Aristotle on the Priority of Virtuous Actions

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I, Leonardo Serafini, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

ABSTRACT

This thesis is about the relationship between virtuous actions and virtuous dispositions in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (*NE*). It argues against the family of claims on which virtuous actions are virtuous derivatively from virtuous dispositions and in favour of the converse thesis: namely, that virtuous actions are virtuous not only independently of virtuous dispositions, but also definitionally prior.

To support this claim, I first analyse *NE* II.4, proposing that those who endorse the idea that an action counts as virtuous when, and because, it is performed by a virtuous agent face important challenges, both textually and conceptually. I argue that II.4's distinction between 'virtuous actions' and 'acting virtuously' enables us to see that for Aristotle there is no required predicate of an agent's character for the performed action to count as virtuous; rather, it is virtuous independently of the excellence of the person carrying it out.

Second, I provide a criterion of correctness for virtuous actions by discussing the doctrine of the mean as found in *NE* II.6. I defend the thesis on which virtuous actions are virtuous because they hit the mean-relative-to-us – this being a notion which is not, in turn, dependent on that of the virtuous agent, as a careful reading of *NE* III.4 indicates. I further argue that the being *mesotēs* of the ethical virtues is to be explained by reference to the notion of the mean-relative-to-us as it applies to our practical and emotional responses, thereby vindicating the definitional priority of virtuous actions. Mean (sc. virtuous) dispositions inherit their intermediacy from mean (sc. virtuous) actions (and feelings).

I conclude by showing that Aristotle is not a virtue ethicist in the modern sense since he does not define right action in the same distinctive way: that is, Aristotle does not appeal to aretaic notions as being ultimately right-making.

Impact Statement

This dissertation presents an unorthodox account of the relationship between virtuous actions and virtuous dispositions in Aristotle's ethics by closely engaging with the *Nicomachean Ethics*. As such, it contributes to the exegetical investigation of some of the central chapters of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, as well as to the general understanding of the structure of Aristotle's ethics. This work also has significant implications outside of Aristotelian scholarship and ancient philosophy: in arguing that Aristotle should not be considered a virtue ethicist in the modern sense, it questions the appropriateness of certain moral taxonomies and the contribution that the Stagirite has made in shaping them. This, in turn, opens up the way for future non-virtue-ethical treatments of Aristotle's ethics and raises the challenging question of its role (if any) as a distinct method of ethics.

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Introduction

In this work, I investigate the metaphysical relationship between virtuous actions and virtuous agents in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (*NE*) in order to identify which of the two is, in a sense, basic – that in terms of which the other is derivatively determined. As Vasiliou (2011, p. 171) perceptively observes, this metaphysical question is no different from a *definitional* question, insofar as we understand this idea in Platonic and Aristotelian terms. In fact, for them, questions of the form 'What is X' (*ti esti*) were not meant to be linguistic, capturing something about the meaning of words, as talk of definition might misleadingly lead us (contemporary readers) to think. Instead, they were meant to capture the essence of a thing: what makes that certain thing the thing it is. If so, in this context, we too can take this metaphysical question to be definitional, for the question I am pursuing is precisely a question regarding the essence of virtuous action: sc. whether it is prior to or derivative of virtuous agents with their excellent character traits.

A caveat is in order. In putting the question in these terms, I do not mean to say that the definiens (whatever it will turn out to be) will fully exhaust the definiendum. All I am committed to is the rather more general thought that one of the two members of the relationship under inquiry cannot be defined without reference to the other and that in this (and only this) it enjoys a derivative status, whereas the other enjoys definitional priority.

More precisely, I intend to argue that, despite a dominant strand of interpretation, we should not attribute to Aristotle the idea that virtuous actions are virtuous because they are performed by a virtuous agent, nor, at a more general level, that the criterion itself of what makes an action virtuous is dependent on the virtuous agent and her excellent dispositions. Rather, there are good reasons, both textual and conceptual, for inverting the direction of priority: virtuous actions enjoy definitional priority over virtuous dispositions or, in other words, they are part of what settles their definition.

Ultimately, the view I propose will rest on a conjunction of the following three claims: (i) that virtuous actions are virtuous independently of their being performed by a virtuous agent; (ii) that the criterion itself of what makes an action virtuous is not, in turn, dependent on the notion of virtuous agents and, lastly, (iii) that virtuous dispositions are defined (at least partly) in terms of virtuous actions. Thus proceeding, I believe, will have a significant impact both on exegetical and philosophical grounds. More specifically, it will (a) free Aristotle's work from

certain misleading interpretations which obfuscate the real meaning of some key passages and, further, (b) it will shed a rather different light on the alleged Aristotelian origins of recent virtue ethics.

I structure the work as follows.

In Chapter 1, I explore and counter the idea that an action is virtuous when, and because, it is performed by a virtuous agent. I do so by discussing *NE* II.4, where Aristotle writes that 'actions are called just or temperate when they are the sort that a just or temperate person would do' (1105b5-7). Some commentators (e.g. Taylor, 2006) have interpreted this passage to the effect that Aristotle himself attributed priority to virtuous agents over virtuous actions. Contrary to this interpretation, I will argue that Aristotle does not attribute priority to the virtuous agent. I will do so by analysing the broader context where the claim is found – a context in which Aristotle responds to an *aporia* for his habituation process by drawing a robust distinction between 'virtuous actions' and 'acting virtuously' (see Jimenez, 2016 and Hirji, 2018b). For an agent to act virtuously, Aristotle's distinction indicates, she cannot just perform virtuous actions. Instead, she needs (1) to act knowingly (*eidōs*), (2) to choose the action and choose it for its own sake (*di'auto*) and (3) to act from a stable and unchanging disposition (*bebaiōs kai ametakinētōs*).

This distinction, I will argue, rests on the idea that while something about the agent must be true for a certain action to be virtuously performed, nothing about the agent must be true for the action to count as virtuous. Keeping the distinction sharp will require rejecting the reading on which the three conditions just stated are read as conditions for an *act* to be registered as virtuous, and not for an *agent* to act virtuously. I will contend that this alternative reading is both hard to square with the chapter itself (sc. it is exegetically onerous) and unnecessarily costly in its solution to the *aporia* (sc. it is philosophically onerous). I conclude by vindicating the idea that, actually, Aristotle in *NE* II.4 is claiming that virtuous actions are virtuous independently of their being performed by a virtuous agent – this being claim (i) above. I gloss the chapter by offering an alternative (epistemological) reading of the contentious passage (1105b5-7) from which we started.

In Chapter 2, building on the works of Brown (2014) and Aufderheide (2017), I discharge the burden of finding a criterion of correctness for virtuous actions which is not dependent on virtuous agents and their dispositions – this being claim (ii) above. In this respect, I believe that the doctrine of the mean contains illuminating insights. Not only, I want to argue, does this doctrine allow us to identify a criterion which is not dependent on the prior notion of excellent

dispositions, it also allows us to draw the further conclusion that virtuous dispositions inherit their 'intermediacy' from mean actions and feelings. The being 'a mean state' (*mesotēs*) of the ethical virtues is derivative of the being 'mean-relative-to-us' (*meson pros hēmas*) of actions and feelings – this being a defence of claim (iii) above. In sum, by looking at this central doctrine, we can both discharge our burden and strengthen the attribution of definitional priority to virtuous actions over virtuous characters.

I close the chapter by rejecting a powerful objection (see Aufderheide, 2017): that Aristotle, in mentioning the practically wise person in the full definition of ethical virtues (1107a1-2), surreptitiously reintroduces the definitional priority of the virtuous agent. Is the mean response mean because the practically wise agent determines it to be such? I will answer in the negative.

In Chapter 3, I evaluate whether Aristotle's ethics counts as a form of virtue ethics. To answer this question, I will start by identifying the distinguishing feature of virtue ethics – that is to say, what makes it a distinct normative ethical theory alongside consequentialism and deontology. I will argue that virtue ethics is a third method of ethics because it offers a distinctive criterion of right action, appealing to aretaic concepts as ultimately right-making (and not, say, to promotion of best consequences or compliance with a certain moral rule). I will then illustrate why, in light of the findings of Chapter 1 and 2, we have compelling reasons to resist including Aristotle's ethical theory under the heading 'virtue ethics'. To this aim, I will critically engage with McAleer's (2007) meticulous attempt at arguing that Aristotle *is* a virtue ethicist even if it is true that (as I contend) Aristotle does not define right action by reference to the virtuous agent like traditional virtue ethicists do. I argue for the implausibility of his account on two independent grounds: (i) its over-inclusiveness and (ii) its ascription to Aristotle of a view for which there is strong textual counter-evidence. I conclude by discussing the implications that answering this question has for our treatment of Aristotle's ethics.

CHAPTER 1

VIRTUOUS AGENTS, VIRTUOUS ACTIONS

1. Introduction: 1105b5-7

One way of understanding the direction of priority between virtuous agents and virtuous actions is to hold that an action is virtuous when, and because, it is performed by a virtuous agent.

A dominant strand of interpretation attributes this view to Aristotle.[1] Indeed, it is a somewhat common thought that for Aristotle virtuous actions are virtuous only derivatively; that is, that their virtuousness is derivative of the virtuousness of the agents carrying them out. On this construal, no 'out-of-character' virtuous action would be possible, for it is something about the virtuous agent's state which determines the act's nature (i.e. its virtuousness).[2] Ultimately, those who believe in this view endorse what we could call, for the sake of a label,

> **Agent Priority:** an action is virtuous *because* it is performed by a virtuous agent (sc. an agent with virtuous dispositions).

Essentially, the idea here is that it is something about the agent and her excellent character which *makes* a certain action the kind of virtuous action it is. Excellent character traits are regarded as being, in a sense, basic; that in terms of which virtuous actions are defined.

One of the chapters of the *Nicomachean Ethics* which is often cited in this connection is II.4. Here, Aristotle writes that 'actions are called just or temperate when they are the sort that a just or temperate person would do' (1105b5-7).[3] This passage has been read as maintaining that it is something about the virtuous agent which makes a certain action the sort of virtuous action it is and that, if this is correct, Aristotle's ethics is agent-centred. Indeed, C. W. Taylor, remarking on this passage, maintains that Aristotle is here assigning 'definitional priority to the

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[1] See Joachim (1951), Hardie (1968), Williams (1995), and Vasiliou (2007). I discuss their views below, in §3.2.

[2] In Chapter 2, I discuss a different way of interpreting the priority of virtuous agents over virtuous actions. To anticipate, on the construal I will there discuss and reject, even if an action's virtuousness does not depend on its performance by a virtuous agent, it is still held that what makes an action virtuous (that is, its criterion of correctness) is dependent on the virtuous agent at a more general level.

[3] Translations of the *NE* are based on those of Rackham (1934), unless otherwise noted.

agent over the act: […] courageous acts are defined as the sort of thing that the courageous person does' (2006, p. 94). From this, he concludes that Aristotle's theory is 'an 'agent-centred', as opposed to an 'act-centred' one' (*ibid.*). 1105b5-7 has been taken as textual proof that Aristotle himself endorses Agent Priority.

In this chapter, I want to argue that this interpretation is mistaken and offer an alternative reading of the misleading passage just quoted. In order to do so, I will now locate the quotation within its broader context; a context the most charitable and coherent interpretation of which suggests, instead, a rejection of Agent Priority.

2. The *aporia* of *NE* II.4

NE II.4 begins with a puzzle (*aporia*) for an idea previously introduced in *NE* II.1: namely, that 'we become just by doing just things, temperate by doing temperate things, and courageous by doing courageous things' (1103a34-b1). In truth, this is already an ethical delineation of a more general thought which, being content-neutral, applies just as much to technical skills (*technai*) as to ethical virtues. The more general thought is this: that one becomes an X kind of person by performing an X kind of actions. By way of instantiation, just as one becomes a harpist by playing the harp or a grammarian by producing grammatical outcomes, similarly, one becomes virtuous by performing virtuous actions. Call this familiar idea the Habituation Principle (HP).[4]

On HP, going back to the case of ethical excellences, we are not born virtuous (*NE* II.1, 1103a19-23).[5] Rather, all of the excellences of character are stable dispositions generated by a repeated performance of the relevant types of actions. As such, ethical virtues arise 'from habit' (*ex ethous*) and neither are present in us at birth nor naturally manifest themselves as we grow up. Instead, a certain active involvement needs to take place: all that is given to us by nature is the ability to acquire these dispositions *if* we engage in the correct active process. Let this suffice as a rough portrayal of HP.

Now, back to the *aporia*. The puzzle is dialectically introduced through a hypothetical sceptic, who is perplexed as to how it is possible that one can perform an X kind of actions before one is already (*ēdē*) an X person. Here is how Aristotle frames it (with alphabetical insertions for reference purposes):

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[4] I borrow this expression from Vasiliou (2011, p. 170).
[5] Contrast with the *natural* virtues of *NE* VI.13.

Aporia. 'A difficulty may however be raised as to what we mean by saying that [A] in order to become just men must do just actions, and in order to become temperate they must do temperate actions. For [B] [B₁] if they do just and temperate actions, they are just and temperate already (*ēdē*), just as, [B₂] if they spell correctly or play in tune, they are scholars or musicians' (1105a17-21).

Note how [A] is just a re-statement of HP in its ethical variant. [B], instead, is the idea underlying the puzzle and is applied both to virtues, [B₁], and technical skills, [B₂]. This reinforces a point previously stated – that HP is content-neutral and, as such, has multiple domains of application.

To bring to the fore the strength of the objection, consider an aspiring learner, someone who is not yet virtuous. Consider also the motivating assumption of the puzzle introduced through [B],[6] which, conceptually put, states the following:

Motivating assumption of the *aporia*: one needs to be X already (*ēdē*) in order to perform X actions.[7]

By combining the motivating assumption with HP, the tension becomes clear. For, if on HP one becomes an X kind of person by performing an X kind of actions, but one can, on the motivating assumption of the *aporia*, perform X actions only if one is X already, the question becomes pressing as to how a learner – someone who is not yet virtuous – could ever perform the actions that (on HP) are conducive to the acquisition of the corresponding virtue. Indeed, the problem cuts quite deep within the Aristotelian framework, for, if part of the aim of *NE* II is, before giving a 'definition' of ethical virtues (II.6), to get somewhat clear on how we acquire them – and the answer is that we do so through habituation –, then the *aporia* is questioning precisely this upshot. Aristotle's process of moral development would be defeated. In fact, to labour the point, the *impasse* we have reached is one on which it is both true that a

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[6] I take this expression from Hampson (2020).

[7] This is the standard translation of *ēdē* (1105a20). I note, however, that there has been an alternative reading of the passage, which translates the *ēdē* not with 'already', but with 'thereby' (Irwin, 1999, p. 22) or 'immediately' (Hampson, 2020, p. 16), generating a completely different *aporia*. I discuss this alternative *aporia* in the Appendix below (§7) and show how my argument holds even on this different interpretation of *NE* II.4. That is, in the Appendix, I show how my argument is not contingent on what one takes to be the best exegesis of *NE* II.4.

learner (someone who is not yet X) cannot perform X actions (because she is not yet X, on the motivating assumption) and can perform X actions (since one becomes X by performing X actions, on HP).

3. Solutions to the *aporia*

There are two ways of solving the puzzle. Let us state them formally first and then consider each in turn. A first solution involves rejecting the motivating assumption of the puzzle and holding that a learner can perform virtuous actions. A second solution is, instead, to accept the motivating assumption and reject the claim that a learner can perform virtuous actions – in effect, as Hampson notices, qualify HP (see 2020, p. 8).

3.1. Solution 1: an analogy

Let us start with the first solution. The central move is to reject the idea that one needs to be an X kind of person in order to perform an X kind of actions. Indeed, this is what is suggested in the first lines of *NE* II.4 (1105a21-26), where an analogy between technical skills and character virtues is introduced, paired with two counterexamples which reveal the falseness of the motivating assumption.

Here is the argument. With skills, one does not count as (e.g.) a grammarian – someone who is competently able to produce grammatical outcomes – if one, say, spells a certain world as it should be spelt either (α) by chance or (β) under someone else's well-informed instruction. These two cases, as Lawrence rightly points out, 'bring out different, incremental, points' (2011, p. 266). On (α), in fact, even if the word is spelt correctly, i.e. despite being in accord with (*kata*) grammar, it does not arise *from* or does not come *with* the relevant grammatical knowledge – namely the knowledge that the word is spelt in such-and-such a way. The thought underlying this first condition is that one does not count as being an X person if she happens to bring about outcomes that are typical of that technical skill accidentally. On (β), instead, if the word is spelt correctly under instruction, the outcome is both in accord with (*kata*) grammar and comes *with* it. However, the relevant knowledge is *in (en)* the wrong place: namely the teacher and not the student. The thought underlying this second condition is that one needs to possess the technical skill 'in oneself' (*en hautō(i)*, 1105a25) in order to count as a certain kind of person producing the typical outcomes of her skill correct-*ly* – in our case, a grammarian producing grammatical outcomes grammatical-*ly*. Unless one satisfies both conditions, one is not performing the act in the relevant way, sc. grammatically.

To put the point in general terms, the grammar case teaches us that it is not sufficient to produce a certain grammatical outcome (*grammatikon ti*) in order to count as a grammarian (*grammatikos*), since, as (α) and (β) indicate, one can produce a grammatical outcome not in the right way, i.e. not in the way a grammatical expert would produce it (*grammatikōs*). However, what the case also teaches us is that, quite crucially, whether a certain outcome counts as grammatical is not determined by something about the agent, but by features pertaining to the outcome itself. *Mutatis mutandis*, the same seems to hold for virtues: one can perform (e.g.) a just act without performing it justly since it is possible that one performs a just act either (α) by chance or (β) under instruction (that is, without being just already). Again, the point here is that the state of the agent is relevant in establishing whether the act is performed justly *and also* that the state of the agent is not relevant in establishing whether the performed act is itself just. So, while something must be true about the agent for her acting to count as an expression of the relevant excellence she herself possesses – be that a craft or a virtue –, nothing, it seems, needs to be true about the agent for what she does to be excellent – be that a product or an act (see Hirji, 2018b, pp. 7-10).

