are not morally praiseworthy on account of being morally gifted as it were.

Three things occur in the desire part of the soul; feelings, capacities and states or dispositions (i.e. the virtues). Aristotle is often read as saying that a virtue is a disposition for a certain feeling and the standard example is the courageous man who is so disposed that he will feel no fear unless it is merited.\textsuperscript{57} It would, however, be false to say that Aristotle took a feeling and then connected it to a virtue. Some of the virtues have a signature feeling but many do not, it does not work that way with generosity or particular justice for example. It is quite clear that virtues are dispositions, but for actions not for feelings. The virtuous agent acts in a certain way, e.g. to avoid harming an innocent person, regardless of how she feels about it.

As mentioned above the character-related virtues all involve how “the part of the soul that does not have reason but which listens and responds to reason” becomes suitably responsive to rational indications in action, in different domains of life”.\textsuperscript{58} When we function well desire listens to reason although it has none in itself. Notably Aristotle talks of two types of reason; intellectual and practical and it is only the former that is free from desire.\textsuperscript{59} Naturally, the virtuous agent would experience a feeling of pleasure as she does the right thing, since the fine and noble is always the most appealing act to her. But the point to bring home is that it is not the feeling of pleasure that explains why the virtuous do what they do. As Hursthouse comments; because most feelings involve a desire to perform an action being well disposed in respect of feelings involves being well disposed in respect of action too. Hence, Aristotle does not mean that excellence of character is merely an inner matter even though it sometimes might sound like that when he talks of virtues and feelings.\textsuperscript{60}

\subsection*{3.2.2 Virtue as excellence}

The Greek word \textit{arete} means virtue in the sense of excellence, to be virtuous is to be excellent at doing something. In that sense the virtues are outward and production oriented and as explained above they are about actions. This might seem odd as many of us are more used to the Judeo-Christian notion of virtue i.e. a quality of inner spirit that has few manifestations. On that view the traditional idea is that regardless of what the world looks like the virtuous are sure to reap their rewards in the afterlife. Not so for the Greek philosophers.\textsuperscript{61} Many of the Greeks held that humans should be virtuous for the sake of this life – now is the time when one will be rewarded (of course as the virtuous action is also the most pleasurable the ‘reward’ is not simply external).

\textsuperscript{57}See e.g. Bostock for a discussion. Bostock D. (2000). \textit{Aristotle’s ethics}. Oxford University Press.
\textsuperscript{59}For the argument see Book 1.13 of the NE, e.g. /NE1102a25-b3/.
\textsuperscript{60}For a discussion see Skorupski, J. (1999). \textit{Ethical explorations}, OUP.
The justification of the moral for the Greek philosophers was ‘because it is good for me’; to be moral was to behave in an egoistically rational way.

3.2.3 Virtue as a habitual disposition

Dispositions give rise to relatively fixed patterns of behaviour. Some but not all dispositions are habits, we also have physical dispositions as a result of normal human nature e.g. to grow, to digest, to think. With regards to the virtues it is the habitual disposition (hexis in Greek) that is of interest. Aristotle defined a hexis as a state and explains; “By states I mean what we have when we are well or badly off in relation to feelings. If, for instance, our feeling is too intense or slack, we are badly off in relation to anger, but if it is intermediate, we are well off; the same is true in the other cases.” /NE1105b27-30/. The hexes are either aretai, virtues and vices i.e. moral skills, or technai, other skills.

As explained above every human being’s soul contains both reason and desire, this is simply a part of the human condition. The difference between the virtuous and the vicious, however, is that only the former has a unified soul. Because reason is on top of their desire they come to desire only the fine and the noble and they only take pleasure in the good. As their desire is in harmony with their reason they suffer no struggles or wrongful temptations. Indeed, this is why self-discipline is a sign of weakness and not a virtue for Aristotle. When presented with the second cream cake of the day my virtuous friend Dr. B refrains effortlessly. She does so because she is sensitive enough to realize that even if she might get pleasure from eating cake in general this is not an instance when she will get any pleasure as she has already had her share for today. On Aristotle’s view this is the type of person we should praise and admire because he is happy and flourishing (which the struggler definitely is not).

3.2.4 The three conditions

Aristotle put forward three conditions for an act to count as virtuous. The agent has to (a) have practical knowledge, i.e. know what she is doing, (b) chose the act and chose it for its own sake and (c) the act must flow from a firm character. To assess if an action is virtuous we need to know how the agent saw what she was doing, because ”...at a pinch a person can on occasion exercise self-control and do what needs to be done even when they cannot do it in the way that

62 For example brittleness which is a dispositional property of glass and this influences the behaviour of glass when dropped i.e. it shatters.
63 It is interesting to note that the root of the word aretai is aner which means ‘man’. Hence, the virtues were what made people manly.
the good person does it. It is therefore not the case that on each occasion a correct moral assessment of what should be done requires moral virtue, though it is true that moral virtue is needed to get things right consistently, day in and day out”.64 When Aristotle emphasizes that virtue involves rational choice he appears to want to say more than simply that agents are responsible for their own morality (obviously we have a choice not to behave virtuously). As Bostock explains, it is likely that Aristotle wishes to distinguish between the virtuous person and the person that simply does what virtue demands. The latter person, who is sometimes referred to as ‘the moral expert’ or ‘the contingent person’, would only be at the trainee stage of virtue. So what is the difference between ‘human excellence’ and ‘expertise’ then? Human excellence is an unconditional disposition to act, to feel and generally respond in ways typical of the good person. Expertise, on the other hand, is simply the ability to act and respond (and perhaps in some cases feel) in the ways typical of the sort of expert in question. Hence, an agent who is not virtuous, say Nurse C’s brother, can be thoroughly possessed by an ability and yet prefer not to exercise it at all, or he could prefer to exercise it badly. In other words – he can commit moral failure as described by Aristotle. Such acts are impossible for the excellent person as her disposition would be firm and unchanging.

3.2.5 The doctrine of the mean

In Book 2.6 Aristotle writes that “Virtue, then, is a state that decides, consisting in a mean, the mean relative to us, which is defined by reference to reason, that is to say, to the reason by reference to which the prudent person would define it.” /NE11007a1-a3/. Very generally speaking one could describe this as saying that an excellence is an intermediate in an ethical triad framework. Flanked by two vices, one dealing with excessive behaviour and one with deficient, the excellence in the middle issues in actions that neither go too far nor falls short. It must immediately be added that this is not always an accurate picture but none the less it is a reasonable starting point for discussion.

Aristotle uses the metaphor of the skilled archer hitting the mark. This, however, might be easier said than done as there are so many ways – even countless - in which we can err. Just like the archer we must take many things into consideration when we aim to shoot, the moral equivalents of hurdles like tremble of hands, crosswinds, effects of gravity etc. We need to compensate for those things – for our moral constitutions. Fortunately the right action does not have to be bulls-

eye every time, on most occasions there is a bigger range in which the hit still qualifies as excellent. (See sections 3.2.7 and 3.2.8).

It should be noted that the doctrine of the mean does not say that one and the same person cannot display both corresponding vices (at different occasions). In fact, that seems a quite plausible scenario as a person who fails to grasp the essence of the specific virtue is likely to go wrong in all kinds of ways. Indeed, such an agent lacks understanding of both proportion and context.

3.2.6 Know thyself
To be virtuous requires astute self-knowledge. For some virtues Aristotle points out that one vice is preferable to the other, e.g. it is better to be a little too generous than too stingy. With regards to other virtues he warns the reader that as most people find one vice more tempting than the other a good strategy is to aim a little closer to the vice one feels the least drawn too. To illustrate this he offers an analogy of a sailboat. Due to unfavourable winds the skipper has to steer the boat towards a place off the intended target in order to end up in the right place. “That is why anyone who aims at the intermediate condition must first of all steer clear of the more contrary extreme, following the advice that Calypso also gives: ‘Hold the ship outside the spray and surge.’”/NE1109a31-33/.

But as pointed out by Pakaluk it is not obvious how “these corrective actions not be wrong, if they depart from the intermediate mark, just as much do the wrong actions we have already committed?” 65 To this Aristotle might, rather straightforwardly have replied, that the idea of the corrective is a way to make it right, it is not a recommendation to do a bunch of little wrong things. “This is enough, then, to make it clear that in every case the intermediate state is praised, but we must sometimes incline towards the excess, sometimes toward the deficiency; for that is the easiest way to hit the intermediate and good condition.”/NE1109b24-27/.

3.2.7 Spot on?
To understand what Aristotle wanted to say with this metaphorical picture of the right balance in life it is not particularly conducive to think of it as one, exact spot. To the contrary the balance is relative to a number of aspects. For example; was it done at the right time, to the right extent, by the right person, for the right reasons, in the right way and so forth (see e.g. /NE1106b21-22/,

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This is what Aristotle calls ‘distinguishable increments’ and what Pakaluk refers to as “the particulars of that action or emotional response”\(^6\). This appears to pre-suppose that we are talking about other things than simply degrees of emotion. To illustrate this it might well be more pragmatic to break it down to a number of sub-scales. In order to hit the mean on the ‘grand scale’ one must hit the mean on all the individual sub-scales. This is presumably what Aristotle had in mind when he somewhat depressingly informs us that we can err in countless way but only get it right in one.

As argued by e.g. Pakaluk it seems plausible that Aristotle intended his doctrine both as a practical rule of thumb and as a principle for classification\(^7\). This is a disputed claim but Aristotle can certainly, and reasonably, be read as both classifying the ethics and then as telling the reader how to use these classifications\(^8\).

### 3.2.8 In a mean ‘relative to us’

Throughout the NE the “to us aspect” is emphasized, it is in relation to us that X is understandable, praiseworthy, shameful and so on. It has to be so because, as previously explained, human nature is key to what is good for us. However, even though Aristotle wrote that the virtue lies in ‘a mean relative to us’ it would be a mistake to interpret that as saying that the mean is somehow relative to the agent’s degree of virtue. He uses an example of what the appropriate amount of food would be for different agents and he compares the needs of the legendary wrestler Milo and those of normal man /NE1106b1-1106b6/. Because the right amount is not the same for everyone the mean cannot be determined without close attention to both the person and the particular circumstance. Note that this is not an excuse for shortcomings but rather that we rightly expect more from very virtuous people\(^9\). It is not entirely clear, however, how the category of “heroic and godlike” virtue is fitting in with the rest of the theory as we should all behave virtuously /see e.g. NE7.1 and NE1145a20-30/. I would like to propose a slightly alternative interpretation which I believe to be consistent with many of Aristotle’s statements. The idea is that everyone has to hit the mean but Ajax is supposed to be braver than Dr. B for example. What would count as very courageous for Dr. B might only be weakly courageous for Ajax. The reason for this is that Ajax has fully internalized, e.g., the virtue


\(^{68}\) For a good account of this see Crisp R., Aristotle on Greatness of Soul, in Kraut R. *Blackwell Companion to the Nicomachean Ethics*, Blackwell, 2006.

\(^{69}\) It should be noted that the ‘food example’ is not about self-improvement but rather intended to show a clear case.
of greatness of soul and thus he is a finer human being than Dr. B – he is capable of more. In theory the maximum amount of courage is the same for both agents but as Dr. B is leading her life somewhere in the lower end of the metaphorical Happy Zone the courage she will actually display is tolerable but nothing more.

As a result Aristotle says there are two types of mean. The first one is in regard to the thing itself, it is located half-way between two extremes and always the same. The second is relative to the agent, this mean deals with the ‘neither too much not too little’ aspect for that individual and this is not exactly the same for everyone. So to return to Ajax and Dr. B this would mean that on the first scale both of them have to hit the same mean (given that they are both virtuous) and clearly Ajax will do a better job of this than Dr. B. But the fact that Dr. B only manages acceptably is not a problem with regards to the first scale. On the second scale, however, both agents have to do very well. Here Dr. B will be expected to do just as well as Ajax because her “lesserness” has already been built in as this is her tailored scale. The second scale is individual in this sense. On my reading Aristotle should be understood as saying that there is a mean ‘range’ especially on the first scale (similar to the Happy Zone I have suggested previously) within which the right action for any agent would fall. Again, Aristotle’s cases are paradigm cases for the NE but that is not to say that every case is like that.

3.2.8.1 Relative to human nature: there are things that no human should be expected to face without lapsing into panic. Situations where we cannot justly be expected to behave in a way that falls within the mean and inappropriate responses would be pardonable e.g. natural disasters like earthquakes, tsunamis and volcano eruptions.

3.2.8.2 Relative to the person’s age, gender, capacity for freedom: for all his wisdom Aristotle had some ideas which strike the modern reader as deeply flawed and problematic. Two examples might be that there was such a thing as natural slaves and that women are weak and thus cannot be expected to behave rationally. A more reasonable example for understanding his point might be a mentally handicapped person – we do not expect them to behave in the same way as others, we demand less of them in certain respects because they lack certain capacities.

3.2.9 Always wrong
But there are of course feelings (dispositions), and the acts produced by them, that are always wrong and because they can never be right they have no mean e.g. malice, shamelessness and
envy. Thus Aristotle should not be read as saying that all actions should be carried out with temperance. Some should never be carried out at all and others should always be carried out with one’s whole being /NE1166a14-19/. Hence, every virtue has a middle disposition but not every middle disposition is a virtue.

As regards Aristotle’s view on forbidden actions on a more general level the situation is more complex. In Book 2.6 he writes that murder and adultery are always forbidden. As pointed out by Roger Crisp, however, Aristotle is presumably only making a semantic point; as murder means the act of wrongful killing it is wrong by definition but it does not follow that the act of killing is always wrong. As a believer in natural law Aristotle could well argue that there are certain standards of justice that precedes society and humans and that the violation of them would always be wrong. But the actions that would be forbidden on such an account would be far broader matters e.g. ‘being unjust’.

3.2.10 Some examples

Let us introduce a couple of examples starting with the virtue of courage. It is often claimed that Aristotle said that the opposite of fear is overconfidence. Losin argues that this was a mistake and refers to Urmson’s model in which he talks of two continua – one for ‘courage’ and one for ‘caution’. The gist of the argument is that Aristotle tried to press too many actions into one single triad.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cowardice</th>
<th>Insensitive fearlessness</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lack of confidence</td>
<td>Overconfidence</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As Urmson points out the mean does not have to be the same on the two scales because the two sets of variables are independent of each other. On a more general note he emphasizes that the mean is not an exact point on either scale – the courageous person hits the mark that is appropriate under the circumstances. Let us imagine the two following situations; (a) it is my turn to present a paper at the moral philosophy seminar in Oxford, and (b) I am standing face-to-face with Attila the Hun. In light of what Aristotle says about the right things to fear the encounter with Attila would permit me, it might even be wrong of me not, to feel somewhat unsettled. To

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70 For more on Aristotle’s view on natural law and social construction see Book 5.7 of the NE where he discusses two types of laws in the good society.
71 Losin is on the other hand rejected by Hursthouse… just to show the complexity…
the contrary, any concern I could have regarding my upcoming seminar would be evidence of my cowardice.

It is important to note that the quantity is not the relevant aspect here. If, for example I fear ten different things along the lines of great pain, humiliation, poverty and death that would be perfectly alright by Aristotle’s standards, but if these ten things are different breeds of mice then I am simply wrong. Further to that point it is important to recall that courage is not a virtue because it is a disposition in the mean nor are cowardice and fearlessness vices because they are deficit and excess. It is the other way around - courage is a virtue because it is the right disposition to fear and therefore it falls in the mean.

Another example is ‘even-temperedness’. Here Losin tells us that there are at least five separate continua;

1. Frequency: never always
2. Degree: too mildly too violently
3. Duration: too short too long
4. People: no one everyone
5. Provoking circumstance: none everything

Again, acts and feelings can fall anywhere on the different continua and each scale can vary independently of the other four sets. Each continuum has two extremes and somewhere in between there is a mean where the agent gets it right. As explained above (3.2.7), what is excellent depends on circumstances like: was it done to the right person, at the right time, to the right extent, for the right reasons and so forth. Naturally, all these continua, or aspects, do not come into play for all virtues.

3.2.11 A middling disposition

So what then is this elusive ‘right amount’? Aristotle’s idea was that the reason for which a feeling is said to be in the mean (with regards to e.g. the amount, the time, the intensity, the reason and so on) is because that is how a virtuous person would feel in that situation. Notably, it is not the case that there is a “right feeling” which is decided independently of the virtuous agent. That said the right-making feature as such is not simply that it is felt – the underlying reason for why this
feeling is correct is of course a story about human nature which is universally true (the function argument).

At first this may sound strange because it seems that the right amount of feeling could sometimes be the maximum amount. Presumably it would be the appropriate reaction to be completely outraged if one for example was the victim of an unprovoked and brutal attack in the street. Notably the doctrine of the mean does not stipulate that agents should always be moderate (they should, however, always be temperate) in their response and it is important to recall that Aristotle would have had little regard for Christian virtues such as e.g. the turning of the cheek and perhaps universal compassion. Bostock’s suggested solution is that Aristotle should be understood as saying that a virtue is a middling disposition – it is the disposition that the virtue is flowing from that lies in the middle.

3.2.12 Additional problems
But the problem seems to persist, not even this more nuanced picture of splitting the two poles into many sub-scales can really capture what Aristotle seems to be saying. Hursthouse held that it fails to do so because the whole “too... and too...” is a misrepresentation of what Aristotle means with ‘right’. In the article ‘A false doctrine of the mean’ she criticizes scholars like e.g. Urmson for taking Aristotle’s talk of ‘the right occasion’ and the ‘right object’ to mean ‘not too much, not too little’. “The idea that the concept of the right reason could be captured by specifying it as a mean between too many and too few reasons has only to be stated as absurd.”

Losin points out that it seems that e.g. getting angry at the ‘wrong’ people is more than a matter of getting angry at a large amount of people, and that e.g. not getting angry on occasions which call for it is more than not getting angry often enough. It appears then that the continuum model is misleading – it is a quantitative model and as such it fails to capture what Aristotle means by the doctrine of the mean. The insistence of thinking of the mean as ‘the middle’ makes it easy to miss Aristotle’s point. It is a two step idea; firstly my motivation must be right (i.e. I act for the sake of the fine and the noble), and secondly the intensity of the response needs to hit the ‘mean zone’ (relative to me). It should not come as a surprise that a single quantitative model interpretation cannot account for this. Perhaps, the mean should instead be thought of as an idea similar to that of the theory of eudaimonia (see part 3.1). There it was concluded that it is the theory as such that is self-sufficient and complete. Just like one could envision ‘a Happy Zone’ the mean could be thought of as ‘a mean zone’.

3.3 Aristotle and Justice

Aristotle recognizes two types of justice, both of which are character related, and he calls them general justice and particular justice. This division is in line with his usual method in the sense that it reflects both the general view held at the time (among his peers at least) as well as what had been said on the topic by Socrates and Plato before him. The former type is universal justice which coincides with the whole of ethical virtue, justice in this broad sense supervenes on all the virtues. The latter type is justice in the narrow sense, i.e. virtues expressed in particular ways which are connected to various parts of the basic structure of society and its institutions.

3.3.1 Justice as a virtue in Plato and in Aristotle

In his work Plato listed four key virtues – prudence, courage, temperance and justice – together these are said to form the base of the good society. This quartet is often referred to as ‘cardinal virtues’, but that term probably owes more to St. Ambrose of Milan (AD 340-397) than to Plato himself. In “The Republic” Plato elaborates on the role of these four virtues. Prudence (or wisdom as it is sometimes called) was the virtue of the ruling class whose task it was to organize society in the best of ways. Courage was the virtue of the military, the Auxiliaries, who would defend the state and conquer any threat from outside. Temperance, on the other hand, attached to all groups. This was the virtue of everyone in society, even the workers as it would make them content going about their often dull and repetitive chores instead of aspiring for more or dreaming of another life. Very broadly understood these three virtues would correspond to Plato’s tripartite view of the human soul; reason (logos), spiritedness or vigor and desire. Both Plato and Aristotle understood temperance as the proper balance between desire and reason in your soul. The task of the fourth and final virtue justice was to arrange the other virtues, to make sure that everything ran as smoothly as possible both in society and in our souls. Although Plato would not have labeled it as such it might be helpful to think of justice as a meta-excellence in the sense that it is works as an organizer of the other virtues. That said justice is not considered as more important or finer than the other three on this account.

It is worth noting that Plato held that for any virtue to be wholly good it must contain a comprehensive element, in other words that it must be equivalent to the whole of virtue. On this view to be excellent would truly mean to have all four virtues. Indeed, both Plato and Socrates argued that the particular virtues should be so broadly understood that they all could be said to

75 Perhaps it could be said that on this view justice and moderation are two sides of the same coin.
be various forms of knowledge. Aristotle, on the other hand, writes that each virtue has its restricted domain within which it regulates the good, or appropriate, behavior. Courage is primarily for the battle-field, generosity is primarily for dealing with money and so forth. That said, most of the virtues of course come into our lives on many levels; I can be generous with my time, my emotions and my knowledge. I need courage in my civic life in the city state e.g. I must show my true colours and take a stand for my view even though I might be humiliated and so on. Aristotle also explains that all virtues contribute to the good functioning of a person in their own particular way and in doing so they complement each other. On his account what helps us ‘see’ the right action in a situation is phronesis, it directs and harmonizes the different virtues so that they can form a coherent whole.

3.3.2 Unity of the virtues

That said, it appears that some virtues are entwined beyond separation but to what extent is a heavily contested issue which cannot possibly be accounted for in any detail in this introduction. Very briefly the ‘unity of the virtues debate’ can be described as involving two quite different understandings of what it means to be a virtuous person. The first group holds that to be virtuous means having all the virtues, this would naturally be very difficult and it might well be the case that there are no virtuous people at all. This camp emphasizes the fact that if this was not what Aristotle thought then it is remarkable that he did not spell it out in a clear-cut and unambiguous way. The opposition argues that to qualify as happy it is good enough to have several virtues and to be well on the way to acquiring the others. In doing this they appeal to Aristotle’s method of creating paradigm cases, common sense morality and e.g. Book 1.9. On the same note, it is sometimes said that only the wealthy and the privileged can acquire the virtues of magnificence and greatness of soul as these would be aristocratic virtues. If that is true that seems to have implications for the unity of the virtues idea. This position, however, is rejected by scholars like Michael Pakaluk and Roger Crisp. Although one would have to have a certain economic standard to throw lavish parties that is not to say that one would have to be affluent to manage it.

3.3.3 To kalon

Moral actions are either to kalon, meaning fine or noble and thus admirable, or aishron, meaning disgraceful and shameful. For Aristotle beauty held a very special place, the virtuous act is to kalon.

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76 For a discussion on this see part 1 of this introduction.
77 For an interesting discussion see Crisp R., Aristotle on Greatness of Soul, in Kraut R. Blackwell Companion to the Nicomachean Ethics, Blackwell, 2006.
and that is why the desire part in our souls is drawn to it (given of course that we are virtuous). The Greeks thought that men and animals alike are attracted by beauty – we admire it, think it fine and noble and being close to it brings out the best in us. Taking the cue from Plato Aristotle claimed that in being *to kalon* the virtuous action is also reasonable and rational. Rather than being a synonym for the virtuous action *to kalon* is a property of it – it is fine because it is rational and it is rational because it is fine as the two cannot be separated by the virtuous agent. As virtuous people we are sensitive to the *to kalon* action; not only do we recognize fineness when we see it but we also choose it.

For all his talk of beauty Aristotle has been accused of not developing a strict, and satisfactory, principle explaining why we prefer the *to kalon* to everything else. According to, e.g. Pakaluk, he offers no real theory of rational preference.\(^78\) I believe this critique to be a bit unfair. Surely Aristotle’s view of rational preference is the combination of (a) the function argument, (b) the assumption that any rational human being wants a fulfilled and happy life and (c) the discussion of the individual virtue.\(^79\) In doing so he argues, of course, that if a person were to go for this package her life would be infinitely better than had she chosen any competing package.

