

ON VIRTUE ETHICS AND ARISTOTLE

Introduction

Modern moral philosophy has long been dominated by two basic theories, Kantianism or deontology on the one hand and utilitarianism or consequentialism on the other. Increasing dissatisfaction with these theories and their variants has led in recent years to the emergence of a different theory, the theory of virtue ethics.¹ According to virtue ethics, what is primary for ethics is not, as deontologists and utilitarians hold, the judgment of acts or their consequences, but the judgment of agents. The good person is the fundamental category for moral philosophy, and the good person is the person of good character, the person who possesses moral virtue.²

Virtue ethics, according to its authors, is not a new theory. Not only are its origins very old, and very various, but Aristotle is still widely held to be its finest exponent.³ Contemporary virtue theorists, therefore, are often characterized as neo-Aristotelians. They are Aristotelians because they accept Aristotle's fundamental ideas. They are neo-Aristotelians because they reject some of his conclusions, notably about manual labor, slavery, and women.⁴ But neo-Aristotelians depart from Aristotle in more ways than those they expressly admit, and in particular over the connection between ethics and politics. The work of Aristotle that is most used and referred to by

¹ Elizabeth Anscombe led the way with her article 'Modern Moral Philosophy' in *Philosophy* 33 (1958). She has been followed in particular by: Philippa Foot, *Virtues and Vices*; Peter Geach, *The Virtues*; Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*. See also Nancy Sherman, *The Fabric of Character*; Michael Slote, *Goods and Virtues*; Bernard Williams, *Moral Luck* and *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. The literature on virtue ethics is now extensive. Volume 13 of *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, edited by Peter A. French, Theodore E. Uehling, Jr., and Howard K. Wettstein, was devoted to the topic, and a representative selection of essays with an extensive bibliography can be found in *The Virtues: Contemporary Essays on Moral Character*, edited by Robert B. Kruschwitz and Robert C. Roberts.

² Louis P. Pojman, *Ethics: Discovering Right and Wrong*, 119-23; David Solomon, 'Internal Objections to Virtue Ethics,' *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, vol.13, pp.428-29.

³ MacIntyre traces back the virtues to Homer's heroes, *After Virtue*, pp. 121-30. The tradition of virtue in Chinese thinking has been much explored by Antonio Cua, in *The Unity of Knowledge and Action: A Study in Wang Yang-ming's Moral Psychology*; *Ethical Argumentation: A Study of Hsün Tzu's Moral Epistemology*; *Moral Vision and Tradition*. For the Greco-Roman tradition, Aristotelian and otherwise, see Julia Annas, *The Morality of Happiness*.

these theorists is the *Nicomachean Ethics*. The *Politics* is seldom if ever mentioned. This is not because such theorists are unaware of the connection between the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Politics*. Rather they do not pay it much attention. Some do explicitly acknowledge the political context of Aristotle's ethics and even endorse this fact themselves,⁵ but when they do so they do not give the reasons Aristotle gives. This is clear from their neglect of the central text of Aristotle on this question, namely the last chapter of the *Ethics*.⁶

Theory, Practice, and Prejudice

Aristotle opens this chapter by asking whether the chosen project of the *Nicomachean Ethics* has been completed. His answer is no because in practical matters the end is not merely to study but to do, not merely to know virtue but to get and use it. The first task may have been completed, but the second has not. It is this second task, the task of coming to get and use virtue, and the questions it raises, that occupy the rest of the chapter. Aristotle's answers to these questions force him into the discussion of political regimes and hence directly into the subject of the *Politics*.⁷

One should not hurry over the beginning of the chapter and its distinction between theory and practice. Drawing such a distinction has now become standard in moral philosophy. Apart from writings on the theories of ethics, which used to be virtually the whole of the academic

⁴ See in particular Rosalind Hursthouse, *Beginning Lives*, p. 220, 236, and MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 159.

⁵ MacIntyre is the most obvious instance here, *After Virtue*, pp. 146-64. But see also Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness*, pp. 343-53, and 'Non-Relative Virtues: An Aristotelian Approach,' in *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, vol.13, pp.32-53.

⁶ The *Eudemian Ethics* and the *Magna Moralia* (which is Aristotelian if not by Aristotle) have no equivalent of this chapter. For some speculations on what this might mean as regards the *Eudemian Ethics*, see Günther Bien, 'Das Theorie-Praxis Problem und die politische Philosophie bei Platon und Aristoteles,' in *Philosophisches Jahrbuch*, vol. 76, p. 304.

⁷ The scholarly dispute as to whether the summary at the end of the *Nicomachean Ethics* fits our text of the *Politics* or not is discussed, and an answer given in the affirmative, in my *A Philosophical Commentary on the Politics of Aristotle*, pp. 10-13.

study of ethics, there now abound works on practical ethics, such as biomedical ethics, business ethics, and so on. Broadly stated, this contemporary distinction between theory and practice is a distinction between the general and the particular, between propounding a general theory and applying it to, or testing it against, particular cases. The aim of the practical side of this exercise is to work out, as far as possible, whether and in what circumstances the particular issue in question, euthanasia say, is morally right or wrong.

This distinction between theory and practice is not the same as Aristotle's. His is not a distinction between the general and the particular. It is a distinction between knowing what is right and wrong on the one hand and actually doing the right and avoiding the wrong on the other. The modern distinction passes over Aristotle's distinction and ignores his practical concern. Conversely, Aristotle's distinction passes over the modern one. But if our modern distinction contains nothing corresponding to Aristotle's practice, we do have what he calls practice. We just do not include it under ethics, but under psychology, therapy, counselling, and the like. It is striking that Aristotle includes this sort of thing under politics. As he goes on to argue, getting people actually to be virtuous is the job of political authority.⁸ Further, though Aristotle does not note the difference between general theory and particular applications, he surely recognizes it. The *Ethics* seems to be full of both: general theory of virtue and particular accounts of its exercise. This is why virtue theorists turn to Aristotle. He provides them with a model of what such a theory should look like.