In addressing the *aporia*, Aristotle would be drawing a robust distinction between 'the thing done' (e.g. the just act) and 'that very same thing being done in a certain way', or, equivalently, 'how that very same thing is done' (e.g. the just act being done justly). Regardless of what it takes to perform a virtuous act virtuously (see §§3.2-4), the point that Aristotle would be driving home is that the motivating assumption of the puzzle is misguided, since there are familiar cases where one produces outcomes typical of the technical skill without possessing the skill herself. The same applies to virtues: there are many cases where people act in accordance with (*kata*) the virtues (i.e. as required in the circumstances) but are not (themselves) virtuous. Let us call this Solution 1 and the distinction introduced the virtuous action/acting virtuously distinction.

Here is how Aristotle puts it:

'But perhaps this is not the case even with the arts. It is possible to produce a grammatical result (*grammatikon ti*) by chance, or because some one else prompts you; hence you will be a grammarian (*grammatikos*) only if you produce a grammatical outcome and do so in the grammarian's way (*grammatikōs*), that is, in virtue of the grammatical knowledge which you yourself possess (*en hautō(i)*)' (1105a22-26).

Before turning to an alternative solution to the *aporia*, let me briefly pause to stress why the distinction just discussed does not merely concern a question of chronological antecedence, but fundamentally relates to the question of metaphysical priority. Surely, the distinction relates to the issue of temporal priority for, we have seen, one need not be virtuous at time *t* in order to perform (either accidentally or under instruction) virtuous actions at that time *t*. In this sense, Aristotle is undoubtedly making a claim about the possible chronological precedence of virtuous actions over virtuous dispositions. However, if we take Aristotle at his word, and agree that there is a marked distinction between 'virtuous actions' and 'acting virtuously', we can also start to appreciate how a stronger (indeed, metaphysical) claim follows: that, on pain of invalidating the distinction, virtuous actions are not virtuous because of the way in which they are performed – or, as some would put it, on whether the virtuous agent performs them 'characteristically'. This, clearly, is a claim (albeit a negative one) about the essence of virtuous actions (more in §§4-5).

3.2. Solution 2: a disanalogy

There is a second strategy that could be adopted: to accept the motivating assumption of the puzzle and claim that a learner is not, strictly speaking, performing virtuous actions. What she is performing, instead, are actions which are 'not strictly virtuous' (Hardie, 1968, p. 105) or not virtuous 'in the same full sense as those which we do when our *hexis* is fully formed' (Joachim, 1951, p. 79), but only in a 'minimal' (Williams, 1995, p. 13 and Vasiliou, 2007, p. 51),[8] loose sense. On this proposal, it is only in an imprecise way that Aristotle says that a learner performs virtuous actions (in order to become virtuous). The *aporia* is then solved by qualifying the Habituation Principle in such a way that one need not perform X actions in order to become an X person but, say, something like sub-genuine X actions. As has been noted (see Jimenez, 2016, pp. 15-18 and Hirji, 2018a, p. 1015), part of what motivates this alternative strategy is to make sense of the disanalogy Aristotle goes on to analyse right after having introduced the analogy between crafts and virtues.

Consider, in fact, the immediately subsequent lines of the passage quoted above:

'Moreover the case of the arts is not really analogous to that of the virtue. Works of art have their merit in themselves, so that it is enough if they are produced having a certain

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[8] Cf. Vasiliou (2011, p. 174) for a more nuanced view.

quality of their own; but acts done in conformity with the virtues are not done justly or temperately if they themselves are of a certain sort, but only if the agent also is in a certain state of mind when he does them: first he must act knowingly (*eidōs*); secondly he must deliberately choose the act, and choose it for its own sake (*prohairoumenos kai prohairoumenos di'auta*); and thirdly the act must spring from a stable and unchanging disposition (*bebaiōs kai ametakinētōs*). For the possession of an art, none of these conditions is included, except the mere qualification of knowledge; but for the possession of the virtues, knowledge is of little or no avail, whereas the other conditions […] are all-important' (1105a26-b3).

On this alternative solution, Aristotle would be saying the following: admittedly, for a craft, whether its output is excellent or not depends solely on the condition of the output. A house may be excellent without considering anything at all about the agent who made the house. For virtue, by contrast, the right thing having been done (e.g., the debt repaid or the donation made) is merely necessary but not sufficient for counting what was done as a virtuous action (respectively, a just or generous act). There are further conditions for an *action* to count as truly virtuous.

(i)   The agent acts knowingly (*eidōs*)

(ii)   The agent acts choosing the action and choosing it for its own sake (*prohairoumenos kai prohairoumenos di'auto*).

(iii)   The agent acts with a stable and unchanging (*bebaiōs kai ametakinētōs*) disposition.

Only when these three conditions are met does an act count as truly virtuous. This view, therefore, assigns definitional priority to the agent over the act and claims that only when the agent is in a certain state does an action count as truly virtuous. This is how, for instance, Taylor seems to read the passage when he claims that when it comes to virtues 'extra conditions concerning the agent must be satisfied *for the act to be virtuous*' (2006, p. 83, my emphasis).

The picture that we get is one where we build into the definition itself of what a virtuous action is features pertaining to the virtuous agent. Once this manoeuvre is conducted, the strategy we are left with cannot be to reject the *aporia*'s motivating assumption, but to qualify HP and claim that a learner is not, strictly speaking, performing 'genuine' virtuous actions. Let us call this Solution 2. If Solution 2 were to be Aristotle's solution, it would follow that virtuous

actions are made virtuous by being performed by a virtuous agent: Aristotle would endorse Agent Priority.

4. Rejecting Solution 2

Which of the two solutions should we attribute to Aristotle?

I will now offer some negative reasons why we should prefer Solution 1 over Solution 2. I will start with the contention that Solution 2 is implausible both on exegetical and philosophical grounds. I will then offer some positive textual reasons to believe that Solution 1 is Aristotle's very own solution.

Firstly, as both Jimenez (2016) and Hirji (2018b) point out, Solution 2 rests on a mistaken assumption: that the three agential conditions are conditions on what it takes for an action to count as 'virtuous', when instead they are conditions on an agent counting as 'acting virtuously'. If Aristotle were identifying, through the disanalogy with the crafts, some further conditions to be fulfilled for an action to count as virtuous – as Solution 2 wants it – why would have he introduced, through the analogy with the crafts, the sharp distinction between virtuous actions and acting virtuously? The objection here is that if to perform an act in a certain way (i.e. V-ly) is what *makes* that act the kind of V act it is, then, it is not at the same time possible to hold that there is a certain V thing that 'ought-to-be-done' in the circumstances and also, as being separate from that, the way in which that V thing is done (i.e. V-ly). Solution 2 forces Aristotle to revoke his words.

As Hirji puts it, '[w]hy bother drawing a distinction between a just action and acting justly if Aristotle goes on in what immediately follows to collapse the distinction?' (2018a, p. 1016). So, what distinguishes the learner's actions from those of the already-virtuous agent is not that the former's actions are *less* virtuous, but that the former's actions are not being *virtuously* performed. As such, there is no inaccuracy in Aristotle's explicit attribution of virtuous actions to learners: there is nothing imprecise in that and we should, instead, take Aristotle at his word. Learners do perform (fully) virtuous actions. In this, I agree with Jimenez's observation: 'the distinction in *NE* II.4 is between two ways of performing fully virtuous actions – i.e. (a) in accordance with virtue but not virtuously, and (b) virtuously. [...] Thus, those who conclude that the actions of the learners are not fully virtuous are disregarding the terms of the distinction that Aristotle establishes in this passage' (2016, p. 22). I conclude that Solution 2 is exegetically onerous.

Before turning to the second objection to Solution 2, let me briefly pause to anticipate and respond to a possible worry: that is to say, how does Solution 1 make sense of the disanalogy?[9] The burden certainly falls upon it: after all, the analogy with the crafts has already disarmed the *aporia* and now an explanation is owed as to why Aristotle feels the urge to discuss, needlessly it appears, a disanalogy. I believe that what Aristotle is telling us through the disanalogy is that there is something more valuable than the mere outcome when we think of ethical virtues – i.e., their goodness (*to eu*) is not reducible to that of their outcome, as is instead the case with crafts (1105a26-28). There is something over and above virtuous actions that is relevant in the case of virtues: that is, the way in which the actions are performed. However, if this is true, if Aristotle did not tell us what (more) it takes for an action to be virtuously performed, on the mere analogy with the crafts, we would be justified in thinking that knowledge is the sole requirement. But that would be wrong, since 'knowledge is of little or no avail, whereas the other conditions […] are all-important' (1105a33-b1); that is, that would be wrong since there are different requirements for an act to be virtuously performed and for an outcome to be skilfully achieved. This is why Aristotle needs to stress the disanalogy.

Let us return to the second objection. A further difficulty of Solution 2 is that, rather than solving the problem for the Habituation Principle as formulated in the *NE*, it tries to explain the tension away by qualifying it. In endorsing the motivating assumption of the *aporia*, it is forced to say that a learner performs (e.g.) sub-genuine virtuous actions. Solution 2 is thus committed to a more permissive version of HP; one on which it suffices that one performs minimally virtuous actions to become virtuous. The unfortunate result of this answer, however, rests on the fact that it takes on a burden which the alternative (more text-adherent) Solution 1 does not possess. In effect, it introduces a hiatus between the actions performed by a learner and those performed by a virtuous agent: one performs minimally virtuous actions, the other fully virtuous actions. Note how the discontinuity is not simply that a learner would perform *what* the virtuous agent performs but not *as* she performs it.[10] Quite differently, if the state of the agent determines the nature of the act, the discontinuity that we get is that a learner does not even perform *what* the virtuous agent performs. This is not to say that it is conceptually impossible to envisage the details of one such account – there is nothing contradictory in it. It

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[9] Recall that part of what motivated Solution 2 was to make sense of Aristotle's disanalogy between virtues and skills.

[10] This, instead, is Jimenez's structurally similar, but focally different, (motivational) 'continuity problem' (2016). sc., whether a learner can act with a relevantly similar motivation to the virtuous agent.

is rather to say that, for any permutation HP is subjected to, the more dissimilarity the variation introduces between the actions that a virtuous agent performs and those of an aspiring learner, the more arduous the explanation of how this mode of acquisition governs the learner's moral development is going to be. In a nutshell, Solution 2 takes away from the original habituation process much of its initial intuitive ground – viz., the identity of the learner's and virtuous agent's actions. Given that Solution 1 faces no parallel worry, I think this is an unnecessary cost. Solution 2 is philosophically onerous.

Perhaps showing awareness of the difficulty involved in drawing a gap between the actions of the virtuous agent and those of the aspiring learner, Aristotle recurrently states that virtuous dispositions are not only caused by but also find their full exercise in (*energeiai*) the *very same actions* which causally produce them (*NE* II.2, 1104a27-29); that is, Aristotle strongly suggests that there is no difference between the actions that a student of virtue performs and those performed by a virtuous agent.

Unsurprisingly, in this respect Solution 2 is confronted with a burden that Solution 1 is not confronted with: Solution 2 needs to qualify the claim that the actions that cause the virtuous disposition are the same as those in which the disposition finds its exercise. For that cannot be true given that the actions which do not stem from a virtuous disposition are, so the qualification would go, only 'minimally' or 'equivocally' virtuous, while actions which stem from a virtuous disposition are, instead, 'fully' or 'truly' virtuous. Quite differently, Solution 1 can readily take the text at its word: the actions which cause a virtuous disposition are exactly the same actions in which (*en tois autois*, 1104a29) the resulting disposition finds its manifestation once it has been produced. As Aristotle phrases it: 'We may then take it as established that […] the actions which produce it [i.e. virtue] are those which increase it [...] and that the actions from which it was produced *are also those in which* it is exercised *(energei)*' (*NE* II.3, 1105a14-16, my emphasis).[11] On Solution 1, this is true in a literal sense and no semantic provisos need to be issued.

5. Taking stock

It is not surprising, therefore, that Aristotle never modifies the Habituation Principle by holding that it works by reference to those actions that are less-than-fully-virtuous. The truth is that while we do not find any modification of HP in subsequent passages, we do find

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[11] See also *NE* III.5, 1114b26-30.

subsequent passages where the distinction between virtuous actions and virtuous actions virtuously performed is restated:

'As some people, we maintain, perform just acts and yet are not just men […], on the other hand, it appears, there is a state of mind in which a man may do these various acts (*to pōs echonta prattein*) with the result that he really is a good man: I mean when he does them from choice, and for the sake of acts themselves' (*NE* VI.12, 1144a13-20).[12]

I find it telling that Aristotle does not say that 'there is a state of mind in which a man may do these various acts with the result that *these acts really are virtuous*', but 'with the result that *he really is a good man*'. Clearly, for Aristotle, acting in a certain way (i.e. virtuously) only makes a certain person, but not a certain action, excellent (i.e. virtuous). And this is basically to say, as Solution 1 maintains, that an action is not made virtuous when, and because, it is performed by a virtuous agent.

I conclude that we should resist Solution 2: not only is it exegetically hard to square with the remainder of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, it also introduces problems that the first view does not possess. For these reasons, the victory Solution 2 achieves in its answer to the *aporia*, I submit, is pyrrhic and we should not ascribe this solution to Aristotle.

However, once we go back to the commonly shared view that virtuous actions are virtuous only derivatively, it becomes clearer why commentators might have been inclined towards assuming all these burdens: Solution 2 is, in effect, an attempt at solving the *aporia* while, at the same time, not giving up the idea that virtuous agents are definitionally prior to virtuous actions. The whole of *NE* II.4 shows, quite differently, that Aristotle does not endorse this view. Crucially, his solution to the *aporia* depends on there being token actions which are virtuous independently of how (sc. by whom) they are performed – that is, on there being a robust distinction between virtuous actions and acting virtuously.

Thus, on what I take to be the most plausible understanding of this *aporia*-chapter, virtuous actions are thought to be virtuous independently of the virtuous agents performing them. To put the point differently by returning to the Habituation Principle, the acquisition of a virtuous disposition is, among other things, a matter of habituating oneself to perform actions which already and independently are of the right (i.e. virtuous) sort.

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12 See Hirji (2018, p. 11) and Jimenez (2016, p. 12, fn. 10), who also mention *NE* V.6 1134a17-23 and V.8 1135b11-25.

Aristotle is not committed, I submit, to Agent Priority.

6. Re-reading 1105b5-7

But how do we interpret the claim that 'actions are called just or temperate when they are the sort that a just or temperate person would do' (*NE* II.4, 1105b5-7) in a way which is coherent with the story I have told? As we have seen, commentators have inferred from this passage that Aristotle himself believed in Agent Priority.

Contrary to the interpretation with which we began, I think that Aristotle is here discussing an epistemological and not a metaphysical claim:[13] namely, that the virtuous agent is the one who reliably identifies and performs virtuous actions and that one can thus have recourse to her trustworthy judgement in figuring out what one ought to do.

That in 1105b5-7 Aristotle is, at least dialectically speaking, *not* making the stronger, metaphysical claim is evidenced by the fact that he pairs this claim with the following adversative clause: 'but (*dè*) the agent is just and temperate not when he does these acts merely, but when he does them in the way in which (*hōs*) just and temperate people do them' (1105b7-9). So, what Aristotle is really maintaining is that *even if* it is true that every just, generous and, generally, virtuous action is one which the just, generous and, generally, virtuous person would perform, *nonetheless*, to count as just, generous and, generally, virtuous one cannot merely perform these actions but needs to do them in a certain way (sc. virtuously).

The former claim (i.e. 1105b5-7), as I read it, forges a link between the actions that a virtuous agent performs and their being of the right, virtuous sort: there is a one-to-one correspondence between the two, such that whenever a virtuous person acts, she does the right thing. The latter claim (i.e. 1105b7-9) is, on the other hand, nothing but a re-statement of the core of Aristotle's answer to the sceptic: namely, that there is a marked distinction between virtuous actions and acting virtuously; a distinction that, as we have seen, negates the thought that actions are virtuous because they are performed by a virtuous agent.[14] Indeed, the first half of the second book of the *NE* can be read (among other things) as a sort of exhortation to those who are not *yet* virtuous to start performing the virtuous actions that they can, despite their current sub-excellent character, already perform. After all, this is the path they ought to follow if they are to become virtuous themselves (1103a34-b1, 1105b11-12).

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[13] I draw from Morison (2007, pp. 243-245), Brown (2014, pp. 78-79) and Hirji (2018b, p. 11).

[14] In this connection, it seems to me that Aristotle is reiterating his points against the hypothetical sceptic by way of summary in 1105b5-9.

In light of this, the most we can infer from these sentences is that Aristotle is asserting a principle according to which we can safely move from virtuousness of disposition to virtuousness of action since if an action stems from a virtuous disposition, then it will be virtuous by default (this being a reformulation of the thought expressed in 1105b5-7). This principle, however, is much weaker than the principle that virtuousness for an action requires virtuousness of disposition from which one acts; a principle which, we have seen, would be incompatible with the distinction Aristotle relies on heavily to solve the *aporia* (as restated in 1105b7-9). Thus, Aristotle is not making the strong metaphysical claim which has been attributed to him: all that we can read into Aristotle's assertion is that the virtuous agent is in the best epistemic position to identify what counts as virtuous in the circumstances and that her judgement is, therefore, trustworthy.

What is more (and as I will explore in detail in Chapter 2), not only do we find many passages throughout the *NE* where it is expressed that the virtuous agent reliably gets things right, as the first claim suggests,[15] the very thought underlying an epistemological reading of the passage might be supported by the following remarks: Aristotle never ceases to remind us that the domain in which our ethical excellences are brought about simply lacks fixity (in this, it is unlike the domain of the unchanging intelligibles). In fact, the subject matter of ethics – the sphere of action – abounding in anomalies and instabilities is *ultimately uncodifiable*,[16] and this creates the need for some contextual sensitivity in determining what is the right thing to do in the circumstance C. This is why Aristotle says that rules and general statements in ethics only work 'for the most part' (*hōs epi to polu*, 1094b21) and thinks that, to put the point in more familiar terms, we should reject any rigoristic 'law-like' conception of ethics.