Aristotle says that our likes and dislikes indicate whether or not we have acquired the virtues to the full extent. Our true preferences will reveal us because the good person takes pleasure only in doing the fine. On occasion this position might seem counter-intuitive, it would appear for example that Aristotle commits himself to views such as ‘it is pleasurable to be hacked to pieces on the battle-field’. But what he reasonably can be read as saying is rather that although virtues such as courage might bring great physical pain, doing the right thing means achieving one’s goals and is thus still pleasurable. Moreover, staying with the war metaphor, nothing can make up for running from the battle-field abandoning one’s friends and fellow citizens. Failing to do the virtuous thing on this occasion will ruin your life – it will simply not be a life worth living any longer. After such a massive slip-up there would be no returning to the Happy Zone for that agent. As Pakaluk explains “Aristotle is committed to a theory of ‘action’ that enables him to distinguish between the kind of action an agent performs from what happens to him when performing an action of that kind”.\(^80\) Let us imagine the following situation; Professor A, an accomplished bio-chemist and explosives expert, has been called in to defuse a bomb filled with lethal gas. The criminal gang who have rigged the bomb have taken over the local supermarket.

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\(^{79}\) What matters here is the actual having of a good life.

where they now hold a large number of terrified shoppers hostage, all of whom they are now threatening to kill. Professor A knows that the odds are very high that she will be severely wounded, most probably killed, in trying to do this. Yet she goes ahead - although setting off the bomb might prove to be a quite physically painful experience she knowingly and willingly chooses that action. It is not that she is tired of life, that she underestimates the gravity of the situation or feels forced to do it etc. Risking her life like that, in these particular circumstances, is *eudaimonia* for her.

### 3.3.4 Justice in the NE

As previously mentioned Aristotle divided the virtues into two overarching groups; the character related (or particular) virtues and the thinking related (or intellectual) virtues. Contrary to many competing theories of justice, e.g. Mills’ and Rawls’, Aristotle was keen to show that justice belonged in the former group, i.e. that it is a particular and thus character related virtue. Just like all the other virtues described by Aristotle justice issue in action. The act itself can of course be just or unjust “… we see everyone using ‘justice’ to mean the sort of disposition that makes people such as to do just things, i.e. which makes them act justly and wish for what is just; and similarly with injustice too – it is what makes people act unjustly and wish for what is unjust” /NE1129a33-11/.

At the end of Book 5.5 Aristotle offers the following definition. “Justice is a mean, not as the other virtues are, but because it is about an intermediate condition, whereas injustice is about the extremes. Justice is the virtue in accord with which the just person is said to do what is just in accord with his decision, distributing good things and bad, both between himself and others and between others. He does not award too much of what is choice worthy to himself and too little to his neighbour (and the reverse with what is harmful), but awards what is proportionally equal; and he does the same in distributing between others”. /NE1134a1-a7/. But how did he arrive at this? Aristotle’s account is based on the following five key components of justice: “(1) a distinct state of character; (2) involving deliberate purpose or choice; (3) dealing with distributable goods; (4) concerned with two sorts of distribution; (5) which distributions, when just, are marked by equality”. The first two are in no way unique to justice, they are shared with all the virtues of character, and thus the discussion below will focus on the remaining three.

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81 Book 3.6-4.9 and Book 10 of the NE.
3.3.5 General justice

General justice is justice in the broadest sense. It is a constituent of all the virtues helping the agent to act in an overall lawful way. It influences all the other virtues and without this element it is impossible to have any character virtue to the full extent. General justice perfects the other virtues by adding the aspect of the other people concerned by the action thus prompting us to take their interests into consideration (see e.g. NE1130a1-6). It cannot be defined as a single state of character and thus it cannot be a separate virtue, it is all the other virtues at the same time - the embodiment of the whole set. Aristotle writes that justice in this broad or general sense is ‘complete or mature virtue as exercised towards others’. It then follows that when we meet a just person we know that she is also without exception a virtuous person. The justice that we recognize in her is just the tip of her ice-berg of inner goodness and because it is so justice is often referred to as the finest and most superior of virtues. “…and the proverb says, ‘And in justice all virtue is summed up’. Moreover, justice is complete virtue to the highest degree because it is the complete exercise of complete virtue’. It is then tempting to conclude that as the having of general justice expresses itself in every action the term general justice is really just another way of saying ‘the having of all the virtues at the same time’. But is that really the case? That seems to presuppose that we cannot have the complete virtue of general justice unless we have all the other virtues, nor can we possess the virtues (to the full extent) without having the necessary component that is general justice. Clearly such a conclusion is not particularly palatable for those of us who read Aristotle as saying that the happy life is a possibility for many rather than a few (or indeed nobody). Rather, re-connecting to my ideas on virtue as a possibility for many, I would favour a reading where an agent can be said to have “enough” virtue to be generally just and thus able to lead a happy life.

Another, perhaps more pressing, problem with general justice (when described like this) is that it cannot be placed neatly on the continuum. It has but one corresponding vice, namely injustice, and thus it does not fit into the Aristotelian model particularly well.

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83 E.g. every virtue has an element of general justice in it because without equity the agent cannot display sufficient situation sensitivity.
84 I believe, contrary to Pakaluk, that ‘others’ should be understood as everyone else around you and not only strangers but also members of your own household for example (for his view see Pakaluk M. (2005). Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics. Cambridge University Press, pp. 188-189).
85 See e.g. the ‘happy zone’ argument in section 3.1.11 of this introduction.
3.3.6 Particular justice

Particular, or narrow, justice is a restricted type of good action, mainly concerned with distributive justice (see /NE1130a14-b8/). A tentative definition might be “a state of character by which someone brings about equality in his dealing with others”.\(^86\)

The distinguishing mark of the particular justice is to do with unjust gain. In the NE we find an example intended to illustrate this. It involves two adulterous men; A is doing it for the money and B for lust. According to Aristotle it follows that A is unjust but B is self-indulgent. This type of justice is more like the other virtues of character in the sense that it has its own domain and Aristotle insists that it works on the continuum model, a claim which has been called into question by many philosophers. Aristotle writes that particular justice is about achieving the intermediate disposition in a similar but not exactly in the same way as with the other excellences /NE11334a1-a7/. It differs in two ways, firstly because “…the extremes are achieved not by distinct contrary defects of excess and deficiency, but simply by injustice, which is simultaneously excessive and deficient to different participants in a single appointment”.\(^87\) Secondly because contrary to the other excellences “… the intermediate achieved and the extremes avoided by justice are (in Ar.’s presentation) necessarily quantative…”\(^88\).

3.3.7 Particular justice and the doctrine of the mean

The corresponding vice here is graspingness or pleonexia which, perhaps not always obviously so, is said to be different from other vices, such as self-indulgence for example. It has to do with what Aristotle refers to as ‘divisible’ /NE1130b31/ or ‘unqualified goods’ /NE1129b6/ like honour, money and security. What one might be eager to grasp are goods that are fought over /NE1168b18-b24/ these are the objects of desire.

Aristotle wanted to show the reader that although problematic, if nothing else with regards to his own model, a division between two types is necessary as there are two categories of injustice. One where we explain wrongdoing by pointing to a vice e.g. the person who cheats on their partner is self-indulgent, the person who runs from the battle is a coward and so forth. But then there are other cases where the cause of the wrongdoing was the search for unfair gain.


Aristotle explains “It is evident, then, that there is another type of injustice, special injustice, apart from injustice as a whole, and that it is synonymous with injustice as a whole, since the definition is in the same genus. For both have their area of competence in relation to another, but special injustice is concerned with honour or wealth or safety (or whatever single name will include all these), and aims at the pleasure that results from making a profit, whereas the concern of injustice as a whole is whatever concerns the excellent person” /NE1130a34-1130b6/. If that is so then one might be tempted to believe that the vice at the other end would be to claim too little for one self, not to recognize and be prepared to claim ones share. At this point it, arguably, becomes very clear that the obstacles cannot be overcome – the fact of the matter is that particular justice only has one corresponding vice namely that of injustice. By its very definition injustice with regards to limited goods includes both allocating too much to some and too little to others. It is a zero-sum game and the distribution is bound to be at someone’s expense.

Further to that point Aristotle tells the reader in Book 5.11 that although it is possible to receive unjust treatment voluntarily we cannot be unjust to ourselves /NE1138a4-29/. So this is not what Aristotle intends – what he talks of is “unjust disproportion”, the giving of too much or too little to others. Recall that the vice is pleonexia – the disrespect for a just distribution of goods which results in e.g. the taking of more than one’s fair share, thinking that one has the right to get something for nothing or unfair gain. This distributional model, however, is one of proportional equality, i.e. it is not about a 50/50 split. The fair share is to be proportionate with respect to both agents (their needs and their contributions). In Book 5.5 Aristotle writes that the equal distribution of these divisible goods can be secured in three ways. Firstly through distributive justice, taking goods from a common stock and handing them out to individuals, secondly through commutative justice, free exchange of goods between people on a market, and thirdly through corrective justice, the correction of inequalities caused by injustice e.g. theft.

It is worth mentioning that aside from the standard view presented above there is another position, defended by Broadie for example. She holds that Aristotle offers two different, partly incompatible, versions of particular justice in Book 5. “It is reasonable to infer that the two

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89 I return to this issue in section 3.8 of this introduction where I discuss the possibility of being kind and generous to one-self.


approaches to narrow or particular justice were devised of independently and were not entirely integrated.”

The two stories supposedly forced together in the text are:

- Particular justice is the opposite of pleonexia or graspingness, the focus appears to be one’s own good.
- Particular justice is the opposite of bias / partiality especially with reference to appointments, here on the other hand the gain could be that of someone else.

On this definition which seeks to show what injustice does, particular justice is manifested in two kinds of operations; the distribution of goods and burdens and the compensation for injuries.

3.3.8 Williams’ critique

One of Aristotle’s harshest critics with regards this part of the definition of justice was Bernard Williams. In essence his attack was the following; it seems fairly implausible that there is only one cause for people behaving unjustly, in fact there could be lots of causes – not just pleonexia which here is interpreted in the narrow sense to make matters even worse. Quite reasonably Williams rejects the idea that only acts for unjust gain belong in the particular justice category.

There are many unjust acts and they could just as well be the products of fear, jealousy or desire for revenge etc. The person running from the battle field is not only a coward (i.e. unjust in the general sense in that he does not have all the virtues or equity), he is also unjust in the particular sense – he cheats and thus secures an unfair advantage for himself.

In his discussion Williams sketches a ‘distributive case’. The different aspects, all of which can be just or unjust, to take into consideration are; the distributor, the method and the outcome. Now, whereas Aristotle’s standard example usually focuses on the just outcome, i.e. each party get their fair share and the just method is the one that brings about that result, Williams wanted to study the distributor. He wanted to analyze what the connection to the fair or just person looks like. This agent will always resist unjust distributions and to excel here she needs all the other virtues as they will help her resisting securing advantages for herself it is said. Then Williams’ moves on

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95 It is, unfortunately one might think, quite clear that Aristotle did not intend unjust gain plus some other vice but simply unjust gain.
to the disposition of the unjust person, the one who distributes unfairly. He concludes that she can either (a) completely lack fairness or (b) have some other motives that the fair person does not have at all e.g. laziness or frivolity (it is dull to be fair). At any rate it seems to be plenty of motives for the unjust, not only personal gain. In Williams’ opinion the cause of Aristotle’s unfortunate insistence on connecting injustice solely with *pleonexia* is not difficult to explain. “The mistake can, moreover, be fairly easily diagnosed at the systematic level: the vice of adikia has been over-assimilated to the other vices of character, so that Aristotle seeks a characteristic motive to go with it, whereas it must be basic to this vice, unlike others, that it does not import a special motive, but rather lack of one.”

3.3.9 The ‘real’ problem with Book 5

Aristotle’s account of justice is generally considered one of the least successful and convincing parts of the NE. As a reader one might suspect that the section on justice was written more hurriedly than the rest and that it did not receive quite the amount of editing and rewriting it might have required. Arguably Aristotle, anticipating the problems, seeks to make a difference between the self-regarding and the other-regarding virtues but this lands him in more trouble. Justice no longer fits the doctrine of the mean and forcing it in there would require him to accept many other problematic things. Naturally Aristotle is aware of at least some of the problems he is getting into at this point. No doubt he is both concerned and self-conscious which is causing him to, in the words of G.E.M Anscombe, start rambling.

3.3.10 To have equity

The just person knows how to interpret the spirit of the law and avoids both making mistakes and becoming overly rigid by following it by the letter. She can adapt to the circumstances without losing sight of what is truly just in a situation. This mature incorporation of justice means that she has the ‘equity’ – the capacity or the decency – to fill in gaps in the law for example. Hence, she would be able to determine the just action and thus deal with situations for which no law has (yet) been written. As with the other virtues she has the ability to reason as well as a deep understanding for what it really means to be just and taken together those qualities enables her to read even very complicated situations right. In a way having general justice is little more than an analogy of having *phronesis*.

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3.3.11 Natural law and virtue ethics

At the very heart of the NE lies a distinct element of natural law and the concept of equity is one of the appeals to it. The just person is supposed to understand that there are constraints and principles that are in a sense just prior to the current law. As pointed out in Book 5.9 “…what is legally just is different from what is primarily just.” /NE1136b37/. So although the just positive legal rights ought to be rooted in natural rights they are, in their current formulation or expression, no more than social constructions. This has, however, little impact on their validity – the point is that the just agent as described in the NE would follow natural law if there were to come to a conflict between the two.

Perhaps surprisingly Aristotle says little about the link between his account of natural law and his views on human nature. Arguably he would have agreed with some of the later ideas that have been put forward with regards to such a connection, e.g. the universe is made up in such a way that the fabric of the world includes both a natural law and a common human nature. Human happiness consists in part in obeying natural law - since it is so intimately connected with our nature – and just institutions in part derive their legitimacy as vehicles to forward happiness.

3.4 The Character Virtues

Aristotle’s term ‘the excellencies of the soul’ is intended to cover both the virtues of character and the virtues of intellect. This section focuses on the following 11 character virtues, thus leaving the virtues of justice and philia to be discussed elsewhere in this introduction.

- Courage (andreia),
- Temperance (sophrosune),
- Generosity (eleutheriotes),
- Magnificence (megaloprepeia),

99 For a debate on natural law as a proper foundation for human justice see e.g. Plato’s Republic or Aristotle’s Politics.
100 I would like to thank Roger Crisp for pointing this out to me.
101 Through out this part I have used Roger Crisp’s translation of the individual virtues (with the exception of direct quotes). Aristotle (2000). The Nicomachean Ethics, (translated and edited by Roger Crisp), Cambridge University Press.
102 See e.g. part 3.5 of this introduction.
103 Not all virtues and vices have a name and are simply referred to as ‘a nameless excellence’ having to do with so-and-so.
• Greatness of soul (megalopsuchia),
• A nameless excellence which has to do with small honors
• Even temper (praotes)
• The three social or conversational, excellences:
  • the first is nameless but has to do with friendliness,
  • the second is also nameless has to do with truthfulness
  • the third is wit (eutrapelia).

As explained in part 3.3 of this introduction all these virtues are arranged in sets of three where the virtue is the mean between two vices. Examples of such ethical triads would be cowardice, courage and rashness or wastefulness, generosity and avariciousness. As discussed previously, it is an open question how well the virtues fit the triads - in some cases there seem to be more than two vices (e.g. temper) and in other cases less (e.g. justice). It is worthwhile to remember that Aristotle did not intend this list to be a complete and final document, these are practical examples intended to clarify his ideas. Further to that point they are paradigm cases made deliberately unambiguous and as such they are extreme. It is unlikely that Aristotle would have insisted that those who did not display virtue to this complete extent in fact had none of it.

3.4.1 To function well

The main part of the analysis of the virtues take place in Book 2.7, but Aristotle offers a preliminary analysis already in Book 1.13. In the latter book a virtue is described as “what it is about a thing which makes it such that it performs its function well”.\textsuperscript{104} I have constructed the following example, involving my wrist watch, to show what I take this statement to mean.

The function of my wrist watch (aesthetics aside) is to tell the time and if it does that well, i.e. exactly, reliably and so on it has the virtues of a wrist watch. If we contrast this with a human being the function would be to exercise rationality and to do so well, i.e. to exercise the virtues. Looking at the different parts of the watch pondering how they all directly or indirectly contribute to making this watch a good watch the virtues can be dismantled further. We will notice that it has parts which are good in the sense that they contribute to the overall goodness of the watch without any qualification, e.g. the cog-wheel, the dial and the hands. They all help in promoting what might be called the constituent of the watch, namely the correct telling of the time on a particular occasion. The corresponding constituent for a human being would then be to

exercise the virtues on a particular occasion. But it also has parts, which although highly important, contributes only indirectly and thus can be said to be good only with qualification, e.g. the wristband of my watch. One might indeed think that the reliability of my wristband is essential to the overall function of my (wrist) watch but when we take a closer look we realize that in fact it is only contributing indirectly to the actual virtue of the watch. This would then be the external goods of the watch, the equivalent of friends or money to a human being.\textsuperscript{105}

3.4.2 The human soul and its parts
Aristotle believed that the human soul and its parts could be analyzed in a similar way to the watch above. Humans also have a primary function namely our \textit{ergon}. Through this method we can gain knowledge both about the connection between the soul and the virtues and about how the virtues contribute to the overall good and enables man to be happy.\textsuperscript{106}

According to Aristotle the human soul consists of three parts, two non-rational parts and one which possesses reason. In turn they are called; the plant-like part, the desire part and the reason / thinking part.\textsuperscript{107} The plant-like or nutritive part of the soul, deals with matters such as nourishment and growth and has thus no bearing on our moral goodness /NE1102a34-1102b13/. The second part is desire, the place where the character virtues are found. Aristotle describes the interaction between desire and reason as the following “For while the plantlike [part] shares in reason not at all, the [part] with appetites and general desires shares in reason in a way, insofar as it both listens to reason and obeys it. This is the way in which we are said to ‘listen to reason’ from father or friends, as opposed to the way in which [we ‘give the reason’ in mathematics”. /NE1102b30-34/. So although not having reason of its own the desire part is perfectly capable of listening to reason and let itself be governed by it. When that happens desire come to express itself in an array of practical actions e.g. courage, generosity and friendliness. The third part - reason - is key to our moral ability and our quest for happiness. This is the part of the soul which is in charge of thinking and it is also the locus of the five intellectual virtues; \textit{episteme, Sophia, nous, phronesis} and \textit{techne}.\textsuperscript{108}

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item[105] I would like to thank Roger Crisp for helping me to construct this example.
\item[106] See part 1 of this introduction (about the Function Argument and the human \textit{ergon}).
\item[107] Reason is then sub-divided into \textit{logistikon} and \textit{epistemikon}, see part 3.6 of this introduction.
\item[108] See part 3.6 of this introduction for a description.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
3.4.3 Learning how to be good

The way to acquire the character related virtues is though habitually behaving in certain ways. At the early stages it is very similar to a skill which the student seeks to perfect but as she develops and matures as a moral agent all the mechanical connotations fall away and it becomes like a second nature. Or, indeed, a first and only nature. The agent internalises the virtues and becomes the type of person who only takes pleasure in doing the fine and noble, which is the ultimate proof that desire is ruled by reason in their souls. The overarching purpose of a good upbringing and the habituation process is to get the agent to understand the world objectively. In other words, to make sure that their ‘desire’ (i.e. the subjective response) is in line with their ‘reason’ and that it stays that way.\textsuperscript{109} This is where the moral expert, the merely continent agent goes wrong (see section 3.2.4). Such a person is guided by reason but lacks the \textit{proper} desire. She knows what the virtuous act is and in fact she frequently chooses it. But whereas the desire in the virtuous person listens to reason and then willingly and with pleasure does its bidding that is not the experience of the continent person. This agent desires things that are not virtuous and thus has to force herself to do what she rationally knows to be the right thing.\textsuperscript{110} Although on one level the virtuous life might involve great sacrifice, it should not be hard in this sense to be virtuous.\textsuperscript{111}

In Book 2.2-2.4 Aristotle elaborates on the various ways in which we can learn the character virtues. We ought to model ourselves on the virtuous, initially we might just imitate them but little by little, given that we do it seriously, deliberately, consciously etc., we start acquiring the virtues. But, as pointed out at /NE1105a17-b18/, there seems to be something odd about the idea that the agent can become virtuous by doing the right thing even if they were not very good to begin with. Aristotle replied by emphasizing that it is \textit{the way} in which we do it that matters. It is about acquiring the right internal dispositions because the virtues always issue in action. You cannot be secretly good yet strategically mean! As Pakaluk writes “… the phrase “acting virtuously” has two senses: it can mean either (i) performing the sort of action that someone who is virtuous would perform, or (ii) performing that sort of action, but \textit{as a virtuous person would do it}.

\textsuperscript{110} For a discussion on self-control and why it is a vice see section 3.4.8.2 of this introduction.
\textsuperscript{111} Two comments on the element of self-sacrifice in virtue. Aristotle argues that the virtuous act always is the most pleasurable one, this is clearly counter-intuitive and at least at first on-look problematic, for a discussion see part 7. It is also questionable if there really is genuine self-sacrifice in the NE, for a discussion on egoism and the right to secure the greatest good for oneself see page.
And Aristotle’s claim is that, by performing actions of the former sort, we become such that we perform actions of the latter sort.”

The person who learns the virtues progress step by step; the first level is that she realizes what the right thing to do in a certain situation is. The second level is to choose the act which the virtuous person would. The third, and final, level is when she performs the deliberation, the choosing and the action as a virtuous agent would have. At last there is no conflict between desire and reason in the soul of the agent and she achieves inner harmony and happiness. It follows that for an agent to be virtuous it is not enough to do the right thing, she must also meet certain other criteria. She must do it knowingly, she must decide to do it, she must recognize that the action is an end in itself and finally she must act from “a firm and unchanging disposition”.

3.4.5 Choosing between the virtues

We know that an agent has acquired a virtue when she habitually acts like a person of virtue would. When she carries out the action willingly and without seeking any reward as the pleasure she derives come from the act itself and not from some external treat or praise. As Roger Crisp explains “Much modern virtue ethics can be seen as continuing the Aristotelian view of nobility as a value. Some virtue ethicists are welfarists, following Hume (on one reading of him) rather than Aristotle and preferring to see the virtues as mere instruments for the promotion of what is really good in itself – well-being. But those within the Aristotelian tradition will contend that virtuous action has some value in itself, and we might describe that value as ‘nobility’.”

The general idea is that the agent would not have preferred any alternative action - nothing else would have been more satisfying or more to their liking. But could not several actions be right on some occasions, could this agent not be neutral between two virtues? Let us imagine a situation where generosity and friendship would prompt me to act in the same way. Can I then ‘choose’ my driving force, is it up to me to decide whether I should be kind or generous? Aristotle would presumably accept this – if it is the case that two or several virtues would yield the same action the virtuous agent is free to choose as she sees fit. He would no doubt add, however, that the

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113 Note that this is not incompatible with it also being a means to the most teleios end.
115 Note that I am not concerned with the idea of conflicting virtues (where different virtues would prompt us to act in very different ways) nor with moral dilemmas (where no action is right).
A virtuous agent would never be in this situation. To individuate the virtues and test them one by one against the situation, like a carpenter might dig through his tool-box, would be the decision-making process of the trainee. To deliberate what every virtue would require of me and then decide, even if I eventually made the right decision and it was willingly and with pleasure and so forth, would be a stage in the learning process. For the morally mature agent, on the other hand, deliberation and decision-making is a holistic process where all the relevant virtues are involved automatically because that is the extent to which I have internalized the virtues.