So what should virtue theory look like? Well, it should at least be a theory that gives us a reasoned account of what virtue in general is and why it is necessary to be virtuous, or why being virtuous is good. More specifically, it should give us a reasoned account of what the number and

⁸ This is not a view of politics that is popular today, and there is not much sign that virtue ethicists want to revive it. See Ruth Putnam, 'Reciprocity and Virtue Ethics,' in *Ethics*, vol. 98, p. 381. MacIntyre might be something of an

kinds of the particular virtues are, why each one of these is good, and what acts they issue in. The general strategy of virtue theorists in response to these questions is to appeal, in the way they say Aristotle did, to human happiness or flourishing. The virtues are those qualities of character the possession and exercise of which make human beings flourish. Flourishing is a good, perhaps the greatest good. Given the proper account of flourishing, the argument goes, we should be able to establish which qualities of character contribute to it, and so are virtues, and which do not, and so are vices. These qualities of character will provide the key to determining good and bad action. A lot of debate about virtue ethics has, therefore, not surprisingly focused on this question of human flourishing and whether an account of it can be given that will do the job required.⁹

One might think that if Aristotle is such a fine exponent of virtue ethics his writings should be of special help here. One would accordingly expect virtue theorists to take over his notion of flourishing to explain and justify the virtues. Unfortunately this turns out not to be such a good idea. Aristotle's notion of flourishing, or *eudaimonia*, appears, on the one hand, not to be a unified whole, since he recognizes two different forms of it, and, on the other hand, to be too narrow and élitist. Only philosophers, or those few who devote themselves to the theoretical life, flourish in the best way, while the politicians, or those who devote themselves to the practical life, flourish in a secondary and lesser way. Everyone else--presumably the vast majority--do not flourish at all. This is one of those places where neo-Aristotelians find themselves forced to be more 'neo' than Aristotelian.¹⁰

exception but for reasons having to do with his historicism, not for the reasons Aristotle gives.

⁹ See Sarah Conly, 'Flourishing and the Failure of the Ethics of Virtue,' in *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, vol.13, pp. 83-96; Nussbaum, 'Non-Relative Virtues,' pp. 32-53; Hursthouse, *Beginning Lives*, pp. 226-37.

¹⁰ See Hursthouse, *Beginning Lives*, p. 236; MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 159. For some discussion of the problem of the two happinesses in Aristotle, see J.L. Ackrill, 'Aristotle on Eudaimonia,' in *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*, ed. Amélie O. Rorty, pp. 15-33; John M. Cooper, *Reason and Human Good in Aristotle*, part 3; W.F.R. Hardie, *Aristotle's Ethical Theory*, chs.2 and 16; Richard Kraut, *Aristotle on the Human Good*, ch.1; Nussbaum, *Fragility of*

There is a more serious difficulty to taking Aristotle as a guide to human flourishing. According to virtue theorists, one is supposed to use the concept of flourishing to develop an account and justification of the virtues. Flourishing is the prior notion and the virtues are to be understood in terms of it. But Aristotle's understanding of the relation between flourishing and the virtues is the opposite of this. Aristotle does not argue to the virtues from some prior notion of flourishing, nor does he even attempt to do this. The virtues fall into the definition of *eudaimonia*. *Eudaimonia* does not fall into the definition of the virtues. *Eudaimonia* is defined as activity of soul along with virtue. The virtues are defined as various habits of choice, lying in a mean relative to us, and determined by reason. What falls into the definition of a thing is prior to that thing and has to be understood before that thing can be understood. So the notion of virtue must be prior to the notion of *eudaimonia* and must be understood before *eudaimonia* can be understood.¹¹ The long discussion of the virtues that follows the definition of *eudaimonia* in *Nicomachean Ethics* book 1, their general definition, their number, their detailed descriptions, are all to be understood as a commentary on the original definition. This is confirmed by the way Aristotle returns to the definition in the final book of the *Ethics*. He picks it up more or less

Goodness, pp. 373-77; Simpson, *A Philosophical Commentary on the Politics of Aristotle*, pp. 209, 238, 242n.

¹¹ *Nicomachean Ethics* 1098a16-18, 1106b36-1107a1. The priority of the virtues to *eudaimonia* in Aristotle's thought, while required by the logic of his definitions, has not always been acknowledged by scholars. Hardie, for instance, argues that the account of human ends or of *eudaimonia* in *Nicomachean Ethics* book 1, and the list of virtues in books 3 and 4, are not "integrated," and their mutual relations "are not made clear," *Aristotle's Ethical Theory*, p. 122. But this is false. It is made very clear that the virtues constitute *eudaimonia*. What Hardie was really pointing to, and what he really should have said, is that there is no justification given by Aristotle for the move from the definition of *eudaimonia* to the particular virtues. This is indeed true, for the movement of thought is the other way round: the virtues are the way to understand *eudaimonia*; *eudaimonia* is not the way to understand the virtues. Complaints similar to Hardie's, as by Cooper, *Reason and Human Good in Aristotle*, pp. 146-47 and A.W.H. Adkins, 'The Connection Between Aristotle's *Ethics* and *Politics*,' in *Political Theory*, vol. 12, pp. 29-49, especially p. 33, can be answered in the same way. Irwin and Kraut see the correct order of priority but do not dwell sufficiently on the implications of the fact that the virtues are independently identifiable, and their goodness independently recognizable; Irwin, *Aristotle's First Principles*, chs. 17 and 18, and Kraut, *Aristotle on the Human Good*, pp. 323-27. Myles Burnyeat is much better in this regard, 'Aristotle on Learning to be Good,' in Rorty, *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*, pp. 69-92. That Aristotle also says of virtue that it makes those who possess it and their work good (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1106a15-17) confirms this order of priority. Virtue makes one good in the same way that health makes one healthy, not because it *causes* goodness but because it *is* goodness. That is why *eudaimonia* is defined by reference to virtue and not vice versa. Virtue and its exercise are what essentially

where he left it in book 1 and, using the account of the virtues he has just given in the intermediate books, finally determines what the flourishing life is. In other words, whereas the first book gives only a formal and general definition of *eudaimonia*, the last book gives the detailed and material definition.