As Aristotle formulates it,

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[15] As I will explore in Chapter 2, talk of 'correct discrimination' (*krinein orthōs*) suggests that the virtuous agent is able to accurately see what is right in every circumstance (see, especially, *NE* III.4).

[16] I say 'ultimately uncodifiable' because I do not think that codifiability needs to be conceived as a binary notion, such that either the object is completely uncodifiable (i.e. that any attempt at codifying it would result in a failure) or completely codifiable (i.e. that there would be no need at all for individual judgment). Rather, codifiability admits of degrees. In light of this, I am only attributing to Aristotle the rather moderate idea that no rule (or set of rules) would suffice on its (or their) own in determining what one ought to do in each and every specific circumstance and that, thus, one cannot just rely on generalisations in ethics but needs to develop a certain moral sensitivity.

'we must not look for equal exactness in all departments of study, but only such as belongs to the subject matter of each, and in such a degree as is appropriate to the particular line of enquiry' (*NE* I.7, 1098a27-29).

As a department of study, this applies to ethics too. So, the degree of exactness we can achieve in it is determined by the nature of its subject matter. Next, combine this methodology with the Aristotelian idea that the subject matter of ethics is variable and unpredictable. It follows that the subject matter of ethics is not perfectly capturable in rules. This is what we find in *NE* II.2, 1104a1-10:

'But let it be granted to begin with that the whole theory of conduct is bound to be an outline only and not an exact system, in accordance with the rule we laid down at the beginning, that philosophical theories must only be required to correspond to their subject matter […]. And if this is true of the general theory of ethics, still less is exact precision possible in dealing with particular cases of conduct; for these come under no science or professional tradition, but the agents themselves have to consider what is suited to the circumstances on each occasion.'[17]

Therefore, as no general rule (or set of them) would suffice on its (or their) own to determine which actions ought to be performed in each and every circumstance, we are left with the need for a general evaluative stance. The stance of the virtuous agent, who is also *phronimos*, is the best epistemic stance we can rely on in figuring out what to do and, indeed, it is the stance we ought to acquire if the question is how to become *eudaimōn* oneself.[18] These passages give us good reasons to think that Aristotle was entertaining an epistemological, rather than metaphysical, thought in *NE* II.4.

7. Appendix

In this appendix, I want to return to the puzzle from which *NE* II.4 originates and show how the claim that an action is virtuous independently of its performance by a virtuous agent holds true for Aristotle whatever the best interpretation of this chapter may be. In fact, given the

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[17] Cf. *NE* I.3 1094b14-16; II.9 1109b21-23; V.10 1137b13-32; IX.2 1165a6-8.

[18] Whether it is also the *only* stance which allows us to identify what counts as the right thing to do is something I explore in some more detail in Chapter 3 §4.

recent attention that has been given to what the best exegesis of the *aporia* is (see Hampson, 2020), one might wonder whether my rejection of Agent Priority is dependent upon my choice of one reading rather than the other. Here, the objector might point to the fact that the nature of the *aporia* changes drastically if we were to translate the *ēdē* at 1105a20 not with 'already', but with 'thereby' (Irwin, 1999, p. 22) or 'immediately' (Hampson, 2020, p. 16).[19] On this alternative understanding of the puzzle, there would not be the need for practice in the first place for the acquisition of virtues since, given a strongly deflationary understanding of virtues, these would be directly reducible to virtuous actions. The hypothetical sceptic Aristotle introduces at the beginning of this chapter would still be questioning 'what we mean by saying that we become just by doing just actions and become temperate by doing temperate actions' (1105a17-18), but she would question that thought having in mind a different objection, which arises from the following, alternative motivating assumption: that 'if we do just or temperate actions, we are *thereby (ēdè)* just or temperate'.

The resulting new puzzle is that, contrary to what Aristotle has been underscoring throughout the preceding chapters, there would not be the *necessity* of habituation: if all it takes for one to be virtuous is to perform virtuous actions, then why would we need to go through the laborious path of repeatedly performing (i.e. practising) these actions? After all, if we do temperate actions, we are thereby temperate. Isn't it obvious, the sceptic rhetorically asks, that all there is to our character are the actions we perform? Isn't it obvious that all there is to being a grammarian is producing grammatical outcomes, just as all there is to being virtuous is that one performs virtuous actions?

Quite differently, the puzzle I was working with in §§2-3.2 was mainly concerned with the possibility or, I should say, the *im*possibility for the student of virtue to perform virtuous actions.[20] Therefore, because the nature of this puzzle is so different from the one I discussed

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[19] See also Lawrence (2011, p. 265, fn. 59), who notes the possibility but does not endorse it, and Nielsen (2017, p. 16).

[20] Of course, this new, alternative reading would also give rise to a secondary question still concerned with the modality of 'possibility', i.e. the question 'as to how a *process of habituation* could be possible' (Hampson, 2020, p. 14). As Hampson rightly notices, however, what this possibility is about is different from the traditional reading of *NE* II.4: the traditional reading is concerned with the possibility of a student of virtue being able to perform virtuous actions; this new, alternative reading is concerned with the conceptual possibility of there being something like a process of habituation in the first place. These are obviously different questions.

above, if this were the right way of reading the passage,[21] one might wonder whether my conclusion still holds. Here, I show that it does.

On this alternative *aporia*, Aristotle would need to demonstrate that, in opposition to what the sceptic maintains, there *is* the necessity of habituation. In other words, that it is not the case that by merely performing virtuous actions one, for that very fact, counts as virtuous. How would Aristotle do that in *NE* II.4? Answer: by employing the distinction between virtuous actions and acting virtuously which arises from the analogy between crafts and virtues (1105a22-26), and as illustrated through the grammar example. This distinction, in fact, provides Aristotle with the needed conceptual resources to create a gap between merely performing virtuous actions and counting as someone who is virtuous, thereby negating the new motivating assumption. As Aristotle indicates, what is characteristic of a virtuous agent is not that she performs (e.g.) courageous or temperate actions, but that she performs these *courageously* and *temperately*. That is to say, what qualifies an individual as virtuous is that one meets the three conditions of (i) acting knowingly, (ii) choosing the action for its own sake and (iii) doing so from a stable and unchanging disposition. In short, there is something over and above merely performing the thing that 'ought-to-be-done' in circumstance C for which an aspiring learner must strive. On account of this divide, Aristotle, by pointing to the demanding conditions that need to be met if one is to act virtuously, can then go back to safely claiming that we *need* to engage in habituation in order to become virtuous, since solely carrying out virtuous actions will not suffice to count as virtuous: again, there is more to being virtuous than simply performing virtuous actions. Indeed, this is precisely what Aristotle reminds us of when he writes that being virtuous 'results from the repeated performance of just and temperate actions' (*NE* II.4 1105b4-5) and that 'no one can have the remotest chance of becoming good without doing them [sc. just and temperate actions]' (1105b11-12). Habituation is necessary, *pace* the sceptic.

The dialectically relevant point, however, is that even if the nature of the puzzle has changed, Aristotle's answer on this new reading of *NE* II.4 still draws upon the virtuous actions/acting virtuously distinction; a distinction which, as shown in §§4-5, is at heart an indication of the fact that an action counts as virtuous independently of its being performed by the virtuous agent. In drawing this distinction to solve the *aporia* (whatever its variant), Aristotle is setting a

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[21] Hampson (2020) argues that *NE* II.4's *aporia* is better read this way. For space reasons, I will not rehearse whether her arguments are conclusive. For, even if they are (as I assume above for the sake of argument), I still believe that a rejection of Agent Priority can be provided, as I now turn to prove.

divide between the virtuous agent and the virtuous action, making it incompatible with his answer to hold that an action's virtuousness depends on something about the virtuous agent's state. After all, what distinguishes the virtuous agent from the aspiring learner is not that one performs virtuous actions and the other does not; rather, the distinguishing feature is that the former performs virtuous actions virtuously, whereas the latter does not perform them in this way – not as long as she is a student of virtue, that is. Moreover, and to labour a point I made earlier, if we were to hold that an action's virtuousness depended on the way in which it is performed, as Agent Priority would compel us to do, we would be collapsing the very distinction between virtuous actions and acting virtuously Aristotle introduces in *NE* II.4 and goes on to repeatedly employ throughout the *NE* (e.g. 1134a17-23 and 1144a13-20).

In light of this, I conclude that, even though the puzzle which arises from this alternative reading of II.4 is different in nature and does not seem to bear as directly on the question of the relationship between virtuous actions and virtuous agents, the resources that are found therein are still very strong evidence against the view that Aristotle holds Agent Priority: as I have been arguing the whole time, for Aristotle an action is not made virtuous when, and because, it is performed by a virtuous agent. What I have added through this appendix is that this is something we can make sense of regardless of how we understand the *aporia* of *NE* II.4.

CHAPTER 2
MEAN RESPONSES, MEAN DISPOSITIONS AND THE *PHRONIMOS*

1. Synopsis

So, if not something about the virtuous agent, what makes virtuous actions virtuous? In this Chapter, I discharge the onus of finding a criterion of correctness for virtuous actions which is not dependent on the virtuous agent. That the criterion of what makes an action virtuous does not, in turn, depend on the (allegedly) prior notion of the virtuous agent is a desideratum that my view needs to meet, lest it introduce another sort of definitional dependence of virtuous actions via the backdoor. In this respect, I believe that the doctrine of the mean contains illuminating insights on what Aristotle takes to be the criterion of virtuous action. Not only, I want to argue, does this doctrine allow us to identify a criterion which is independent of the notion of excellent character traits; it also allows us to draw the further conclusion that the differentia of the ethical virtues – their being 'a mean state' (*mesotēs*) – is *derivative of* the being 'mean-relative-to-us' (*meson pros hēmas*) of feelings and actions. In sum, by looking at this central doctrine, we can both discharge our burden and strengthen the attribution of definitional priority to virtuous actions over virtuous characters.

In summary, the key thought will be that the primary locus of application of the doctrine of the mean is our practical (and emotional) responses (*pace* Bostock, 2000): an action (or feeling) is virtuous when it hits the mean relative to us, being neither excessive nor defective in the circumstances. Therefore, an action is not virtuous, or right, because it stems from a mean state – i.e. a virtue lying between two vices, one of excess and one of deficiency (*pace* Urmson, 1980); rather, as I will argue, a virtue is a mean state because the actions – those the performance of which is both constitutive of and conducive to it – hit the mean. Indeed, building on the works of Brown (2014) and Aufderheide (2017), I will show how, properly understood, the notorious definition of ethical virtues and the argument leading to it in *NE* II.6 state precisely this.

I conclude the chapter by rejecting the worry that Aristotle, in mentioning the practically wise person in the definition of ethical virtues, surreptitiously reintroduces the priority of the virtuous agent: is the mean response mean because the practically wise agent determines (*horiseien*, *NE* II.6, 1107a1-2) it to be such? In other words, does Aristotle believe in a (*sui generis*) relativist view *à la* Protagoras when it comes to the virtuousness of actions? I will answer in the

negative by having recourse, mainly, to *NE* III.4, where Aristotle discusses the relationship between the good (*to agathon*) and the excellent person (*spoudaios*).

2. The doctrine of the mean

I now suggest looking at the doctrine of the mean as we find it in *NE* II.6. Here, Aristotle sets out to individuate the differentia of the ethical virtues, having established their genus: that these are neither feelings nor capacities, but settled dispositions (or states, *hexeis*, *NE* II.5), just like vices. As the adage goes, the answer to the question 'what kind of state is a virtue (differently from vice)?' is that virtue is a mean state, a *mesotēs*, lying between two vices, one of defect and one of excess (*NE* II.6, 1107a2-3).

What is telling, however, is that Aristotle also defines what it is for an action to be virtuous in terms of its hitting the mean. This much is clear from the following remarks: 'in feelings and actions excess and deficiency are errors, while the mean amount is praised and constitutes success' (1106b26-27). So, it seems that Aristotle not only believes that the mean quality of the ethical virtues is of crucial importance for their definition, but also that the mean quality of actions is. Indeed, the passage just quoted suggests that we should understand the idea of an action's virtuousness in terms of its hitting the mean in the circumstances (see Crisp, 2015, pp. 265-266).

The ineluctable question, then, is: what is the relationship between the intermediacy of virtuous actions and that of virtuous dispositions? Do we explain the intermediate nature of virtuous actions by reference to the intermediacy of virtuous dispositions, or vice versa? In other words, given that Aristotle defines virtuous actions as mean actions and virtuous dispositions as mean dispositions, which 'mean' should we take as basic?[22]

2.1. Priority of the mean state

Some have held that we explain the *meson* quality of our actions in terms of the intermediacy of the states from which they issue.

Urmson, for instance, confidently holds that 'it is perfectly plain […] that for Aristotle what is primarily in a mean is a settled state of character. In his definition he says that excellence of character is a settled state in a mean; thus an emotion or action is a mean if it exhibits a settled state that is in a mean' (1980, p. 161). Here, Urmson suggests that we understand the

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[22] Brown (2014) and Aufderheide (2017) analyse this question in detail.

intermediacy of virtues as being prior to the intermediacy of virtuous actions: the former explains the latter. So, an action is mean when, and because, it is performed by an agent with a mean disposition: the intermediate nature of the action is an expression of the intermediate nature of the state. As he summarises his point, 'Aristotle holds excellence of character to be a mean or intermediate disposition regarding emotions and actions, not that it is a disposition toward mean or intermediate emotions and actions' (*ibid.*). What this indicates is that, on an Urmson-like view, virtuous dispositions are defined independently of virtuous actions and that the virtuousness of actions is, instead, derivative of that of the corresponding states. To hold the inverse, Urmson believes, would commit Aristotle to the implausible view that our conduct should always aim for some sort of moderation. That is, if we took Aristotle to predicate the attribute 'mean' directly of actions and feelings, we would end up with an absurd view on which we always ought to feel and act moderately (I will return to this argument below, in §4).

Urmson is not alone in thinking that priority goes to the virtuous state. Bostock too maintains that 'the best suggestion seems to be that it is not the virtuous action, on each occasion, that has something 'middling' about it, but rather the general disposition from which it flows. It is, as Aristotle says, this *disposition* that is 'in the middle', for each virtue lies between two vices, one of excess, and one of deficiency' (2000, p. 42). According to Bostock's reading too, then, priority goes to the mean state over the mean response: we explain the intermediacy of the latter by reference to the intermediacy of the former (more in §4).

Part of the appeal of attributing priority to mean states is that this strategy allows for a ready and neat explanation of why Aristotle subscribes to a 'doctrine of the mean' rather than a 'doctrine of the right and appropriate'.

Aufderheide nicely develops this point as follows, before proceeding to reject the view: '[S]uppose you are angry because you have received a flagrantly insulting email from a student. Your anger flares up, but on closer examination, the student seems to suffer from a serious mental illness – in which case the anger should subside immediately: in view of the full picture anger ceases to be appropriate. While the example shows why Aristotle rejects the arithmetical middle (cf. 1106a29-b5) – the right and middle response does not always lie in the middle between too little (say zero anger) and too much (extreme rage) – it also raises the general question why Aristotle thinks the right response should have anything to do with the middle' (Aufderheide, 2017, p. 207). But we do have a ready answer, the proponent of this strategy contends, if we focus on how virtuous states are primarily intermediate and if we judge an action or a feeling as being in the mean by reference to the issuing state. 'Returning to the

example, responding with zero anger lies in the middle insofar as it expresses the middle state called 'good temper', a state between irascibility and 'unanger' (apparently of Aristotle's coinage, 2.7 1108a4–9). Although the unangered and the good-tempered person alike respond with zero anger, the former fails to hit the middle: not because she does so for the wrong reasons (she may or may not), but because she never exhibits anger, i.e. she fails on the score of frequency, a difference hard to account for by concentrating on individual actions rather than character. Thus […], assigning primacy to character over the response accounts for and explains Aristotle's 'doctrine of the mean" (2017, pp. 207-208).

Despite this (apparent) advantage, I believe that we should not be willing to concede this strategy. As I will illustrate in §4, the cost of explaining why Aristotle subscribes to a doctrine of the 'mean' in this way is too high, both textually and conceptually. But, if so, part of the attractiveness of attributing priority to mean states over mean actions ceases to have a grip on us. Indeed, as I will contend, there seems to be nothing wrong, in light of what the text itself suggests, in calling 'mean' the anger felt by the unangered person (insofar as she does not feel it for the wrong reasons, as Aufderheide *ex hypothesi* assumes), or, more generally, in calling mean responses which do not stem from mean dispositions. This, however, will leave me with a canonical puzzle: does it really make sense to talk of a doctrine of the *mean*?

2.2. Priority of the mean response: *NE* II.6

I now wish to reject the above way of interpreting Aristotle's doctrine of the mean. In order to do so, I will need to carefully examine the text and show that Aristotle's argument actually derives the notion of an intermediate state from that of an intermediate response (be that practical, an action, or emotional, a feeling). The text suggests a completely different picture from the one described in §2.1. I will follow Brown (2014) in this task.

After reminding us that every excellence is a (good) state in virtue of which we are said to be in a good condition and able to perform our characteristic (*idion*) function (*ergon*) well (*NE* II.6, 1106a15-26), Aristotle begins his discussion of the mean with a premise about divisible continua:

P1. 'Of everything that is continuous and divisible, it is possible to take the larger part (*to pleion*), or the smaller part (*to elatton*), or an equal part (*to ison*)' (1106a27).

On the back of P1, Aristotle formally introduces the notion of the mean:

P2. The equal part is said to be 'a mean between excess and deficiency' (*meson ti hyperbolēs kai elleipseōs*, 1106a28-9).