3.4.6 Conflicting virtues

It is sometimes suggested that the different virtues can give conflicting advice thus leaving the agent stranded in her moment of need. Irwin, Hursthouse and others have argued against this. Irwin writes that because the virtues require *phronesis* the virtuous agent will never be stuck in a situation of conflicting advice.\(^\text{116}\)

I read him as saying roughly that as *phronesis* helps the agent to read the situation right it seems to be that case that conflicting advice it is either the result of her having misread the situation or because she does not fully understand what the virtue asks of her.\(^\text{117}\) Let us construct a Hursthousean example to better discuss this. On finding out that Nurse C’s wife is having an affair how should I, as a virtuous agent, act? To be honest seems to imply that I should tell Nurse C although I do not know any details, or indeed if it is even a proper affair. To be kind, on the other hand, might lead me to stay quiet and not force Nurse C into a situation where stands must be taken. The virtues conflict and the holistic approach outlined above does not really seem to work for situations like these. I take it, however, that both Hursthouse and Irwin would reply that the reason why I think there is a conflict is because I do not understand what it means to be kind in this type of situation. To be kind here would mean to be honest with my friend, to tell Nurse C what I saw and then leave it to him to deal with the information as he sees fit. Moreover, I would see this if I were a more mature moral agent.\(^\text{118}\) I shall return to this topic in part 3.5 where I discuss the possibility of moral dilemmas for the virtuous agent. See section 3.5.15 and section 3.5.16.\(^\text{119}\)


\(^{117}\) For more on *phronesis* see part 5 of this introduction.

\(^{118}\) Naturally I do not mean this as in abandoning her in her hour of need but rather that I, as a good friend, would respect her decision what ever that might be.

3.4.7 The character virtues

Courage

The ethical triad
Cowardice Courage Nameless (rashness)

Courage is generally considered to be a rather clear-cut case of a character related virtue as Aristotle described them and one might suspect that this is contributing to his choice to cover it first. Just like all the other virtues courage plays an important social role. The courageous person values his life highly and is neither a coward nor prone to taking foolish risks. Courage should be understood as feeling the right amount of fear, at the right time, for the right reasons and so forth. It is said to lie in the mean between cowardice and rashness and the paradigm case is on the battlefield.

It has been said that Aristotle in fact might have held that that the bravest thing is never to feel fear at all and that the sensation of fear is a reliable indication of vice in these situations. By and large such a reading seems implausible. Indeed, it could be argued that it can be highly appropriate to feel fear as it shows that one realizes the gravity of the situation and understands ones own mortality. That the fear I feel will not escalate into panic and I can stay calm and level headed in the midst of danger. My feelings will not take control of me and suddenly prompt me to run from the battle. In fact the contrary is true – because I am courageous I am happy to have this opportunity to defend my country and I want to do just that even though it is likely to be my end. My reasonable fear will work to my advantage as the adrenalin will make me more focused without taking over my capacity for rational decision making.

For all the emphasis on the warrior examples I do not think that Aristotle should be read as saying that true courage can only be displayed on the battle field when engaged in mortal combat. We can very well imagine everyday scenarios where doing the right thing would require a quite high amount of courage. Let us consider the following example; I am meeting Philosopher E after work. As she arrives rather late I demand an explanation for her tardiness. It turns out that

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120 Irwin’s translation of andreia is bravery but in this introduction I have chosen to use the word courage instead (as does e.g. Roger Crisp as well as Broadie & Rowe) to avoid getting stuck in the battle metaphors.


122 I have previously stated that the virtues are dispositions for actions, not for feelings, consequently what I mean here is "a feeling that will issue in the right action".
as she was waiting for the bus she had heard raised voices and a woman’s muffled scream. Peeking around the corner she saw a very large, very angry man violently shaking a crying woman. The man was very aggressive, the street dark and empty and Philosopher E is a rather slight woman. Yet she leaped forward scolding and shouting and managed to rescue the woman.

As Pakaluk points out, the battle metaphor is one of the strongest we have we use it all the time for any situation that calls for bravery. Further to this point, the life in the city state was arranged such that the most immediate threats to one’s life had been removed. Consequently the big remaining worry was conflicts with other states, so again it was natural to use the battle metaphor. In light of this there is nothing odd about Aristotle favouring the war scenario when he speaks of courage and should not lead the reader to the conclusion that it is the only situation where true courage can be displayed.

In Book 3.8 Aristotle talks of five different types of false, or spurious, courage. Here I shall only discuss bravery of citizens, or spurious courage, which Aristotle believed to be the trickiest form as it “...looks the most like bravery.”/NE1116a18/. He talks of people who do brave things out of fear of dishonour and shame — their primary concern is what others might think rather than doing the fine. In this group we also find those who pretend to be courageous while knowing fully well they are perfectly safe. With the Athenian city-soldier foremost on his mind Aristotle wrote “for there seem to be many groundless alarms in war, and the professionals are the most familiar with these. Hence they appear brave, since others do not know that the alarms are groundless.”/NE1116b6-9/.

It is sometimes suggested that it is not possible to show true courage in the Aristotelian sense in a situation which one did not bring about oneself and where there is no hope of escape. That in order to be courageous there has to be both exist a possibility to escape and a way of warding off evil by standing one’s ground. I think it is unfortunate to interpret Aristotle as arguing that courage is not for facing a hopeless situation where there is no hope of victory (be that external or internal). It seems odd in light of the rest of his argument let alone the fact that it is on collision course with common sense. It is more plausible that he would recognize that the dying

124 See e.g. Broadie, p 24-25 where she refers to Book 3.8, 1116a30-b2 and 3.6, 1115b4 of the NE in: Aristotle (2002). *The Nicomachean Ethics*, (translation, introduction and commentary by S. Broadie and C. Rowe), Oxford University Press.
patient facing her death in a dignified and composed way is displaying courage, just in the same way as a prisoner on death-row can.\textsuperscript{125}

Pears argues that Aristotle’s account of courage is muddled as he tries to squeeze in too many parameters. Instead there should be two scales; one that deals with fear (i.e. courage and cowardice) and another which is more about being risk prone or risk averse. Further more Pears asks where confidence can fit in. According to Pears courage is a matter of feeling and controlling fear. I believe that this is a valid point, yet I would like to explore a slightly different reading. Could we not also understand Aristotle as saying that the reason why the brave do not panic is not because they have stronger self-control but because they have the right combination of \textit{nous}, \textit{episteme} and \textit{phronesis}. As a result they can see a danger for what it is, they do not suffer phobias for example, and they have their priorities straight.

Let us contemplate the following case; according to Viking mythology the best way to secure a good seat at dinner table in Valhalla, and partake in the never ending pork and beer feast, was to die in battle. If one is convinced that the only way to the happy and fulfilled life is through e.g. battle and pain one might be very afraid yet not in the panicky sense or in the sense that one would have to muster up all the self-control one could.\textsuperscript{126} It does not strike me as improbable that one might feel a certain peace in this situation. The violent death becomes ‘the good’, and desirable death. Although there will no doubt be severe physical pain there will be no spiritual pain which perhaps serves to subdue the fear of death. One’s disposition would be such that one had already accepted that this is the way it has to be, one would be willing to do this not because one particularly wanted to die but because this is the kind of person one is. Given the values and believes this agent subscribes to he does this voluntarily and with pleasure, the fact that if he had had his choice this scenario would have turned up in 20 years time does not affect his willingness to die given that things are the way they are. Maybe, however, it is unrealistic to believe that one’s desire can be so in line with one’s reason that there is not even an inkling of an impulse to run when one sees the fearsome warriors of the enemy storm forward? Then again I am wondering whether such self-control would be mere impulse control and surely the odd impulse would be allowed if as soon as I realized that I had felt this I could calm down and not have the wish anymore.


\textsuperscript{126}Either because it is the way to a better place as for the Vikings, or because there is really no alternative as might have been the case for the Greeks.
Aristotle frequently says that the virtuous agent does what he does willingly and with pleasure. Feelings of like and dislike reveal important facts about the moral status agent, “we must take someone’s pleasure or pain following on his action to be a sign of his state.” /NE1104b5-6/.

Undeniably many virtuous actions would indeed be enjoyable yet it is also clear that there can be situations such that the agent definitely would not experience any pleasure. Returning to the warrior in the example above a rather pleasureless scenario might be getting hacked to pieces by a berserk enemy. So how are we to understand Aristotle here? As Pakaluk points out Aristotle in fact recognizes that courage might well involve pain but that “insofar as someone does what is courageous in spite of the pain, he achieves his goal, and this is something he likes and enjoys. That he enjoys his action in this respect can be missed precisely because of the pain that surrounds it.”

Hence, as Aristotle argued that there are two types of pleasures, those of the body and those of the soul, it is possible for him to say that doing the fine and noble in fact is pleasurable even though it might involve great pain and suffering.

Even if one’s death is painful and even if one would ideally have wanted a few more good years the fact that one will now have a glorious death to crown one’s life is pleasurable. It could perhaps also be added that for the virtuous there are no alternatives at that stage, nothing could ever make up for fleeing.

Temperance

This is the opposite of courage in the sense that the former is about pain and this is about pleasure. Or, more to the point, about the desire for pleasure and why it should be controlled.

We need the virtue of temperance not to become insatiable and destructive both on a personal level and a societal one. It helps us to reject our sheer animality and re-affirm our status as humans. Note that temperance is about becoming the master of your weaknesses. Hence, in light of my strong preference for cheese staging a raclette and kirsch bonanza would be quite bad whereas the same amount of melted cheese consumed by someone else might not qualify as self-indulgent.

The temperate person is fully capable of enjoying the pleasures of consumption but not completely driven by desire. Desire does not take over and silences the voice of reason in the

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128 See Book 3 of the NE.
129 I return to this subject in part 6 Akrasia, see e.g. section 3.6.10 and in part 7 on Pleasure, see section 3.7.6 of this introduction.
130 Naturally, the agents I have in mind do not have the same taste as I do.
good agent. She is aware and in control of the lure of bodily pleasure and thus she knows to enjoy it at the right time, to the right extent, at the right time, with the right people, for the right reasons and so on. Temperance is not about denying oneself the good stuff but about not letting the desire for it rule one’s life. The concern is about enjoying pleasure in the wrong way just as much as it is about enjoying the wrong kind of pleasure. Hence, a very late, wine-drenched evening with friends need not be problematic at all per se, at any rate there would not be nothing objectively wrong about it. According to Aristotle there are many problems with self-indulgence and not all of them have to do with over-consumption. A related problem is that the only thing the agent cares about is the smell and the taste of the food – like an animal obsessed with its prey. In doing this we over-look the finer nuances and become insensitive to them. Instead we should be like wine-connoisseurs and appreciate the colour, texture, bouquet etc. equally much.

The vicious, lacking in temperance, are always yearning for pleasures and feel deprived when they cannot have them. Aristotle holds that self-control is just a confirmation that the agent is vicious.\footnote{For more on self-control and akratic behaviour see section 3.6.9 of this introduction.} For him both a sense of shame and self-control entails having inappropriate desires and consequently he found the moral saint far more praise-worthy than the moral hero. Here a sense of shame is an affection (a worry about getting a bad reputation) and not a proper disposition and thus a true sign of worthlessness in any adult. For youths who are still trainees, on the other hand, it might well be useful and they can benefit greatly as it stops them from realizing their worst ideas and helps to form their characters.\footnote{See e.g. Book 2.7 of the NE, especially 1108a31-23, 4.9, 1128b10-12 and 15-21.} Thus, the reformed alcoholic who still might feel the urge to drink every now and then but who never gives in is not admirable for Aristotle. This might seem counter intuitive to us because we often connect ‘how hard is it to do X’ to ‘how admirable it is to be good at X’.

As mentioned in the discussion on courage Aristotle talks of two types of pain, here the equivalent is two types of pleasure. Those that have to do with the body and those that have to do with the soul, examples of the latter would be love of honour or of learning.\footnote{See e.g. Book 3.10 of the NE, especially 1117b24-33/.} With regard to temperance Aristotle focuses on ‘the pleasures we share with the animals’, e.g. eating, drinking and sex, as he argues that such things are the domains of excess and deficiency. Then he goes on to make a further distinction; “Temperance, then, will be about bodily pleasures, but not even about all of these. For those who enjoyment in objects of sight, such as colors, shapes, a painting,
are called neither temperate nor intemperate, even though it would also seem possible to enjoy these either rightly or excessively or deficiently.” /NE1118a2-7/.

It is peculiar that Aristotle restricts temperance to brutish or animalistic pleasures, in particular in light of the last sentence in the above quote. Why would he not apply it to those who are fanatical about art or music? Let us imagine an example; on retiring from bioethics Dr. B has relocated to Paris and become an art-collector. She has a quite intense relationship with art such that she actually gets a physical high similar to that of a drug every time she sees the Mona Lisa. Not a day goes by without her skulking down to the Louvre for her daily Da Vinci fix and if push comes to shove she will forsake other commitments to have the time to sit there and gaze. This relationship hardly appears to be an example of someone who appreciates art ‘in the right way’ - where is the to kalon in an obsession? Examples like these do not succeed in meeting Aristotle’s notion of how one should maintain reason while enjoying the satisfaction of bodily appetites as Pakaluk put it.\(^\text{134}\) So why is this better, not even the same thing, as being, for example, a bulimic?

**Generosity**

The ethical triad  
Wastefulness  
Generosity  
Stinginess

This virtue has to do with the giving, taking and usage of financial assets (including money, services and property). As Aristotle writes it deals with “anything whose worth is measured by money.” /NE1119b26-27/. To qualify as generous it is acceptable to give a bit too much but it is never ok to take too much - it is far worse to be greedy than to be wasteful as the avaricious tend to go to greater lengths at getting what they want. The excellence lies not in the quantity that is given but in the disposition of the giver. One must only give in accordance with one’s assets, otherwise one is left without resources and thus unable to give to the deserving.

Generosity deals both with how we receive our money or assets - from what source, in what manner and so forth - and how we choose to spend it. Notably, however, Aristotle emphasizes that it is more important to give in the right way than it is to take in the right way, this is because he argues that for most people it is harder to part with property without regret than to take. “Using wealth seems to consist in spending and giving, whereas taking and keeping seems to be possessing rather than using. That is why it is more proper to the generous person to give to the

right people than to take from the right sources and not the wrong sources.” /NE1120a9-12/. Thus, giving is superior to receiving.

Further more, this view is linked to the idea that the receiver finds himself indebted to the giver which is not a good position to be in. “For it is more proper to virtue to do good than to receive good, and more proper to do fine actions than not to do shameful ones, and clearly [the right sort of] giving implies doing good and doing fine actions, while [the right sort of] taking implies receiving well or not doing something shameful.” /NE1120a13-16/. That said, it is important not to read Aristotle as saying that we have any obligation to give more than common decency calls for. Being generous has nothing to do with the supererogatory for him, and indeed how could there be room for such act with in his theory as that would imply that there would be finer acts than the virtuous?

The two extremes are the wasteful and the stingy. As the former spends both too much, and indiscriminately, and takes too little she is likely to end up bankrupt. The good news is that such a person might be cured. The latter, on the other hand, is worse off as their condition is incurable and the avaricious tend to go to greater lengths to satisfy their desire. Stinginess involves two factors; deficiency in giving and excess in taking both regarding the amount taken and the source where it comes from. It is explained that there are two types of avaricious people; the miser who takes the right way but obviously is far too tight-fisted and the scavenger for profit who might well be generous in one sense but yet guilty of taking money from any source he can lay his hand on /NE1121b21-31/.

A related aspect is the type of relationship the person has with her money. Presumably their attitude towards their assets and the way they take pleasure in them might be rather revealing. Let us think for a second about Donald Duck’s Uncle Scrooge – not only is he a miser of intergalactic proportions but it is the way in which he takes pleasure in his money that seems deeply troubling. He obviously fails to hit the mean.

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**Magnificence**

| The ethical triad | Vulgarity | Magnificence | Niggardliness |

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135 This is discussed further in the section on greatness of soul below.
136 Examples of wrong ways to earn money would be pimping, shylocking, dicing or being a petty-thief.
137 Note that there can be people such that they suffer both the opposing vices at the same time.
138 Note that the virtue of open-handedness also deals with the way the agent spend on herself.
This virtue has to do with the fact that in Athens rich families had a moral obligation to pay for e.g. battleships, plays and entertainment for foreign dignitaries.\textsuperscript{139} This was a way of contributing to society and the ‘when’ and ‘on whom’ aspects were regulated by civic or religious customs. So just like generosity it is about spending money but on a much grander scale, “it does not extend, as generosity does, to all the actions involving wealth, but only to those involving heavy expenses, and in them it exceeds generosity in its large scale.” /NE1122a20-22/. In the broadest sense magnificence can be said to be about good taste. The vice of niggardliness should be understood as spending too little or having poor taste whereas the other extreme would be impersonated by the agent who just takes it as an opportunity to flaunt their wealth in the face of others.

\textbf{Greatness of soul}

\begin{tabular}{l l l}
\textit{The ethical triad} & Vanity & Greatness of soul & Smallness of soul \\
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This is the excellence of the agent who rightly thinks herself worthy of great things /NE1123b2/. When reading this part of the NE Aristotle's audience would have thought of heroes such as Achilles or Ajax who could never tolerate an insult or coming in second. They were considered \textit{aristoi} which means "the true elite by whatever standard". \textsuperscript{140} If that is what it means to have greatness of soul then these people must be truly good - good without qualification. Aristotle writes “Since the magnanimous person is worthy of the greatest things, he is the best person.” /NE1123b26/. This is the ’crown’ of all virtues, “Magnanimitiy, then, would seem to be a sort of adornment of the virtues; for it makes them greater, and it does not arise without them.” /NE1124a1-2/. But, Aristotle continues “That is why it is difficult to be truly magnanimous, since it is not possible without being fine and good.” /NE1124a3-4/.\textsuperscript{141}

As mentioned in part 3.3 of this introduction, justice, like greatness of soul, is said to be implicated in the other virtues. There is an element in every individual virtue that cannot be understood, and thus not internalized, by an agent who lacks the excellences of greatness of soul and justice. But there is an important difference between the two in this respect; without a sense of justice you cannot be virtuous at all but if you lack greatness of soul that implies that you cannot have the virtues to the full extent. If greatness of soul is the icing on the cake, justice

\textsuperscript{139} Although it could also occasionally be about weddings and one-off parties.


\textsuperscript{141} “Truly” or perhaps “sincerely” can reasonably be understood as ‘to the full extent’, as explained elsewhere this arguably does not mean that Aristotle is committed to saying that we need to have all the virtues at the same time in order to be happy as we can lead a happy life without being fully virtuous.
would be the baking powder. Roger Crisp writes that we can think of the presence of greatness of soul in every virtue as a support for why it is desirable to aim for the mean. That it helps us to have a correct view of value - to 'distinguish great goods from small' and to find the worthwhile and proportionate.\textsuperscript{142}

Arguably Aristotle recognized that greatness of soul, just like justice, was not fully captured by the doctrine of the mean. Yet, as this was his preferred model he brushes these problems aside in the NE. The vices on either side have to do with the over- and the under-estimation of ones own qualities. As Broadie writes “The defects of excess and deficiency each exhibit a mismatch between self-estimated and actual desert”.\textsuperscript{143} A good example might be a person who believes that the fact that they are wealthy, or of noble birth, entails that they have greatness of soul. This virtue it is also connected to ambition, a positive quality according to Aristotle. The person ‘of proper ambition’ can be said to hit the mean in an acceptable way even though he is less excellent than a person who has greatness of soul.

The great-souled person is detached from more worldly matters such as wealth, power and nobility for she knows that these are not excellences. In particular it is greatness of soul that stands in between us and the temptation to give up when times are tough, this is the excellence that keeps us fighting. If one does not have this excellence it is easy to be morally corrupted by sudden fortune and in general attach to much value to external goods. The person who has greatness of soul only seeks honour when it advances the common good. She wants to be honoured and respected by other good people and for the right things.\textsuperscript{144} As Roger Crisp writes; “Greatness of soul was seen as closely related to generosity, and someone could be described as great souled who helps another in need (Dover, 1974, p.178). Indeed, in the first book of the Rhetoric, usually thought to be an early work, Aristotle describes greatness of soul as the virtue that disposes us to do good to others on a large scale (1366b17)”.\textsuperscript{145} Conversely, she will chose her fights in the sense that she will not risk her life for just any old thing – it has to be a worthwhile and noble cause. She would for example sacrifice herself and agree to fight a

champion she could never conquer, but this would not be like a lamb to the slaughter, but rather on behalf of her people or her city.

On occasion the great souled person has been attacked as an unsympathetic prig. But as pointed out by Roger Crisp it might be more productive to try to see it from Aristotle’s point of view, to assume that the virtues in general, as he pictured them, indeed were in line with people’s common beliefs (ta endoxa) and thus perhaps not as elitist as we see them today.

The nameless excellence that has to do with small honors

The ethical triad  Love of honor  Nameless  Indifference to honor

This excellence forms a pair with greatness of soul in the same way as magnificence does with generosity /NE1125b1-4/. It is about the desire for (smaller) honors. As pointed out by Broadie; where as greatness of soul deals with respect for that which is most important about a human being - honor deals with institutional honor such as titles, privileges and awards.

Even temper

The ethical triad  Irascibility  Even temper  Spiritlessness

The even tempered person shows her feelings honestly and do not seek revenge. People of the corresponding vices either get angry with the wrong people, for the wrong reasons at the wrong time etc., or nurses the anger thus turning vengeful and bitter. To have the virtue of an even temper means that one is in control of ones’ temper and is not prone to get carried away by feelings. Note, however, that it does not recommend turning the other cheek as a general rule, quite the contrary there are situations where the only appropriate thing is to be furious for example /NE1125b26-1126a4/.

The three social excellences (or the three conversational excellences)

The first two contributes to any social situation when one is mixing with others and the third is about relaxation. The first virtue is nameless but it has to do with the pleasing and displeasing of

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149 For more on this see section 3.2.11 in this introduction.
others, “This state has no name, but it would seem to be most like friendship…” /NE1126b19-20/. It is often called ‘friendliness’ and is a light-version of friendship, more of a general consideration and kindness to one’s fellowman because as Aristotle writes, “It differs from friendship in not requiring any special feeling or any fondness for the people we meet.” /NE1126a22-23/.

The ethical triad

Obsequiousness     Nameless     Contentiousness

Those who are inflicted with the first vice and consequently always seek to please, can be separated into two sub-groups. First there is the obsequious - the person who is dying to be liked but who is also said to not to want to spoil the pleasure of others - then there is the ingratiating, the person who aims at material profit. At the other extreme we find the people who “oppose us on every point and do not care in the least about causing pain” such people are called “cantankerous and quarrelsome.” /NE1126b15-16/.

The ethical triad

Boastfulness     Nameless     Self-deprecation

The second of the social virtues is also nameless but it has to do with how one presents oneself while interacting with others. It discusses “those who are truthful and false, both in words and in actions – that is to say, in their claims [about themselves].” /NE1127a19-20/. For example it talks of different aspects of honesty; to be honest about oneself, to stick to one’s word, to be honest with others without offending or hurting them and to tell the truth for the sake of truth. Aristotle particularly dislikes the vices on each side because they show disregard for the truth

The ethical triad

Buffoonery     Wit     Humorless boorishness

The third of the social virtues is wittiness and tell us how to be playful in a fitting way. According to Aristotle relaxation, amusement and play are necessary parts of a good human existence - that is why a fine sense of humour is important.

Recall what Aristotle said about a general sense of philia that the virtuous person has for all other men.

Arguably this sounds like two different characters and without going into detail it would be an example of how Aristotle got into trouble as he tried to put one feature to many into the description of the agent who would have such a virtue.
3.5 Phronesis

Where as the last section covered the character virtues, i.e. being good or excellent at doing X, Y or Z, this section is about the intellectual virtues, i.e. being good or excellent at thinking about how one should act.