If this is true, then any theorists who want to follow Aristotle in this respect are going to face a serious problem. Surely, to use the virtues to define flourishing instead of using flourishing to define the virtues begs all the important questions. The job of ethics is to give an account and justification of why such and such is good or bad, vicious or virtuous, right or wrong. It is not its job to assume this in advance and then use it to tell us what to do or how to live. To think this would be to think that the job of ethics is simply to tell us what we are already supposed to know, which is not only useless but completely misses the point. It is because we do not know, or are unsure about, what we should do or how we should live that we turn to ethics in the hope of finding answers. Such is what the standard modern theories of ethics, utilitarianism and deontology, attempt to do. It is, moreover, what contemporary virtue theorists profess to do. Otherwise their theory could not be put forward as a serious rival to these others.

What about Aristotle himself? If he does not derive the virtues from the notion of flourishing, whence does he derive them? What other justification does he give in their defense? To the question of whence he derives the virtues, there seems to be a very simple answer: from common opinion. The virtues Aristotle lists, and the descriptions he gives of them and their possessors, are taken from the common experience and opinions of the citizens of the day. “Everyone in Aristotle’s Athens knew who the virtuous citizens were; everyone could recognize courage or magnanimity.”¹² But if this answers the question of derivation, it can hardly answer

constitute the goodness of *eudaimonia*.

¹² Putnam, ‘Reciprocity and Virtue Ethics,’ p. 380. See also Adkins, ‘The Connection between Aristotle’s *Ethics* and

the question of justification. Merely because something is commonly believed to be a virtue does not mean that it is. Perhaps it was enough for Aristotle that everyone would agree that these were the virtues. What need of proof is there if everyone already knows?

Is it true that everyone did know or that everyone would agree? Surely we learn enough from the sophists and from the dialogues of Plato to know that the Athenians were very far from agreed about the good and about virtue. Aristotle himself concedes that the many do not think that virtue is good, or the primary good, or that it makes one happy and flourishing, but rather that the sensual pleasures do. If Aristotle is relying on common opinion, this is not the opinion of the many. It can only be the opinion of the few. We do not have to go very far to find out who these few are. It is necessary, declares Aristotle, that those who are going to study ethics should be well trained in their habits. For the first principles of this study are the facts, and such persons already have or will easily accept these first principles. Those who neither know the facts, nor will believe someone who tells them, are, in the words of Hesiod, “good for nothing.”¹³ What are the facts? They are the facts about the just and the beautiful, as the context makes clear. Those who possess these facts are certainly not the many, who are, says Aristotle, anything but well trained in their habits, since they follow their passions and have no sense at all of the beautiful. They are rather those who call themselves, and are called by Aristotle, “the beautiful and the good.”¹⁴ Our English words imitate the Greek in this respect, for we speak of “gentlemen” and “nobles.”

Politics,’ and Hardie, *Aristotle’s Ethical Theory*, pp. 119-20, who quotes T.H. Green, W.D. Ross, and Bertrand Russell to the same effect.

¹³ *Nicomachean Ethics* 1095b3-13. On this passage see in particular Burnyeat, ‘Aristotle on Learning to be Good,’ pp. 71-72.

¹⁴ The Greek word is *kaloikagathoi*, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1099a6, 1124a4, 1179b10. There is a long discussion of *kalokagathia* in the last chapter of the *Eudemian Ethics*. Notice also the contrast between “the refined” (*hoi charientes*) and “the many” at 1095a18-20. Lord’s remarks in this regard are apposite, ‘Politics and Education in Aristotle’s *Politics*,’ in Günther Patzig ed., *Aristoteles’ Politik: Akten des XI Symposium Aristotelicum*, pp. 202-15, especially p. 213.

Gentlemen have few doubts about what is good and beautiful. They are confident that they both know it and possess it.¹⁵ Aristotle evidently agrees with them. One of the notorious problems in his ethical theory concerns the criterion for determining what is virtuous and what is vicious.¹⁶ We know that each virtue is a mean between two vicious extremes. We also know the names for the virtues and the vices. But how are we to determine in each case where the mean lies, or how are we to determine about this or that particular action whether it is an act of virtue? This is where Aristotle appeals to the virtue of prudence (*phronesis*). The mean is what prudence determines to be the mean. This doctrine has struck many readers as signally unhelpful. What we want is not a discussion of the faculty that does the deciding but of the criterion by reference to which it does so.

Aristotle is, despite appearances, not quite as vague as this. He says on more than one occasion that prudence is perception. It operates in the here and now. It decides what is the virtuous thing to do here and now, and judging the here and now is the work of perception. He also refers to prudence as a sort of “eye.”¹⁷ Prudence judges where the mean of virtue lies in the here and now, not by referring back to some criterion or measure, but directly by “seeing” this mean in the here and now. In other words, prudence does not *reason* about virtue; it directly *intuits* it. To look for a criterion of virtue which prudence is to follow is mistaken. To think a criterion is necessary is to think that prudence is some sort of reasoning faculty which subsumes particular cases under general rules or applies general rules to particular cases. But if prudence intuits, rather than reasons out, this is precisely what it will *not* do.¹⁸

¹⁵ Cf. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, part 9, “What is Noble?”

¹⁶ For just a few of the discussions, see Ackrill, in Rorty, *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*, pp. 15, 30-31; Cooper, *Reason and Human Good in Aristotle*, pp. 101-33; Hardie, *Aristotle's Ethical Theory*, ch.11; J.L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, p. 186; Nussbaum, *Fragility of Goodness*, ch.10.