Before turning to the two renowned senses of the mean, a brief detour into the *Physics* is called for to gain further clarity about what Aristotle takes to be a divisible continuum.[23] The definition of 'continuous' comes at 227a10-15:

> 'things are called continuous when the touching limits of each become one and the same and are, as the word implies, contained in each other: continuity is impossible if these extremities are two. This definition makes it plain that continuity belongs to things that naturally in virtue of their mutual contact form a unity' (*Physics* 227a10-15).[24]

At 231b16, Aristotle clarifies that every continuum is also infinitely divisible as follows:

> 'it is plain that everything continuous is divisible into divisibles that are always divisible' (*Physics* 231b16).

So, a continuum is divisible in the sense that it is 'infinitely divisible' or, in other words, 'divisible at any point' and not constituted of distinct parts that are divisible only between them (i.e. 'discrete'). I note this here as it will be important to bear in mind. Aristotle is clearly setting a desideratum: if anything is to admit of a mean, it needs to be the sort of thing that qualifies as a divisible continuum in the sense just explored.

Now, back to the mean. Aristotle famously distinguishes between two notions of the mean, that of the mean-relative-to-the-object (*kat'auto to pragma*) and that of the mean-relative-to-us (*pros hēmas*). He informs us that it is the latter notion that interests him, the former being a merely arithmetical notion which is irrelevant in the ethical domain, and indeed in the domain of technical skills as well.[25] In fact, Aristotle starts by noticing how it is by looking at this second

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[23] Let me clarify that I take the *kai* present in 'divisible *and* continuum' to be epexegetic. Aristotle is not postulating two spheres in which we can find the *meson*: a continuum that admits of a mean is a continuum that is (infinitely) divisible by definition. The *Physics* makes this clear, as I now report.

[24] All translations of the *Physics* are from Hardie & Gaye (1984).

[25] The two senses of 'mean', descriptive and evaluative, are nicely captured by the related Greek words *pleion*, *elatton* and *ison* – they all have descriptive and evaluative meanings.

notion of the mean that every craftsperson produces *good* productions: it is only by reaching the mean relative to us that a perfect work of art is produced, one of which, as the saying goes, nothing could be added to or taken from without ruining it (1106b5-14). Through an *a fortiori* argument, Aristotle extends the point to virtues as well. That is, the outcomes of virtues (i.e. our practical and emotional responses) will be good when they hit the mean relative to us. As Aristotle puts it, 'since virtue, like nature, is better and more exact than any craft, it will also aim at what is intermediate (*tou mesou stochastikē*)' (*NE* II.6, 1106b15-16).

We might summarise these points thus:

P3. The relevant notion of the mean (both in the technical and in the ethical domain) is that of the *mean-relative-to-us*, for things which are mean-relative-to-us constitute success and are praiseworthy.

But how are we to understand this notion of the mean-relative-to-us?[26] What does this notion amount to? Aristotle has a ready answer, which appeals to what we might call 'parameters' (see Rapp, 2006 and Brown, 2014):

'For example, one can be frightened or bold, feel desire or anger or pity, and experience pleasure and pain in general, either too much or too little, and in both cases wrongly; whereas to feel these feelings *at the right time, on the right occasion, towards the right people, for the right purpose and in the right way (hōs dei)*, is to feel the best amount of them, which is the mean amount – and the best amount is of course the mark of virtue. And similarly there can be excess, deficiency, and the due mean in actions' (1106b18-24, my emphasis).

What Aristotle is here noticing is that there are certain 'spheres' concerned with certain human responses; some are emotional, involving human feelings such as anger, while others are practical, involving human actions such as the giving away of money. However, because Aristotle does not believe in the full codifiability of the ethical realm (as shown in Chapter 1, §6), it makes sense that he is elucidating the notion of the mean by reference to a rich set of parameters that needs to be met in the circumstances. So, it will be the case that for every

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[26] For space reasons, I bracket the issue of why Aristotle labels the ethically relevant notion of the mean 'relative-to-us' (*pros hēmas*). For a discussion, see Brown (1997).

action (or feeling) A, in the specific circumstance C, there will be a rich story about why that certain action counts as of the virtuous sort V: the story is unlikely to be simple and cannot be fully provided a priori. To illustrate, whether an action will qualify as generous, it will need to be the case that the agent is giving away a significant amount of money; that she is donating it to a worthy individual (to an individual in need, rather than a friend who is already wealthy); who needs the money now rather than later and so forth (see Crisp, 2015, p. 267).

To summarise, because

P4. Actions and feelings are the sorts of things that constitute divisible continua – that is, they admit of a mean,

we might elucidate what it is for a response to be mean by saying that

P5. For a practical or emotional response to be mean, it needs to be done or 'felt at the right time, about the right things, toward the right people…,' and, generally, as one should (*hōs dei*).

When an action meets all the relevant parameters, because it is mean, it is praised and constitutes success (1106b26-7).

To summarise,

P6. Actions and feelings that are mean are of the virtuous, praiseworthy sort.

What Aristotle has told us so far is (a) that an action's virtuousness is explained in terms of its hitting the mean, and (b) that hitting the mean requires getting the parameters right. (a) answers the question of what makes an action virtuous; (b) makes it clear that this is not dependent on the prior notion of virtuous agents and their excellent character traits, since the mean quality of an action is explained in terms of the action's appropriateness in the circumstances, given the relevant parameters.[27] Virtuous actions are virtuous independently of virtuous dispositions.

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[27] Notice that the way in which I understand the idea of an action's being virtuous makes no reference to aretaic terms, such as the virtuous agent. As Crisp (2015) suggests, it seems as if the virtuousness of actions is actually a non-ultimate feature which is derivative of the actions' *meson* quality. What is it for an action to be virtuous? That it hits the mean. What is it for an action to hit the mean? That it is done

Aristotle now adds a further claim, which he is recalling from the points established in the preceding chapters: that 'virtue is about feelings and actions' (*peri pathē kai praxeis*, 1106b24-5). But virtue will not, quite obviously, be about *any* action or feeling, being a good state. Rather, it will be about those actions and feelings that are good and deserve to be praised, i.e. those that hit the mean (1106b22-23, 1106b27). In short:

P7. Virtue is about those actions and feelings that are virtuous (i.e. mean), as opposed to vice.

Given P7, Aristotle can now explain in what sense he takes virtue to be a *mesotēs*:

P8. 'Virtue, therefore, is a mean state (*mesotēs*) *in the sense that* (or *insofar as*) it is able to hit the mean' (*NE* II.6 1106b27, my emphasis). Or, as is further reaffirmed in *NE* II.9, virtue 'is a mean *because* (*dia*) it aims at hitting the middle point *in feelings and in actions*' (1109a22-23, my emphasis).[28]

A few lines down, Aristotle can finally conclude the dialectic of *NE* II.6, offering the famous definition of virtue, having identified its differentia:[29]

> 'Virtue, then, is a state concerned with choice, consisting in a mean, the mean relative to us, which is defined by reference to reason, namely the reason by which the person of practical wisdom would determine it. And it is a mean state between two vices, one of excess and one of defect. Furthermore, it is a mean state in that whereas the vices either fall short of or exceed what is right in feelings and in actions, virtue ascertains and adopts the mean' (1106b36-1107a6, translation based on Irwin).

'at the right time, towards the right things etc.'. No aretaic term figures in the explanation. I postpone to Chapter 3 a discussion of the implications of this point, especially in relation to modern virtue ethics.
[28] Aristotle's submission of P8 rests on an unstated premise – that a state counts as a *mesotēs* because it aims at and achieves what is intermediate in the relevant sphere (in our case, actions and feelings).
[29] In truth, although Aristotle offers this definition as the conclusion of *NE* II.6's dialectic (as attested by the presence of *ara* at 1106b36), many of the notions that are found therein (e.g., *prohairesis* and *phronēsis*) have not yet been elucidated (see Books III and VI for a proper discussion).

In light of these passages, it is clear that Aristotle does not start from the virtuous state to then define the corresponding virtuous actions; rather, he starts from the relevant actions and then defines the corresponding states: since virtue is about these responses, it itself counts as mean, and since virtue hits the mean *in feelings and actions*, it is said to be a mean state. Therefore, the text suggests that the being *mesotētes* of the ethical virtues is derivative from the *meson* quality of the actions and feelings these dispositions are about (see Brown, 2014).[30] Virtuous actions are definitionally prior to virtuous dispositions.

3. Virtue as a mean between two vices

However, as evidenced at 1107a2-3, Aristotle also describes virtue as a *mesotēs* between two vices, one of excess and one of defect.

Through my summary of *NE* II.6, I hope to have shown that this explanation of the intermediate nature of virtues is not Aristotle's most central and definitive explanation of why virtue counts as a *mesotēs*. It is true that Aristotle held that a virtue lies between two vices,[31] and perhaps he said so in an attempt to systematise through a graph (*ek tēs diagraphēs*, 1107a33-4) the disorderly realm of the various virtues and vices discussed at his time.[32] What the text does not suggest, however, is that a virtue is a *mesotēs* because it lies between two vices. That it does is a mere observation, not an explanation of the (ethically) relevant sense in which it is 'mean'.

Indeed, anyone committed to offering that explanation would face the following difficulty: given that Aristotle introduces the notion of the mean on the back of the claim about divisible continua (P1), one would need to demonstrate that the triad of vice-virtue-vice constitutes a continuum of the sort Aristotle is interested in. As the *Physics* read, 'things are called continuous when the touching limits of each become one and the same and are, as the word implies, contained in each other' (227a10-13). The problem is that it is impossible to think of the three-place schema of vice-virtue-vice as being one such continuum, the extremities of which 'become one and the same' (how would a virtue, being good and praiseworthy, ever become

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[30] Young (1997, p. 94) makes a similar conceptual point.

[31] Did he also believe that a virtue lies *exclusively* between two vices? As discussion of (e.g.) the virtue of courage clearly indicates, he did not. Against those who think so, Hursthouse rhetorically asks: 'that to each virtue there should correspond precisely two vices, neither more nor less – what kind of explanation could there be of this extraordinary mathematical symmetry?' (1981, p. 60).

[32] For a discussion, see Broadie & Rowe (2002, p. 22).

one with a vice, which is bad and objectionable?). A 'virtue does not (and cannot) 'shade into' a vice', as Brown puts it (2014, p. 72, fn. 13).[33]

If there is anything in common between virtues and vices (as there is), it is the practical or emotional response they are both concerned with (*peri*) – these, crucially, being clear examples of the divisible continua that admit of a mean (P4). So, a vice of defect, a virtue and a vice of excess are linked by the fact that they are all about a certain human response (a certain action or a certain feeling); they differ because virtue is always about the mean amount of these responses, whereas vices are not. By way of illustration, the sense in which stinginess, generosity and wastefulness are linked is the fact that they are all concerned with 'the giving away of money'. However, while generosity reliably issues in actions which hit the mean, stinginess and wastefulness reliably issue in actions which fail to hit the mean deficiently and excessively respectively.

At this stage, it should be clear that when Aristotle introduces the notion of the mean, he is mainly concerned with the divisible continua represented by our practical and emotional responses, and only secondarily with virtue and vices; that is, only insofar as virtue and vices are about these responses.

So, Brown (2014) is right, I take it, in holding that just as a virtue is a mean state in a way that is derivative from its being a state that hits the mean in actions and feelings; likewise, a vice of excess is an excessive state derivatively from the fact that the actions and feelings it is about fail to hit the mean *excessively*. Similarly for a vice of defect: a vice of defect is a deficient state derivatively from the fact that the actions and feelings it is about fail to hit the mean *deficiently*.

4. *Contra* Urmson and Bostock

We are now in a position to reject all the interpretations on which the mean quality of an action is explained derivatively from its issuing from a mean state.[34]

Let us return to Urmson. He believes that the intermediacy of virtuous actions is to be explained in terms of the intermediacy of the corresponding virtuous states. As he summarised his reading, 'Aristotle holds excellence of character to be a mean or intermediate disposition regarding emotions and actions, *not* that it is a disposition toward mean or intermediate emotions and actions' (1980, p. 161, my emphasis). We can now appreciate that this reading

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[33] Brown draws, in turn, from Rapp (2006, pp. 114-115).
[34] Brown (2014) too discusses Urmson's and Bostock's views.

encounters strong textual resistance. As we have seen, Aristotle starts from our emotional and practical responses, characterises these as admitting of a mean, and then transfers this qualification to the corresponding states. To be fair, it is true that Aristotle makes the general claim (compatible with Urmson's account) that excellence of character is a settled disposition concerned with (*peri*, 1106b24-5) feelings and actions. However, having reminded us that our practical and emotional responses admit of excess, deficiency and an intermediate condition (1106b25-27), it is also true that he refines his previous statement by adding (incompatibly with Urmson's account) that reliably reaching the intermediate condition in actions and feelings is what makes virtue an intermediate state: this is 'the mark of virtue' (1106b22-23 and 1106b27), what constitutes its differentia (1106b27-28). So, Aristotle does say, contrary to what Urmson holds, that virtue is a settled disposition toward mean actions and feelings and that this is what explains its intermediate nature (cf. P7 and P8).

But what about Urmson's defence of his interpretation? Namely, that holding that an action is primarily mean would be absurd, since it would commit Aristotle to the view that we ought to always aim for the 'golden mean' in our conduct. We are now also in a position to see how this defence is simply a *non sequitur*. Aristotle makes it clear that he does not believe that mean actions and feelings are moderate actions and feelings. This is particularly evident given the way in which he elucidates the notion of the mean through the parameters. Suppose you are on the battlefield facing a formidable enemy, risking your life. Presumably, the mean amount of (e.g.) fear you should feel is large, and not just a moderate amount – after all, you are risking your life. If you only felt a moderate or middling amount of fear, you would not be feeling enough fear given the danger of the circumstances. Thus, when predicated of our practical and emotional responses, *meson* and moderate are not synonymous for Aristotle.

Let us now return to Bostock. Bostock holds that 'the best suggestion seems to be that it is not the virtuous action, on each occasion, that has something 'middling' about it, but rather the general disposition from which it flows. It is, as Aristotle says, this *disposition* that is 'in the middle', for each virtue lies between two vices, one of excess, and one of deficiency' (2000, p. 42).

As with Urmson, it is clear that for Aristotle the primary locus of application of the doctrine of the mean are actions and feelings, not states. Bostock's position, in light of what we find in *NE* II.6, seems exegetically unsupported.

Bostock's justification, however, appeals to *NE* II.2, rather than *NE* II.6, where Aristotle says:

'The man who runs away from everything in fear and never endures anything becomes a coward; the man who fears nothing whatsoever but encounters everything becomes rash. Similarly, he that indulges in every pleasure and refrains from none turns out a profligate, and he that shuns all pleasure, as boorish persons do, becomes what may be called insensible. Thus, Temperance and Courage are destroyed by excess and deficiency, and preserved by the observance of the mean' (*hypo tēs mesotētos* 1104a20-7).

'Undoubtedly', Bostock comments, 'Aristotle is thinking here not of the intensity of the emotion on a given occasion, but of the way that it may be displayed on too many, or too few, occasions (or types of occasion)' (*ibid.*). He then asks, 'What, then, is the *scale* involved? A simple suggestion is that it is the number of occasions, or better the number of types of occasion, on which the emotion in question is felt. As Aristotle has said earlier, when anticipating his doctrine in chapter 2' (*ibid.*).

After having recognised that Aristotle also says that 'virtue *is* a kind of mean (i.e. a middling disposition) *because* it aims at a mean (i.e. a middling emotion, on particular occasions)', he concludes that, nonetheless, 'to be charitable, we may suggest that what is uppermost in his thought is that virtue is a middling disposition' (Bostock, 2000, p. 43).

Bostock is right in noticing that *NE* II.2 suggests a different reading of the doctrine of the mean. However, whether this line of defence is successful depends, partly at least, on whether *NE* II.2 informs *NE* II.6. I hold that we have good reasons to believe it does not.

In II.2, Aristotle was mainly concerned with a discussion of habituation, and it just makes sense to think that there Aristotle was simply encouraging the student of virtue to neither over- nor under-do it. To be fair, I think that Bostock is entirely right in pointing out that this is something that we will fail to account for if we focus on the mean quality of actions and feelings on single occasions, since the sense in which Aristotle is there employing talk of intermediacy makes reference to the frequency with which an action is performed or an emotion felt. Nonetheless, I do not believe that in *NE* II.2 Aristotle was making any conceptual point about the notion of the mean-relative-to-us and about when and why an action counts as mean (i.e. virtuous). He was rather, at the heart of his discussion of habituation, giving some practical guidance to the student of virtue by discussing some general conditions under which virtuous dispositions come and cease to exist. If so, we might be sceptical that there is any tight conceptual relationship between *NE* II.2 and II.6.

Similarly, Rapp supported the view that we should not read *NE* II.2 as informing *NE* II.6 (2006: 106-109). He perceptively observed how the remarks of *NE* II.2 (which make up what he labels the 'empirical doctrine') are completely absent in the *Eudemian Ethics* (*EE*), where, instead, remarks of the sort discussed in *NE* II.6 about the mean-relative-to-us abound (cf. *EE* 1220b21-35). This suggests that Aristotle himself considered the content of *NE* II.6 to be self-standing, and the content of *NE* II.2 as not necessarily relevant to it: as Rapp puts it, 'the full doctrine of the mean can be defended without any reference to the empirical conditions of generation and destruction of virtuous dispositions' (2006, p. 107).

In fact, one might think it non-accidental that Aristotle in *NE* II.2 does not even introduce the technical notion of the mean-relative-to-us, but merely sticks to general talk of intermediacy and suitable quantities to express a very much empirical and practical doctrine: just like strength and health, Aristotle's analogy runs, virtues are 'produced, increased and preserved by suitable quantities (*ta symmetra*, 1104a17); they are 'destroyed by excess and deficiency, and preserved by the observance of the mean' (*hypo tēs mesotētos*, 1104a26). Even in these sentences, which more closely echo the terminology of *NE* II.6, there is no allusion to the notion of the mean-relative-to-us. If so, why should we believe that Aristotle is even talking about the *same* doctrine? We might conjecture that all there is in common between *NE* II.2 and II.6 is a misleading terminological overlap.