In the NE Aristotle explains that there are five separate intellectual virtues and spends a fair amount of effort on showing how his account is fact a detailed break-down of what Socrates regarded as the single virtue of wisdom.\textsuperscript{152} Aristotle points out, for example, that they should be considered in a special order, that they all have their own tasks and that they are not all equally important.\textsuperscript{153} We learn that there is scientific knowledge (\textit{episteme}) /Book 6.3/, craft knowledge (\textit{techne}) /Book 6.4/, practical wisdom (\textit{phronesis}) /Book 6.5/, intellect (\textit{nous}) /Book 6.6/ and last but certainly not least there is wisdom (\textit{sophia}) /Book 6.7/. \textit{Sophia} is the highest of all the thinking virtues - this is the virtue of \textit{Theoria} which as explained earlier is the best and most meaningful activity for any human being.

3.5.1 Epistemikon and logistikon

In Book 6.7 Aristotle writes that the reason part of the soul is divided into two sections; the knowledge attaining part (\textit{epistemikon}) and the reckoning part (\textit{logistikon}). The former deals with matters like basic causes and laws of nature, whereas the latter governs changeable things. In \textit{epistemikon} we find the intellectual virtues of \textit{episteme}, \textit{sophia} and \textit{nous}. It might be slightly surprising that \textit{nous} (intelligence, often understood as the kind of cleverness or intuition that comes with experience) is in the same group as knowledge since \textit{nous} is said to help us discover and formulate the first principles (such as laws of nature and basic intuitions like for example that \textit{eudaimonia} equals human good).\textsuperscript{154} \textit{Phronesis} and \textit{techne}, on the other hand, both reside in \textit{logistikon}. It should be noted that Aristotle is careful to separate \textit{techne}, which is about making, from \textit{phronesis}, which is about doing.

3.5.2 What is phronesis?

On clarifying the sub-sections of reason Aristotle proceeds to define ‘sound reason’, explaining that it must be of a special kind in order to be suitable for moral deliberation. It has to be

\textsuperscript{152} For \textit{episteme}, \textit{techne} and \textit{sophia} I have used Irwin’s translation but for \textit{phronesis} and \textit{nous} I have chosen Roger Crisp’s.


phronesis, defined for example as “... a state grasping the truth, involving reason, concerned with action about things that are good and bad for a human being.” /NE1140b5-7/. Another key feature is that it correctly prescribes the right action. /see e.g. NE1144b27-29/. Pakaluk concludes that the primary task of phronesis is to promote the virtue of Sophia, that “phronesis is for the sake of Sophia”.155 These are the two supreme intellectual virtues for Aristotle and they complement each other in the sense that the domain of phronesis is the practical and the domain of Sophia is the theoretical.

Sometimes phronesis is translated as ‘the right principle’ or ‘the correct rule’. This is misleading as it might tempt the reader to understand it as a single maxim, rather than a virtue just as dynamic as the character related ones (in the broad sense it involves for example good deliberation and cleverness / intuition, i.e. nous). Again, Aristotle’s uses the metaphor of the arrow and the target as elaborated on in section 3.2.5. For a distinction between phronesis (a capacity to recognize reason) and reason itself orthos logos (which of course is freestanding from us – it is the right principle we can tap into with the help of phronesis) see /NE1106b-1107a/.

To have phronesis means to be good at thinking about how one should act in order to live a worthwhile life. Such an individual is good at thinking morally, i.e. she knows the moral principles and moreover, she knows how to apply them in practical situations. Hughes summarizes the key points of phronesis in the following way;

1. “Practical wisdom involves a combination of understanding and experience
2. It consist in the ability to read individual situations aright
3. In so doing, one is drawing on previous experience (which has helped to build up the understanding of the demands of truthfulness, kindness, courage etc.)
4. One is also continually enhancing that understanding in the light of each particular situation with which one is confronted”.156

3.5.3 Always right?

Aristotle held that neither phronesis, nor any of the other intellectual virtues, could be wrong about what would be the right action /NE1141a1-10/. This might sound somewhat peculiar. Let us construct an example involving the able health professional Dr. B who just prescribed a heart medicine for her critically ill patient. Unfortunately, although a highly efficient treatment for the patient’s original condition the drug ends up killing him due an allergy that was unknown to Dr.

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B. It might then seem strange for us to say that Dr. B did the right thing. But I would like to challenge that intuition – if in fact we do not blame Dr. B in the sense that she should have known had she been a truly good doctor then it seems that she did the right thing. Or at least, given that the death of patient was such a bad result, that she did the right thing in the circumstance, i.e. in a qualified way. Presumably Aristotle would have maintained that Dr. B did the right thing in spite of the unfortunate result.\footnote{157} One reason for doing that is of course that he had recognized that sometimes doing the virtuous thing will have a worse result than some alternative action would have had, but that does not change the fact that it was the right action.

3.5.4 How does phronesis relate to the character virtues?

The relationship between the intellectual and the emotional in moral decision-making is among the most disputed issues in the NE.\footnote{158} It is said that complete practical excellence combines the qualities of the intellect and the character - together they help us select the means and assess what are the worthwhile goals. What seems to me a quite plausible way of connecting them was suggested by Sarah Broadie.\footnote{159} Aristotle says that the character virtues and phronesis each make a necessary contribution to good conduct. However, for phronesis to be able to ‘look in the right direction’ and to be sensitive to the relevant characteristics of the situation (i.e. identifying the stuff that is to go into the deliberation) it needs the support of nous (cleverness, penetration, intelligence, intuition call it what you want). Nous ‘helps’ phronesis to spot the mean and then the excellence of the person comes out in the deliberation when the fine and noble act is chosen. Hence, without phronesis we cannot have complete character virtues and vice versa. Perhaps it could be said that it provides the necessary infrastructure for deliberation and decision-making.

In the past the role of nous has often been marginalized but Richard Sorabji offers an interesting defence of this connection. Among other things he claims that the ‘mindless’ process of habituation simply is not enough to make men good. Instead he suggests that the role of nous in the moral virtues lies in the following three factors; choice, phronesis and moral education.\footnote{160}

\footnote{157} Probably adding that Dr. B in this instance is neither culpable, nor blameworthy.\footnote{158} This is in no small part due to Aristotle’s apparently contradictory accounts, compare e.g. Book 3.2-3 with Book 6.12-13 of the NE.\footnote{159} Aristotle (2002). The Nicomachean Ethics, (translation, introduction and commentary by S. Broadie and C. Rowe), Oxford University Press.\footnote{160} Sorabji R. (1973-74). Aristotle on the role of intellect in virtue. In, Essays On Aristotle’s Ethics, ed. A O. Rorty, 1980, University of California Press, p. 201-219.
3.5.5 The role of choice and decision-making

In the NE Aristotle explains to us that *phronesis* issue in action - first you identify the right action and then you decide (choose) that this is what is to be done. “Then perhaps what is decided is what has been previously deliberated. For decision involves reason and thought, and even the name itself would seem to indicate that [what is decided, *prohaireton*] is chosen [*haireton*] before [pro] other things.” /NE1112a17-20/. But the story he offers the reader in Book 3 raises questions about the nature of ‘choice’. Choice is a notoriously challenging question for philosophy in general and it seems that Aristotle’s contribution fails to shed much light on the topic. Perhaps one could use the metaphor of the black box to describe how choice seems to work in the NE. Since Aristotle does not give a plausible explanation for the process taking place inside the box the reader is simply told that reason goes in at one end and out the other comes desire. It is likely that he envisioned it as something involving both reason and desire but we know little of the details. On a more general note it deserves mentioning that the choice of an action can occur long before the actual opportunity arises. I can, for example, decide to avenge my fathers’ death when the right opportunity presents itself.¹⁶¹

3.5.6 What are we choosing - the ends, the means or both?

There are two competing views on how to understand what Aristotle thought of the interplay between means and ends. One only has to read e.g. passage /NE1141b10-22/ to understand why this has become such a contested aspect of the NE. Very briefly the traditional intellectualist account might be recapitulated as the following;

In Book 3 Aristotle could be read as saying that choice is a rather intellectual matter. To do the right thing the agent must first choose to do it, and what she chooses are the means for reaching the desired end. Here the scope of *phronesis* is means only, there is no need to deliberate the end since it is already a given that it is *eudaimonia*. To use one of Aristotle’s own examples; the ends of doctors is to restore the health of their patients, now this can be done in many ways and that is what has to be delibered. /NE1112b11-17/.¹⁶² On this reading *phronesis* is the process where practical reason calculates which action(s) are likely to lead to the good we (rightly) desire. We


¹⁶² Sarah Broadie, explores an interesting idea in her book namely that perhaps this only applies when we think about matters like politics, economics, the law etc. in an entirely general sense. For the full argument see Aristotle (2002). *The Nicomachean Ethics*, (translation, introduction and commentary by S. Broadie and C. Rowe), Oxford University Press, pp. 46-47.
know the good – what we ponder is the best way to bring it about and then we choose.\textsuperscript{163} If true, choice is about desiring to do that which has been identified in the deliberation process, something which implies a strong connection between rationality and choice. As Burnyeat writes “choice is desire pursuing what reason asserts to be good”.\textsuperscript{164}

This is an increasingly contested view. Its opponents would agree that in Book 3 ‘choice’ might indeed reasonably be defined as ‘choosing the means’ but in the other books, e.g. Book 6.9, Aristotle appears to mean different things by the same word. Here ‘choice’ could also be interpreted as of ‘ends’ and of ‘one’s general purpose’. What is perceived to be the problem is that on the one hand we are told that we must choose the virtues for their own sake and on the other Aristotle talks of actions as means. There is concern that the virtues would become instrumental and that the agent would choose them as a quick way, a technique, to secure the happy life. This would be problematic because acting virtuously is not something we do in the sense that we might agree to take medicine to get well - exercising the virtues is part of \textit{eudaimonia}. Clearly Aristotle argues that doing the fine and noble \emph{is leading} the fulfilled life and thus that the virtuous action is an end in itself.

However, as pointed out by e.g. Hughes, it appears difficult to deliberate about means and yet not to think about ends as well and vice versa. It seems indeed that the two make better sense together. This opens up for the more modern, and to me far more reasonable, idea that the two positions are not really conflicting. The agent is grasping the constituent ends through the means, e.g. we choose the courageous act both for the sake of acting courageously and for the sake of being a courageous person.\textsuperscript{165} Consequently there is a little mean and a lot of end in all the virtues and then doing the virtuous \emph{is} the good, (see earlier discussion on ‘the most \textit{teleios} end’ and ‘minor ends’ in section 3.1.7). Here it is recognized that even though the ultimate rational for our actions is \textit{eudaimonia} (the most \textit{teleios} of ends) it is only through the virtues we can reach it because when we act in the right way we are leading the happy life.\textsuperscript{166} When we deliberate we think both about the particular action \textit{and} about what a happy life involves. The general idea, which to me seems

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\textsuperscript{166} \textit{Eudaimonia} is the best life for any human, about this we have no choice because it is a result of our nature see e.g. /NE1111b28-30/.
\end{flushright}
highly plausible, is that we deliberate both the particular and the universal, that *phronesis* is not restricted to just one level of the practical syllogism.

Knowing what to choose requires one not only to have virtue but also to be able to read the situation and understand how that virtue ought to be applied in this particular circumstance. To do that I must deliberate what it would mean to be kind, generous, courageous and so on in this such-and-such situation. What should I, for example, do about the fact that Professor A fails to realize that her colleagues really do take offence at the crude jokes she insists on telling at the hospital staff meetings? What would the virtuous act be? Is it kind not to tell her as it might cause her to return to her old shy and self-critical ways and undo years of therapy in one swift blow, or does kindness here mean telling her the truth? Does truthfulness and courage demand that I stop pulling the wool over her eyes? To know what the virtue requires of me I need to be a mature moral agent and there is no denying that moral decision-making is difficult business. As Hughes summarizes “where the moral life is concerned, to deliberate about particular actions is also to deliberate about what a fulfilled and worthwhile life involves. It is therefore to become the kind of person who sees life in a particular way, and sees one’s decisions as fitting into that vision of a life. This blend of practical living and *Theoria* is the activity of a particular kind of agent – a morally admirable person; it has little or nothing to do with ends or means to an end.” Hence, the choice we make is ‘an all things considered’ judgment of how to act in a situation. This is the outcome of good deliberation which brings us to Sorabji’s next point.

Subscribing to the mixed reading roughly outlined above Sorabji elaborates on the second way in which Aristotle connects the mastering of the virtues to the intellect. The argument here is that the virtues require the ability to deliberate and that deliberation is a part of *phronesis*. When we use *phronesis* we deliberate both the good life and happiness in a general sense and we think of the specific action. He argues that *phronesis* “… enables man, in the light of his conception of the good life in general, to perceive what generosity requires of him, or more generally what virtue and to kalon requires of him, in the particular case, and it instructs him to act accordingly.” *Phronesis* helps us too ‘see’ the virtuous act, it answers all the ‘how’, ‘when’, ‘to whom’ and ‘how much’ questions that arise in our lives.

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167 As Hursthouse point out.
3.5.7 McDowell and deliberation – a comment

It is an open question if Aristotle would say that all situations require deliberation. Indeed, it is possible that there could be everyday scenarios where any virtuous agent would know what to do almost straight away. McDowell advocates this possibility when he comments that an agent sometimes might exercise his practical reason but not have to use his practical reasoning as it were. On the other hand Aristotle says that every virtue involves a choice and to make a choice one needs to deliberate. However, he might agree that the experienced agent (or in situations where the choice is obvious) does not have to go through all the alternatives but can in fact almost instantly know how to act. Maybe one could say that there is reflection but not of a conscious kind. Jonathan Dancy takes it one step further and argues that the virtuous agent identifies the right action straight away - for him excellence operates without deliberation. This is a quite extreme reading and to most scholars it appears far more plausible that Aristotle would defend the idea that the virtuous agent do deliberate (at least in most cases).

McDowell famously writes that we should not understand deliberation as the weighing of one action against another as this might conjure up a picture of scheming. Rather, it is the case that the right action ‘silences’ the alternatives. But what does he mean by this, how should ‘silencing’ be interpreted? Is it that the alternatives holds no temptation or is it that the agent literally is no longer aware of them, that they are completely phased out? I fully agree with McDowell (and presumably with Aristotle) that to be virtuous is to have one single but very complex sensitivity to situations. Deliberation for the morally mature is not necessarily about thinking ‘What would be courageous? What would be kind?’ and so on. Having to go through the virtues one by one comparing and contrasting would be the mark of the trainee. That said, I would argue that it is not a sign of weakness to take one’s time, it is not necessarily about fighting temptation but an indication that the choice can be very complex and hard. Furthermore I reject the idea that the truly virtuous agent is somehow blind to the possible alternatives - that the mere acknowledgement of them as alternatives in the objective sense (not for themselves as virtuous agents though) would indicate weakness. This appears to me to bring us close to Dancy’s idea, introduced above, that the virtuous do not even have to deliberate, a claim that strikes me as peculiar. It might well be the case that the right action is truly obvious in some situations and then the deliberation would be so quick that the agent hardly notices it. But that does not change

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171 Having said that, /NE1142b26-28/ admittedly speaks in favour of quick deliberation but I have chosen to see this passage as a one off.
the fact that a choice, of some kind, is made. In the broadest sense of the word there is always an alternative action, even if that is doing nothing, and thus a choice to be deliberated and eventually made.

A more convincing analysis would be that the virtuous person when faced with a choice can see all the options, understand that some of them are appealing in an objective sense (although they are wrong) and yet feel no allure. She is not wrestling with herself but as a human being she can understand intellectually that some of the options would be very tempting for a person who was not virtuous. Then she turns her attention to the virtuous options (let us for arguments sake say that there are several) and ponder them – that is where the deliberation takes place. She is weighing and contemplating the acceptable alternatives, not the vicious ones. A quick example; Nurse C arrives a little late for the annual Christmas Party at the hospital and most of the others are already there. As he enters the room the guests turn to see who it is and among the faces Nurse C notices several very attractive women. Now, he can see this in an objective way – he knows what it is for a woman to be beautiful and they certainly meet the criteria – yet he is not tempted by them as he is happy with his partner. He would never think of the possibility of an affair and it is not that he struggles with himself or is held back by fear of being caught. He truly does not feel tempted but that does not mean that he is blind to their beauty. Let us try another example to bring home this point; I am out on my boat and as darkness falls I begin looking for a harbour for the night. In the fading light I can see lots of small islands with, for all I know, very suitable natural havens. These places do not enter my deliberation, but I see them and I know what they are – I understand the serene beauty and stillness they might hold. Yet I do not consider them because at the distance I can see a light-house and, although perhaps not as close as some of the islands, I know that this indicates a safe harbour for me and my crew.172 This is where I will go because I know that in the circumstances this is the best thing I can do, not because I think it is the only possible harbour.

3.5.8 The ethical code

According to Aristotle a good way to recognize the virtuous person is that she can explain and analyze her actions in hind-sight when asked to. She can tell us why she did what she did, to that extent, to that person and so forth. In saying this he acknowledges that even a spontaneous action can express excellences given that the agent would be able to explain the action to other agents. McDowell reads Aristotle as saying that the virtuous person indeed can be expected to

172 I know for a fact that in these waters light-houses indicate safe and well organized marinas.
explain but only to another virtuous person. Failing to convince the vicious could hardly be seen as evidence that the act was wrong. I believe that this is correct, after all it never was part of Aristotle’s program to convince those who had radically different views on life that the virtues was the road to happiness. Further to that last point McDowell holds that “the rationality of virtue is not demonstrable from an external standpoint”. I take him to mean that because the virtuous people of this world have one perspective and the vicious quite another it is impossible for the former to prove rationally to the latter that their life is better. For this to be possible there has to be a minimum of shared values and Aristotle himself points out that a Skeptic, for example, can never really understand why she should be virtuous. It is only when we have internalized the virtues appropriately (i.e. when we know the because) that we really can see the point of being virtuous. (for more on this see section 3.5.11).

Aristotle believed that a complete view of how one should behave cannot be successfully codified. As ethics is not a science to treat it as such would be to miss the whole philosophical point. The question ‘how should we live?’ cannot be given a codifiable answer beyond the recommendation to acquire the virtues and only take pleasure in doing the fine and noble. To him that was the wrong approach - as rules could not possibly capture all potential scenarios they will end up becoming a hindrance and an over-simplification rather than help. Moral decision-making is instead about learning how to become sensitive to circumstance, to see what is right to do in a situation as this is the only reliable skill we can hope for, the only one versatile enough. The mature moral decision maker achieves this sensitivity through a combination of phronesis, the virtues and a sense of equity. Consequently, the moral agent must simply learn to be situation sensitive and thus judge things rightly, that is the only way to lead the fulfilled life. At first this might seem like a profound challenge to the whole theory. If it is true that any principle that we could come up with sooner or later would meet an exception then how can morality ever be said to rest on a solid foundation?

Some philosophers, for example Roger Crisp, argue that Aristotle’s aversion to rules has been exaggerated to create a false contrast with e.g. utilitarianism (e.g. by McDowell). He would say that virtue ethics indeed has a very central rule, namely that all agents should be virtuous. Further

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173 The dialectic method aside Aristotle probably would have claimed that those who disagree are mistaken about what the good life is.

174 For an explanation of what equity is see section 3.3.10 of this introduction.
to that point Crisp also rejects the claim that rules for moral decision-making has to interfere with situation sensitivity.\textsuperscript{175}

Hence, although Aristotle clearly would not be in favour of rigidity, or the usage of rules to free the agent from having to deliberate deeply complex situations, rules \textit{per se} were not problematic for Aristotle.\textsuperscript{176} It was rather the rules of thumb, e.g. as seen in Book 9.2, that he was reluctant to spell out as they are context dependent. In fact McDowell himself goes on to saying that this is not a major concern. Already Wittgenstein showed that “…acting rationally does not require that one be guided by a stateable rule. Sometimes there is no further foundation for our going on in the same way than human practices themselves. And these do not rest on any rule. When you are teaching somebody to do something they can often ‘latch on’ to what you are getting at, without their or your working out a universal principle. McDowell wants to say that this is because they see how to go on – they are enmeshed in what Wittgenstein calls a ‘form of life’”.\textsuperscript{177}

As a matter of fact the discussion of the role of rules in Aristotle goes right to the heart of his theory. Aristotle explained that actions possess moral qualities independently what we happened to believe or feel about them and an agent who have \textit{phronesis} knows this. Hence, \textit{phronesis} can be said to involve both true judgment (I am capable of reading situations aright), and correct desire (because if I have the character virtues I will only desire the fine and noble). Against this it is frequently protested that since there are no independent criteria for the correctness of moral judgment it is not clear how the virtuous agent is to be identified? To this Aristotle presumably would have replied that any satisfactory moral theory must have its roots in a theory of how human beings are by nature constructed and then of course point to the function argument. He might also argue that just as we can see when people are in good health without being trained as doctors we can recognize when someone lives a fulfilled life - we do not need a complete and detailed theoretical account to do this. Thirdly, it might be argued that the fact that the virtuous person is capable of explaining their actions, albeit in hindsight, and that they will do this by invoking one or several of the virtues is evidence. See also section 3.5.15 of this introduction where I discuss action guiding.

\textsuperscript{175} See Book 9.2 of the NE, especially the last sentence.
\textsuperscript{176} For more on this see part 5, especially sections 3.5.9 and 3.5.16, of this introduction.
\textsuperscript{177} Roger Crisp, Handout on McDowell, November 20\textsuperscript{th}, 1988. For a good general point about why Aristotle thinks that rules are a bad idea in ethics see Book 1.3 and Book 5.10 of the NE, /NE1137b19-24/.
3.5.9 *The that and The because*

Unfortunately, Aristotle is not very forthcoming when it comes to explaining how we acquire the thinking virtues and he settles for saying something vague about it being more through instruction than practice and training. To add insult to injury his explanation is not only unsatisfactory in its briefness but it also is quite odd – why would it not be important to e.g. practice deliberation in order to perfect it? At any rate it is clear that for Aristotle moral virtue comes in stages, through education and habituation, and it has both cognitive and emotional dimensions.\(^\text{178}\) Admittedly his analysis might not have been very refined in the eyes of a modern psychologist but he touched on something that is still a question in ethics, i.e. can virtue be taught or can it only be acquired by practicing or is it perhaps part of human nature? \(/\text{NE1179b20-1180a/}\). Below I shall try to take a closer look at how the good man develops his morality over time.