¹⁷ *Nicomachean Ethics* 1109b20-23, 1126b2-4, 1142a23-30, 1143a32-b17, 1144a29-31.

¹⁸ For some discussion of intuition in Aristotle, see Hardie, *Aristotle's Ethical Theory*, pp. 232-34; Cooper, *Reason and Human Good in Aristotle*, pp. 58-76; and especially Sandra Peterson, ‘*Horos* (Limit) in Aristotle's

The great problem with appeals to intuition is that different people, and even the same people at different times, have different intuitions, so one will never get, in this way, a single and consistent answer about what it is right to do. Aristotle would have no problem with this. He would reply that not everyone's intuitions count as instances of prudence. Only the intuitions of the virtuous do. Those who lack virtue necessarily lack the right sort of intuition. The "eye" of their soul is blind.¹⁹ This reply is circular. If we ask who the virtuous are we are told they are those who have right intuition. If we ask who those with right intuition are we are told they are the virtuous.

Is this circle all that Aristotle leaves us with? Well, he does offer hints about acquiring the necessary prudence. He counsels us, for instance, to steer away from the extreme that is more contrary to the mean. He says we should guard against our natural tendencies as regards pleasures and pains. He says we should cling to the unproved sayings of the old and wise. He gives us instances of acts that are vicious, such as adultery, murder, and theft; or bestial or diseased, such as homosexuality, cannibalism, and fear of the sounds of mice.²⁰ But what help do these sorts of remarks provide? After all, Aristotle never bothers to explain or justify *why* adultery or murder are wrong. Their wrongness is just asserted as a fact. This is presumably the sort of fact that Aristotle requires the hearers of the *Ethics* already to know, since those who do not know these facts are good-for-nothings. We come back to where we were before, to "the beautiful and the good," to the gentlemen and the sons of gentlemen. They will not be troubled by Aristotle's circle because they are already inside it. If not yet fully virtuous, they are on the way there. They certainly know and accept the necessary facts. Their intuitions are basically

Nicomachean Ethics, in *Phronesis*, vol. 33, pp. 233-50.

¹⁹ *Nicomachean Ethics* 1144a29-36.

²⁰ *Nicomachean Ethics* 1109a30-b26, 1143b11-13, 1107a8-15, 1148b19-1149a20.

right. The circle in Aristotle's theory may be a problem for everyone else. It is not a problem for the gentlemen.

Aristotle's theory presents an altogether striking character. First, it does not seem to be a moral theory at all, at least not in the sense of moral theory that we standardly recognize. What we want from a moral theory is some overall account of moral goodness and badness which we can then use to show why this or that particular act is right or wrong. So the Kantian explains the right and wrong in terms of agreement with the categorical imperative, and the utilitarian in terms of promotion of the general welfare. Aristotle indeed has a general account of virtue, that it is a mean between extremes, and so on. This general account, however, cannot be used to show that something is an act of virtue or something else an act of vice. The truth about such particulars is not shown by theory; it is perceived by prudence. In fact the truth about Aristotle's general theory is shown from the particulars rather than vice versa. When Aristotle wants to confirm that virtue is a mean between extremes he looks to particular virtues and particular acts to do this. It is because his hearers already recognize particular virtues and vices and their corresponding acts that they are able to see, when Aristotle makes it explicit, that in each case virtue is a mean and vice an extreme.²¹

Aristotle does not have a moral theory in the typically modern sense. Consequently he does not offer a good place for contemporary virtue ethicists to start if they want to develop such a theory. A striking contrast between them and Aristotle can be noted here. It is one of the chief concerns of virtue ethicists to establish that the virtues really are virtues or really are goods worth

²¹ Aristotle does give general considerations to show that virtue is a mean, but he does not put much confidence in such "common" arguments, as he calls them. Where actions are concerned, the particulars are truer and the general account has to be shown to harmonize with the particulars. Aristotle does just that. He appeals directly to his list of particular virtues and shows from them, not from the common arguments just given, that virtues are means between extremes. He uses, in other words, a sort of proof by ostension, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1106b28-34.

having.²² This is never a concern of Aristotle's. He never bothers to argue that justice or courage are goods worth having. These are givens of his argument, not conclusions. So much is clear in the definition of *eudaimonia* as excellent activity of soul. For that the virtues he goes on to list are the excellences is taken as manifest. This is indeed manifest to those Aristotle is addressing, the well-educated gentlemen. It is not manifest to the many. Contemporary virtue ethicists evidently agree with the many: they do not take it as manifest either.²³

Another striking character of Aristotle's theory of virtue follows from this. It now looks as if Aristotle's theory is not only not a moral theory; it is not even a piece of moral philosophy. When it comes to particular judgments about good and bad, Aristotle's court of appeal is not reason or argument but opinion--and not the opinion of all, but only of a few.²⁴ These few turn out to be generally identifiable with a particular social class, the class of gentlemen. Aristotle's ethics is an ethics of and for gentlemen. It is prejudice, not philosophy.²⁵

Gentlemanly Ethics

Aristotle's position is not so crude, as a further look at the last chapter of the *Nicomachean Ethics* will reveal.²⁶ Having made the distinction between knowing virtue and getting it, Aristotle

²² See in particular Foot, *Virtues and Vices*, and Hursthouse, *Beginning Lives*, pp. 226-37.

²³ Cf. Robert B. Loudon, 'On Some Vices of Virtue Ethics,' in *American Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 21, pp. 227-34, and Pojman, *Ethics: Discovering Right and Wrong*, pp. 123-24. As far as Aristotle is concerned, Burnyeat's remarks are exact, 'Aristotle on Learning to be Good,' p. 81.

²⁴ This might seem to conflict with Aristotle's stated dialectical method of getting after the truth by examining the opinions, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1145b2-7, since he would, in the case of virtue, be ignoring some of these opinions and opinions held by a great many. On this point see Jonathan Barnes, 'Aristotle on the Methods of Ethics,' *Revue Internationale de Philosophie*, vol. 34, pp. 490-511, from whom the following passage (on page 504) explaining Aristotle's position is worth quoting: "We must distinguish between *hoi polloi* and *hoi pleistoi*: opinions held by most men are indeed *endoxa* [that is, to be taken seriously]; but opinions peculiar to *hoi polloi*, the vulgar herd, should be ignored."

