

1 Aristotle on Virtue

Wrong, Wrong, and Wrong

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Recent decades have seen a revival of philosophical interest in moral virtue. Prompted initially by an article of Elizabeth Anscombe's,¹ it has generated a school of thought called 'virtue ethics' that's now often seen as a third main 'method of ethics' alongside consequentialism and deontology. While Mill and Kant are the classical exponents of these views, the classical exponent of virtue-based ethics is commonly taken to be Aristotle; the rise of virtue ethics has therefore been the rise of an Aristotelian approach to the subject.

I agree that moral virtue is an important moral concept, but I think Aristotle is the wrong figure to look to for insight into it. Many of his central claims about virtue are mistaken, and present-day virtue-ethical theories that embrace them are therefore misguided. This chapter develops a critique of Aristotle's account of virtue, but it first sketches a better account by contrast with which the flaws in his become evident.

VIRTUE AS A HIGHER-LEVEL GOOD

This account was widely accepted in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—in Britain by Hastings Rashdall, G. E. Moore, W. D. Ross, and others, in Europe by Franz Brentano and his followers.² It treats virtue as a higher-level moral concept, involving a relation to items falling under other, independently applied moral concepts. More specifically, it sees the virtues as intrinsic goods that involve morally fitting attitudes to items with other moral properties, and the vices as evils involving unfitting attitudes.

The account's first proponents were consequentialists and therefore took all the virtues and vices to involve attitudes to items falling under the consequentialist concepts of good and evil. One of their claims was that if something is intrinsically good, then having a positive attitude toward it, that is, desiring, pursuing, or taking pleasure in it—in short, loving it—for itself is another intrinsic good and a form of virtue. Thus, if your pleasure is intrinsically good, my desiring, pursuing, or taking pleasure in it is also good and an instance of virtue, more specifically of benevolence. By contrast, if something is intrinsically evil, loving it for itself is another evil and vicious;

thus, my desiring, pursuing, or taking pleasure in your pain for itself is evil and, more specifically, malicious. The fitting and therefore virtuous attitude to an evil such as your pain is negative, involving desire for or pursuit of its absence, or pain at its presence; this hating your pain for itself is good and involves the virtue of compassion. But hating something good, as when I enviously want your pleasure to end, is vicious and evil. Attitudes whose orientation matches the value of their object—positive to positive or negative to negative—are virtuous and good, while ones that oppose it are vicious. There can also be deontological virtues. If an act is right, my wanting to perform it because it's right is fitting and therefore virtuous—it involves conscientiousness, or a Kantian good will. And it's likewise virtuous to hate doing what's wrong. But whether its object is good or right, a virtuous attitude need not care about it *as* good or right. If your pleasure is good, my wanting it because it's good is virtuous, but so is my wanting it just because it's a pleasure and independently of any thoughts about goodness. Likewise, my hating lying is virtuous not only when I think of lying as wrong but also when I just don't like lying. An attitude to something good or right for the properties that make it so is virtuous even when it doesn't think of them as good- or right-making.

A complete higher-level account must also say *how* virtuous or vicious different attitudes are. Here it's guided by an ideal of proportionality, which says it's best to love objects in proportion to their degrees of goodness or evil. Thus, a fully virtuous person will be more pleased by another's intense pleasure than by her mild pleasure, and by as much as the first pleasure is more intense; he'll likewise be more anxious to relieve a worse pain. Something similar holds for deontological virtues. If some act's being an instance of lying does more to make it wrong than its promoting pleasure does to make it right, he'll be more averse to it as an instance of lying than drawn to it as a promoting of pleasure.

However exactly it's developed, the higher-level account treats the moral virtues as intrinsically good, so they have value not just instrumentally, or for the other goods they promote, but also in themselves. Being benevolent by itself makes your life better and being malicious makes it worse. But the account also makes virtue in several ways a secondary moral concept. First, as a response to items falling under other moral concepts, it can't be the only or main such concept; unless other things are independently good or right, there's nothing for it to care fittingly about. Second, as so understood virtue plays only a minor role in the evaluation of actions. Imagine that you can give either a large pleasure to one person or a small pleasure to another. Given the ideal of proportionality, it's most virtuous to desire the larger pleasure more than the smaller and therefore to produce the larger pleasure. But the claim about virtue isn't needed to establish that you ought to produce the larger pleasure. That already follows from the fact that it's the greater good, or from that plus the claim that you ought to produce the most good you can. That in doing so you'll also act from the most virtuous motive may

be an additional reason to do the independently right act, but it can't change what this act is; that already follows from the facts that make your motive best. Finally, and departing from many of the account's proponents, I think virtue is a lesser intrinsic good in the sense that it always has less value than its intentional object. Compassion for another's pain is good, but it isn't more good than the pain is evil; it can't be better for there to be pain and compassion for it than no pain and no compassion. Likewise for vice: a torturer's malicious pleasure in his victim's pain isn't as evil as the victim's pain. If you can eliminate only one of the two, you ought to eliminate the pain.