Aristotle talks of *the that* (knowledge in a qualified sense) and *the because* (knowledge in the unqualified sense). Humans can have either just *the that*, i.e. the capacity to listen to the advice of good people and to observe what the just men do, or both. When we have both we have *phronesis* and thus we can work out for ourselves how to act in any given situation. We have a deep understanding and have internalized the virtues fully. We desire to do the noble and we take pleasure in doing it. In Aristotle’s world his students would learn *the that* by listening to his lectures and then, with lots of practice and over time, they would also be able to acquire *the because*. Knowing *the that* means knowing what it is to do the fine and noble, to have a good grasp both of the character virtues and the intellectual virtues (so that one can read the situation right). The student knows these things because she has observed the behaviour of good men and listened to their advice. She has leaned them by heart like she would any other subject and is slowly beginning to realize how to do this on her own. In fact it is quite similar to how we might learn a language like say French. First I learn the words for particular situations e.g. what to say at the customs or when I go grocery shopping. I produce grammatically correct, although very simple, sentences – not because I know French grammar well but because I have learnt (and accepted) that this is the good way of talking to a customs officer. At this stage I do not yet know *the because* and thus my knowledge is unreliable but none the less I believe that this is the noble and fine given the circumstance. “And those who have just learned something do not yet know it, though they string the words together; for it must grow into them, and this takes time.” \(/\text{NE1147a22-24/}\). Gradually, as I learn more (become familiar with a great number of situations

and practice my grammar and vocabulary) and start to internalize the language. I become able to know what to say in new situations. I reach the level where I can construct my own grammatically correct sentences for new situations. Now I am beginning to know the because. I get more and more advanced and suddenly one day I am fluent in French. I no longer think of rules or specific words – it just flows out of me, effortlessly and with pleasure in all situations. In doing this I meet one of Aristotle’s key criteria as a student; I understand what would be the virtuous choice and I take pleasure in doing just that.179

I chose the example of language because it seems to me that just like morality a language cannot be fully mastered through a set of rules. To really speak well, as opposed to merely correct, one must have a feeling for the language, be sensitive to the different words and situations, the nuances, the undercurrents. No set of meticulous rules can ever capture this. As Burnyeat writes “what Aristotle is pointing too is our ability to internalize from a scattered range of particular cases a general evaluative attitude which is not reducible to rules or precepts”.180 Further more it appears to work well with another idea in the NE namely that there is something less trustworthy about the ‘moral expert’ than the virtuous agent. Although the former might be able to model herself on the virtuous agent and act like he would every time their act would not be the same form a moral point of view. Even if she is doing the right thing that does not make her virtuous. Chances are of course that this moral impostor would slip up sooner or later but even if she did not we would trust her less. Presumably such an agent would also have problems explaining her actions. Similarly with the language; we would be reluctant to agree that a person was mastering a language if they had no knowledge of grammar and never could explain why they constructed their sentences the way they did. Even though such a person might speak fluently it is not them we would go to for advice on syntax.

A brief summary of the key points; the first step in the moral development is to learn the that and begin to take pleasure in doing the noble, this is done through the right upbringing. This will teach the agent what the good life is and she will then decide to do what it takes to secure this happy life – she accepts the goal of eudaimonia. It should be noted that natural virtue, although perhaps pleasant for the person in question, does not equal virtue proper. Such an agent would still have to practice and learn phronesis in order to fully understand the goal of eudaimonia and thus

have ‘real virtue’.\textsuperscript{181} The second step is to install the habitual part of the virtues in the person through practice which involves both habituation and teaching as it is not possible to simply reason one’s way to becoming virtuous. At this point, although the agent starts to take increasing pleasure in doing the noble, she might still occasionally slip up. The third step, which develops parallel to the second step, is about *phronesis*. This is the icing on the virtue-cake and without it one cannot have any of the individual virtues and consequently nor the whole of virtue. This intellectual virtue makes the agent see which action is the right one, i.e. the virtuous one. This action is both means and ends, it is an end in itself and will bring about the desired overall end which of course is the fulfilled life. Now you only take pleasure in the noble and you have learned *the because*. As you know that this is the most advantageous choice for you are no longer tempted to act otherwise, that would simply be irrational.

3.5.10 Pre-requisites

As hinted at in section 3.1.3 of this introduction the student Aristotle had in mind was not a blank slate. Already coming into the ‘lecture’ she had a rather good understanding of what type of action would qualify as fine and noble. The students and the teachers would share a basic understanding of what morality is, including *eudaimonia*, and this idea would largely be a result of good upbringing. As the whole moral enterprise by means of the dialectic method has to begin with ‘what is known to us’ this common starting point was absolutely necessary for Aristotle. Consequently, the students needed no in-depth explanation of why *the that* is right. Had that not been the case there would probably have been issues that might have proved very hard to solve through habituation. In fact Aristotle would not have recommended his virtues to those who did not share his basic understandings. For a wicked agent with fundamentally different views and another set of goals in life the virtues would be merely instrumental, and worthless at that. Naturally such an agent would have been considered irrational and incapable of ever leading a fulfilled life but that is another matter.\textsuperscript{182} An agent who had already begun to see her erring ways, however, might have been judged in a kinder light. A person who sincerely wanted to reform, ‘a born again virtue ethicist’, might well be able to retrain her preferences and develop a taste for

\textsuperscript{181} For a discussion see Book 6.13 of the NE.
\textsuperscript{182} That said Aristotle claims of course that his ethics is for all people in the sense that this is definition of the good life for any human being. The complicating fact that e.g. the barbarians in the North lead lives, and have preferences, which are truly horrific might well cause him to say that this is not a worthwhile pursuit for them in their current condition because they are more or less amoral. But that does not change the fact that his way would have been better for them had they just not been so hopelessly ruined. In other words: there is no alternative moral philosophy out there which potentially could be better or more correct.
the noble. As moral novices, and intermediates, we work towards becoming agents with settled characters who do the virtuous, willingly and for its’ own sake. “But for actions in accord with the virtues to be done temperately or justly it does not suffice that they themselves have the right qualities. Rather, the agent must also be in the right state when he does them. First, he must know [that he is doing virtuous actions]; second, he must decide on them, and decide on them for themselves; and, third, he must also do them from a firm and unchanging state.” /NE1105a29-1105b1/.

3.5.11 How does practice lead to knowledge?
Aristotle observed that as the chief motive for children to do things is pleasure it is of the essence to establish a connection between the virtues and pleasure at an early stage in a child’s life. Those who do not get the right upbringing and thus fail to acquire the right tastes will end up taking pleasure in the wrong things, at the wrong time, to the wrong extent and so forth. Unfortunately the only way to get them to behave is to threaten to punish them, Aristotle remarks somewhat grimly in Book 10.9 /NE1179b11-13/. Those who have developed a sense of shame and “…been prepared by habits for enjoying and hating finely…” /NE1179b26/, i.e. to associate the noble with pleasure they, on the other hand, can be successfully trained to acquire phronesis. Here Aristotle relies on Plato’s account of the middle part of the soul, the so called the spirited one. This part develops in young people before reason does and it seeks to do the just and noble (The Republic, 440cd). Now, if what has been said so far is a reasonable explanation of how morality develops then it is apparent that morality cannot be reduced simply to rationality and reason. Rather it is a mix of reflective reason and all these other experiences that together is phronesis.

3.5.12 Is virtue a possibility for many or only for a few?
As explained earlier in this introduction I find the idea that Aristotle would consider the happy life a real possibility for many both appealing and plausible.183 This is of course a controversial reading of the NE, not in least because Aristotle continued to voice conflicting opinions on the matter. This tension surfaces for example when he talks of phronesis. In Book 6.13 /NE1144b32-1145a2/ he tells the reader that as soon as we possess phronesis (without which no virtue is complete) we must also possess all the excellences. Not just a few of them or perhaps all except one – but really all of them. “What we have said, then, makes it clear that we cannot be fully good without prudence, or prudent without virtue of character.” /NE1144b31-32/.184 If this is

183 Partly because I believe it important to have reasonably realistic moral ideals.
184 Note that the quote is from Irwin’s translation and therefore “prudence” should be understood as phronesis.
true then it seems very difficult to argue in favour of the Happy Zone idea I put forward in section 3.1.11.

On the Book 6.13 account an agent is either vicious or virtuous. The explanation is that as all the virtues are interlinked to the extent that we cannot know what each virtue requires of us if we do not also know what the good life in general requires etc. Arguably, there could be levels in the virtuous section in the sense that some individuals would spend more time on *Theoria*. Yet it cannot be denied that the threshold, the bare minimum, for moving out of viciousness is said to be complete virtue.

Admittedly this poses a challenge but then again there is the previously mentioned section in Book 1.9 which seems to be in line with my reading. Here Aristotle says that ‘a lot of people could be happy’, i.e. virtuous. It seems relatively uncontroversial to argue that if happiness would require complete virtue, i.e. both a very specific character and a favoured material situation, it would be an unattainable ideal for most people.\(^{185}\) In addition we should bear in mind that Aristotle only discusses paradigm cases in his work. Arguably, he describes the perfect person, as opposed to ‘all possible ways in which to qualify as virtuous’, as he thought that would give the reader enough guidance for other cases.

### 3.5.13 Virtues and consequences

For Aristotle the moral value of an action is based on whether or not the agent can see what she is doing as making sense from the point of view of the fulfilled life. This is not to say, however, that the consequences are irrelevant and should be wholly disregarded. Consequences matter to the virtuous agent but they are simply not the right-making feature against which ones actions are to be evaluated. In the case of the good life one has to think specifically about the quality of what one is doing and only secondarily of the causal effectiveness. For example; my bioethics mentor, Professor A has had an accident and will hospitalized for a week. Visiting people in the hospital might be a kind thing to do for an array of reasons one of which would be that it is often boring to be a patient - time passes slowly and there is little distraction from the pain. As a virtuous person I will do what is kind but not as an instrument to cheer Professor A up, that is a positive consequence but my reason for acting is for the sake of fine and noble. Now, in most cases the virtuous action will indeed generate the best outcome but the fact that this is not always the case hardly poses a threat to the validity of the theory as such.

\(^{185}\) For a discussion see Crisp R., Aristotle on Greatness of Soul, in Kraut R. *Blackwell Companion to the Nicomachean Ethics*, Blackwell, 2006.
3.5.14 Can there be moral dilemmas for the virtuous?

McDowell comments that there might be situations which have no right answer (I take it that he means moral dilemmas), but adds that to the extent that there is an answer to be found the virtuous person should be able to identify it. That may well be so but this should not lead us to draw the conclusion that Aristotle would recognize certain situations as true moral dilemmas. After all part of the very definition of being (fully) virtuous is to have a disposition such that one knows the right act for any agent in any situation. At first glance there might be situations which seem highly problematic but I read McDowell as arguing that if there seem to be no answer it is because the decision-maker has misread the situation and therefore thinks there is a dilemma, or no answer. This links in well with Hursthouse’s comments on moral decision-making being a complex matter and at times it might be quite challenging for the agent. Moreover, a virtuous person would never end up stuck between a rock and a hard-place as she would foresee such a scenario. Hence, even if there could arise a situation where there was no answer that would not plague the virtuous. As a last resort Aristotle might remove one of the evils and excuse the agent thus saving him from the sticky situation. This is arguably what Aristotle sought to do when he created the example of the captain who throws the cargo over-board in a desperate attempt to save his crew and ship.

3.5.15 Action guidance

A common criticism of Aristotle is that the theory he offers lacks in action guidance. Although a complex issue it is widely considered that for any moral theory to be taken seriously it must be helpful with regards to choosing the right action in a difficult situation. If true, many philosophers would take that as evidence of a very serious flaw which would jeopardize virtue ethics claim to be a capable normative theory in its own right. Most likely that would lead them to conclude that the main contribution of virtue ethics would be as a supplement to another, more robust, theory. Such attacks often point to Book 6.1 as a particularly problematic section saying that here Aristotle admits that the doctrine of the mean, with its sweeping statements like ‘virtuous actions are intermediate, in the way that sound reasons indicates’, is not very helpful for those who seek moral guidance. That it is about as action guiding as being told by the doctor that

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186 For a discussion on situations where the virtues appear to give conflicting advice see section 3.4.5 of this introduction.
187 Although Aristotle says nothing of moral dilemmas it seems unlikely that he would believe in their existence. In Book 2.6 of the NE he says that there are some actions which are always forbidden like murder and adultery but crisp says that this should be understood as a semantic point — murder is always bad by definition otherwise it would be killing, or perhaps even rightful killing.
188 For more on this see part 3.6 Akrasia and part 3.7 Pleasure in this introduction.
one will get well if one takes medicine – and then getting kicked out before being told which medicine. Indeed, he never answers the question that he himself raised, in spite of claiming that he is intending to give his readers a good reply.¹⁸⁹

Not all scholars agree with this reading of Book 6.1. One example would be Michael Pakaluk who proposes that this section could be understood in the following way (in which case there would be nothing odd about it); Aristotle was not overly concerned with this alleged problem of guidance. In fact he would have thought most people capable of figuring out what bravery in battle, or justice when dealing with others, would require. Pakaluk goes on to say that it would in fact be rather odd for Aristotle to be offering rules or specific guidelines because “…he has emphasized up to this point that rules are open-ended. The way in which maxims must be left unspecified, because they require sensitivity to particular circumstances, is not something that could be remedied by giving further rules and prescriptions.”¹⁹⁰ Then he adds that this is in fact where ‘sound reason’ comes into the picture – this is the situation sensitivity. So in fact Aristotle is not calling for rules in Book 6.1 - he is calling for increased sensitivity.

3.5.16 The practical syllogism

In the absence of a substantial set of general rules Aristotle argues that the virtuous person’s ability to judge the situation can be explained as a practical syllogism. As pointed out by Sherman; “Knowing how to discern the particulars, Aristotle stresses, is the mark of virtue”.¹⁹¹ This is a puzzling suggestion. It is far from obvious that this is the best way of explaining an action and does it really follow for example that we must act on the conclusion?¹⁹² Although Aristotle held that the notion of rationality in ethics cannot be the same as that for sciences he suggested that the practical syllogism was a good method for finding out what the right thing to do in a given situation might be. That said he did not hold that the premises in the syllogism were objectively, undeniably and perpetually true. In other words that they do not express what we might refer to as ‘necessary truths’.¹⁹³ None the less Aristotle would of course argue that they are true for the most part given that one has arrived at them through the appropriate method and so forth. However, before we turn to the critique, let us take a closer look at the structure;

¹⁹² On occasion Aristotle even seems to argue that the conclusion is the action which seems a rather strange thing to say, however he does not expand greatly on that point.
P1 is the major premise – some piece of universal knowledge

- e.g. lean meat is good for humans

P2 is the minor premise – some piece of particular knowledge

- e.g. this piece of chicken is lean meat
- (then there are other minor help premises which are not really spelled out e.g. ‘I am a human’)

C1 – I should eat this piece of chicken

So how are such practical syllogisms – this “idea of an argument-like schema for explanations of actions” 194 - to help the virtuous person to make reliable, correct, judgments? Aristotle claims that it will contribute to the weeding out the wrong concerns from the right ones (given the particular circumstances). But how is that possible? The major premise is supposed to be selected by the virtuous person on the basis of her conception of the worthwhile life. The problem seems to be that the virtuous person’s idea of how the good life should be lived cannot be captured by rules. So in addition to all the rest the agent has to have the ability to detect the salient features - to ‘see’ and to be sensitive to the right aspects. Hence, McDowell claims that the major premise may consist of an unarticulated understanding of what is good and bad. As a consequence, we cannot even formulate the major premise without missing something uncodifiable which the virtuous agent would have built in but which could not be captured and put on paper. 195 As Aristotle wrote “Presumably, then, the excellent person is far superior because he sees what is true in each case, being himself a sort of standard and measure.” /NE1113a33-34/.

3.6 Akrasia

Actions can either be done voluntarily, in which case they are bekon, or counter-voluntarily 196, in which case they are akon. On Aristotle’s view an action is bekon unless it was either a result of

195 I take it that MacDowell intends ‘uncodifiable’ to mean that we cannot come up with a list of principles or rules that will be correct on every occasion we try to apply them.
196 This is the Broadie & Rowe translation of akon. I find it attractive as it captures both action that are involuntary and those that are non-voluntary. It should be noted that Aristotle made three distinctions; the voluntary = bekon, the non-voluntary = ukbekon and the involuntary = akon. Although not clearly spelled out a reasonable take on ukbekon is that it refers to acts which although not voluntary you do not regret
compulsion or ignorance and an agent can only be held responsible for a *bekon* act. For a person to truly perform an action it has to be voluntary and the most obvious case of a voluntary action is when the agent acts willingly, with pleasure and without reluctance. As Broadie notes voluntary agency is central in the NE as it is said that our ethical dispositions are expressed, as well as built up, by repeated voluntary action. Consequently it is only on the basis of voluntary action that an agent can be said to be good or bad.

But what is it more precisely that makes an act *akon*? Is it perhaps the fact that the agent feels pain and that she suffers when carrying it out? After all, Aristotle seems to be happy to say that such negative feelings are reliable indicators that an action is wrong. Or is the crucial factor instead that the agent was overpowered by an external force? The latter explanation appears especially problematic. Broadie points out that we can imagine actions which an agent does reluctantly (and perhaps thought that they would never do) yet they know what they are doing and there is no external force in the Aristotelian sense. An example might be a good parent who at the brink of exhaustion suddenly smacks her child. It seems fair to assume that this would prove a quite painful experience for both parties albeit, perhaps, in different ways. Such scenarios show that the ‘counter-voluntary label’ cannot be applied to all cases of pain and reluctance. Part of the problem is that Aristotle had a somewhat different take on what agency is. For him, the focus was on external causes, hence his examples of storms and other natural disasters. Most modern readers, on the other hand, tend to think of agency in a primarily internal sense. Without dwelling on this aspect further it is clear that Aristotle thought that the agents’ attitude towards the act, how she feels about it, reveals important facts about her ethical disposition. This idea is present throughout the NE – there cannot be a virtuous agent that does not choose her action willingly, because she sees that it is the good thing to do and takes pleasure in doing it.

### 3.6.1 Ignorance as a cause of moral failure

The idea that we are blameworthy is based on the notion that we should have known better as a result of our moral training. This training should have helped us in developing the virtues and acquire correct moral judgment. To Socrates and Plato virtue was knowledge and vice was ignorance and on their account moral failure is ultimately down to a lack of information /see Book 7.2-7.3/. This was the only reason which could cause a rational individual to act wrongly as

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no one in their right mind would choose anything over happiness if they only realized that it was
in fact a lesser alternative. This line of thought puts a heavy emphasis on the intellectual side of
morality - the focus was on rationality and reason. Contrary to Socrates and Plato, Aristotle
thought that people can be willingly vicious as well as willingly virtuous – for him there were
other sources of moral failure than ignorance. We can commit moral failure for other reasons than ignorance because we can find ourselves in a
situation where, although we in one sense see what the fully virtuous see, we mess up and choose
the ‘wrong action’. We do this because our judgment is clouded by our wrongful desire and this
makes us temporarily insensitive to the circumstances of the situation. What I mean is that
initially this agent sees what should be done but it is in relation to the minor premises, when it
comes to actually applying this knowledge, that she slips up. The agent suffers temporary moral
disorientation (this is the effect of her desire) and does the wrong thing but then, as the deed is
done, she again sees things correctly and she is overcome by regret and guilt.

3.6.2 The effects of a bad childhood
As previously explained the right thing to do, the virtuous thing, is objective in the sense that
there is a list of virtues. But it is also context dependent as a large part of being virtuous is
having the capacity to read particular situations right, the agent has to be sensitive to all kinds of
morally relevant factors.

As a result Aristotle argued that agents are to be held responsible for the shape of their moral
characters to a much larger extent than either of his two predecessors were prepared to /see e.g.
NE1113b3-1114b25/. Aristotle adopted this view because if we are not to be blamed for the
vices that come from bad upbringing then nor could we be praised for the virtues that come
from a good one. None less did he express concern over the fact that certain parents and cities
might not be able to provide the adequate moral training, rendering them incapable of setting a

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198 E.g. Burnyeat claims that this is at the expense of the psychology dimension. Burnyeat M. F. (1980).
Aristotle on Learning to be Good. In, Essays On Aristotle's Ethics, ed. A O. Rorty, 1980, University of

199 Note that he did not reject the idea as such, he just did not think that it explained all possible cases of
moral failure.

200 Because if she saw things as the fully virtuous do all along, if there was no clouded judgment, then she
would of course act as the fully virtuous would have done. Clearly my account draws more on Book 7
than Book 1.13 of the NE.

201 Note however, that if we are taking Aristotle's list as an example this is not to be considered a final list.
These are just good examples of character traits that the good man ought to have but that is not to say
that there cannot be other, additional, virtues.
proper example for the young. This observation did not, however, in any way convince him that for example an unfortunate childhood would be a reason to demand less of a person. Such an agent would be just as blameworthy as the rest of us. This line of reasoning lead Aristotle to deny that there might be a ‘talent for morality’. He rejected the idea that some individuals could be more morally gifted, that the virtue would just come easier to some because they have a certain set of other personal qualities.\textsuperscript{202} To make his strong case for personal moral responsibility Aristotle of course had to insist that we all have a capacity for virtue and vice. Further to this point Aristotle was eager to prove that there are no other ways than a correct upbringing to become a good moral agent. As a result he held that the student can acquire the that through e.g. habituation, induction, perception, experience and yet he is not very forthcoming with regards to how we learn. Do these methods all collaborate to make us learn or are they perhaps appropriate for learning different things?

3.6.3 Compulsion through external force

In Aristotle’s book counter-voluntary behavior is not blameworthy. A clear-cut case of where the blameless agent falls prey to hostile external causes is the sailor who is blown off his ship in a storm. But, as always, there are exceptions. Aristotle recognizes that there are situations where the agent can be free of blame even though their behavior was not really forced. The first two he mentions are; when the pressure is inhumanely strong and / or when the agent is certifiably insane.\textsuperscript{203} We cannot hold these individuals responsible in the same way as we normally would. Here the right thing to do is to exonerate and pity the perpetrator whom we should think of as a victim. It is not that we praise or blame the act itself but because of the unfortunate circumstances the consequences cannot be what they normally would be. A third possible scenario is the special case of action under threat – a situation where the agent (no fault of her own) is stuck between two evils.\textsuperscript{204} Aristotle presents the example of a captain who throws his cargo overboard in a storm in an attempt to save the ship and the crew. Such a captain does on the one hand act voluntarily and yet, claims Aristotle, the action can be seen as counter-voluntary due to the extreme circumstance. Had it not been for the storm he would have acted differently /NE1110a8-11/. This would have been a blameworthy action under normal circumstance but in this case it was an acceptable thing to do and in fact the captain deserves our pity. Careful not to create a loophole for any type of action Aristotle mentions that there are exceptions. If, for example, what the agent did was truly horrendous he might indeed be at fault. “But presumably

\textsuperscript{202} Not in the sense of ‘natural virtue’.


\textsuperscript{204} See Book 3.1 of the NE.
there are some things we cannot be compelled to do. Rather than do them we should suffer the most terrible consequences and accept death; for the things that [allegedly] compelled Euripides’ Alcmaeon to kill his mother appear ridiculous.” /NE1110a26-29/. So regardless how bad things are, and how free of blame the agent, it is not a green-light for just any action. Faced with certain choices even death would be preferable.

### 3.6.4 Factual ignorance

Aristotle argues that an agent also can escape blame if she (no fault of her own) was ignorant of relevant moral facts, provided of course that she would have acted differently had she known.

Broadie uses the example of Oedipus accidentally killing his father to highlight an important distinction in Aristotle’s work - that between sameness in actuality and sameness in account. Let us contemplate the following two statements;

1. Oedipus kills an old man
2. Oedipus kills his father

Both are the same actuality, namely the killing of a man but they (arguably) differ dramatically in account. The idea is that even though Oedipus knew what he was doing, in the sense that he was committing murder, he only did (1) voluntarily. The fact that unbeknownst to him the victim was his own father, however, places the patricide (which presumably is an especially horrendous crime) in the same category as counter-voluntary actions. On the condition that he is pained and tormented after realizing what he has done Oedipus deserves our pity.206

Hence, we should not be held accountable when we have no way of knowing all the facts but of course there are cases where our ignorance is not excusable. Some things we really should have known and as Hughes points out “failure to see what one is doing can itself be a moral failure - in which case it is blameworthy, as are the actions involving such failure”.207 There is an important difference between acting in ignorance, e.g. under the influence, and because of ignorance, e.g. as Oedipus. The former is a moral mistake where as the latter is a factual mistake which, although a very serious one, was not seen as blameworthy by Aristotle. Instead these unfortunate people deserve our exoneration and pity. Aristotle does not accept this in the case of strong desire as he holds that at the end of the day all actions involve desire. Hence, to say that the deed was a crime

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205 Alcmaeon murder his mother in an attempt not to get cursed by his father.
of passion, for example, and that the rage and jealousy was like a force of nature, does nothing to lighten the blameworthiness.