²⁵ Consider Hursthouse's remarks, *Beginning Lives*, p. 236 about Aristotle's "lamentable parochialism." See also Nussbaum, 'Non-Relative Virtues,' p. 34; Stuart Hampshire, *Morality and Conflict*, pp. 149-53; Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, pp. 34-36. That Aristotle's moral and political thought is mere ideology is a view long held by Marxists. It was already insinuated by Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ch.15.

²⁶ On this part of the text see Burnyeat, 'Aristotle on Learning to be Good,' pp. 69-92. Burnyeat's conclusions are

turns to consider how to get it. If words were sufficient for this, he says, we should provide them. As it is words only seem effective with those already in love with beauty and the noble. The many remain untouched. Words cannot turn them towards what is beautiful and good. The many have no notion of the beautiful. They obey the rule of fear, not of shame, and shun what is base not because it is ugly but because it is punished. The many are in need of something else to make them virtuous. What might this something else be? Aristotle mentions three things through which we become good: nature, habit, and teaching. There is nothing we can do to ensure the presence of the first. It belongs to the truly fortunate through causes that are divine. The third, teaching, will only be effective with those whose soul has already been prepared in its habits to enjoy and hate in a beautiful way. Teaching requires prior habituation, the second of the three things Aristotle mentions. The hearer's character must first be disposed to virtue and be already in love with the beautiful if teaching is to have its effect. The only way to achieve this is through proper training from youth up, and this, in turn, cannot be achieved without the right laws.²⁷

Words, it is now evident, are sufficient for no one except the divinely fortunate. The beauty-loving youth for whom they were first said to be sufficient only become beauty-loving through discipline. Once habituation under coercive laws has preceded, then words can have their effect and convert law-generated love of beauty into fully fledged virtue. So how will the many become good? Aristotle's silent answer is that they cannot become good. The necessary love of beauty has not been generated in them, and all that the laws are able to do is keep them in check through force.²⁸

Aristotle's denial that the many can become virtuous goes along with his earlier refusal to

basically correct; they just need to be pushed much further. See Lord, 'Politics and Education in Aristotle's *Politics*,' p. 208 n14.

²⁷ *Nicomachean Ethics* 1179b4-1180a5.

²⁸ Cf. *Nicomachean Ethics* 1144a13-17.

pay their opinions about good and bad any serious attention. His preference for the gentlemen is consistent. But the preference is not prejudice. As this passage indicates, Aristotle's views about gentlemen and beauty-loving youth are tied up with his views about the soul and its parts.

Aristotle outlines his theory of the soul at the end of the first book of the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

There are three parts to the soul, but only two are relevant to ethics: appetite and reason. Appetite ought by nature to obey reason, for reason is what makes humans to be human and not just animal.²⁹ This does not happen automatically. The fact is manifest in the akratic or weak-willed, whose reason tells them to do the best, but whose desires and passions drag them in the opposite direction. In the continent, by contrast, and especially in the virtuous, reason has the upper hand and the desires yield to reason. Clearly what is decisive for virtue and its development is the subordination of appetite to reason. Experience teaches that such subordination comes about by habituation, not teaching. Experience further teaches that if passion gets the upper hand, appeals to reason are useless. Appeals to reason could only work if reason were in control, but in such cases reason is, *ex hypothesi*, not in control.³⁰

Reason and appetite are in agreement in the vicious as well as in the virtuous. In the vicious this agreement is the wrong way round. Reason is here subordinate to passion, not passion to reason. That is why, as Aristotle says, bad habits corrupt not only desire, so that one does not love beauty, but also reason, so that one has no knowledge of or appreciation for beauty. Bad habits blind one to the moral facts and make one think that vice is good and to be pursued, and virtue bad and to be avoided. In such people the first principles have been lost.³¹

Aristotle's doctrine of prudence is tied up with this psychology. Prudence is the

²⁹ This is part of the point of the famous "function" argument in *Nicomachean Ethics* 1.7.

³⁰ Cf. the remarks about children and self-control at the end of *Nicomachean Ethics* book 3, 1119b5-18.

³¹ Hence reason is here, in a sense, in conflict with itself (even if it is in agreement with passion). Reason is prevented from operating in its special capacity of discerning beauty and is relegated to being an instrument, a slave,

perception or intuition that the virtuous have. The virtuous are those in whom reason rules, and rules without opposition. Their perception is therefore the perception of reason. What this reason perceives is the mean, and the mean is what agrees with reason. Prudence, the finding of the virtuous mean, is reason finding what accords with reason. As and when each situation arises, a finely attuned reason, unclouded by distractions of passion, will simply sense what is right, what goes too far and what does not go far enough. We sometimes talk about things “feeling right,” meaning what feels right to affections and emotions. We could, with not too much license, talk also about what “feels right” to reason.³² If we did, this would bring us close to the perceiving that is Aristotle’s prudence. Not everyone is going to be good at feeling what is right to reason. Only those will be in whom reason rules and whose feeling is therefore the feeling of reason. Those who are dominated by passion will not be good at this because their feelings will either be those of their passions or will be too influenced by their passions. They will not be competent judges, and their opinions about what is virtuous and vicious will be without authority.³³

Aristotle’s psychology and ethics are closely tied together. Both are also closely tied to observation: the observation of human souls in action, in particular the observation of how passion and reason interact, and of how passion will dominate reason if nothing is done early in life to prevent it. The importance for Aristotle of such observation of souls can be seen also in

for passion. Such relegation is a sort of self-denaturing of reason.