What is more, Bostock thinks that it is the number of types of occasions which needs to be mean. But, as he himself admits in a footnote, 'strictly speaking, a scale of (whole) numbers is not something that counts, in Aristotle's vocabulary, as 'continuous and divisible'' – although he believes that 'is a complication we may reasonably ignore' (Bostock, 2000, p. 42, fn. 27). My argument in response to this is that, unfortunately, we cannot ignore this complication if we are to be 'charitable' to Aristotle, since, as P1 illustrates, the text provides the proper introduction of the doctrine of the mean precisely on the back of the assumption that there is a mean in things that constitute divisible continua. If we are to be charitable to the text, as Bostock himself suggests, we should not be reading Aristotle the way Bostock does.

What about the commonly accepted suggestion, illustrated by Aufderheide, that this view seems preferable insofar as it can offer a direct explanation of why Aristotle employs talk of the 'mean'?[35] As we have seen in §2.1, the moral of Aufderheide's example was that we can

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[35] This is part of Broadie's (1991, pp. 97-102) strategy of attributing priority to mean states over mean responses (see Brown, 2014, 73-78 and Aufderheide, 2017, pp. 206-208 for a discussion). She seems to have changed her mind in Broadie & Rowe (2002, p. 21), when she says that (e.g.) '[m]ildness, the

only differentiate the response of virtuous from non-virtuous Professor by looking at the issuing state, since both might respond, for the same reasons, in the same way: that is, with zero anger. However, only the former's response hits the mean, the contention goes, since it stems from the mean state 'good temper'. The latter's response fails to hit the mean, on the other hand, since it stems from the corresponding vice of defect, 'unanger'.

The issue with this account is that, in order to offer an explanation of Aristotle's terminology, it (wrongly) assumes that there is a difference between the two responses which needs to be accounted for. My suspicion is that this is misguided and that the point should not even be conceded in the first place. After all, in light of the remarks of §2.2, the anger felt by the vicious 'unangered' Professor *is* mean: insofar as the emotion felt by her satisfies all of the parameters (as is assumed in Aufderheide's example), that response will be 'just right' (*meson*) in the circumstances. As we have seen, mean responses are mean independently of their issuance from mean states. If we follow Aristotle's remarks in *NE* II.6, I see nothing wrong in deeming the amount of anger felt towards the students by both virtuous and non-virtuous Professor as being of the mean, virtuous sort – again, insofar as it is felt, in both cases, towards the right person, at the right time and so on.

Moreover, in light of Chapter 1, if we combine the thought that an action is mean because it stems from mean states with the thought that mean actions are virtuous actions and mean dispositions are virtuous dispositions, we reach the conclusion that it is not possible for someone who is not virtuous to perform virtuous actions. This brings us back to the problem of how a student of virtue could ever become virtuous, since she does not possess the disposition which enables one to perform the actions that are conducive to the acquisition of that very disposition: as is now familiar, one becomes virtuous by doing virtuous actions. But, if virtuous actions are mean actions and an action counts as mean only when it issues from a mean (i.e. virtuous) disposition, how is habituation supposed to work?

My point is simply that attributing priority to mean states over mean responses is not a good account with the additional advantage of having a ready explanation of Aristotle's employment of a certain terminology. It is a conceptually and exegetically onerous account with the advantage of having a ready explanation of Aristotle's employment of a certain terminology. The cost of explaining why Aristotle subscribes to a doctrine of the mean, rather than a doctrine

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disposition, logically inherits the 'intermediacy' of its responses', showing an inclination for the position I explored in §2.2.

of the right and appropriate, by attributing priority to mean states over mean responses is a cost I do not think we should be willing to pay.

Of course, this leaves entirely unanswered whether the view I have been defending is able to take on and discharge this burden. Is there any ready explanation of why Aristotle employs talk of intermediacy if we understand him as holding that mean actions are mean independently of mean dispositions? Unfortunately not. For, if what it is for a response to be mean is for it to get all the (relevant)[36] parameters right, despite this being an informative elucidation of the theory, one is still left wondering why call this a doctrine of the 'mean'. It really seems as if the relevant notion is that of the right or appropriate response, rather than the mean one. I am inclined to agree with Brown that all we need to say is that 'Aristotle himself evidently saw no tension between the two accounts: the insistence that going wrong is always a matter of excess or of deficiency, and the recognition of a whole array of reasons why a response may be wrong […]. Aristotle never wavers from labelling the right response *meson*, or from the view that right responses are indeed 'in-between,' that is, just right' (2014, p. 75).

In any case, whether this is a Gordian knot, the solution to which is simply to rescind it and forsake talk of *meson*, or whether the quantitative language of *meson* is indeed always compatible with that of the parameters, I leave open.[37] For, regardless of the answer to this question, as shown above, there is nothing particularly preferable in attributing priority to mean states over mean actions that requires conclusively settling this question.

5. Recapitulation

Following Brown (2014) and Aufderheide (2017), and *contra* Urmson (1980) and Bostock (2000), I have argued that the qualification 'intermediate' (*meson*) transfers from actions to states, and not from states to actions. The primary locus of application of the doctrine of the mean is actions and feelings, as *NE* II.6 and II.9 indicate, for these are the sorts of things that qualify as divisible continua.

If this is right, then it is also right to hold the following corollary: that given that virtuous actions are mean actions, and that mean actions explain the 'between-ness' of virtuous

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[36] The qualification 'relevant' is needed as Aristotle does not believe that the number of parameters offered in *NE* II.6 is fixed and exhaustive. Consider, in fact, *NE* II.9 1109b14-16 and IV.5 1125b31-33, where Aristotle introduces (e.g.) the parameter of the 'right length of time', absent in *NE* II.6.

[37] For the former approach, see Hursthouse (2006), Taylor (2006) and Brown (2014). For the latter attempt at reconciling the apparently quantitative language of the mean with that of the parameters, see Curzer (1996), Pearson (2006) and Rapp (2006).

dispositions (i.e. their differentia), virtuous actions are definitionally prior to virtuous dispositions. Not only is it the case, thus, that Aristotle defines what it is for an action to be virtuous independently of any aretaic, virtue-derived notion, but purely in terms of its rightness or appropriateness (*dei*) in the circumstances. What is more, he defines what it is for a virtuous disposition to be a virtuous disposition in terms of whether it reliably hits the mean in actions and feelings.

This coheres nicely with Aristotle's claim in *NE* IV.2, 1122b1-2: 'a disposition (*hexis*) is defined (*horizetai*) by the activities (*tais energeiais*) in which it is displayed, and by the objects to which it is related'. If we take *horizetai* here in the strict definitional sense, we can revise Aristotle's claim thus: a virtuous disposition is defined by the activities in which it is displayed. Among these activities, there are virtuous actions, as we know from *NE* II.2 1104a27-30 and *NE* II.3 1105a14-16. Therefore, virtuous dispositions are defined, partly at least, in terms of virtuous actions.[38]

6. The *phronimos* as constitutor of the mean

A powerful objection arises from a certain reading of *NE* II.6's definition of virtue, which runs as follows:

> 'Virtue, then, is a state concerned with choice, consisting in a mean, the mean relative to us, which is determined by reference to reason (*logō(i)*), namely the reason by which the person of practical wisdom (*phronimos*) would determine it (*horiseien*)' (1106b36-1107a2, translation based on Irwin).

In order to see the objection, we need to recall that Aristotle believes in a thesis usually referred to as the 'unity' or 'reciprocity of the virtues' according to which 'if a man have the one virtue of Prudence he will also have all the Moral Virtues together with it' (*NE* VI.12, 1145a2-3). For our dialectical purposes, the point is merely that the *phronimos* is also the virtuous agent.

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[38] Why should we take the *horizetai* definitionally? Support for this move is provided by Aristotle's metaphysical view that actuality is prior to potentiality in definition (*kata ton logon*, see *Metaphysics* IX.9 and *De Anima* II.1 and II.4). Because virtuous dispositions are second potentialities (or first actualities) and virtuous actions are second actualities, it follows that virtuous actions are prior in definition to virtuous dispositions. Santas, appealing to *De Anima* II.4, makes a similar point when he holds that 'first actualities (states of character) are explicated in part at least by second actualities (the actions)' (1993, p. 16).

In light of this, one might contend that Aristotle is here suggesting some form of definitional dependence of virtuous actions on virtuous agents or, more precisely, that at 1106b36-1107a2 Aristotle is maintaining that an action is mean (i.e. virtuous) because it is determined to be so by the *phronimos*. (Strictly speaking, it is the virtuous agent's *logos* which determines the mean).

If this interpretation is sound, then clearly one cannot hold the priority of virtuous actions over virtuous agents, for the virtuousness of an action is in some way dependent on the virtuous agent. Another form of priority of the virtuous agent would manifest itself. This is, quite obviously, a different form of priority from the one rejected in Chapter 1. There, the thought was that an action counted as virtuous due to its performance by someone with an excellent character. On this new priority, it is the virtuous agent's judgement that a certain action is mean which makes the action mean. The judgement of the virtuous agent is authoritative in some constitutive sense: it constitutes the mean (i.e. virtuous) quality of our practical and emotional responses. At all events, both versions consider the virtuousness of actions to be, in some way or other, dependent on the relationship borne with the virtuous agent. As Aufderheide frames the issue: 'When Aristotle proleptically refers to the wise person, he raises the question of whether the middle at which virtue aims depends in some deeper way on the wise and virtuous person' (2017, p. 210).[39] If it does, then virtuous actions would be neither independent from nor prior to virtuous agents.

7. *NE* III.4

At one point in *NE* III.4 Aristotle explicitly refers to the virtuous agent as a sort of 'standard and measure' (*kanōn kai metron*, 1113a33). Should this be read as suggesting that the virtuous agent's judgement about ethical affairs has the authoritative status described above, whereby in deeming things good or bad she, by that very fact, makes them good or bad? In order to answer this question, I propose looking precisely at *NE* III.4, since I believe that the necessary resources to answer our conundrum can be found therein.[40] As we will see in a moment, in that chapter Aristotle faces head-on the question of the derivative or independent nature of goodness (*to agathon*), in answer to a puzzle about what counts as an object of wish (*to boulēton*).

Here is the puzzle. There are two common views (*endoxa*) about the object of wish. The former holds that the object of wish is the good (*to agathon*). The latter that it is the apparent

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[39] Statman (1997) and McAleer (2007) too identify this issue as germane, although they do not fully address it. I discuss McAleer's arguments in Chapter 3 §2. Cf. fn. 61 for Statman's view.

[40] In this, I follow Charles (1995) and Aufderheide (2017).

good (*to phainomenon agathon*). According to Aristotle, the first view has the absurd implication that if a certain person mistakenly wishes for something which appears good to her, but which is, in fact, not good, what she was wishing for is not, truly, an object of wish (113a17-21). The argument is truncated, but we can reconstruct it thus: this first view holds that things are good independently of their being judged to be good by someone. If the goodness of things is independent of their being judged to be good, it follows that it is possible for someone to wish for something which she believes is good even though, in truth, it is not. But now the proposal unravels. If the agent wishes for something which is not good, she is not wishing at all, given the assumption that only the good can be an object of wish.

The second view rejects the thought that there is such a thing as the independence of goodness from individuals' judgements and perceptions, thereby escaping the implausible conclusion of the first view: to be an object of wish, something only needs to appear good to X. This second view holds a sort of co-variance thesis: varying the desirer, so will the good vary with her. Aristotle, however, believes that the price just paid to avoid the paradoxical conclusion described above is too high, since this proposal has the implication that nothing could ever qualify as an object of wish by nature (*physei*). Anything, as long as it is wished for by someone, is a proper object of wish, 'yet', Aristotle worries at 1113a21-22, 'different, and it may be opposite, things appear good to different people' (see Gottlieb, 1991).

Following his usual endoxic method, Aristotle endorses neither of the commonly established views in their entirety but combines them into one which retains what he takes to be the grain of truth contained in each.

His solution to the *aporia* involves a distinction between a predicate applying without qualification (*haplōs*) and applying subject to qualification (see Taylor, 2006, pp. 160-161). The predicate in question is, of course, 'being the object of wish' (*boulēton*). This applies without qualification to what is really good (*kat'alētheian*), but subject to qualification to the apparent (*phainomenon*) good. So, for Aristotle, the following propositions can both be true (though in different ways): 'What is really good is the object of wish' and 'The apparent good is the object of wish'. The former is true *haplōs*, that is, 'without qualification'; the latter instead is true only subject to the qualification 'for that person'. This strategy (1105a22-24) allows Aristotle to have it both ways: there is something which is good by nature, independently of its being wished for and which, we might add, ought to be wished. Of this something, we predicate 'being the object of wish' without qualification. Nonetheless, this does not exclude that if something is not truly, but is only apparently, good, such a thing would not qualify as an object of wish. Of this

something we predicate 'being the object of wish' in the qualified sense, namely 'for that person'.

With these ideas in mind, Aristotle states that the excellent person is the one for whom these two faces of wish always come together, contrary to the bad man:

> 'for the excellent person (*tō(i) spoudaiō(i)*), then, what is wished will be what is really so (*kat'alētheian*), while for the base person (*tō(i) phaulō(i)*) what is wished is whatever it turns out to be [that appears good to him] (*to tychon*)' (1113a25-26).[41]

The good and the apparent good are always one for the excellent person. Via an analogy with the somatically healthy person, Aristotle concludes the chapter by stating the superiority of the excellent person over the base person:

> '[s]imilarly in the case of bodies, really healthy things are healthy for people in good condition (*tois men eu diakeimenois hygieina esti ta kat'alētheian toiauta onta*), while other things are healthy for sickly people (*tois d'epinosois hetera*); and the same is true of what is bitter, sweet, hot, heavy, and so on. For the excellent person judges each sort of thing correctly (*krinei orthōs*), and in each case what is true appears to him (*t'alēthes autō(i) phainetai*). For each state [of character] has its own distinctive [view of] what is fine and pleasant. Presumably, then, the excellent person is far superior because he sees (*horan*) what is true in each case, being himself a sort of standard and measure (*hōsper kanōn kai metron autōn ōn*)' (1113a26-33).

7.1. Protagorean reading

These are the sentences with which we need to wrestle, because it is still left entirely open whether something counting as truly good is dependent on the judgement of the excellent person. The fact that there is an overlap of the apparent good with what is good without qualification for the *spoudaios* might be conditional on the fact that Aristotle takes the excellent person's judgement to be constitutive of things being a certain way: the alignment is possible only because something counting as truly good is derivative of its judgement as such by the virtuous agent. On this construal of the passage, Aristotle seems to discuss a thesis reminiscent

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[41] Translations of *NE* III.4 are based on Irwin's (1999).

of Protagoras. Indeed, the expression 'standard and measure' employed at 1113a33 strongly suggests this: the virtuous agent is a 'a sort of standard and measure' in the same fashion in which Protagoras held that 'man is measure of things' (*pantōn chrēmatōn metron anthrōpos*).[42] What is more, the analogy with the case of bodies concerns the same perceptual qualities that Plato mentions in the *Theaetetus* (152a-153a) when discussing Protagoras's view. This lends strong *prima facie* support to a Protagorean reading of *NE* III.4.

A caveat is in order. There is no question as to whether Aristotle's view is Protagoras's, for there is 'an obvious difference' of scope between the two: 'Protagoras thinks that each individual is the measure whereas Aristotle thinks that only the good person is the measure' (Gottlieb, 1991, p. 26, fn. 3). There is, nonetheless, a question as to whether Aristotle's view is of a Protagorean nature.[43]

The position Aristotle would endorse on this reading might indeed be referred to as a relativism *sui generis*, for Aristotle would accept the basic structure of Protagoras's thesis – that the goodness of things is dependent on, and constituted by, their appearing so to someone – but would immediately restrict it so that it is not mistaken with its classical form – on which nothing counts as truly good, but anything counts as good insofar as it appears good to someone. When something appears good to the excellent person, Aristotle's qualification would go, *that* counts as truly good. So, for Aristotle, not every individual can be the measure of things. Only the virtuous agent is.

Nonetheless, given that relativism is commonly associated with 'lack of objectivity', I will avoid employing this label, since Aristotle's text is unequivocal about the existence of things that are good without qualification. The question, then, is whether the objectivity of goodness occurs *ex post* – that is, in virtue of having been constructed by the authoritative exemplar, in the *sui generis* relativist fashion described above –, or *ex ante* – that is, independently of the judgement of the authoritative exemplar; judgement which, instead, latches onto an axiological reality which is, as it were, out 'there', waiting to be apprehended.

If the former option is true, Aristotle might be read as saying precisely what I wish to deny: that the person of practical wisdom settles what counts as good (or, for our overarching purposes, mean).

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[42] For this suggestion see Gottlieb (1991) and Aufderheide (2017).

[43] In reality, there is the further, vexed question of what Protagoras's view really amounts to. I will be simply referring to the 'Protagoras "of legend"', as Charles puts it (1995, p. 136, fn. 2).

7.2. Non-Protagorean reading

I now want to suggest that Aristotle does not endorse, but rather rejects, this Protagorean view, despite the unquestionably Protagorean language.[44] My contention will be that the excellent person merely identifies what is truly good, contributing nothing to its status as good in her identification of it as such. Furthermore, being virtuous, having an excellent character, is what enables one to have the finest sensitivity to the good-making features of things. On the Protagorean view, the thought would not be of this epistemological sort, but rather metaphysical: the good person makes things good in deeming them good. Whether something counts as good (fine or pleasant) is a function of its appearing so to the virtuous agent. According to the non-Protagorean position I will defend, this is incorrect: things being a certain way is not a function of their being judged to be such by the excellent person. Instead, that they appear the way they appear to the excellent person, *that* is a function of her excellent character. As I will argue below, all that Aristotle is claiming is that our characters condition how things appear to us. They can prevent us (if bad) or enable us (if good) to see, in Aristotle's words, the 'truth' – how things really are, as we might paraphrase him.[45]

To support this reading, let me now return to the analogy with healthy bodies, for it is there evident that these ideas are operative in Aristotle's mind. First of all, the language employed by Aristotle, despite seeming Protagorean at first glance, suggests that there is a certain objective reality out there which manifests itself to the excellent person (Aufderheide, 2017, p. 216): the excellent person 'discriminates things correctly' (*krinei orthōs*, 1113a30); 'in each case the truth appears to her' (*t'alethēs autō(i) phainetai*, 1113a30-31); she 'sees what's true in all departments' (*tō(i) t'alēthes en hekastois horan*, 1113a32-33).