3.6.5 Akrasia

So let us turn to those situations where the agent is indeed to blame for her behaviour. For Aristotle the basis of moral failure was two-fold; it could be the result of ignorance (of the ‘in’ kind, not the ‘because’ one) or of akrasia.

The akratic agent is the opposite of the good one, she is said to be weak willed and incontinent. Although she knows what the good is she fails, for various reasons, to choose it. As explained above Aristotle believed that we can do the wrong thing knowingly, a view which fits well with the common sense idea that one can know that X is wrong and still go right ahead and do it. /see e.g. NE1145b27-28/. As noted by Broadie “…although at times Aristotle, like Socrates and Plato, speaks of ethical failings as ‘ignorance’, he does not follow them in holding that conduct that flows from such ignorance – the ignorance of good and bad, right and wrong – is on that account not voluntary. In much of his discussion he is clearly guided by the principle that if a decent person disapproves of such and such behaviour, the behavior is voluntary”.208

Aristotle discusses several kinds of moral failure, all are different versions of ‘to know and not keep in mind’ or perhaps ‘to know and not to know’. Broadly speaking they can be summarized in the following way;

1. One can know and not use that knowledge /NE1146b31-36/. We might for example know that stealing is wrong but we fail to bear that in mind right then and there. In many ways this seems to be a text-book example of what we mean by moral failure – to know the right thing and yet not do it. But how is this radically different to example 3 below?209 Hughes writes that this is a type of ‘un-activated knowledge’ and I would indeed agree that the operative word here is ‘forget’.

An example might be the following; my friend Dr. B has a stomach ulcer and has been told by her doctor to stick to a strict diet so when I bump into her at the Pizza Hut eat-as-much-as-you-like-buffet I am somewhat surprised. Yet as I remind Dr. B of the doctors’ advice she remembers and is happy to go

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209 Unfortunately Aristotle does not really provide any good example of this in the NE

somewhere else. Now, if Dr. B was *akratic* it would not have been all that easy to prompt her back on track. Where as Dr. B simply had forgotten the recommendation the *akratic* would not have forgotten but rather decided that they did not want to listen to the doctor and given into to their craving.

2. One can know and not consider /NE1147a1-10/. Again we know that stealing is wrong but we do not consider this act an act of stealing, e.g. sampling the grapes at the grocery store. Although bad and blameworthy this is not *akrasia*.

3. One can know and then choose to act differently /NE1147a25-1147b2/.

This is the textbook example of *akrasia* – the weakness of will. The agent gets completely carried away by his desire and ignores reason. The person is said both to have the knowledge and not to have it. “…some people, such as those asleep or mad or drunk, both have knowledge in a way and do not have it. Moreover, this is the condition of those affected by strong feelings. For spirited reactions, sexual appetites, and some conditions of this sort clearly [both disturb knowledge and] disturb the body as well, and even produce fits of madness in some people.” /NE1147a12-17/. Aristotle argues that one is blameworthy for putting oneself in that state.

When talking of *akrasia* Aristotle’s account is Socratic in the sense that he argues that the universal premise in the syllogism is intact. The trouble starts in the particular premise as the agent fails miserably to apply the knowledge they have to their own circumstance. Plato might have said that this was because the agent fails to recognize her situation in a sense, if she only knew what the virtuous act was then she would choose it. On such an account knowledge is being dragged around by desire. Aristotle, on the other hand, would have to claim that the agent can be aware of both the universal and the particular and yet do the wrong thing (because of the temporary clouding at the decision-making moment).

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211 For split into 4 different ways see Hughes. He argues that there is a difference between the drunk person and his fourth category agent namely that the latter is not knocked off their feet by the strength of the desire. See Hughes G. (2001), *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Aristotle on Ethics*, NY: Routledge, pp. 149-154. Someone like Roger Crisp on the other hand, rejects the idea that there is any real difference and holds that Aristotle simply is using the drunk man as a paradigm case not intending for it to be contrasted with the ‘sweets’ example at NE /1147a30/

212 Aristotle’s account of *akrasia* presupposes the doctrine of the practical syllogism, see Book 7 of the NE /NE1147a24-1147b19/.
3.6.6 *Akrasia* and the trainee

Burnyeat recommends adopting a temporal perspective on moral development as he believes that will make for a better understanding.\(^{213}\) The virtuous person in the making, i.e. the well brought-up trainee, is curbing her desires and fighting hard to listen to reason. On occasion it is likely that she will fail to hear the voice of reason, be overtaken by her wrongful desires and display akratic behavior. In one sense *akrasia* is a natural step on the trainee ladder, as we become better and more aware we learn to take pleasure in the right things and do not suffer inner conflict. The problem is of course that many of us appear to get stuck at this stage, at least in some aspects of our lives. We know what to do yet we fail to do it, we do not give up smoking, drink less coffee or alcohol, stop stressing or start to exercise. It seems that we cannot quite get on top of what Aristotle would have referred to as our animalistic pleasure cravings. The perplexing twist is of course that we, as rational beings, crave what we know to be bad for us. It is when it comes to choosing (rather than deliberating) that the akratic person goes wrong. She desires not the good but something else for which she has an appetite and as a result she ignores their practical reason. This person suffers from inner conflict, presumably a nasty state to be in. She is, however, not be confused with the plain wicked who has no idea of the virtues, nor with the ignorant who for what could well be a valid reason is unaware of central facts.\(^{214}\) The akratic person knows what to do yet fails to do it. She does not always take pleasure in the noble because she does not realize that the noble is also the most advantageous choice she could make.

3.6.7 *Self-control*

Aristotle did not believe that self-control was a virtue, to the contrary it was a good indication that something was deeply wrong. It is proof that the agent is lacking in virtue as she apparently feels tempted by things other than the fine and noble. At first on-look this might sound peculiar as people displaying self-control often are thought admirable. Imagine for example that Nurse C has given up smoking and when I ask him if it is a struggle he tells me that surprisingly he has felt no temptation and has not thought about it even once since he stopped. Although I would still think his decision is a good one and be happy that it is so easy for him I would not admire his discipline. Then again, had he spent his first weeks pale-faced and fraught with illicit desire but still not given in I would have been in awe. Aristotle, on the other hand, would not have been particularly impressed at all. To him Nurse C’s behavior would have indicated weakness and confirmed that he was merely a continent (rather than virtuous) person. Had Nurse C been

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\(^{214}\) As explained above in Broadie’s example with Oedipus.
exercising self-control he would have been conflicted and thus not entirely happy, genuine human excellence has to involve an inner harmony.

Aristotle’s two main examples of self-control are appetite and temper and of the two he thinks appetite the more shameful. In the NE we can distinguish three types of moral agents only one of which is considered good. The other two, the continent and the incontinent, although different have in common that they are both ‘aware’ of their wrongful actions.\footnote{215} Aristotle writes “Again, the incontinent person acts on appetite, not on decision, but the continent person does the reverse, by acting on decision, not appetite.” /NE1111b14-16/. The idea then is that the incontinent agent acts on her desire and fails to listen to reason and the continent acts on her reason but does not have the right desire;

1. The incontinent person (note that this is not the plain wicked). On occasion this agent has an idea what the right thing to do might be but as their moral judgment is corrupt and they are controlled by their desire they rarely choose it. Perhaps we could say that this person has little impulse control and fails to understand how that would be advantageous seeing that they have a different take on what might constitute eudaimonia. They seek instant gratification at every turn.

2. The continent, or self-controlling, person. This person, contrary to (1) knows what they should do but do not feel particularly inclined to do it. She is capable of taking pleasure in acts which are less than fine. This person is probably quite unhappy and tormented by her conflicting wishes. In a sense she is worse off than the ‘incontinent’ because she knows what she should do and that it will make her happy yet she is overcome by wrongful desire.

3. The virtuous person. This agent does the right thing, willingly and with pleasure and indeed they would never be tempted to act otherwise.


\footnote{216} It is worth mentioning here that Aristotle had a rather special conception of ‘choice’, i.e. that ‘choice’ and ‘rational choice’ were two different things. For a comment see e.g. Wiggins D. (1978-79). Weakness of will, commensurability, and the objects of deliberation and desire. In, *Essays On Aristotle’s Ethics*, ed. A O. Rorty, 1980, University of California Press, p. 252.
To Aristotle self-controlled agents act on their moral conclusions rather than on what their desire tells them. They might do the right thing in the sense that they choose the action that the virtuous would have chosen but they do it in the wrong way and for the wrong reasons. This is problematic because it means that the desire in their souls is not ruled by reason and hence they are (a) not the right type of person and (b) cannot be trusted to be consistent in choosing the virtuous action.

3.6.8 A neo-Aristotelian account of akrasia

In the article ‘Weakness of Will, Commensurability, and the Objects of Deliberation and Desire’ Wiggins presents what he calls a neo-Aristotelian account of akrasia.217 Here the akratic person is someone who “chooses that which he knows or believes to be the worse course of action when he could choose the better course; and that, in acting this way, the weak-willed man acts not for no reason at all – that would be strange and atypical – but irrationally.”218 This is a controversial reading and many philosophers (arguably due to the lingering effect of the Platonic tradition) have rejected it on the grounds of it being an illusion. The counter argument is of course that if we were truly convinced in our heart of hearts that this was the wrong decision we would not make it, so in fact akrasia can be traced to self-deception and ignorance.

Wiggins raises the interesting question whether or not it is possible for even the very good agent to make a mistake and slip up over a relatively simple issue. He uses an example involving an excellent horse that trips over an obstacle which a much lesser animal managed fine just minutes before. The part of the lesser animal is straightforward enough. As explained above the none-virtuous can do the right thing but not in the right way, as a result they are highly likely to reveal their true colors through inconsistency. But what about the excellent horse, how could even the best make a moral mistake? It seems reasonable to argue that if the virtuous person slips-up, and it is not a horrendous error like perhaps running from battle, she could still count as virtuous (given of course that she realized her mistake and honestly regretted it).219 The more pressing issue is, naturally, how this could ever happen. Under which circumstances could the good agent fail to ‘see’ that the virtuous thing is the most advantageous and pleasurable and then choose that action? One explanation seems to be that people could count as virtuous without having all the virtues. In earlier parts of this introduction I have defended the idea of the Happy Zone, i.e. that

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219 I am talking of blameworthy mistakes here.
an agent need not have all the virtues (or to the full extent) in order to lead a reasonably happy life. It is possible to be at the lower end of the Happy Zone without being fully virtuous.\textsuperscript{220} Admittedly Aristotle never put it exactly like this but the text is indeterminate and in light of Aristotle’s rather pragmatic character it seems reasonable to suspect that he would have allowed for a grey zone of this kind. Further to that last point, he does make a distinction between the fully virtuous and the virtuous in the text.\textsuperscript{221}

3.7 Pleasure

Most of us know all too well that we are capable of taking pleasure in things which are bad for us and at times this makes for a complex relationship with pleasure. The NE includes two discussions of pleasure and although they sometimes overlap (and even refer to one another /NE1175b/) they have appeared oddly separate to many readers.\textsuperscript{222} There is the A account in Book 7 /NE7.11-14/ and then there is the B account in Book 10 /NE10.1-10.5/. In Book 7 Aristotle seems to argue that pleasure is an activity but in Book 10 he can be read as saying that pleasure is separate from the activity and serves to make it even more appealing. The standard explanation to this is that parts of the NE are copied from the Eudemian Ethics (generally regarded as written earlier) and that Aristotle did not quite finish the editing before he passed away. However that may be the two explanations, as they now stand, often have been taken to generate two incompatible definitions of what pleasure is. This section will take a closer look at the two versions and see just how, if at all, contradictory they are.

3.7.1 The two accounts of pleasure

The A account tells the reader that “For pleasures are not becomings, nor do they all even involve a becoming. They are activities, and an end [in themselves], and arise when we exercise [a capacity], not when we are coming to be [in some state]. And not all pleasures have something else as their end, but only those in people who are being lead toward the completion of their nature.” /NE1153a9-12/.\textsuperscript{223} It is clear that on the A account pleasure is a certain (set of) activity

\textsuperscript{220} Note that I do not wish to open the door to incontinence but I would argue that an agent who possess a large number of virtues and is continent with regards to the rest could well be leading a happy life. Naturally this also have implications for how I think of \textit{phronesis}.

\textsuperscript{221} I would like to thank Roger Crisp for pointing this out to me.

\textsuperscript{222} The cross-reference has been pointed out by several scholars but perhaps most vividly so by Owen who occasionally is accused of over-interpreting it.

\textsuperscript{223} Natural disposition is to be understood in an active sense and Aristotle holds that an animal that is recharging (i.e. eating, drinking, sleeping) is not yet in its natural condition but rather preparing to return
or as Pakaluk put is “pleasure is the unimpeded activity of a living thing in its natural condition”. 224 I take Pakaluk to mean that as the natural condition is to be understood as the fulfilled life (eudaimonia) – and that a human in this state would be experiencing pleasure all the time as this is a happy and pleasurable life. This is simply a way of saying that all virtuous acts are pleasurable and hence the fulfilled life is combination deal – it is both the best and the most pleasurable life available to a human being.

The B account, on the other hand, holds that “Pleasure completes the activity – not, however, as the state does, by being present [in the activity], but as a sort of consequent end, like the bloom on youths.” /NE1174b31-33/. 225 Admittedly this sounds quite different from A above. Here the pleasure and the activity are separated and although pleasure follows from the activity but they are not the same. That said, Aristotle informs the reader that the action and the pleasure might be so closely linked that it is not surprising at all that they are often taken to be one and the same /NE1175b30-34/.

3.7.2 Two replies

This incompatibility problem has been addressed in two different ways in the literature. The first explanation seeks to downplay the perceived differences between the two versions by claiming that A and B basically make the same point. Here it is said that Book 7 should be read as stating that pleasure is an ‘unimpeded activity’ and that this pleasure belongs with the ‘unimpededness’ rather than with the activity. If the focus is moved to how an act is carried out (willingly with pleasure), as opposed to just the act on its own, then (most) of the initial contradictions disappear. Indeed such an understanding seems to go quite well with B where pleasure is seen as the icing on the virtue cake. Not only do we do the right thing but we take pleasure in doing it and thus pleasure perfects the activity. Naturally this is a contested reading. The critics point out that in B Aristotle explains that the pleasure one derives is distinct from the act itself and even that it is a goal in itself. To understand ‘unimpededness’ in this way is thus to force the issue.

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225 Broadie & Rowe uses ‘supervenient’ instead of Irwin’s ‘consequent’.

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The second explanation, generally attributed to Owen and widely accepted, admits the differences but argue that A and B are still compatible.\textsuperscript{226} Owen maintains that A and B are complementary because they answer two different questions.\textsuperscript{227} He says that it is because of the very nature of pleasure – the fact that it is ambiguous - that Aristotle gives us two stories. It can either mean something objective (the type of activity that is pleasure filled in itself e.g. going for a walk with a friend) or it can mean something subjective like what it is for me personally to take pleasure in something. In the latter case the pleasure I might take is separate from the action and can work as an extra motive for me to act. Hence, the A discussion deals with the objective, i.e. what activities are enjoyable, whereas B focus on the subjective, i.e. what pleasure adds to the enjoyed activity.\textsuperscript{228}

That is not to say, however, that there are several kinds of pleasure and that virtuous would get a double helping. That they first would get type A pleasure from doing the fine and noble and then they would also get type B pleasure because their subjective preferences would not divert from those of the virtuous agent. The conclusion is rather that there is one type of pleasure but it can be looked at in different ways.

Although basically positive towards Owen’s interpretation Pakaluk comments that it would be atypical of Aristotle to be comfortable with the notion that such a central philosophical term as pleasure could have two meanings. On that note Pakaluk adds “If Aristotle indeed wrote both the A and the B accounts, and these accounts are different, it would have been strange for him not to notice the difference, and even stranger that he not argue that one sense of the term is more basic or more proper”.\textsuperscript{229} Roger Crisp, on the other hand, questions why Aristotle would insist on such an internal hierarchy. He finds it far more likely that Aristotle in fact would be quite happy with Owen’s interpretation and agree that what we see are two different answers to two different questions.\textsuperscript{230}


\textsuperscript{228} It appears that such a distinction is more relevant for the vicious as the virtuous would only take subjective pleasure in the objectively pleasurable. The virtuous cannot separate the fine from the pleasurable it is one and the same.


3.7.3 A closer look at the subjective and the objective

The notion that pleasure, not happiness, was the ultimate justification for all our actions was a popular idea in Aristotle’s day and he was fighting hard to champion happiness in the NE. Early on in Book 7 he outlines several different versions of the argument that pleasure and the good are distinct from each other. He then proceeds to defend this claim via a lengthy, by and large unsuccessful, description of the relationship between pleasures and processes. What Aristotle wanted to convince us of was that although the chief-good is pleasurable, pleasure is not the chief-good.

In Book 7 Aristotle repeatedly refers to what he calls his thesis of pleasure, i.e. that it is the ‘unimpeded activity of the natural state’ /NE1153a12-15/. Already prior to Book 7 Aristotle had devoted both space and energy on arguing that the good (both the individual action and overall happiness) and the pleasurable coincide. Drawing on these earlier arguments of the subjective and the objective pleasures Aristotle now once and for all sought to make it clear that pleasure cannot be detached from the action it flows from. Throughout he continues to make the distinction between the objective and the subjective, between the pleasant thing / act and the pleasure one might take in it, e.g. /NE1173b22-30/, and furthermore he sticks to the idea that the pleasurable things are those that the good take pleasure in /NE1175a15-20/.

Aristotle wanted to show that it is only the virtuous agent who reliably can claim consistency regarding the objective and the subjective pleasures. The reason is that she by default only takes pleasure in that which is objectively pleasurable. So yet again Aristotle points out that the explanation is to be found in human nature – the virtuous agent takes pleasure in doing the right thing and doing the fine and noble is leading the happy life. Aristotle uses an example with how sick people like acidic tastes whereas healthy people get little pleasure from them. To take pleasure in the wrong thing is being sick in the sense that such a person is not functioning well.

3.7.4 Pleasure abuse

As shown above Aristotle wanted to argue that pleasure is good and that it should be sought, the problem was how to get people to pursue only the right kind of pleasure. How are they to avoid becoming pleasure junkies simply craving pleasure for the sake of pleasure, doing the right thing only for the rush of knowing that they did the virtuous deed? This problem becomes more pressing with regards to the subjective dimension as we can imagine how the wicked might get enormous amounts of pleasure and the virtuous get much less (which seems problematic given
that Aristotle did not want to leave anything good for the wicked). Aristotle’s reply is that we should differentiate between pleasure and pleasure. There is a certain type, the right one, which is only available to the virtuous agent and then there is the crude pleasure which is the sensation available for the wicked.\(^{231}\)

It is not entirely obvious how taking pleasure in the wrong thing / the wrong way could even qualify as pleasure. Given the earlier definition only the virtuous can have pleasure and therefore it strikes me as odd to talk of the incontinent as deriving ‘wrongful’ or ‘bad’ pleasure. The superior pleasure (or real pleasure) can only be had when one is in one’s natural state, i.e. ‘healthy’ – we understand that as being virtuous, when one is performing at one’s top capacity and so forth. It seems more plausible to admit that ‘bad pleasure’ is another feeling. The agent might think that it is pleasure but in fact that cannot be because the wicked do not have the character which would be necessary for such a sensation.\(^{232}\) In this introduction I have therefore resorted to referring to this feeling (whatever it may be) as ‘fake pleasure’. In doing this I would like to emphasize that such a feeling, even at its very best, could not be more than bleak copy of the real thing.

### 3.7.5 Pleasure as an extra motivator

In the B discussion pleasure is seen as an extra motivator for doing the right thing, as Pakaluk writes “nature has attached pleasures to good activities for a purpose – in order to stimulate and encourage those activities…”\(^{233}\). This of course re-enforces the idea that the virtuous person is true to her function. Moreover, that the types of pleasure and pain we feel depend on what type of animals we are, it is linked to our nature, and it is so wisely arranged that the things that are good for us fill us with pleasure and those that are bad pain us\(^{234}\). Pakaluk continues, “there is a characteristic pleasure for each sort of thing”\(^{235}\), intending that there is human pleasure, frog pleasure, cat pleasure etc. There is one type of pleasure for all humans because of our **ergon** and then when it attaches to the virtuous act (or perhaps any action as with wrongful pleasure) it becomes the typical pleasure of that action which might be happy pleasure, bitter-sweet pleasure and melodramatic pleasure to mention but a few types. In /NE1174b15-25/ Aristotle examines

\(^{231}\) This is empty and without value.

\(^{232}\) The agent is mistaken about her feelings, again displaying the lack of rationality we find in the wicked.


\(^{234}\) Given that we are roughly virtuous, i.e. healthy in this context.

the function of pleasure. It is often held that ‘the pleasure completes the activity’ – i.e. rather than being a constituent to the activity pleasure is its companion and they run parallel as the activity is carried out. Pleasure can be said to work both as a motive for choosing an act and for sticking with it. Here pleasure is envisioned as something that completes and perfects the activity but is separate from it (see e.g. /NE1174b14-23/). The function of pleasure is to stimulate towards something good and the nearer the activity is to completion the higher the pleasure. Pleasure pushes us and motivates us to both choose and subsequently to complete the action and Aristotle claimed that the proper pleasure of an activity will increase the intensity and accuracy of the activity /NE1175a30-b24/. This is not to say that the virtuous act needs an extra boost from pleasure that it somehow is not sufficiently attractive on its own. Rather, when we need to explain why people act the way they do it can often be given a good explanation with pleasure, even for the virtuous. But of course if you would ask a virtuous person why they do what they do, they would say for the sake of fine and not for pleasure. Indeed, they might not even understand the question because for them the fine act and the most pleasurable act is one and the same.

### 3.7.6 Painful virtues and the possibility of regret

As previously discussed in section 3.4.8.2 Aristotle argues that the virtuous agent always takes pleasure in doing the right thing and that the virtuous action is always the most rewarding and enjoyable act she can perform (see e.g. /NE1104b5-10/). At first on-look this is perplexing, clearly we can imagine many a situation where this would not be true at all. Admittedly Aristotle agrees that this would be an oversimplification and in /NE1117a32-b16/ he clarifies his position as regards the virtue of courage. Here he admits that doing the courageous thing might well be painful and this is indeed why courage is such a praiseworthy quality. He explains that although the agent recognizes that given the situation the virtuous action being the best thing, no other alternative would be better. That said she might still regret being in that situation. The warrior might have preferred to have had a few more years before it was his turn to die. He realizes that he will miss out on a potentially fulfilled life but on the other hand dying on the battle-field is reaching the highest level of nobility. Although he does not enjoy this situation yet he feels no pain as such, he deeply regrets that the world is not different but that is it, no more than that. The fact that he feels this way will not prompt him to turn around and run, that is

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simply not a possible alternative – in fact there is no alternative action for the truly virtuous in this situation. Nothing could ever have made up for fleeing like a coward and the good life would be closed forever. Hence the warrior might find it regretful that his country is at war, regretful that things turned out that way, but given the circumstances he feels no regret that he is about to die.

Irwin argues that although the virtuous person never regrets a decision he can feel sorry for having missed out on a pleasure which he had to deny himself.\textsuperscript{238} Although much more in line with most peoples intuitions and thus perhaps more reasonable I find it difficult to see that Aristotle would have been able to accept that. How can the virtuous person even view a vicious choice it as a potential pleasure? Can we recognize something as pleasurable without the slightest inkling of temptation and if we truly feel no temptation then one might be forgiven for wondering what exactly the challenge is?\textsuperscript{239}

A few brief concluding remarks. As pointed out by e.g. Owen pleasure is an end in itself, yet it cannot be identified without reference to the activity it promotes.\textsuperscript{240} This means that pleasure is part of every virtuous activity and that is the only pleasure there is. There is no alternative pleasure to be found elsewhere so to speak if you think that then you are mistaken and you are irrational. Aristotle is careful to point out that pleasure here is not the process towards some desirable state like e.g. an enjoyable convalescence might be a path to good health.