³² In the Penguin translation of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, p. 110, H. Tredennick correctly notes the following: “A person of good character *feels* that he is getting too angry; he does not, in a particular case, refer to a general principle of ethics.” Kraut argues that there is a principle the person of good character refers to, namely, promoting a life of excellent theoretical and practical reasoning; *Aristotle on the Human Good*, pp. 335-38. This interpretation is based on a bizarre reading of the phrase “right reason” in *Ethics* 1138b18-34. This is taken to mean right reason in the sense of giving the right reason for doing something, rather than in the sense of describing the condition that the faculty of reason is in when it is right, that is, when it judges rightly (see 1144b21-28). Admittedly the goal of excellent reasoning is served when reason rightly judges the mean. But this is because, in the case of practical reason, rightly judging the mean *is* excellent reasoning (that is, excellent exercise of reason). It is not because rightly judging the mean has the promotion of excellent reasoning as its criterion or measure.

³³ On this point see Burnyeat, “Aristotle on Learning to be Good,” pp. 73-81. Some contemporary virtue ethicists show signs of wanting to follow Aristotle in holding that there are moral truths that one cannot perceive if one does not have the requisite character. The full implications of this, however, they have yet to draw out; see Hursthouse,

this other way. When he first broaches the question of what flourishing or happiness is, he mentions three kinds of lives: the lives of indulgence, of politics, and of philosophy. These are the only candidates for happiness. All others reduce to these.³⁴ This claim is part of what we might call Aristotle's response to cultural and ethical relativism. Aristotle denies that the variety of opinions and practices in human life is as various as is often thought. He also denies that there is no way to reduce them to basic types. On the contrary, it is quite possible to do this, and the types are the three mentioned. For only those lives are to be considered that have a claim to being called happy. Many lives are devoted to things necessary, such as a life of business or of the mechanical arts, and not to a free and leisured happiness.³⁵

Given that only these three lives are worth considering when it comes to the happy life, one can easily show that only two are worth considering seriously. The life of indulgence, of sensual pleasure, is not a human life, and so is not a life of human happiness. The happy life must indeed be pleasant, but not, or not simply, with the physical pleasures. The ox worshipped in Egypt as the god Apis, notes Aristotle drily, has a greater abundance of such pleasures than many monarchs.³⁶ This leaves only the lives of politics and philosophy. But if the political life is really to denote a distinct kind of life, and constitute a third possibility, it must be understood as the life that those lead who devote themselves to politics for the sake of performing beautiful and virtuous deeds. Many politicians enter politics for the sake of gain. Their kind of political life is no different from the life of others who live for gain.³⁷ The life of gain is either not a happy life, for it is subject to necessity, or it reduces to the life of indulgence. The truly political life is the

Beginning Lives, pp. 232-33.

³⁴ The point is made very clear in *Eudemian Ethics* 1.4-5.1215a20-1216a36. The parallel chapter in the *Nicomachean Ethics* is briefer and less fully argued (1.5.1095b14-1096a10).

³⁵ A point made in *Eudemian Ethics* 1215a26-33.

³⁶ *Eudemian Ethics* 1216a1-2.

³⁷ *Eudemian Ethics*, 1216a23-27.

life devoted to moral and political virtue. This sort of politics is readily identifiable as the sort of that gentlemen practice and strive to practice. The history of ancient Athens, to say nothing of the history of other places, provides us with plenty of examples.³⁸

The life of philosophy too is a life of virtue, though a life of theoretical virtue. Still, philosophers do not ignore the moral and political virtues. They will practice these virtues as a matter of course in their life in the city. In this regard the philosophers will not differ from the gentlemen. The only serious question in ethics, therefore, about what life to lead concerns the political and philosophic lives (though in actual practice these will, in the best regime, reduce to the same).³⁹ The other contender, the life of indulgence, has already been declared defeated because it is not human. From this it follows necessarily that the happy life must be the life of virtue in the sense in which virtue means the moral virtues of gentlemen and the theoretical virtues of philosophers. So if Aristotle prefers the gentleman, and if his theory of moral virtue is class-based, this is not a result of prejudice. He has reasons for his preference based on empirical observations of human souls, and human lives, and of the conditions and nature of each.

Many will still say that Aristotle was wrong in his preferences even if he was not simply prejudiced. Some want to explain this error in terms of history. Aristotle was not able, they say, to think beyond the limits of his time. If his views apply, they apply only to the ancient Greeks. This explanation is false for two reasons. First, Aristotle's ethical views apply not to all the ancient Greeks, but to a limited group of them, the noble few. There were plenty of Greeks who would have rejected his views.⁴⁰ Second, this group of people, while always limited *at any*

³⁸ Several gentlemen-politicians, or *kaloikagathoi*, are referred to as such in the Aristotelian *Ath_nai_n Politeia*, most notably in chapter 28, where there is also a sharp contrast drawn between these and the vulgar politicians, the demagogues. On whether Aristotle is the author of this book, and for a commentary on this particular chapter of it, see P.J. Rhodes, *A Commentary on the Aristotelian Ath_nai_n Politeia*, pp. 58-63, 344-61.

³⁹ *Politics* book 4(7), chs.1-3, and see Simpson, *A Philosophical Commentary on the Politics of Aristotle*, pp. 209, 238, 242n.

⁴⁰ That Aristotle's moral and political views represent a minority position and were not shared by everyone in

particular time, has never been limited *to* any particular time. There were gentlemen, and people Aristotle would have recognized as gentlemen, both before his time and for many centuries after it. Such people still exist. They may not have much political influence, but that is not new, for in fact they did not have much political influence in Aristotle's time either. This is something he complains about. Moreover, Aristotle's other class, the many, seems to be as timeless as his class of gentlemen. The many are predominantly the *d_mos*, the mass of the poor--but not just the poor. Most of the rich will fall into the same group. For though the class of the rich and the class of the poor are different and in more or less perpetual conflict, this opposition is of no consequence for the analysis of virtue. The poor and the rich share the same view about the good life. The difference is that the rich have this life and want to keep it, while the poor do not have it and want to get it.