Moreover, as Aufderheide, following Gottlieb (1991), aptly notices, '[e]ven if 'X appears healthy to the person in good condition' implies 'X is healthy for her', the further claim that 'X appears healthy to the person in good condition' just is 'X is healthy for her' finds no support in Aristotle' (Aufderheide, 2017, p. 214).

In fact, the more illuminating analogy with healthy bodies, according to the current reading, does not concentrate on the difference between what is healthy for someone in a good somatic

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[44] For a similar reading, see Gottlieb (1991), Charles (1995), Irwin (1999) and, more recently, Broadie (2007) and Aufderheide (2017).

[45] Cf. *NE* III.5, 1114a31-b25. There, Aristotle addresses the following objection: no wrongdoing could be attributed to anyone since it is both true that (i) things appearing to us in a certain way is a function of our character and (ii) our character is not 'up to us' (i.e. voluntary). Aristotle responds by rejecting (ii) – although (NB) he also seems to offer a different answer at 1114b18-19.

constitution as opposed to what is healthy for someone in a bad somatic constitution. Rather, the analogy centres around the distinction between how things appear to people in a good somatic constitution as opposed to how they appear to people in a bad somatic constitution – the underlying thought being that being 'healthy' (i.e. having a good *sōma*) entails the proper functioning of one's perceptual faculties.

In light of this, as suggested by both Gottlieb (1991) and Aufderheide (2017), it is preferable to translate the *agathon*, or *hygieinon*, with the dative not as 'good/healthy for' some person or other, but as 'good/healthy to' (that is in the judgement of) some person or other.[46] On this construal, the dative in question would be primarily a dative denoting how things appear to the perceiver, or how they are in her judgement, and not a dative of benefit – hence why the preferability of the English translation 'good/healthy to' instead of 'good/healthy for'.[47]

If this reading is plausible, Aristotle does not attribute any constituting role to the judgement of the healthy person in the determination of what counts as truly healthy through the body analogy. That a certain thing appears to be healthy (as it truly is) to the healthy person contributes nothing to its being healthy: the 'healthy' thing merely appears as it is (i.e. healthy *kat'alētheian*) *to* her. The same holds for the other qualities (bitterness, sweetness etc.), *mutatis mutandis*.

So, when Aristotle says that 'each state [of character] has its own distinctive [view of] what is fine and pleasant', I take him to mean precisely what he stresses later on in *NE* VI.12 at 1144b34-36: that the *ariston*, 'the Supreme Good only appears good to the good man: vice

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[46] This is the difference between *dativus iudicantis* and *dativus commodi*. Cf. Rackham (1934), who translates the datives at 1113a25-29 with 'for', rather than 'to' the healthy person.

[47] On the non-Protagorean reading, however, it is not excluded that different things might be healthy for different individuals, as the health analogy might seem to suggest. After all, it does not seem wrong to say that wearing a cast is 'healthy' for someone who has a broken leg and does not thus have a healthy body. However, it does seem wrong to say that wearing a cast is 'healthy' for someone with perfectly functioning legs. Does this suggest a problematic relativism or, at any rate, a problem for the non-Protagorean reading? I do not think so. All that the defender of the non-Protagorean thesis needs to hold, in fact, is that what is healthy for the impaired individual is not *truly* healthy (or healthy *haplōs*), although it might be healthy *for* her in her current state – whereas it would not be healthy for her if she were not impaired, but well-functioning (see Gottlieb, 1991, p. 40). So, even if it is the case that different things are healthy for the healthy person and for the impaired person, we should just say that what is healthy for the healthy person is healthy without qualification and that what is healthy for the impaired person is healthy subject to qualification ('for that person, given her circumstances'). Once this clarification is in place, the relevant question (and the answer to it) is the same as above: is what is really healthy really healthy because it is healthy for the healthy person, or is it really healthy independently of being such for the healthy person?

perverts the mind and causes to hold false views about the first principle of conduct'. In other words, that each state of character enables or prevents someone of such character to perceive certain objective qualities, and not, as on a Protagorean understanding, that things are the way they are because they appear so to an individual with a certain character.

Support for this interpretation abounds in the *Metaphysics* (*Met.*):

> 'The same thing never appears sweet to some and the opposite of sweet to others, unless in the one case the sense-organ which discriminates (*to aisthētērion kai kritērion*) the aforesaid flavours has been corrupted and injured. And if this is the case, the one party must be taken to be the measure (*metron*), and the other not. And I say the same of good and bad (*epi agathou kai kakou*), and beautiful and ugly, and all other such qualities' (*Met.* XI.6, 1063a1-6).[48]

This passage illuminates the health analogy under an epistemological light in making reference to the very same perceptual qualities mentioned in *NE* III.4 and in referencing the idea of an agent being the measure (*metron*) in the relevant domain insofar as she has the relevant sense-organs well-functioning. What Aristotle is concerned with when he describes someone as healthy is that she has the relevant perceptual abilities in good shape. The same point applies to virtues: when one is in a good moral constitution (or at least not in a bad moral constitution), one has one's moral sensitivity finely attuned; one is able to reliably track what is, independently of its being tracked, good without qualification.[49] Significantly, this is not only suggested by the matching expression '*metron*' and the matching perceptual qualities (e.g. sweetness) employed both in *NE* III.4 and *Met.* XI.6, but by Aristotle's own extension of the point just made to the other moral and aesthetic qualities: 'And I say the same of good and bad, and beautiful and ugly, and all other such qualities' (*Met.* 1063a6).

Some earlier remarks in the *Met.*, where Aristotle comments on Protagoras' measure doctrine, suggest the same:

> 'Knowledge also, and perception, we call the measure of things, for the same reason, because we know something by them, – while as a matter of fact they are *measured*

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[48] All translations of the *Met.* are based on those of W. D. Ross (1984).

[49] I employ expressions such as 'moral sensitivity' wilfully, in order to avoid giving the impression that Aristotle thought there was, literally, a sense-organ able to perceive moral qualities.

rather than the measurers (metrountai mallon ē metrousin) […]. But Protagoras says man is the measure of all things (*anthrōpon […] pantōn einai metron*), meaning really the man who knows or the man who perceives, and these because they have respectively knowledge and perception, which we say are the measures of objects. They are saying nothing, then, while appearing to be saying something remarkable' (*Met.* 1053a31-b4, my emphasis).

I find it telling that Aristotle elucidates what it is for a person to be *metron* in terms of her judgement (knowledge, perception) being measured rather than measurer (*metrountai mallon ē metrousin*). This indicates that, if the virtuous agent is *metron*, she is *metron* insofar as her judgement measures up to a reality which is there independently of her judgement and not, crucially, that the reality is the way it is because it was measured against the agent's knowledge and perception (see Charles, 1995, p. 157, p. 171 and Aufderheide, 2017, p. 213). Nothing depends on the virtuous agent's responses.

But we need not go all the way to the *Metaphysics*. The *Nicomachean Ethics* is just as revealing on this matter. In X.5, Aristotle, after he has echoed the remarks expressed through the body analogy in III.4, elucidates with absolute clarity the message of his remarks.

There, in fact, Aristotle starts by re-discussing the claim that different things are perceived as having different qualities by different individuals, to then apply the thought to the more specific healthy/sick opposition:

'The same things delight some men and annoy others, and things painful and disgusting to some are pleasant and attractive to others. This also holds good of things sweet to the taste: the same things do not taste sweet to a man in a fever as to one in good health; nor does the same temperature feel warm to an invalid and to a person of robust constitution. The same holds good of other things as well' (11176a10-15).

Subsequently, as if anticipating objections, and with vocabulary now all too familiar, Aristotle immediately makes it clear that no (*sui generis*) relativism should be inferred from such observations, shifting the discussion to the ethical case of the *spoudaios* (here too, as in *NE* III.4, said to be *metron* of things):

'But we hold that in all such cases what is really so is what appears so to the excellent person (*to phainomenon tō(i) spoudaiō(i)*). And if this rule is sound, as it is generally held to be, and if the standard (*metron*) of everything is virtue, or the good man, *qua* good, then the things that seem to him to be pleasures are pleasures, and the things he enjoys are pleasant. Nor need it cause surprise that things disagreeable to the excellent person should seem pleasant to some men; for mankind is liable to many corruptions and diseases, and the things in question are not really pleasant, but only pleasant to these particular persons, who are in a condition to think them so' (1176a15–24).[50]

In this passage, corrupted and vicious people are depicted as those whose views about the pleasant are mistaken – mistaken relative to the objective standard of what counts as pleasant, which the virtuous agent, on the contrary, gets right insofar as she is good (1176a18). Moral corruption, Aristotle makes clear, leads to a loss of the proper moral sensitivity which characterises the virtuous agent.

In light of all these passages, I take Aristotle's general point to be that those who are in a good condition (be it somatic or moral) find themselves in a reliable epistemic standpoint to identify what counts as truly good (be that somatically or morally). That is, just as the judgement of the somatically healthy individual is a measure in relation to qualities such as bitterness, sweetness etc., the judgement of the morally excellent individual is a measure in relation to the quality of goodness (fineness and pleasure). In short, the excellent person is an epistemically dependable guide to what is truly good, but she is not a constructor of what is good. It is in *this* sense that she qualifies as a sort of standard and measure.

Thus, going back to what initially seemed reminiscent of the Protagorean adage, a completely different understanding of the Greek *metron* suggests itself. The resultant understanding of the virtuous agent as *metron* is, in Broadie's words, the idea of the virtuous agent as the 'ethical yardstick of the particular situations [s]he is presented with' (Broadie, 2007, p. 120). The virtuous agent is *metron* insofar as she reports what is already there, just as a ruler

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[50] Cf. Irwin's (1999, p. 307) and Segvic's (2008, p. 126) comments ad loc. See also *NE* II.3, where Aristotle, discussing the tripartition of objects of choice – the fine, the beneficial and the pleasant –, says that 'the good person is the one who gets it right (*katorthōtikos*) in all these respects and the bad the one who goes wrong' (1104b30-1105a1).

is *metron* insofar as it reports the objective length of what is laid against – would it not be absurd to think that something is of a certain length because it has been placed next to a ruler?

Interestingly, the sentence in which the excellent person is said to be a sort of standard and measure of things is introduced by '*hōsper*' (1113a33), which suggests that Aristotle is talking loosely: he is not saying that the virtuous agent unequivocally *is* a standard and measure of things, but rather that she, *as it were*, is a standard and measure. I do not think that the '*hōsper*' is there accidentally. My impression is that Aristotle is deliberately employing Protagorean terminology to reject a Protagorean thesis.

8. Back to *NE* II.6

I have argued that there are two possible interpretations of the relationship between goodness and the judgement of the virtuous agents (see Taylor, 2006, pp. 159-163 and Irwin, 1999, p. 207). On the first, Protagorean reading, the relationship is metaphysical: the goodness of something is derivative of its being judged to be good by the excellent person. In other words, the sense in which the virtuous agent is said to be 'standard and measure' reflects the idea that the goodness of things is a function of how they appear to her.

On the second, non-Protagorean reading, the relationship is epistemological. It is worth noting that what is epistemological is *not* the non-Protagorean reading itself, but the relationship between the virtuous agent's judgement and the good. Strictly speaking, the non-Protagorean reading is still making, and relying on, a metaphysical claim: namely, that for Aristotle the goodness of things is independent of their being judged to be good by the excellent person. The epistemological element I am discussing refers to the judgement of the virtuous agent: the excellent person is the one who, when she judges something to be good, can be sure to have gotten things right; her wish is always for the unqualified object of wish, namely what is truly good. In short, the virtuous agent reliably perceives what is truly and independently good and its unmistakeably appearing so to her is a function of her excellent character.

Taylor, noting in his Clarendon commentary how these two alternatives are equally suggested by *NE* III.4, proposes acknowledging that the chapter 'is not decisive between the alternative construals' (2006, p. 163). On the grounds offered above, I disagree. We have strong reasons to prefer the latter over the former reading. So, what we should say is that for Aristotle the objectivity of goodness occurs *ex ante*: there is a sort of axiological reality out there waiting to be apprehended by those who manage to reach, or approximate, the epistemically privileged

standpoint afforded by the possession of an excellent character. (Or, less demandingly, by those who manage to avoid acquiring a corrupted, vicious character).

We can now return to our initial puzzle, that the mean relative to us is determined by the person of practical wisdom (1106b36-1107a1). That sentence, I maintain, should be understood as saying only that the *phronimos* is right about what counts as mean in the circumstances (see Charles, 1995 and Aufderheide, 2017). Aristotle nowhere gives us any suggestion to believe that the mean is defined as what the virtuous agent perceives and judges to be such. He does, on the other hand, give us abundant hints to believe that the virtuous agent is characterised (*inter alia*) as the one who accurately perceives, owing to her excellent character, what is (independently of her recognition) mean. The *horizein* at 1107a1 should thus not be read in the strict definitional sense, suggesting that the *phronimos* determines (in the sense of 'defines'), through her judgement, what counts as mean; it should instead be read as merely indicating that the *phronimos* reliably marks out what counts as mean.

Therefore, the *phronimos* gets things right, but she does not make things right. If we are uncertain about what counts as mean in a particular circumstance, we can be sure that if a virtuous agent was at hand, she would be able to tell us what that is (cf. Chapter 1, §6). We can conclude the independence of the mean from the virtuous agent.

CHAPTER 3

ARISTOTLE AND VIRTUE ETHICS

1. Virtue ethics as a third method of ethics

In this chapter, building on the results of Chapter 1 and 2, I intend to evaluate whether Aristotle is, as often assumed, a virtue ethicist and, conversely, whether it is plausible to think that much of recent virtue ethics is, as Hursthouse most eminently claims, neo-Aristotelian.

The structure of this chapter is as follows: in §1, I describe virtue ethics and its distinguishing feature – what makes it a distinctive normative ethical theory. In §2, I evaluate whether Aristotle is a virtue ethicist in the sense outlined in §1, concluding that we have good reasons to think that he is not. In §3, after presenting McAleer's (2007) novel account of virtue ethics, which has the explicit aim of making Aristotle a virtue ethicist, I offer a first argument against one such account – proleptically, that it has the undesirable consequence of being over-inclusive. In §4, I offer a second, independent argument for why we should be sceptical of McAleer's account – that it ascribes a view to Aristotle for which there is strong counter-evidence. Finally, I conclude by exploring the significance of asking the question whether Aristotle's ethics counts as a form of virtue ethics.

It is now a widespread belief that virtue ethics represents a third, distinctive method of ethics alongside consequentialism and deontology (see Frankena, 1973 and Baron, Pettit, & Slote, 1997). But what makes it a distinctive normative ethical theory? The usual answer is that it offers a distinctive criterion of right action – it appeals to a different right-making property to consequentialism and deontology.

Consider Hurka's and Crisp's remarks:

> 'It is often said that virtue ethics is distinguished by its account of moral rightness. Whereas consequentialism identifies right actions by the goodness of their outcomes and deontology by their relation to principles of duty, virtue ethics derives rightness from virtue, so right actions are those standing in some specified relation to virtuous motives, character traits, or persons. This gives virtue the same centrality that goodness and duty have in other moral theories and makes for a distinctive approach to ethics.' (Hurka, 2001, p. 220)

and

'each of the […] three methods [i.e. consequentialism, deontology and virtue ethics] is concerned with how to distinguish right from wrong, good from evil' (Crisp, 2015, p. 257). As Crisp continues a few pages down, '[t]o be a form of virtue ethics, a theory must presumably make ineliminable reference to the virtues or to the virtuous person in its explanatory account of the ultimate right-making property or properties. Consider first the property Hursthouse herself appeals to in her account of virtue ethics: 'being what a virtuous agent would characteristically (i.e. acting in character) do in the circumstances" (2015, p. 264).

Using Hursthouse's renowned example to illustrate the point, suppose that it is evident that someone in need should be helped: a 'utilitarian will point to the fact that the consequences of doing so will maximize well-being, a deontologist to the fact that, in doing so, the agent will be acting in accordance with a moral rule such as "Do unto others as you would be done by" and a virtue ethicist to the fact that helping the person would be charitable or benevolent' (see Hursthouse & Pettigrove, 2018).

This brings us to one of the central tenets of virtue ethics, which is usually referred to as the Primacy of Character. This is the claim that aretaic concepts are explanatorily more basic than the concept of right conduct: virtue ethics explains the rightness of actions by reference to the virtues, or the virtuous agent. As Watson expresses the idea: 'the concept of virtue is explanatorily prior to that of right conduct, prior indeed more generally to the concepts that fall under the heading 'morally good conduct'" (Watson, 1997, p. 58).

This is visually best seen by describing how the various ethical theories would define right action in formulaic terms, and by focusing our attention on the right-hand side of the biconditional. Following Hursthouse (1998, pp. 26-28), we might claim that consequentialism will hold something along the lines of

C. An action is right iff it promotes the best consequences.

Deontology will hold something along the lines of

D. An action is right iff it is in accordance with a correct moral rule or principle.

Virtue ethics will hold something along the lines of

> **V.** An action is right iff it is what a virtuous agent would characteristically (i.e. acting in character) do in the circumstances.