\section*{3.8 Philia & Love}

Aristotle found friendship (\textit{philia}) a very important part of human happiness. He devoted two full books to the topic in the NE and there are plenty of references to it in his other work. Whereas Aristotle was primarily focusing on the relationships with those close to us (and the idea of

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\textsuperscript{238} Irwin T. (1988). \textit{Aristotle’s First Principles}. Oxford: Clarendon, p. 380. Arguably this should be understood as the agent regretting that the world did not turn out in a way that made actions / choices such as X possible.

\textsuperscript{239} This might sound incompatible with my previous comments on McDowell’s idea of silencing, see section 3.5.7, but that is not how this is intended. What I mean here is that the virtuous cannot see it as a potential pleasure \textit{for them} (and thus regret missing out), but they can intellectually recognize it as fake pleasure.

most modern philosophers are more interested in what kind of moral obligations we might have towards people we do not know.\textsuperscript{241}

Aristotle explains that for any human to be happy she needs friends and other people close to her, without that nothing else is worth anything. \textsuperscript{NE1169b10-15}. With the possible exception of \textit{Theoria} the shared life is always superior - it is better to engage in practical activities with a friend than to do it on one’s own. Friendship is truly key to happiness in Aristotle because human wellbeing and social activity cannot be separated. So much so that even if offered the riches of the world nobody in their right mind would accept if it was conditional on a solitary existence. “Presumably it is also absurd to make the blessed person solitary. For no one would choose to have all [other] goods and yet be alone, since a human being is a political [animal], tending by nature to live together with others.” \textsuperscript{NE1169b16-20}. Friends are the ‘greatest’ and ‘most necessary’ of all external goods \textsuperscript{NE1169b11}, \textsuperscript{NE1155a1-10} without them we are only half we people we could, and indeed, should be. Aristotle claims that without friends we cannot be happy anymore than a person who sleeps away their life can \textsuperscript{NE1099a1-6}, \textsuperscript{NE1155a5-6}.\textsuperscript{242}

But there is also another dimension of friendship – the political one. Aristotle makes a great effort to show how the structure of the family is the same as that of a city-state or a political system albeit on different scales. He says that it is natural, and thus good, for man to exist in such a system, it is the framework within which we are the happiest and we fare the best. In Book 9 we see that Aristotle in part abandoned the earlier ideal of the ascetic or hermit-like life (championed by e.g. Socrates and Plato) claiming that nobody is self-sufficient in this sense. For us to be happy we simply must have friends to interact with. These relationships are necessary both to have the good life and in order to survive spiritually and mentally. Naturally I do not wish to say that he is going back on saying that the best activity for any man is \textit{Theoria}, but rather that he says that there is more to happiness than solitary contemplation no matter how fine.\textsuperscript{243} It is then presumably true that not even a philosopher of the magnitude of Plato would be best off engaging solely in \textit{Theoria}. Even he would need a social dimension, not because he would need friends in the instrumental sense, in that department he is truly self-sufficient, but rather in an intrinsic sense.

\textsuperscript{241} Admittedly Aristotle has references that imply that he thought that every human had a certain amount of \textit{philia} with every other, simply in virtue of them being fellow humans. Other references along the same lines can be found in e.g. Book 8.1 of the NE where he says that everyone cares for other people.

\textsuperscript{242} For a discussion on how friends are external good and out need to exercise he virtues on them see e.g. NE Book 1.8.

The having of a companion with whom you can pursue the happy life is valuable because your happiness in irreversibly interwoven with that of others, see e.g. /NE1099b/.

The paradigm case of friendship for Aristotle is a relationship that is mutually recognized and taking place between two adults of equal standing (balance is of the essence here). What they admire and love about each other are the virtues they can see in one another. All other relationships are inferior to this one. As will be discussed later, however, Aristotle agrees that relationships between e.g. the non-virtuous may also be called friendship but of a lesser kind. The most important aspect of friendship is spending time together, preferably engaging in *Theoria* - this is the signum of the good friendship /NE1157b19-24/.

Complete friendship helps us grow as a humans and virtuous beings as our friends inspire and help us. Both parties gain self-knowledge, “we are able to observe our neighbours more than ourselves, and to observe actions more than our own” /NE1169b33-35/. Further to that point Cooper writes “the presumption is that even an intimate friend remains distinct enough to be studied objectively; yet because one intuitively knows to be fundamentally the same in character as he is, one obtains through him an objective view of oneself”.244 So by watching our friend, our other self and a mirror, as it were, we discover ourselves. This is an ongoing process; we change when going through life and therefore we must maintain our friendships not to loose track of ourselves. As Sherman succinctly puts it “… friendship creates a context or arena for the expression of virtue and ultimately for happiness”.

### 3.8.1 Partiality – the difference between friends and others

Seeing what weight Aristotle places on having friends, it does not come as a surprise that we are morally allowed to be partial to our near and dear. Such behaviour is not only permissible but actually expected of the virtuous agent, Aristotle writes that we **should** help our friends before we help strangers /NE1160a1-10/. Indeed it is difficult to see how we would be able to create and maintain the type of very close relationships he is after if we were compelled to neutrality. Furthermore it would be surprising for such a non-intuitive idea to come from Aristotle. It seems to be in line with common sense morality that one would be allowed to favour friends and family over strangers.

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Aristotle adds that I can favour my friends both in everyday situations and instances when helping a friend is especially fine or necessary /NE1164b23-1165a2/. Although reluctant to dictate universal rules, he offers some examples of situations where partiality would be morally compulsive. One such case is the ransoming of one’s father if captured (even before paying one’s own ransom in fact)\(^{246}\), indeed we should give priority to our parents when it comes to offering support because our debt to them is greater than that we might have to others /NE1165a23-25/.

That said Aristotle does not provide and excuse for rampant nepotism, there are limitations. For example; it is perfectly fine that I invite my friend Nurse C, and not my bioethics mentor Professor A, out for dinner. But if I happen to owe Professor A money and it is between repaying her and taking my friend for a lavish surprise supper then I should repay my loan first. Reasons which would not be acceptable are to favour someone close (either in the sense that she is a friend or the sense that she has done me a favour earlier) who is not virtuous over a good man. It then seems reasonable to suppose that our right to partiality can be overridden in some situations. Although not specifically discussed in the NE Aristotle might well agree that even if our state is not by any means a meritocracy we must not favour our relatives and appoint them to positions when they are downright incompetent and corrupt. That would jeopardize the wellbeing of the society which is more important. If the candidates were equally strong, however, this constraint would of course not apply.

Although friendship is very central it is not the only parameter that counts. As always the virtuous must be sensitive to the particular, ethically relevant, circumstances. The agent must take a holistic approach to the situation and see how her choice is in harmony with other good ends in life. I must not just regard friendship aspects, but instead make an all things considered judgment of what to do.

### 3.8.2 Aristotle and egoism

Aristotle is frequently accused of both recommending and defending blatantly egotistical behaviour. It is indeed true that Aristotelian ethics preach egoism but I think it is worthwhile to take a closer look at the issue rather than to simply dismiss it as ethical egoism.

If pressed, the virtuous agent will say that the overarching rationale behind everything she does is her own *eudaimonia*. She does the fine and noble, willingly and with pleasure because that is happiness and the best life she could ever have as a human being. Now, of course that is egoism

in one sense of the word but it seems worthwhile to recall that the virtuous agent does not see the virtues as mere instruments. She is not a calculating and scheming agent who contemplates how to maximize at every turn. Because *eudaimonia* is such a rich and complex matter involving many aspects of life the agent has to be sensitive to the particular circumstances, read the situation right and then decide what to do. It might indeed be correct to act for one’s own sake but there is also (arguably) room for self-sacrifice and profound consideration for the good of others. It is important to note that being concerned about one’s own fulfilment is not a bad thing per se on this account, in fact it is the only rational thing, but one can be selfish in different ways (see Book 9.8). There is the bad, vicious way, where the agent displays graspingness and greed and then there is the good, virtuous way, where the agent is entitled to secure the greater share if the noble for herself.247

On some interpretations, Aristotle is read as saying that the own good and the universal good are one and the same. I do not find this convincing, as shown by Roger Crisp Aristotle’s virtuous agent is clearly a very selfish person in many regards but this does not make her bad, at least not in the eyes of Aristotle. Further to that last point, it is of the essence not to project a modern view of “selfishness” on the text.248 I am inclined to understand Aristotle as saying that sacrificing oneself is only something one would do for a friend. In general, our obligations to strangers are very limited and to give up an opportunity to do the fine and noble only to hand it over to a stranger would be far too demanding. To gain a more nuanced view we need to look closer at what he has to say about our relationship to others.

In his companion to Aristotle, G. Hughes argues that a reason why Aristotle is not an (ethical) egoist in spite of the emphasis on self-love is that the virtuous agent does not pursuit happiness at the expense of others - there is no shortage of the fine and noble. I am willing to agree with Hughes that *Theoria* presumably is not a limited good but if we look to the agents who find themselves in the lower parts of the Happy Zone his argument is weaker. Here there could very well occur zero-sum games such as struggles for wealth, something which arguably is required for *eudaimonia*. To show how an agent could be denied the opportunity for the fine Aristotle uses a sports metaphor; “Just as at the Olympic Games it is not the finest and the strongest that are crowned but those who compete (for the winners come from among these), so too in life it is the doers that become achievers of fine and good things – and rightly so.” /NE1099a4-6/. It has

247 Roger Crisp
248 I have put selfishness with in citation as I realize it is a difficult term in the same sense as “murder” (vs. rightful killing) is.
been suggested to me that I need not worry. No such struggle would take place between the virtuous agents because giving up an opportunity to secure an advantage for oneself in favour of one’s friend might be the noblest thing to do (see e.g. Book 9.8 for a discussion). I take this to be true but only applicable to friendships between two fully virtuous persons, not to those who find themselves at the lower end of the Happy Zone. I most certainly agree with Hughes as he emphasizes that there is no contradiction between an agent having genuine goodwill (as a motive for actions) for others and at the same time be committed to eudaimonia. The good of a friend could very well be a minor end and thus both a worthwhile thing in itself and worthwhile in the sense that it contributes to the overall good. There is no conflict in having both minor ends and a most teleias end.

Although I will not pursue this line of thought further in this introduction I would like to add a final comment which draws on Butler’s Sermon XI Upon the Love of our Neighbour. In this 1726 sermon Butler starts off by noting that every rational man has a desire to be happy – to satisfy his appetites and passions. But then he interestingly rejects that this self-love would be incompatible with a greater feeling of altruism. He defines self-love as “…an affection to ourselves, a regard to our own private good…”. This would then be distinct from any concern we might have for the welfare of our fellow man which he refers to as benevolence. The general idea is that there is no special conflict between self-love and altruism and more over that being motivated by self-love is quite different from pure egoism. Butler concludes “as it has been proved, that there is no peculiar rivalship or competition between self-love and benevolence; that as there may be a competition between these two, so there may also between any particular affection whatever and self-love; that every particular affection, benevolence among the rest, is subservient to self-love, by being the instrument of private enjoyment; and that in one respect benevolence contributes more to private interest, i. e. enjoyment or satisfaction, than any other of the particular common affections, as it is in a degree its own gratification.”. This idea also takes care of the a priori argument of psychological egoism; Butler agrees that all our actions are due to our own desire but that is just trivially true, in fact it says little or nothing about our deeper intentions and desires.

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249 I would like to thank Mrs J M Day for pointing this out to me (Lectures in Metaethics, TT-06, Oxford).
251 “if an action is my action, then its motive is my motive, i.e. the self-regarding motive of satisfying my own desires” (Mrs Day’s definition. Lectures in Metaethics, TT-06, Oxford).
To conclude this brief discussion; it is undeniable that Aristotle expects the virtuous agent to choose what is best for her. But from the agent’s perspective this means to act in accordance with the virtues, something which I think is quite different to the recommendation of the ethical egoist, i.e. maximize your own good at every turn. It seems to me that the difference in mindset, even if the result might be the same, is relevant for how we ought to think about these agents. In addition, as pointed out above, there are situations where Aristotle expects the virtuous agent to display genuine consideration for her friends even if means missing out on something good.

3.8.3 *Philia*

The preferred translation of the Greek word *philia* is friendship but I should be noticed that the English ‘friendship’ is much more narrow term than *philia*. The latter covers all the relationships we have with all kinds of people around us ranging from our family to our fellow statesmen. It includes a substantial chunk of the members in our society, for example the lifelong friend /NE1156b12/, the local cobbler /NE1163b35/ and one’s political or business contacts /NE1158a28/. Indeed Aristotle writes that we even have a certain *philia* with all of mankind, that there is an ever so small element of care among all humans.\(^{252}\) Hence, it has been argued that *philia* does not have to imply any particular intimacy. Pakaluk comments, “… since Aristotle uses the term for any affection that expects reciprocation, or that expects and finds reciprocation, no matter how extended or attenuated that affection, he applies it very widely: to families, clubs, clans, and even to reciprocal affections of loyalty and patriotism among citizens”\(^{253}\). A slightly more conservative approach can be seen in e.g. Price, Walker and Cooper who all (too various degree) argue that the lesser kinds of friendship and other relationship do not qualify as friendship proper.\(^{254}\)

For a relationship to qualify as *philia* Aristotle says that among other things the goodwill and love has to be mutual. Both parties have to be aware of the relationship and they must both harbor similar feelings for each other (see Book 8.3, /NE1155b26-56a5/). A comprehensive definition of *philia* is “…the mutually acknowledged and reciprocal exchange of goodwill and affection that exists among individuals who share an interest in each other on the basis of virtue, pleasure or

\(^{252}\) See Book 8.1 of the NE.


\(^{254}\) See e.g. Cooper J. M, (1977). Aristotle on Friendship. In, *Essays On Aristotle’s Ethics*, ed. A O. Rorty, 1980, University of California Press, p. 316. This is also expanded on below. Note however that I do not wish to say that Pakaluk’s view is incompatible with Price et al., his view might be fitted in with the idea that the lesser friendships are not friendship proper.
utility (NE VIII.2). In addition to voluntary associations of this sort, Aristotle also includes among friendships the non-chosen relations of affection and care that exists among family members and fellow citizens (cf. NE VIII.9, VIII. 12, IX. 6).”

It is clear then that we can only have philia with living things (see e.g. Book 8.2. /NE1155b27-32/). But what about animals, can we have philia with them? We all know of cases where the feelings of companionship and understanding someone might feel for their dog or their horse far supersedes any such feeling they have for the humans in their lives. The potential stumbling block would be how well, if at all, the animal can satisfy the reciprocity condition. Without getting entrenched in animal psychology, or epistemology for that matter, it seems to be the case that pets like dogs are at least capable of recognizing, becoming attached to and even mourning their master. Moreover, that they will stay ‘loyal’ even if they are severely abused by this person - implying that it is not only about ‘not biting the hand that feeds you’, or mere stupidity.

3.8.4 Three different kinds of friendship

Aristotle argued that there are three main qualities for which someone is cherished. The first is usefulness, the second is pleasantness and the third is goodness and/or excellence. He then moves on to saying that these translate into three types of paradigm cases of the relationship people have with other (naturally they frequently overlap). (See Book 8.3, /NE1156a6-8/).

1. relationships based on mutual admiration
2. relationships based on mutual pleasure
3. relationships based on mutual advantage

Aristotle would say that the first kind is superior to the other two because it is based on excellence, what the two friends admire is the virtue of the other. It deals with the inner qualities of a person in these situations we love our friend for intrinsic reasons and not solely as a road to pleasure and utility. I do not choose my friend because he makes me laugh or buys me expensive chocolates or has the right connections to secure me the best seats at the opera opening-nights. When I only love that which is useful and pleasant to me my friend becomes instrumental to securing those goods for me (see Book 8.3, /NE1156a14-19/). These intrinsic qualities are stable (contrary to e.g. fame, beauty and wealth) so even if my virtuous friend falls on hard times he will still have those personal qualities I admire and love. The foundations of such a friendship are good without qualification. My friend and I like each other, share basic values and we admire

256 Aristotle himself does not comment specifically on this in the NE.
each other for the right things. We see the virtue in one another and we are drawn to it and we wish each other good for the sake of good (see Book 8.3-8.6).

Traditionally the finest friendship is called ‘first’ or ‘proper’, this might convey the idea that only the fully virtuous agent can enjoy friendship. I would suggest that Aristotle can be read as saying that in fact we do not have to be perfect to have meaningful friendships and consequently that the lesser forms also can contain elements of the worthwhile. At any rate it would follow from my idea of the Happy Zone that anyone who would qualify as a virtuous agent on that model could have friendship which although not perfect still would count as meaningful to some extent.

As stated previously there is nothing problematic about being committed to eudaimonia as the most teleios end and at the same time have minor ends of e.g. utility and pleasure. Note that the three types of friendships overlap, but the point is that I see my friend as useful and pleasant because I love him and not the other way around (see Book 7.3 /NE1138a3-8/, Book 8.3 /NE1156b18-24/, Book 9.9 /NE1170a5-6/, Book 7.2 /NE1236b27-32/ and /NE1237a26-33/). Aristotle clearly believes that friends are important both as instruments of happiness, “…happiness also evidently needs external goods to be added, as we said, we cannot, or cannot easily, do fine actions if we lack the resources. For, first of all, in many actions we use friends, wealth, and political power just as we use instruments.” /NE1099a31-1099b2/. And as intrinsic, necessary components of happiness, “Further, deprivation of certain [externals] – for instance, good birth, good children, beauty – mars our blessedness. For we do not altogether have the character of happiness if we look utterly repulsive or are ill-born, solitary, or childless; and we have it even less, presumably, if our children or friends are totally bad, or were good but have died.” /NE1099b2-6/. We are friends in both senses because even the finest of friendships include pleasure and utility aspects and this does not taint them in any way.

3.8.5 Goodwill, well-wishing and love

Aristotle makes a distinction between goodwill in the wider sense and goodwill in the narrow sense. Some scholars have chosen to call the former goodwill and the latter love, others – to my mind more distinctly – have called the first well-wishing while reserving the term goodwill for the latter cases.258

Very generally we are told that goodwill does not come from some a sense of brotherliness, which presumably could be the case with well-wishing, but rather that its basis is shared values. Goodwill is an attitude and something that you feel towards someone close to you. Indeed, this person will be very similar to you with regards to e.g. up-bringing, background and moral outlook.  

When I have a proper character friendship (as described above) I wish my friend well in every respect because I love my friend in every respect. In Aristotle’s own words “Each of them is both good without qualification and good for his friend, since good people are both good and good without qualification and advantageous for each other.”/NE1156b13-15/.

An example of well-wishing would be saying ‘have a good day’ to a stranger on the street or ‘bless you’ to the sneezer next to you on the tube.  

Well-wishing is an essential component of all three types of friendship. This is not very demanding; and all it takes is an honest wish from one person to another and since it does not imply any sort of relationship between the parties one can wish people whom we do not know well in a genuine way. Goodwill and love, on the other hand, both have a much more narrow area of application.

Aristotle makes no distinction between loving and liking, according to him we can love our friend, spouse, children, money, glory and so on. But to love the inanimate things we must first love other people and even more importantly we must love ourselves. Things are only legitimate objects of love in their capacity as welfare promoters for the people we love. Love is clearly more demanding than well-wishing, as it actually takes commitment. When we love we actively want to do something good for the other as love means involvement. What we feel when we love is goodwill (in the narrow sense) and we deliberately seek to promote the good in the other. I help my friend either to do the good or to come closer to it and my reasons for doing so are feelings of love and friendship. What I love about the other, (I love him ‘for himself’ and ‘on his own account’), is something about him which is independent of our relationship - it is a set of qualities that is him. “But complete friendship is the friendship of good people similar in virtue; for they


259 See Book 9.5 of the NE.
260 Because of the function argument we know that there is a distinct good for things so goodwill in the wide sense is about recognizing that X would be good for this person and then wishing for X to be the case.
262 See Book 9.5 of the NE.
wish goods in the same way to each other insofar as they are good, and they are good in their own right.” /NE1156b7-10/.

At this point it could be argued that it is not particularly clear what it really means to ‘love someone for themselves’. Due to the format of this thesis I cannot properly address the issue of what the object of love in the best friendship actually is. Perhaps it is about essence, uniqueness or even shared experiences? According to Aristotle, however, it is impossible for the virtuous individual to tell if she loves her friend because she thinks her good or because she thinks her pleasant. For happy people the good is the pleasant and the pleasant is the good – it makes no sense to say “I love her but it is a shame she isn’t more pleasant!”. Consequently, a complete relationship is one that is based on two people loving one another because they take the other to be good, such a relationship includes usefulness, pleasantness and so on (see Book 8.2). It might not be entirely obvious how Aristotle squares ‘loving her for herself’ and ‘loving her as another self’. Perhaps the former answers the ‘why’ question and the latter the ‘how’ question? It is important to note that although my happiness in part depends on my friend (and that I know this) I do not love her as a mere instrument to my happiness. I love her for her own sake and thus it is ok that I also love her for the pleasure he gives me and because I find him useful.

3.8.6 Should the lesser forms even count as friendship?

Aristotle moves on to investigate what grounds we have for this goodwill that we extend to our friends. “…friendship has three species, corresponding to the three objects of love. For each object of love has a corresponding type of mutual loving, combined with the awareness of it. But those who love each other wish goods to each other [only] in so far as they love each other.” /NE1156a8-15/.

This could be taken to mean that the amount of goodwill will vary depending on the nature of the relationship but that it is always a necessary ingredient that one is prepared to do things for one’s friend, for their good and for their own sake.²⁶³ Further to that point Aristotle concludes in /NE1157a30-33/ that the lesser forms should still be called friendship because he says there are different kinds; those between good men and those of similarity “For in so far as there is something good, and [hence] something similar to [what one finds in the best kind], people [in the incomplete friendships] are friends; for what is pleasant is good to lovers of pleasure.” /NE1157a31-34/. It appears then that Aristotle is committed, to some extent, to the idea that

even lesser friendships include an element of genuine love and goodwill. I believe that the general idea here is that, although not 1st class, the relationships based on usefulness or pleasure can still count as friendships (see /NE1157a25-35/ and /NE1158b5-11/). Even though they might not contain all the right elements they could contain “enough” to at least make them count. This is a contested claim. In fact it has been debated both how the three types of friendship relate to each other and, perhaps more dramatically, if the lesser forms should even count as friendship. The positions range from blatant rejection of the lesser forms to inclusive views where the friendships of utility and pleasure are subject to various forms of qualification.264

An example: If I love my friend Dr. B for her willingness (and ability) to let me side-step the cue at the emergency when one of my children has hurt themselves then I will try to promote her ability to do so. I am much more likely to act in her interest, be helpful and generally forthcoming when it is about promoting her career (or things that will make her more powerful at the hospital) than when other matters are at stake e.g. looking after her cat, giving her good advice on how to deal with her mother or throwing her a surprise party on her birthday. I do not love her ‘in her own right’ as I would, had we had a character friendship. A relationship like mine and Dr B’s appears to have a hard time to meet Aristotle’s friendship criteria of goodness. It is not reciprocal, nor do I seem to love Dr. B for her own sake, or she me for mine - quite to the contrary we seem to appreciate very different things in one another. What I find good, pleasant and useful in Dr. B might be her medical skills and her willingness to help my children. What she finds good, pleasant and useful in me might be my language skills and my sense of humour.

But how similar do the lesser friendships have to be to the first class ones then? Or to put it more bluntly - how much do I actually have to like the other person? In the NE it is not always clear what it meant by ‘goodwill’. Sometimes it appears to be intended very broadly – as a blanket term covering everything from the very low level philia I might feel towards all of humanity to strong feelings of love and affection. On other occasions, however, the reader might get the impression that goodwill is only referring to the bare minimum, that general benevolence and respect we ought to feel towards all others 265 whereas ‘liking’ and ‘loving’ both have their own domains.