Gentlemanly Politics

If Aristotle takes his bearings by gentlemanly opinions, he does not simply follow them. These opinions, though sound, may, when examined by a philosopher, be seen to point beyond themselves. For example, the opinions about virtue point to the fact that virtue is a mean between extremes. That fact may not be fully articulated, however, and some virtues may be contrasted by existing opinion with only one vice and not two. Again, the opinions about virtue point to the fact that there are several virtues, because there are several distinct areas of human feeling and action, and all of them are handled well or badly according to the presence or absence of the relevant habit.⁴¹ But this fact too may not be fully articulated, and some areas of human life, those that come less to attention, may have been passed over by opinion in the assignment of

ancient Greece has long been recognized by historians, if not always by historicist-minded philosophers. For a recent discussion see Cynthia Farrar, *Inventing Politics: the Origins of Democratic Thinking*.

virtues. The philosopher must come to the aid of opinion in these respects and complete it where it is still lacking.

All this supposes that gentlemanly opinion is getting hold of genuine facts about human life and how it is to be led, but getting hold of them imperfectly. That there are facts here, and that gentlemanly opinion does get hold of them (whereas the opinion of the many does not), is a doctrine that Aristotle has maintained from the beginning of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. That gentlemanly opinion is imperfect in getting hold of these facts, and so needs supplementing and correcting, is revealed by Aristotle as his analysis proceeds. This supplementing and correcting will, in turn, help to improve practice, at least of those who are ready to listen. Thus, for a suitably prepared audience, well brought up and in love with the beautiful, the words that will help to make them more fully virtuous will include Aristotle's own *Nicomachean Ethics*.

All that is left is the task of suitably preparing an audience. This task is what Aristotle takes up in the remaining sections of the last chapter of the *Ethics*. He has just argued that preparing a suitable audience for ethical teaching, since of necessity it is itself not a task of teaching, is a task of forced training. This training should begin as early in youth as possible. It must begin in the family. But the family is not sufficient for this. One father's command, taken on its own in separation from the political community, does not have the necessary strength. It needs to be backed up by the political community, by the city. The city has more force and more authority, and the exercise of its power is less resented. The city should undertake the task of training the young. If the city does not do this, and of course many do not, one must try to do it as best as one can in one's own family. Since to do this is to become a lawgiver in one's own home, one can only do it well by becoming in effect a lawgiver altogether. The serious educator must learn the art of legislation. This requires a study and investigation of the laws and of the

⁴¹ Cf. Nussbaum, "Non-Relative Virtues," pp. 34-36.

regimes which express and support the laws, and especially a study of the best regime and the best laws. Such a study and investigation, says Aristotle, does not yet exist. It needs to be provided. This is what the *Politics* is for.

The *Politics* is devoted to finding regimes best suited to education in virtue, and its audience is legislators, potential or actual, who have an interest in such education--predominantly the heads of gentlemanly families. It should occasion no surprise that the fundamental themes of the *Politics*, even in the books where this seems least obvious, are education and the best regime (or the best regime possible).⁴² It should also occasion no surprise that Aristotle's preference for the gentlemen remains as pervasive in the *Politics* as it was in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. This preference for gentlemen in the *Politics* has the same features as the preference for gentlemen in the *Ethics*. It is a philosophically motivated and discriminating preference. As in the *Ethics*, so in the *Politics*, Aristotle corrects gentlemanly opinion even as he follows it. Take, for instance, the case of slavery. Contrary to existing practice and belief, but in a way drawing out the implications of existing practice and belief, Aristotle shows that just slavery reduces to natural slavery; that natural slavery refers to facts of the soul, not to facts of national origin (except incidentally); that slavery is a mutually beneficial service, not the extortion of a hostile servitude; that slaves are human, even capable of a species of virtue, and are not brute animals.⁴³

That slaves can be virtuous is not what the *Nicomachean Ethics* would have led us to expect, where virtues seem attainable only by gentleman. The *Politics* introduces additions to

⁴² See Lord, 'Politics and Education;' Lord, *Education and Culture in the Political Thought of Aristotle*; Pierre Pellegrin, 'La Politique d'Aristote: Unité et Fractures,' in *Revue Philosophique de la France et de l'Étranger*, vol. 177, pp. 129-59.

⁴³ *Politics* book 1, chs. 4-6, 13.

Aristotle's theory of virtue that are of great interest.⁴⁴ Virtue comes in more than one form, not just in the sense that there are several kinds of virtue, as courage, moderation, and so on, but also in the sense that there are several kinds of these kinds. In the case of the family, for instance, there is a courage of the man, another of the woman, another of children, and another of slaves. The case is similar with moderation and justice. The ruler of the family, however, will have perfect virtue, while the others will have as much of virtue as falls to them according to their work. These virtues differ in kind, because ruler and ruled differ in kind.⁴⁵ Aristotle returns to the same point later when he argues that the virtue of the good man and the good citizen need not be the same. The goodness of good citizens varies from regime to regime. The goodness of the good man is always one and the same. The goodness of the good man and the good citizen will only be identical where the good citizen is ruler of a good city. The reason is that the ruler needs prudence in order to govern well, while the citizen who is ruled needs only right opinion.⁴⁶ Prudence makes the difference between the perfect virtue of the good man and the various kinds of virtue of the various kinds of good citizen. Already in the *Ethics* the importance of prudence was stressed, and virtue was denied to anyone who did not possess it.⁴⁷ But prudence was there distinguished into various kinds.

There is prudence about one's own affairs and about the city. Of the latter there is first legislative prudence, which is architectonic prudence, and then practical and deliberative prudence. There is also prudence about the household. Aristotle is obscure about the first kind of prudence, prudence about one's own affairs. He suggests that it is not possible for one's own affairs to be in good order without a household and a city, but he leaves this point aside for later

⁴⁴ Some hints can be found already in *Nicomachean Ethics* book 9, chs. 9-13.