The right-hand side of the biconditional specifies what is taken to be fundamentally right-making for each of the theories: promotion of the best consequences, accordance with a certain moral rule and a certain relationship with the virtuous agent respectively.[51]

The Primacy of Character, I take it, is the thesis the endorsement of which makes an ethical theory virtue ethical. I thus suggest distancing ourselves from Nussbaum's understanding of virtue ethics as any ethical theory having a (more or less) systematic discussion of the virtues (see Nussbaum, 1999, pp. 165-167, p. 200). If we conceive of virtue ethics as any theory having a systematic discussion of the virtues, we will risk lumping together authors who have, ethically, little to share in their understanding of what makes right conduct right. For, it is now well known, (e.g.) Kant himself devoted part of his study to the virtues. Indeed, Nussbaum's criticism that virtue ethics is a misleading category – one which we would better do away with – would be sound: it would have the bizarre result of making Aristotle, Kant and many utilitarians virtue ethicists. In short, it would be over-inclusive.[52] But this is not so as soon as we see that it is not the mere *presence* of a systematic discussion of aretaic concepts that marks a theory as virtue ethical (as opposed to consequentialist or deontologist), but rather the *centrality* that is assigned to them.[53] In other words, what demarcates a theory as virtue ethical is the explanatory role that virtue plays in it. So, even if it is the case that consequentialists might very well emphasise the importance of the virtues, defining them as character traits worth having *because* they maximise production of goodness, and deontologists might very well emphasise the importance of the virtues too, defining them as character traits worth having *because* (e.g.) they reliably allow us to fulfil our duties; nonetheless, this will not suffice to count these theories as versions of virtue ethics. '[V]irtue ethicists will resist the attempt to define

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[51] As Hursthouse is (rightly) at pains to remind us, each of the formulae above needs to be supplemented by a further premise specifying, respectively, what counts as 'the best consequences', what counts as 'correct moral rule' and who counts as 'a virtuous agent' (see Hursthouse, 1998, p. 28).

[52] For an objection to Nussbaum's account, see McAleer (2007, p. 209-210) and Crisp (2015, p. 259, fn. 1). It is now common to refer to Nussbaum's understanding of virtue ethics as simply 'virtue theory'.

[53] Cf. Hurka's remarks above (2001, p. 220). See also Watson (1990), Kawall (2009) and Hursthouse & Pettigrove (2018).

virtues in terms of some other concept that is taken to be more fundamental. Rather, virtues and vices will be foundational for virtue ethical theories and other normative notions will be grounded in them' (Hursthouse & Pettigrove, 2018), such as right conduct. Reference to the virtuous agent needs to be ineliminable in our account of right action.

Thus, virtue ethics is taken to be a distinctive method of ethics because it offers a distinctive criterion of right action, one which appeals to different right-making properties to consequentialism and deontology. In short, different criteria of right action lead to different genera of normative ethical theories (see Aufderheide, 2017, p. 201). What is ultimately right-making?[54] Is it (e.g.) compliance with a certain moral rule, promotion of the best consequences, or being what the virtuous agent would characteristically do?[55]

2. Aristotle and virtue ethics: Part I

Having established the distinctive trait of virtue ethics, we can now answer the question of whether Aristotle himself is a virtue ethicist. He is if he endorses the idea that right conduct is ultimately defined, and explained, in terms of the virtuous agent – the Primacy of Character.

An increasing number of scholars and philosophers have argued that Aristotle is not a virtue-ethicist in this sense (see Broadie, 2007, Brown, 2014 and Aufderheide, 2017). I agree with them.[56] If the preceding chapters of this work are right, a close reading of the text suggests that Aristotle does not subscribe to the Primacy of Character.

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[54] The qualification 'ultimately' emphasises the idea that the reference to whatever property (or properties) one takes to be right-making is ineliminable, and cannot be either paraphrased away or dispensed with. As I argued above, it cannot be merely present in one's theory, it has to be fundamental. This is why Crisp (2015) proposes substituting the biconditional – 'iff' – with the expression 'solely in virtue of'. For conformity with the debate, I avoid making this substitution.

[55] I assume, for the present purposes, that this is a plausible way of marking out ethical theories. Some might have worries about the general validity of engaging in moral taxonomy and, more specifically, about this particular way of classifying ethical theories (namely, by looking at the way in which each theory specifies what makes right conduct right). Hursthouse herself, for instance, despite embarking on such a project and arguably following this methodology, showed some scepticism (see 1998, p. 5 and 2006a, pp. 107-108). Setting these complications aside, I believe that conducting the investigation in this way allows us to gain a framework from which we can better evaluate the relationship between Aristotle and the tradition he has inspired, bringing to the fore dissimilarities that would otherwise go unnoticed.

[56] Broadie: Aristotle 'is not even, it has to be said, a modern-style 'virtue-ethicist' if this means a philosopher who defines right or appropriate action as the action of the virtuous person (or the courageous or moderate or good-tempered or just, etc., depending on the case). On the contrary, Aristotle explains virtue and the virtues as dispositions for right or appropriate action and emotion (towards the appropriate people, at the appropriate moment, in the appropriate amount, etc.), but

To summarise my earlier argument for this conclusion: Aristotle neither believes that being virtuous is a necessary condition for the performance of virtuous actions (cf. Ch.1), nor that virtuous actions are defined by reference to the virtues or the virtuous agent (cf. Ch. 2). Instead, what makes an action virtuous is that it hits the mean in the circumstances. What is more, Aristotle also believes that virtuous actions are (at least partly) definitionally prior to virtuous dispositions, insofar as the differentia of the ethical virtues (that they are *mesotētes*) is explained in terms of the virtues aiming at and hitting the mean in actions and feelings.

In formulaic terms:

> An action is right iff it hits the mean in the circumstances – where the mean is what gets the parameters (i.e. the object, the occasion, the amount, the timing etc.) of the situation right (*dei*).

If this is correct, since the rightness of actions is not explained by reference to the virtues or the virtuous agent, but merely to whether they hit the mean in the circumstances, Aristotle does not endorse the Primacy of Character.

McAleer (2007), however, contends that Aristotle *is* a virtue ethicist, despite the seeming plausibility of the formula above. His argument comes in two waves, the first of which (as I now discuss) is composed of two objections.[57]

First Objection – Deontic over Aretaic. Anyone committed to showing that Aristotle does not endorse the Primacy of Character on the basis that he grounds, as a certain reading of *NE* II.6 suggests, the aretaic on the deontic – the being virtuous of actions on their being right (*dei*) – would be making too quick an inference. For instance, Crisp, focusing on the use of *dei* present in the passages discussing the mean-relative-to-us (e.g., *NE* II.6), makes this suggestion when

without ever being prompted to a state a set of rules to which these ethical responses would generally conform' (2007, p. 126).

Brown: 'It seems clear that Aristotle does *not* subscribe to the thesis of the explanatory or definitional priority of virtue (good character) over good or right action. So, *if* that is a central tenet of modern virtue ethics, Aristotle's view cannot be claimed as an ancestor' (2014, p. 79).

Aufderheide: 'In any case, character does not seem to play the role in Aristotle's account that it does in contemporary virtue ethics. So, virtue ethicists could let go of their sacred cow: Aristotle helped shape contemporary virtue ethics, but more as instrument than paradigm' (2017, p. 219).

Watson too, although less openly, admits that there is good 'textual evidence' (i.e. *NE* II.6, 1106b28 and *NE* II.9 1109a22-32) that Aristotle 'did not countenance […] the claim of explanatory primacy' (1997, p. 467, fn. 24).

[57] I discuss the second wave below (see §3).

he claims that 'it is quite plausible to interpret Aristotle as holding that in an important sense deontic terms are prior to aretaic, since the latter are defined with reference to the former' (2015, p. 266, fn. 13).[58]

McAleer takes issue precisely with this sort of suggestion, contending that the notion of *dei* is not deontic. Firstly, it is not attached to actions directly, but to the features of the circumstances, such as the object, the person, the timing etc. Secondly, as Hursthouse underlines, 'right' in this context does not mean 'obligatory', but rather 'correct', as in 'The right answer' to 'What is the capital of New Zealand?' is 'Wellington' (see Hursthouse 1998, p. 108). This is reinforced by an exploration of the virtue of magnificence in Book IV, where Aristotle employs *dei* as synonymous to *prepon,* suggesting that what is chief in his mind is the idea of appropriateness and fittingness, rather than the modern sense of obligation.[59] So, McAleer concludes, 'the worry that the many *dei*-passages pose' – that Aristotle grounds the aretaic on the deontic – 'is overblown' (2007, p. 222) and we might still read Aristotle as endorsing the Primacy of Character.

Setting aside the issue of the best interpretation of the notion of *dei* and its relationship with the more recent deontic notions such as obligation, this is no objection in the first place. For we do not need to go as far as showing that the deontic is prior to the aretaic for Aristotle in order to maintain that he does not endorse the Primacy of Character. All we need is the more cautious, but equally effective, claim that Aristotle does *not* explain right conduct by reference to aretaic concepts. Whether from the notion of appropriateness and *dei* we can further derive the claim that Aristotle attributes priority to the deontic over the aretaic is a separate issue. The negative claim about the non-priority of the virtues will suffice to show that Aristotle does not accept the Primacy of Character.[60]

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[58] To support his reading semantically, he continues: 'On translation, see Liddell & Scott 1940: 372, s.v. Having noted that the later 'sense of moral obligation' emerged from the earlier 'there is need', they translate the neuter participle *deon* using 'ought'" (Crisp, 2015, p. 266, fn. 13).

[59] In Chapter IV, Aristotle employs talk of *prepon* in order to echo the etymology of the virtue in question (i.e. magnificence). 'as its name itself implies [*megaloprepeia*], it consists in suitable [*prepousa*] expenditure on a great scale' (*NE* IV.2, 1122a22-23). See McAleer (*ibid.*).

[60] Indeed, despite being inclined to make the stronger point about the priority of the deontic over the aretaic, Crisp himself recognises that the 'main point here about the non-ultimate nature of virtue-properties in actions can anyway be restated in non-deontic terms' (2015, p. 267, fn. 14), showing awareness that the establishment of the *non*-priority of the aretaic is all that is needed to demonstrate Aristotle's rejection of the Primacy of Character.

Second Objection – Textual Inconclusiveness. McAleer's second response is this: even if the *dei*-passages supported the view that Aristotle does not endorse the Primacy of Character, this would still be insufficient to commit Aristotle, and the broader architecture of his ethics, to such a view. As is often the case, some passages of the *NE* suggest a certain idea while some others negate that very idea, producing exegetical dilemmas.

As he puts it:

> 'One response to the problem the *dei*-passages raise is to note that Aristotle also says that the virtuous person herself is the standard: "the refined and well-bred man . . . will be . . . as it were a law to himself (*hoion nomos ôn heautôi*)" (*NE* 1128a31–32), and "the good man (*ho spoudaios*) judges each class of things rightly . . . being as it were the norm and measure (*kanôn kai metron*)" (*NE* 1113a29–b3). Now it may be that the virtuous agent is a law to herself and a standard and measure because she has fully internalized some ultimately external, deontic standard, to which she appropriately responds. Or it may be that she is herself ultimately the source of the standard to which she appropriately responds' (McAleer, 2007, p. 219).[61]

McAleer does not resolve this Euthyphro-like dilemma. He merely states it as a challenge to anyone committed to showing that there is not some form of definitional priority of the virtuous agent over the virtuous action. Given the passages discussed (most eminently, *NE* III.4), his objection runs, we cannot yet claim that the virtuous agent simply reliably tracks 'some ultimately external, deontic standard[s]', contributing nothing to their status. Until we offer a detailed argument of why *NE* III.4 should not be read in a way that conflicts with our reading of *NE* II.6, the text is inconclusive, and the strength of the *dei*-passages is insufficient to show that Aristotle is not a virtue ethicist. After all, III.4 might be interpreted in such a way that the virtuous agent is herself the source of the virtuousness of actions for Aristotle.

This, McAleer himself admits, is not 'a knockdown argument' that Aristotle believes in the Primacy of Character, but rather a suggestion as to 'why the *dei*-passages are not the premises

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[61] Statman too identifies this issue as decisive for the question of whether Aristotle counts as a virtue ethicist: 'What is at stake here is how to understand Aristotle's *phronimos*; is the *phronimos* the standard for appropriate behavior so that an act is right because, and only because, the *phronimos* performs (or would perform) it, or does the *phronimos* perform it because he perceives its independent value?' (Statman, 1997, p. 27).

of a knockdown argument that he does not' (2007, p. 222). His objection, thus, is that if Aristotle does not believe in the Primacy of Character, this 'will be clear only after detailed argument and exegesis' (*ibid.*).

Through what I hope is adequate detailed argument and exegesis, I have already proposed in Chapter 2 that the second horn of this Euthyphro-like dilemma is not something Aristotle believes in. Instead, a careful reading of the text illustrates that the virtuous agent is merely the one whose excellent character allows her to discriminate things correctly (*orthōs*, 1113a30) and see the truth (*t'alēthes*, 1113a30) in all departments ('truth' which, I have suggested, is out there, independently of its being perceived by the virtuous agent). To reiterate what I argued there, it is only an unsupportable Protagorean reading of *NE* III.4 which would suggest that for Aristotle the virtuous agent is, in McAleer's terms, 'the source of the standard'; an interpretation which, if true, would support understanding *NE* II.6's idea of the person of practical wisdom 'determining' the mean as indicating some dependence of the mean on the virtuous agent's judgement. This reading, however, not only disregards Aristotle's employment of a certain terminology – that of truth manifesting itself to the virtuous agent (*t'alēthes phainetai* 1113a31) and of the virtuous agent discriminating correctly (*krinei orthōs* 1113a30) –, it also encounters strong textual counter-evidence. In fact, as I have argued, *NE* III.4 is open to a non-Protagorean reading which is much better supported both within and outside Aristotle's ethical work. This latter reading makes it clear that the preferable interpretation of III.4 and II.6 is one on which the independence of the mean from the virtuous agent is stated, rather than negated: the *phronimos* merely identifies what is (already and independently of its identification as such) mean.

If this is right, then we still have very good reasons to maintain that Aristotle does not endorse the Primacy of Character, and that he is not, therefore, a virtue ethicist in the modern sense.

3. Aristotle and virtue ethics: Part II

As I mentioned above, McAleer has a second wave to his argument. Having argued against reading the *dei*-passages as premises of 'a knockdown argument' that Aristotle does not endorse the Primacy of Character, he tries to identify a more positive (indeed, alternative) sense in which Aristotle can be considered a virtue ethicist.

To see his reasoning, we must go back to the answer I have provided to the question of what makes right action right for Aristotle. Roughly,

An action is right iff it hits the mean in the circumstances.

McAleer's objection runs as follows: there is still some ineliminable dependence on the virtuous agent in this formula. In fact, he contends, though this formula 'makes no *explicit* appeal or reference to the virtuous agent, it does so implicitly: Aristotle believes that there is no agent-independent rule or principle that can determine where the mean is (*NE* 1109b14-23, 1126a31-b4). The mean is where the virtuous person, who possesses the intellectual virtue of *phronêsis*, determines it to be. So [the above formula] does not succeed in eliminating the aretaic notion, and, since we cannot determine where the mean is independently of the virtuous agent, Aristotle's ethics can be taken to assert' (McAleer, 2007, p. 217) the idea that reference to the virtuous agent is *ineliminable*. So, McAleer concludes, 'even if the virtuous person only correctly perceives what a situation calls for, since there is no way to determine what is called for without appeal to the virtuous agent's perception, Aristotle's ethics counts as [a version of] virtue ethics' (2007, p. 222).

Let me start by noting that, quite obviously, this is not how virtue ethics is usually defined. We began with the thought that ethical theories belong to different genera in virtue of what they take to be ultimately right-making. However, on this alternative construal, we are not taking the virtuous agent as being explanatorily prior – as Hursthouse, Watson et al. classically do. Rather, we are taking the virtuous agent as enjoying the status of exclusive heuristics of what counts as mean in the circumstances. Yet, it is one thing to say that an ethical theory counts as virtue ethical insofar as it holds that the criterion of the mean is the virtuous agent and quite another to say that an ethical theory counts as virtue ethical insofar as it endorses the idea that the criterion of discovery (or the heuristics) of the mean is the virtuous agent.

Even so, McAleer will push back by maintaining that his approach is, as it were, an ameliorative one, urging us to devise an account of virtue ethics which will do the kind of taxonomic work we (might) wish it to do, namely to make Aristotle a virtue ethicist. In fact, he believes that to 'capture the self-consciously neo-Aristotelian cast of so much work in virtue ethics' (2007: 211), an 'eminently plausible adequacy constraint on any account of virtue ethics is that Aristotle have a virtue ethics by its lights' (2007, p. 210), although he admits (perhaps

with some awareness of the circularity that would otherwise be involved) that this is better thought of as a 'presumptive rather than peremptory constraint' (2007, p. 211).[62]

Thus, his novel account would thus run as follows: a sufficient condition for an ethical theory to count as virtue ethical is that it attributes an exclusive or ineliminable role to the virtuous agent in revealing what the situation requires, what it calls for.[63] That is to say, that it attributes, as he puts it, 'epistemological priority' to the virtuous agent.

I say 'sufficient condition' to be fair to McAleer's proposal, which is a disjunctive one (2007, p. 221). On his account, in fact, virtue ethics will be any theory believing in (i) both the definitional and epistemological priority of the virtuous agent, *or* (ii) in just the definitional priority, *or* (iii) in just the epistemological priority. Depending on how many, and which, of the stated theses a theory endorses, it will belong to a correspondingly stronger or weaker version of virtue ethics.[64]

At any rate, we have seen that Aristotle does not believe in either of the first two disjuncts since he does not endorse the Primacy of Character. So, returning to our main question, we need to evaluate the plausibility of thinking that the sole endorsement of the epistemological priority of the virtuous agent makes a certain theory virtue ethical. Is this a sufficiently exclusive way of specifying virtue ethics?

Suppose there is a version of consequentialism which, like many versions of virtue ethics, believes in the inexactness of the ethical realm – a version which agrees with the thought that there is no all-encompassing rule (or set of rules) which can help us determine what is required in each and every specific circumstance. Suppose, further, that this version of consequentialism endorses the claim that only the virtuous agent (and us, by reference to her) can discover what the right thing to do is – a version which also holds that there is no virtue-independent way to determine what action is required. This theory would still be consequentialist in character, and,

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[62] Regardless of the worries of circularity involved in this constraint and granting its *prima facie* plausibility, my argument will be that this is an objectionably presumptive constraint: it has undesirable consequences.