265 This is what I take it that Aristotle means when he is talking of philia for all others.
Consequently it seems to me to be perfectly reasonable to call into question what exactly the problem with the relationship between Dr B and me would be. Very broadly it seems it could be rejected on two grounds;

1. This is not love. It seems odd to argue that the above can indeed be seen as friendship of any kind because it is empty of genuine goodwill and love, or at least we could only talk of a highly qualified type of goodwill and love. This is in fact sheer exploitation, little more than a charade bearing no resemblance to a character relationship.

2. There is love but it will not last. Although accepting that inferior or lesser friends might well love and cherish each other and there can be plenty of goodwill the above case can still be rejected. The grounds for doing that would be that most of the positive feelings will be restricted to, and dependent on, my friend doing something for me. It is not ‘her’ I love but rather ‘him-as-a-generator-of-X’ and if she ceases to be that then I will care far less for her (perhaps not at all in fact). What I find intrinsically valuable here is utility and pleasure. There might be love but that is only secondary, not the prime motivator.

3.8.6.1 Focal connection

Without side-tracking too much I will very briefly say a few words about what aside from the ‘genus & species model’ is a key explanatory model for Aristotle, namely ‘focal connection’ (Irwin) or ‘focal meaning’ (Owen) or ‘central case analysis’ (Pakaluk). This was how Aristotle explained the connection between the three different kinds of friendship. The general idea is that in order to connect different things their common denominator has to be identified, this can only be done when one starts with the central case (otherwise the other things just look random). Imagine a flower - all the petals have something of the centre of the flower in them. So all ‘members’ have at least 1 (the same) feature in common both with each other and the centre. Further to that point they can only be understood as a group in a meaningful sense if we know the common denominator (i.e. the centre). An example could be a brain (our central case) and polio, BSE and Alzheimer. It is difficult to see the link between these three diseases until we realize that they are connected because they all affect the brain. They are all diseases relative to

266 As pointed out by G.E.L Owen Aristotle only managed to capture the necessary and not the sufficient conditions in his description of the focal connection. A reason might be that Aristotle did not really think in terms of the necessary and the sufficient.
the case of the healthy brain, that is how we define them and we understand them.\textsuperscript{267} This is not to be confused with Wittgenstein’s idea of family likeness. That concept can best be illustrated as a chain – all family members have at least one feature in common with at least one other family member.

3.8.6.2 Cooper, Price and Walker: 3 takes on friendship

A very standard reading might summarize the different forms of friendship in Aristotle as the following. Depending on what is attracting the two parties, and thus on what binds them together, there are three different basic kinds of friendships. However, it is only the first one that “recognizes the moral goodness of the other” and therefore it is the perfect friendship /NE:1156b7-32/. People in the lesser friendships are concerned with their own good and they will only look out for their friend when it has direct bearing on the utility / pleasure aspects of the friendship, i.e. when their own interests are at stake.

Cooper rejects this and puts forward a rather optimistic view claiming that Aristotle saw genuine goodwill and elements of unselfishness and concern for the other in all three friendships.\textsuperscript{268} The basis of this interpretation is the definition of love and friendship found in the Rhetoric (Book 2.4). The general idea is that loving your friend is “wishing for him what you believe to be good things, not for your own sake but for his, and being inclined, so far as you can, to bring these things about” /1380b36-1381a1/.\textsuperscript{269} Cooper says that Aristotle would argue that not even the lesser friendships are entirely self-centred, that there is genuine concern for the other for his own sake, and on that basis even these relationships merit to be called friendships. That goodwill carry over from first friendships to lesser.

Other scholars, e.g. Price, have criticized this and pointed out that Aristotle had many different formulations in the Rethoric, the Eudameian Ethics and the NE. Sometimes he would appear to support the idea that there is goodwill in all friendships and on other occasions he seemed to reject it. Further to that point Price says that what Cooper believes to be goodwill in the lesser friendships is in fact merely the much weaker feeling of well-wishing. That is the impersonal, non-committing, unspecified benign attitude we might well fell towards the whole human race, even animals. Cooper might respond to this by pointing out that Aristotle recognizes that there


\textsuperscript{268} Again we should recall that *philia* is a much wider concept that our friendship. It is more about a shared outlook on life and the worthwhile than the intimacy that we consider central in friendship.

\textsuperscript{269} And of course what Aristotle writes in Book 8.2 of the NE.
clearly is a difference between lesser friends and those who just happen to have a joint interest and it is between those two groups that the division lies. Cooper “…a businessman is no friend of all his regular customers, and when a personal relationship is more or less purely exploitative it would be taken for irony to describe the persons in question as friends”. 270 It appears that Cooper is saying that there are three levels, two which qualify as friendships and then the rest. 271

Walker on the other hand would reject Cooper’s interpretation, but not on the same grounds as Price. For him the problem is rather that he does not see Aristotle’s friendships as focally related. 272 Instead he reads passage /NE1157a30-35/ to mean that although the lesser friendships are indeed friendships they are only so with qualifications (they do not manage to meet the criteria well enough and thus they are not friendship proper). 273 This is so because these people only feel mutual, and recognized, goodwill and love for each other when they find the other useful and / or pleasant.

Cooper expresses concerns that by rejecting cases like the example above (with Dr B and me) a first-class friendship might become an unattainable ideal, which he would find ‘harsh’ and ‘depressing’. 274 Price, on the other hand thinks such worries are uncalled for “what is needed [for goodwill and friendship] is a community of values (and that may only be partial), not a community of saints”. 275 Not convinced, Cooper concludes that the ‘perfect friendship’ as described by Aristotle is just a paradigm case – that is not the only version of friendship. Even though we might have to settle for the lesser forms all is not lost, also those forms contain genuine well-wishing and goodwill for the sake of the other. I find this a very plausible interpretation, anyone seeking to make constructive use of Aristotle’s ideas would be wise to adopt the position that he created paradigm cases in the interest of clarity not because he believed that the only thing that counts are the perfect instances. Presumably Aristotle thought both pure friendship and the fullness of virtue very rare, but although that does not make those states less

271 For something to count as friendship, also the lesser kind, there has to be a genuine interest in the other for his sake, although there is of course much less interest and less merging of lives, and less of spending time etc.
272 Nor as related through analogy either for that matter as was suggested by Fortenbaugh W. W, (1975). Aristotle’s Analysis of Friendship: Function and Analogy, Resemblance, and Focal Meaning, Phronesis, Volume 20, Number 1, 1975, pp. 51-62(12).
beautiful or less admirable it does mean that perfection is not the only way. We can still have friendship in a lesser way and we can still be virtuous to a lesser extent.

3.8.7 What to do when my friend is bad

As argued above Aristotle acknowledges that there are lesser relationships than first class friendships which merit to be called friendships given that they meet certain criteria. These may take place either between two non-virtuous persons or one virtuous and one non-virtuous. The friendship between the latter two is, however, likely to be very complicated as a result of their different ways. As Price writes “the virtuous man aims his choices at the fine, and his appetites fall into line; the vicious man aims his choices at the satisfaction of his appetite”. The non-virtuous man (both the akratic and the self-controlled man) is at the mercy of his appetites and is thus often regretful of what he has done. To love such a man is difficult and the friendship will be very hard but (arguably) not impossible. That said there is no denying that there are other passages which seem to contradict this, e.g. “hence friendships of base people turn out to be vicious. For they are unstable, and share base pursuits; and by becoming similar to each other they grow viscous” /NE1172a9-12/. I take it that Aristotle is concerned not so much about the virtuous friend becoming corrupted but rather that she should be putting her limited time to better use. For example that she should spend it with her good and virtuous friends. As explained earlier I would still think, however, that given that we can be happy without being perfect we can also have imperfect, but worthwhile, friendships. If, however, the friendship adds nothing to my fulfillment I might be wise to give up on that friend. One example would be if he turns out to have a very different view of the fulfilled life, so much so that it would undermine my eudaimonia to help him in promoting his goal.

3.8.8 Self-love – the greatest love of all?

In Book 9.4-9.8 Aristotle develops the idea of the friend as ‘another self’, to feel like that about one’s friend is the ideal case (this is how Aristotle gets talking about self-love). One should care about his happiness as much as one’s own – indeed like one’s own – and extend one’s goodwill. As shown later on in the same book this is indeed the rational thing to do as a substantial part of my happiness lies in the interaction with friends.

Good and true friends do things for one another and even though it might not be about counting and taking turns there is an overall balance that both parties are aware of. But what you do for

your friend is not done to secure advantages for yourself, it is done simply because you see your
friend as another self. Your friend is an extension of you, in the sense that your happiness is
partially dependent on him part of your fate lies in the hands of your friend(s). As mentioned
before, however, one must take heed of the deep rooted ambiguity in these passages in the NE.277

Aristotle said that we first understand self-love and only later love for others. Self-love develops
along with the virtues through out childhood and adolescence, and then later on the love for
others comes. As a consequence it is only as mature adults that we can form virtue based
friendships. Aristotle holds that we ought to love ourselves, in fact that we ought to love
ourselves the most. But this love must not express itself as it does in the vicious who thinks that
it is all about securing goods for oneself, to accumulate wealth and pleasures at the expense of
others. Those who develop the bad self-love are those who fail to identify themselves with their
thinking part and thus reason is not on top of desire in their souls. Meeting this central obligation
to look after one self, being as Aristotle put is ‘exceptionally eager to do fine actions’
/NE1169a8/ means to live life in the way that is the fulfilled life. Not to run around fighting
others over limited worldly goods like wealth and fame. “so the good person must be a self-lover,
since he will both help himself and benefit others by doing fine actions. But the vicious person
must not love himself, since he will harm both himself and his neighbours by following his base
feelings.” /NE1169a12-15/.

3.8.9 Self-regarding and other-regarding virtues

Summarizing how we should treat, and feel about, a good friend Aristotle identified four
characteristic marks of friendship; (i) we should assists our friend, (ii) we should feel joy at the
fact that our friend exists, (iii) we should seek our friend’s company, and (iii) we should
sympathise with our friend and share her happiness as well as her sorrows.278 But if we should
treat a good friend like this then this is also how we should treat ourselves – something which has
proven a controversial idea indeed.

Traditionally virtue ethicists have divided the character virtues into two groups. The first is said
to consist of other-regarding virtues, focused on the forwarding of the good of others, whereas
the second consists of self-regarding virtues benefiting the agent herself. Very briefly the idea is

277 Even though the argument just outlined might well provide a good motive for action for the virtuous
agent, it is of the essence to recall that the ultimate justification for anything is always the agents own
happiness.

University Press, p. 277.
that some virtues, such as generosity, are other-regarding as they seem to presuppose some sort of exchange between two different agents (in fact it is sometimes argued that the only, truly, self-regarding virtue is temperance). They are said to be other-regarding in the sense that they deal primarily with the promotion of happiness of others as well as the forwarding of the common good. This distinction should not be understood as an attempt to reduce the latter to the former, i.e. that we are only concerned with the happiness of others because the common good is key to our own *eudaimonia*. Although this is true on one level (the good of others is essential to me because without them I cannot thrive) it is false on another as the concern for the common good is not purely instrumental. As Aristotle explains it is both a means and an end in the same sense as the individual virtues are to the whole of virtue and *eudaimonia*. Just because the ultimate rationale for all my actions is happiness does not mean that everything I do to secure that end is a mere mean void of value and meaning in itself. Naturally, if that was not the case it would not be meaningful to talk both of self-regarding and of other-regarding virtues at all. This is problematized and discussed in Article 5 where I reject the above distinction. Instead I suggest that many of the so-called other-regarding virtues in fact have a dual scope, i.e. they are ‘other-and self-regarding’. As a consequence an agent needs to apply the virtue both with regards to herself and with regards to others in order to be fully virtuous.

### 3.8.10 The friend as a separate being

Aristotle argues that a friend should be another self, see for example /NE1166a32/ and /NE1170b6/. Some might say that this talk of another self sounds paternalistic and appears to be incompatible with autonomy but that seems to be a misreading of Aristotle. For him the two friends are clearly separate individuals who respect each other.279

So what sort of unity is Aristotle talking about then? Price identifies two types of unity that Aristotle did not intend; that of the merging of lovers and that of the slave and his master (or a parent and a baby). The former is of course the classical epitome of romantic love where souls merge and people cease to be whatever they were before. All their preferences are shared and their status as individuals is but a distant memory. They understand one another at the deepest level, they see everything and, perhaps because of that, they love the mortality and imperfection in the other.280 Such a relationship would clearly be incompatible with Aristotle’s view that friends are, and should be, two separate beings. The latter unity would allow for me to treat my friend as

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280 One version of this can be found in Plato’s Symposium.
an instrument, I could exploit him for his usefulness and my pleasure. But, friendship also involves justice and according to Aristotle I cannot (in an unqualified sense) do injustice to my serf or my child – they are parts of me and have no rights separate from me. Thus this cannot be the type of unity that Aristotle has in mind when he talks of friends.

Price tests the following idea “I am to care for my friend in the kind of way in which I care about my whole welfare, not just a part of it”. As reasonable as the above may sound there is a snag. What if I am willing to sacrifice all my interests for what I find a very worthy cause? On this account it would follow that it would be alright for me to do that on behalf of my friend too. This would be peculiar and arguably not what can be expected from me as the good friend. Even if preferences were no problem (seeing that we are both virtuous we would have the same opinion of what is good and worthwhile), acting in this way would mean that I secured all the moral advantages for myself, while my friend would be stuck with all the material sacrifice. What should be done, on the other hand, is to allow for one’s friend to choose the worthy cause on his own. Naturally his material sacrifice would be the same but now he can share the moral advantages with me, or at least some of them as we shall see below.

Further to that last point, this concern for the good of the other might also take the expression of self-sacrifice. On most occasions the sacrifice involves passing on distributable, scarce, goods for which there is a zero-sum game e.g. money, power opportunity. But there can also be the ultimate sacrifice – to die for one’s friend. Under the right circumstances giving my life for my friend in this way would mean that I had secured a noble death which would be the culmination of my fulfilled, if short, life. But there is an extra twist – if my friend then is prepared to take my place to take my place I should let him. The right thing to do is to let him die for me. The idea is that by proving that I am not greedy to be the agent that does good, that I am willing to let my friend be the person who gets the glory I am in fact the most praiseworthy. The bottom line is that I both secure the greater share of the noble for myself and live to fight another day. This is what Aristotle talks about in Book 9.8 “He treats honours and offices in the same way; for he will sacrifice them all for his friends, since this is fine and praiseworthy for himself. It is not surprising, then, that he seems to be excellent, since he chooses the fine at the cost of everything. It is also possible, however, to sacrifice actions to his friend, since it may be finer to be responsible for his friend’s doing the action than to do it himself.”

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Book 9.8 has a reputation for being a strange and difficult passage and it is indeed very paradoxical – by giving up the opportunity to do the fine and noble for my friend I in fact end up securing the greatest good for myself.

In light of what has been said so far it should be clear that when we choose a character friend we choose another self. On a very deep level my happiness is interwoven with that of my friend, he holds the key to part of my happiness as I do to his. Yet we are separate entities in every sense, “the oak and the cypress do not grow in each other’s shadow” as the poet Kahlil Gibran observed. Aristotle points out that it takes time and trust to find such a friend and it requires having “experience of him and be on familiar terms with him, which is extremely difficult”. He says that because the fine friend is such a high-quality friend in the sense that he fulfils all (or at least most) of my needs I do not need many. That said I should have as many as I can as long as the quality of the friendship does not suffer due to time constraints. “Presumably, then, it is good not to seek as many friends as possible, and good to have no more than enough for living together; indeed it even seems impossible to be an extremely close friend to many people.” Like good men my friend and I have a joint project which we work on continuously. We identify with each other and we see the actions of the other as one’s own actions and thus we contribute to each other’s eudaimonia. We are in agreement on where we are heading (both internally and with one another) and we suffer no conflicting wishes. For bad men one the other hand it is quite a different matter. They are always tormented by conflicting wishes and temptations, see e.g. and .

Friends might not agree on everything but there is definitely what the Greeks would have called ‘homonoia’ - a consensus on how life should be lived and what overall goals that are worthy of pursuit. Homonoia is not found through leading very similar lives, or grazing the same pasture as Aristotle would have put it, but rather through the sharing of ”conversation and thought”. For example; let us assume that my friend Professor A and I are committed to the virtue of generosity. Professor A shows this by donating money for a new wing at the public hospital. I, less well off, do it by spending an afternoon every week at the local state school helping the students with their home-work.

### 3.8.11 Civic friendships

In Book 8.9-8.12 Aristotle elaborates on what we might call civic friendship, i.e. the type of affection that citizens of the same state might (perhaps should) feel for one another. The basis

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for this would be the fact that they are members of the political association that is a country. Such feelings are essential to the good functioning of the political society as it maintains the whole social project. Aristotle compares the structure of the family to that of the structure of political society and argues that it is hardly a coincidence that they mirror each other. For example he says that kingship corresponds to a father and his children /NE1160b24-27/ and aristocracy corresponds to a husband and wife governing their separate parts of the household /NE1160b33-1161a3/.

Aristotle talks of friendship as existing in koinonia (an association, a community or a partnership). He explains that people form such groups when they want things that they cannot secure as individuals but only through cooperation with others - they join forces and go after a common goal. According to Aristotle it is friendship that binds the citizens together but justice is also necessary to get any joint project off the ground. Without justice the whole cooperative system just collapses. But although justice is generally considered key to a good political order that is not to say that it is the all encompassing political virtue. For that to be the case it would follow that the good society would always be the just society – something which is clearly false. There could, for example, well be a society which is good as a result of everyone living there are friends. “…in our travels we can see how every human is akin and beloved to a human being. Moreover, friendship would seem to hold cities together, and legislators would seem to be more concerned about it than justice. For concord would seem to be similar to friendship, and they aim at concord among all, while they try above all to expel civil conflict, which is enmity. Further, if people are friends, they have no need of justice, but if they are just they need friendship in addition; and the justice that is most just seems to belong to friendship.” /NE1155a23-30/.
4. Preview of Articles I-V

**Article I: Bodily Rights and Property Rights**

The first article of this thesis was written in collaboration with Sven Ove Hansson. It discusses ownership of biological material from a philosophical perspective drawing on the work of e.g. Felix Cohen and Tony Honoré. Whereas previous discussions on ownership of biological material have been much informed by the natural rights tradition, insufficient attention has been paid to the strand in liberal political theory, represented by Felix Cohen, Tony Honoré and others, that treats property relations as socially constructed bundles of rights. In accordance with that tradition, we propose that the primary normative issue is what combination of rights a person should have to a particular item of biological material. Whether or not that bundle qualifies to be called “property” or “ownership” is a secondary, terminological issue. We suggest five principles of bodily rights and show how they can be applied to the construction of ethically appropriate bundles of rights to biological material. The first principle stipulates: No material may be taken from a person’s body without that person’s informed consent. The second: Under conditions of informed consent, removal of bodily material is allowed as a means to obtain significant therapeutic advantages for the person herself. The third: Under conditions of informed consent, removal of bodily material is allowed as a means to obtain significant therapeutic advantages for one or several other persons, provided that the removal does not cause serious or disproportionate harm to the person from whom the material is taken. The fourth: If there is a significant risk that a certain practice in dealing with a biological material will result in exploitation of human beings, then that practice should either be disallowed or modified so that the exploitation is brought to an end. The fifth, and final principle is: The system of legal rights should promote the efficient distribution of biological material for therapeutic purposes to patients according to their medical needs.

**Article II: Different Types – Different Rights. Distinguishing Between Different Perspectives on Ownership of Biological Material.**

The second paper should be regarded as a stand-alone continuation of *Article I*. Drawing on the social construction theory of ownership in biological material this paper discusses which differences in biological material might motivate differences in treatment and ownership rights.
The analysis covers both the perspective of the person from whom the material originates and that of the potential recipient. Seven components of bundles of rights and their relationships to various types of biological material are investigated, drawing on the analytical tradition of Tony Honoré. To exemplify these categories the cases of a heart, a kidney, stem cells and hair are used.

In the text the term “biological need” is used. This is of course a concept charged with many a connotation, and any detailed analysis is far beyond the scope of both the article and the thesis. In spite of this I have decided to use this term and by it I mean those needs that are related to the biological functioning of our bodies. This would then include the physical need that every living human being has for a heart, a liver etc. Practically speaking, these are needs that human beings have under all, or nearly all, social conditions. Admittedly it may not be possible to draw a sharp line between biological and other needs but none the less there appears to exist a common sense understanding of what a biological need is. It should be noted, however, that I do not wish to say that all biological needs are equally important.

The paper reaches the perhaps somewhat surprising conclusion that the higher the biological need of an e.g. organ the fewer are the rights that are attached to it in current legislations. On the surface this may well appear counter intuitive. Should we not enjoy very strong rights with regards to biological material which literally means the difference between life and death? A possible explanation could be that the lawgiver tries to protect us by not giving us those rights as we might use them to our disadvantage, and as a result suffer loss of organs and other types of biological material.

**Article III: Why We are Not Allowed to Sell that Which We are Encouraged to Donate.**

In this article I chose a virtue ethics approach seeking to explain why we are morally allowed to donate but not to sell our organs. I argue here that virtue ethics can be action guiding in the sense that it is clear what decision a virtuous person would reach when faced with the choice between donating their organs for free or giving them up conditioned on a price. Further to that point it is concluded that donating organs will bring us closer to a state of flourishing as it implies that we act in accordance with several of the virtues as listed by Aristotle when we refrain from monetary compensation in these instances.
**Article IV: On the Necessary Self-regarding Aspects of Other-regarding Virtues.**

This article examines the self-regarding aspects of a number of so-called other-regarding character virtues, and challenges the common assumption that the character virtues can be divided into two groups, one consisting of other-regarding virtues and one of self-regarding virtues. The former group is often said to focus on advancing the good of others whereas the latter primarily benefits the agent herself. Here it will be argued that virtues like *philia*, justice, beneficence, even temper and generosity — traditionally all seen as other-regarding — contain strong self-regarding aspects. The central claim of this article is that these self-regarding aspects of the other-regarding virtues are necessary components of complete virtue. Given the scope of these virtues, an agent has to act virtuously in her dealings both with herself and with others in order to qualify as fully virtuous.

**Article V: Why Organ Donation is a Supererogatory Act. A Discussion on *Philia* and the Moral Right to Favour Oneself.**

I have previously argued (*Article III*) that if an agent is contemplating donating one of her kidneys it is more virtuous to give it up for free than to sell it. Donating under such circumstances would mean acting in line with several of the virtues as listed by Aristotle, something which would bring us closer to a state of flourishing. This prompted some of my colleagues to ask me if I thought it followed that all (healthy) virtuous agents have an obligation to give up one of their organs given the current organ shortage. My answer to that is no. Regardless of how closely related the person is to me, in my example it is my sister, I am still morally entitled to be partial to myself. *Article V* applies the ideas that were developed in *Article IV* to the case of living organ donations to next of kin. The article presents an Aristotelian virtue ethics-based explanation of why it is morally permissible (in most cases) for a virtuous agent to refrain from acting as a living organ donor for a next of kin. It is shown that the virtuous agent has a moral right to prioritize herself as the ultimate reason for action is the eudaimon life. The commitment to this fundamental principle is manifested through actions which are in line with the character virtues, here exemplified by *philia*. In order to illustrate the practical usefulness of applying Aristotelian virtue ethics to bioethics, a number of practical examples, fictive and real, are introduced. It should be noted that I do not wish to say that it is morally bad to donate under these circumstances but simply that beyond what any reasonable moral theory can ask of us.
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