⁴⁵ *Politics* 1260a20-24.

⁴⁶ *Politics* book 3, ch. 4.

⁴⁷ *Nicomachean Ethics* book 6, chs. 12-13.

consideration.⁴⁸ This later consideration is taken up in the last chapter of the *Nicomachean Ethics* and in the *Politics*. The supremacy of legislative prudence and its necessity for the well-being of one's own affairs is expressly argued in that last chapter of the *Ethics*. To provide the materials for such prudence is the specific task of the *Politics*. Aristotle is evidently indicating that no kind of prudence can exist, not excluding prudence about one's own affairs, without architectonic legislative prudence. This need not mean that everyone who is prudent in any sense must be prudent in the legislative sense. It need only mean that those who are prudent in the subordinate senses need others who are prudent in the legislative sense. They could not be prudent in those subordinate senses without the guidance and rule of those who are prudent in the legislative sense.

In the *Politics* Aristotle is both relaxing and tightening the conditions for virtue. He is relaxing them because he is allowing that the virtues discussed in the *Nicomachean Ethics* come in many kinds and that these kinds can be spread over all members of a household and all members of a city. He is tightening them because he is saying that only those really have prudence, and hence really have virtue, who have legislative prudence. Such people are likely to be few even within the class of gentlemen itself.

Nevertheless, this all neatly fits Aristotle's teaching in the *Politics* about the virtue of the good man and the virtue of the citizen. The picture we get is of a moral and political hierarchy. At the top of this hierarchy stand the simply good men who possess virtue in the highest sense and prudence in the highest sense. They are also the rulers. Below them in descending orders and dependencies come the various kinds of good citizen and good members of households. Some of these good citizens and members of households may be in the process of rising up the hierarchy. They will themselves some day achieve the highest eminence and become simply good. Others

⁴⁸ *Nicomachean Ethics* 1141b23-1142a11.

may be rising higher but will not reach the highest. Yet others may already have reached their upper limit. All, if not good simply, will be good in their degree and according to their capacity. At least this would be the case in the best governed city; and the best governed city, and hence the training of the sort of men who could establish and govern it, is Aristotle's primary and ultimate concern in the *Politics*.

Such a hierarchical picture enables us to see better the character of Aristotle's ethical theory and the role played in it by his preference for the gentlemen. This preference does not exclude other classes altogether. Virtue in its subordinate forms can be attained by non-gentlemen (which is Aristotle's answer, if there is one, to the question of how the many can become virtuous). This is only possible in a certain political context. The development and perfection of virtuous life is not something that can be abstracted from the development and perfection of politics. Virtue, both in its subordinate and its highest forms, is the product of a good regime. A good regime is one where gentlemen are dominant. Even so, the gentlemen themselves are not self-sufficient. They have need of someone to point out to them the true bearing of their opinions and to teach them how to reach to higher levels of virtue and prudence. This someone else is the philosopher. Unlike Plato's Socrates, Aristotle does not require the philosophers to rule. He only requires rulers to listen to philosophers.⁴⁹ Or, to be more precise, he does not require the rulers to rule *qua* philosophers but rather *qua* endowed with prudence, which is the virtue *par excellence* of the ruler.⁵⁰ Aristotle does require the rulers, at least in the best regime, to be philosophers. Philosophy is the virtue of leisure and the life of leisure constitutes the activity or the practice of the best regime.⁵¹ The rulers will rule by virtue of their prudence,

⁴⁹ Aristotle frag. 647 Rose.

⁵⁰ *Politics* 1277b25-30.

⁵¹ *Politics* book 4(7), ch. 15, and also chs. 2-3, where the practice of philosophy is said to be the content of the practical life of the best regime.

not their philosophy (or their theoretical contemplation). They will have philosophy nevertheless, and it is to this philosophy that their prudence will listen. Aristotle is concerned with philosophers as well as with gentlemen. Or he is concerned that the gentlemen be philosophers. That is why he includes, both in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Politics*, appeals to the philosophic life. These appeals are not obtrusive; they are moderate both in expression and in length. They appear, nevertheless, in both works at the important points.⁵²

Conclusion

Viewed in the light of the *Politics*, Aristotle's ethical theory is inseparable not only from the opinions of gentlemen, but also from the politics of gentlemen. Virtue exists fully in aristocratic regimes and elsewhere only in isolation. Since contemporary virtue ethicists have no intention of tying their theory to gentlemanly opinions, let alone gentlemanly politics, their theory is not, and could never be, Aristotelian. The "neo" in their title destroys the "Aristotelian" to which it is attached. Their theory is not a continuation of something old.⁵³ On the contrary, it is quite new. Getting clear about this newness, while it may prohibit easy appeals on the part of such theorists to the thought of the Stagirite, will have the advantage of keeping separate things separate.⁵⁴ This will benefit both the understanding of Aristotle and the understanding of modern virtue ethics.

There will be less risk that our study of the one will be distorted by irrelevant echoes from the

⁵² The determination of happiness and the goal of life: *Nicomachean Ethics* book 10, ch. 7; *Politics* book 4(7), chs. 2-3.

⁵³ Cf. Adkins, 'The Connection Between Aristotle's *Ethics* and *Politics*,' pp. 47-48. MacIntyre's insistence on the role of historical traditions makes him more Aristotelian than most, but he still rejects what is decisive for Aristotle. Insofar as virtue ethics is dependent on the opinions embodied in the traditions MacIntyre follows Aristotle. Insofar as the traditions are subordinate to history and there is no abiding class of gentlemen, whether actual or possible, by which to take one's bearings, MacIntyre entirely rejects him.

⁵⁴ Some have wanted to suggest Hume as an alternative historical inspiration for contemporary virtue ethics. But Hume's dependence on gentlemanly opinion for what counts as "personal merit," and hence for the content of ethics, seems, if we attend to his examples and sources, very evident; see *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, sect. 138.

other.