[63] Hence, McAleer is imprecise when he claims that for this kind of virtue ethics 'that the virtuous agent would φ in c is the *best or only* evidence that φ-ing in c is right' (2007, p. 220, my emphasis). Strictly speaking, in fact, that something is the best evidence that φ-ing in c is right does not entail that it is also the exclusive evidence that φ-ing in c is right – there might be a second-best, after all. If so, and if McAleer is to meet the very desideratum of the ineliminability of the virtuous agent, then he should have simply stated that the virtuous agent is the *only* evidence that φ-ing in c is right.

[64] This disjunctive definition of virtue ethics saves McAleer from the undesirable consequence of negating that those who believe in the Primacy of Character are virtue ethicists.

quite plausibly, we would not be inclined to deem it a version of virtue ethics. I conjecture that the reason why we would not have this inclination is that this variant of consequentialism would not take basic moral facts to be facts about virtues. Virtues, it would still hold in its consequentialist vein, are character traits worth having *because* they (enable us to) maximise production of goodness, but they themselves are not, ultimately, right-making: maximisation of goodness is.

The same reasoning could be applied to a deontology *à la* Ross which held that there are moral facts 'out there' waiting to be intuited and which introduced the further restriction that only the virtuous agent (and us, by reference to her) can discover what is required of us in the circumstances.

What should we say about these theories? That they are all versions of virtue ethics? If so, to what end? Simply to be able to assert that Aristotle is a virtue ethicist? Would it not be more accurate to say that they are all different ethical theories with the same epistemological twist? On McAleer's construal, however, we would have to say that they are all different species of the same genus: virtue ethics. But this has the undesirable outcome of lumping together Aristotle's ethics and these modified versions of consequentialism and deontology – all for the sake of holding that Aristotle *is*, in some sense, a virtue ethicist. In other words, this account of virtue ethics is vulnerable to a charge of over-inclusiveness.

This, I take it, re-illuminates the plausibility of our starting point: that different ethical theories belong to different genera in virtue of what they take to be ultimately right-making and not in virtue of what they take to be the heuristics one has for discovering what is (independently of the heuristics) right.

While it seems plausible, thus, to find the same moral epistemology across different genera of normative ethical theories, it seems much less plausible (indeed, implausible) to find the same criterion of right action across different genera of normative ethical theories.

At this juncture, there seems to be only one question left: to what lengths are we willing to go to make Aristotle a virtue ethicist?

4. On the accessibility of the mean

In this section, I want to evaluate the plausibility of McAleer's idea of the epistemological priority of the virtuous agent in its own right, regardless of the implications it has when taken as the distinguishing feature of virtue ethics.

Recall that McAleer's idea is not just the simple thought that the virtuous agent enjoys 'epistemological priority' in the sense I explored in Chapter 1 §6 and Chapter 2 §§7-8, namely that she is an exemplar when it comes to getting things right. That is true by definition, and is perhaps almost a truism, in Aristotle's ethics: after all, she is the best specimen of her sort and possesses the excellence of *phronēsis* – the best virtue one could hope to acquire regarding moral knowledge. As a matter of fact, there will be a one-to-one correspondence between the actions rationally chosen and performed by the virtuous agent and their rightness.

Rather, McAleer's idea is that 'there is *no* virtue-independent way to determine what action is required' (2007, p. 222, my emphasis). This would make reference to the virtuous agent ineliminable, even if only epistemologically. But should we attribute to Aristotle the idea that there is no 'virtue-independent' way of figuring out what the mean thing to do is?

First of all, notice that McAleer's argument proceeds swiftly from the thought that for Aristotle 'there is no agent-independent rule or principle that can determine where the mean is' to 'we cannot determine where the mean is independently of the virtuous agent' (2007, p. 217). We might start by observing, however, that it is not obvious whether we can establish the truth of both claims in Aristotle.

The former claim is, in some sense, true: Aristotle is suspicious that there are all-encompassing rules or principles which can guide action, by way of inference, in each and every specific circumstance. Morality is, to a large extent, uncodifiable. As he puts it, rules work 'for the most part' (*hōs epi to polu*, 1094b21) and, even when some principles seem generally true, they are still underspecified (1104a5-10), such that the answer to what we ought to do ultimately 'lies in perception' (1109b23), with its provision of the missing particulars. In other words, it is true that for Aristotle in many cases we will need to find ourselves in the situation before we can conclusively know what the right thing to do is. No ethical almanac will suffice on its own. Relatedly, as the agent will be an integral part of the contextual complexity, it is also true in this sense that there is no 'agent-independent' way of figuring out what the mean is: features concerning the agent are part of the set of parameters involved in identifying the mean.[65]

On the other hand, the latter claim – that 'we cannot determine where the mean is independently of the virtuous agent' – is dubious. Aristotle nowhere explicitly holds this thesis,

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[65] Consider, for instance, someone donating her money. For the action to count as generous, the money needs to be a substantial portion of one's wealth. For why this does not lead to some form of objectionable agent-relativity, see Brown (1997). For a criticism, see Gottlieb (2009, esp. pp. 25-39). For a response, see Brown (2014, esp. p. 68, fn. 9).

and his text does not commit us to it. Indeed, the text might suggest otherwise. In this connection, I propose considering two cases.

First, let us consider the enkratic agent. As Aristotle tells us, the enkratic agent rationally chooses virtuous actions knowing that they are virtuous, but does so feeling conflicted (*NE* VII). She does not meet, we might surmise, the stability condition introduced in *NE* II.4. When she acts, she does not do so 'from a stable and unchanging disposition' (*bebaiōs kai ametakinētōs*, 1105a33). Among other things, in fact, that the issuing state be *ametakinētos* requires that one does not feel pain or hesitancy when one acts. If she does so feel, it counts against her possessing virtue; no emotional disturbance should be present at the time of action.[66] Thus, because the enkratic agent is so conflicted, she is non-virtuous (though of course not vicious). Moreover, as per the thesis of the reciprocity of the virtues, she also does not have *phronēsis* (for if she did, she would be virtuous, *per impossibile*). And yet she can, independently of the possession of *phronēsis*, determine where the mean is: she chooses virtuous actions knowing that they are virtuous or, we might equally paraphrase, mean actions knowing that they are mean.

A similar case, perhaps more speculative in nature, is that of the learner approaching the endpoint of habituation. I advance that there will be a point in time in which the learner will be able to reliably identify what the right thing to do is *herself*.[67] She might not perform the mean thing in the right way (sc. virtuously), not yet at least. Nonetheless, she will get things right without possessing *phronēsis* herself.

It is worth noting that, nonetheless, there is a crucial difference between the enkratic (as well as the learner) and the virtuous agent and that, indeed, the difference is one of moral sensitivity. In fact, it might be hypothesised that the enkratic agent does not *really* see the world in the same way in which the virtuous agent does. For instance, if one is truly courageous, what

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[66] To be sure, Aristotle is not just making a point about the lack of internal conflict (or perhaps even the stricter requirement that the virtuous agent takes pleasure and feels harmonious in doing the right thing). In asking that the agent performs the virtuous action 'from a stable and unchanging disposition', I think that he is also understanding the condition in more deflationary, and indeed more generally counterfactual, terms: that if things got harder (increasingly harder), the virtuous agent would not vacillate and would still perform the virtuous action. For this more general reason too, the condition is rightly called 'stable' and 'unchanging'. (Proviso: there will be a point where ψ-ing, rather than φ-ing, will be the virtuous thing to). See Broadie (1991, p. 89).

[67] Recall the analogy with grammar of *NE* II.4: that one counts as a grammarian when one has knowledge 'within oneself' (*en hautō(i)*) of (e.g.) how one's name is spelt, and not when one produces grammatical outcomes either accidentally or under instruction.

seems like a frightful and dangerous situation to many will simply appear to her as an occasion to manifest her bravery. Being courageous, one might think, involves having the motivations that the courageous person has; it involves seeing the world in the very specific way in which she sees it.[68] So, while the enkratic agent has a remainder of conflict, possibly because she is still attributing some weight to the reasons against φ-ing, the virtuous agent will not be affected by the reasons against φ-ing (although her *logos* might still be sensitive to them). Her excellent character makes it the case that she feels no internal conflict. Thus, the virtuous agent, it might be thought, sees more directly what the mean thing to do is.

Yet, even if this were an accurate description of the virtuous and the enkratic agent's psychology, it would not suffice to vindicate McAleer's thesis. For the enkratic agent still sees perfectly well that φ-ing is the right thing to do (indeed, she sees why it is overall required of her to φ, rather than ψ). In light of this, insofar as we are concerned with the question 'What is the right thing to do?', there is little difference between the virtuous agent and the enkratic agent. The difference lies elsewhere, such as in how they perceive what the right thing to do is and what sort of effects this perceptual difference makes to their motivational state, which, in turn, might lead to different ways of performing the action which they do, in fact, both perform.[69]

A similar line of response would run for someone objecting that there is a notable difference between the enkratic and the virtuous agent, precisely in virtue of what I have argued in Chapter 2, namely that the way in which we perceive things is a function of our character. So, if it is true, as I argued there, that the virtuous agent is the one who reliably sees what the right thing to do is in virtue of her excellent character, is it still plausible to think that the enkratic agent, lacking such an excellent character, correctly identifies the mean? The answer will be negative only if we foist onto Aristotle an implausibly restrictive view, such that only those who are virtuous can correctly identify the mean. The idea I explored in Chapter 2 §§7-8, however, need only commit us to thinking that for Aristotle there is a certain character (the vicious sort) which is so perverted that access to the mean is necessarily precluded to it *and* a certain character (the virtuous sort) so excellent that access is reliably granted to it: what is in-between, nevertheless, might still enjoy a sufficiently good grasp of what the situation calls for. I would locate the enkratic agent here.

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[68] See Gardner (2007, pp. 126-127).

[69] Similarly, the akratic agent too sees what action would be required of her. The difference is that she is not moved to perform it.

It might be the case that if one is to have the finest rational appreciation of the right-making qualities of virtuous actions, one needs to be virtuous oneself, having acquired *phronēsis*. But it might well be that to have a sufficiently clear understanding of which actions count as right and virtuous might well not be the prerogative of the virtuous agent. Thus, insofar as the question is one about 'right action' (and not, say, about *eudaimonia*), I do not see how the virtuous agent has any sort of exclusive access to it.

These examples are intended to show that our access to the mean need not be mediated by *phronēsis*. In other words, and returning to McAleer's suggestion, it need not be the case that since Aristotle does not believe in the full codifiability of ethics, then he also believes that figuring out what we ought to do is the exclusive province of the virtuous agent. We should thus be cautious not to overstate Aristotle's remarks on the non-rigorous nature of morality: it simply does not follow from Aristotle's statement that in ethics rules 'work for the most part' that such rules do *not* work. And it is perhaps under the influence of one such overstatement that we will feel the urge of substituting the emptiness left behind by the complete absence of rules with an exclusive moral exemplar. In Aristotle, luckily, there is no such drastic void to be filled.

This leads me to a second textual point. I find it telling that Aristotle constantly offers rules of thumb (such as steering clear of the more contrary extreme, 1109a30-32, or paying our debts before doing favours to our companions, 1164b30-33) as well as conceptual devices to locate the right thing to do (such as the doctrine of the mean, with its general advice of avoiding excess and deficiency in behaviour and its more specific advice of checking the parameters). It is *these* tools that Aristotle, throughout the chapters concerned with habituation and the investigation of the individual ethical virtues, provides as practical guidance to the student of virtue. He does not incite the learner to think of what the virtuous agent would do but rather to follow the guidance of the various generalisations he offers and examine the particulars of the circumstances (the object, the amount, the person etc.).

Therefore, it is far from obvious that Aristotle attributes this ineliminable epistemological role to the virtuous agent for the discovery of the mean, as McAleer thinks he clearly does. Neither do we need to possess *phronēsis* ourselves in order to figure out what the right thing to do is, nor do we always need to appeal to the idea of 'what the virtuous agent would do': in simple cases, it seems to me that we simply intuit what the right thing to do is. In other cases, rules of thumb will suffice. Of course, I am not contending that Aristotle finds implausible the idea of asking the closest available virtuous agent or of thinking about what she would do.

What I am arguing against is the idea that there is no way of discovering the mean independently of virtue or *phronēsis*.

5. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that we have good reasons to resist the idea that Aristotle is a virtue ethicist, both in the stronger, canonical sense of endorsing the Primacy of Character and in the weaker sense suggested by McAleer. In conclusion, I wish to analyse the implications of answering the question of whether Aristotle is a virtue ethicist.

From a taxonomical perspective, Aristotle cannot be said to be a virtue ethicist in the modern sense, since he does not explain what it is for an action to be virtuous in terms of the virtuous person. Instead, he defines virtuous actions by appealing to the notion of the mean. What is more, he even makes the further step of inverting the direction of priority: having specified what it is for an action to be mean, he tells us that the dispositions of the excellent person are mean dispositions because they are concerned with (*peri*) mean actions and feelings – that is, their intermediacy is inherited. As he puts it, they are *mesotētes* because they aim at and achieve what is mean (*tou mesou stochastikē*) in actions and feelings.

Conversely, this also implies that, insofar as recent virtue ethics is characterised by its endorsement of the Primacy of Character, it cannot profess Aristotelian origins. Thus, when Hursthouse claims that her version of virtue ethics is neo-Aristotelian because it 'aims to stick pretty close to his ethical writings wherever else it can' (1998, p. 8), we should pause and ask how plausible this claim is. As we have seen, the claim might not be very plausible, so long as questions about right action go. Virtue ethics does not, and need not, stand on Aristotle's shoulders.[70]

But, if so, it is also problematic to think of Aristotle's ethics as belonging to the triad of normative ethical theories, alongside consequentialism and deontology. We have seen that what sets these theories apart is the criterion they offer for what counts as right (and wrong) action: as I put it above, different criteria of right action lead to different genera of normative ethical theories. However, once we subtract from Aristotle the distinctively virtue ethical criterion of right action, we are left with a lacuna: is it still plausible to think of Aristotle's ethics as occupying a distinctive role in the triad? Or does Aristotle's ethics simply belong to either consequentialism or deontology? In which case, is there any other distinctive role for Aristotle's

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[70] Of course, these remarks have no bearing on the plausibility of the project of modern virtue ethics considered in its own right.

ethics as a method of ethics? These are (some of) the questions that urgently surface once we can no longer assume that the Stagirite's ethics is a species of virtue ethics.[71]

Lastly, there are considerable exegetical benefits. In showing that Aristotle is not a virtue ethicist in the modern sense, we free Aristotle's text (or, I should say, our reading of it) from certain colourings which would otherwise cloud the real meaning of some key passages. More precisely, conducting our exegeses with a critical eye to the recent tradition that Aristotle has doubtlessly inspired helps us see that his text is far from suggestive of some form of definitional priority of the virtuous agent. More precisely, it neither suggests that an action counts as virtuous when, and because, it is performed by a virtuous agent (as some have thought he held in *NE* II.4), nor that the mean quality of virtuous actions is to be explained in terms of the intermediacy of the dispositions from which they flow (as some have thought he held in *NE* II.2 and II.6). What we get, to reiterate, is virtuous actions' independence from and definitional priority over virtuous dispositions.

I surmise that calling attention to this distance between Aristotle and virtue ethics will allow us to better see and evaluate the plausibility of a different, non-virtue-ethical treatment of the Stagirite's ethics.

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[71] See Crisp (2015), who suggests considering Aristotle's ethics as a non-Kantian form of deontology and finding its distinctiveness in the sort of (non-instrumental) value it attaches to the virtues. See also Hirji (2018b).

Conclusion

In this thesis I have explored the relationship between virtuous actions and virtuous dispositions in Aristotle's *NE*, arguing against the set of claims on which virtuous actions are virtuous in some derivative sense. Ultimately, I have defended the idea that virtuous actions are not only virtuous independently of virtuous dispositions but also definitionally prior.

In Chapter 1, I have argued against the claim that virtuous actions are virtuous because they are performed by a virtuous agent. I have done so by discussing *NE* II.4's distinction between virtuous actions and acting virtuously, as presented via the analogy with technical skills in response to the *aporia* raised by the hypothetical sceptic. This distinction, I have indicated, implies that nothing about the agent needs to be true for a certain action to count as virtuous – that is, that the (knowledge, choice and stability) conditions Aristotle discusses at 1105a26-b3 are conditions which need to be met by an agent if she is to count as virtuous, and not conditions for an act to count as virtuous.

In Chapter 2, I have answered the question of what makes an action virtuous, if not the fact that it is performed by a virtuous agent. I have argued that what makes an action virtuous is that it hits the mean-relative-to-us. I emphasised how this notion applies primarily to actions and feelings, and not to dispositions, since only the former, being divisible continua, directly admit of an intermediate, excessive and deficient condition. After rejecting those views on which the intermediacy of virtuous dispositions is taken to be explanatorily prior to that of virtuous actions, I then made the further step of inverting the direction of priority: virtuous dispositions inherit their intermediacy from virtuous actions (and feelings); that is, virtuous dispositions are mean dispositions because they hit the mean in actions and feelings. I concluded the second chapter by responding to the objection that Aristotle himself might have suggested some form of dependence of virtuous actions on the virtuous agent when he claimed that the mean is determined by the *phronimos* (1106b36-1107a2): as *NE* III.4 strongly suggests, the *phronimos* merely identifies what already and independently counts as mean.

Lastly, in the third and final chapter, I have explained how, if the claims presented in the first two chapters are true, Aristotle's ethics does not count as a form of modern virtue ethics. In Aristotle's ethical theory, the relationship between virtuous actions and virtuous dispositions is not what is often assumed: there is no definitional dependence of the former on the latter.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

DA – De Anima

EE – Eudemian Ethics

Met. – Metaphysics

NE – Nicomachean Ethics

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