This is a brief sketch of a 'higher-level' account of virtue, and when we turn to Aristotle's account, we find several points of similarity. He too thinks moral virtue is good in itself, contributing to a desirable life not just instrumentally but in its own right. He also thinks virtue is a matter of your attitudes broadly conceived, of your desires, motives in acting, and pleasures and pains. An act's virtuousness depends not on its effects or conformity to external moral rules but on inner states such as its motive and accompanying feelings. But on other central issues he's mistaken.

PRAISE AND BLAME

First a smaller point. In the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle says the virtues and vices are traits for which we're praised and blamed (1105b31–1106a1, 1106a7).³ Since he recognizes that praise and blame are appropriate only for things under our voluntary control (1109b30–33), he must hold that virtue and vice are voluntary, and he defends that view in *NE* III.5. But his arguments for it are unpersuasive.

In one passage he seems to argue that it's always in our power to act virtuously (1113b3–6), but a virtuous action must be done from a virtuous motive, and someone who's vicious can't now produce a virtuous motive in himself.⁴ He also argues that even if a vicious person can't now act virtuously, he's responsible for his vicious action because he could have avoided developing his bad character in the past: vicious people 'are themselves by their slack lives responsible for becoming men of that kind' (1114a3–5). But this claim is hard to square with his insistence on the importance for moral virtue of the right childhood training and education (1095b4–12, 1103a15–18, 1103b3–6, 24–25, 1104b11–13, 1105a1–2, 1179b24–27). If you were raised badly by vicious parents, how could you start to develop virtuous desires, and if you couldn't start, how can you be blamed for not having them now?

The concepts of praise and blame, like those of right and wrong, presuppose voluntariness: you can't have acted wrongly or be to blame unless you could have done otherwise. But no such requirement governs the concepts of good and evil. A serendipitous pleasure is good even if no one voluntarily produced it, and pain evil even when it's no one's fault. The higher-level account

makes use of only these last two concepts. It says virtue is intrinsically good and vice evil, and they can be so regardless of how they came about. If Hume and Mill were right that we have innate tendencies to be pleased by others' pleasure and pained by their pain, the account says we're naturally virtuous and good, though we deserve no credit for this. If we innately delight in others' pain, as a bleaker view has it, we're naturally vicious but not blameably so. Aristotle's claim that virtue is praised and vice blamed applies the wrong concepts to them, forcing him into implausible arguments about voluntary control. Those arguments aren't needed if virtue and vice are instead said to be just good or evil.

DISPOSITIONS VS. OCCURRENT STATES

Another issue concerns the primary locus of virtue. We make virtue ascriptions at two levels, one more global and one more local. Speaking globally, we may say someone has the character trait of generosity or is a generous person. More locally, we may say a particular act was generous or a particular feeling malicious. Is one of these two types of ascription primary? Do we first understand the virtues as traits of character and count individual acts or feelings as virtuous only when they issue from such traits? Or do we first identify individual motives and feelings as virtuous and understand a virtuous character as one that tends to produce them?

The higher-level account takes the second view, ascribing virtue properties first to occurrent states such as individual desires, acts, and feelings and only then to dispositions. However, Aristotle takes the first view. He defines virtue as a state of character (*hexis*) (1105b20–1106a13) and says that to be done virtuously an act must issue from a 'firm and unchangeable character' (1105a33–34), otherwise it may be 'in accordance with the virtues' (1105a29) but it can't be fully virtuous. Aristotle doesn't think the mere possession of virtue is the highest good; that comes only in the active exercise of virtue, as in particular virtuous acts (1095b32–34, 1098b33–1099a6). But they're only done virtuously if they issue from a stable character.

I think this view is both false to our everyday understanding of virtue and morally mistaken. If you see someone kick a dog just for pleasure, do you say 'That was a vicious act, on condition that it issued from a stable disposition to perform similar acts on similar occasions', or just 'That was a vicious act'. Surely you say the latter. Your remark doesn't concern only the kick's physical properties; it turns essentially on the motive from which it was done. But it concerns only its motive at the time, independently of any longer-lasting trait. Or imagine that a friend who normally doesn't do this gives \$20 to a homeless person from concern at the time for his welfare. If you say 'That was uncharacteristically generous of you', you don't contradict yourself. Or imagine that we're a military committee deciding whether to give a medal for bravery to a soldier who threw

himself on a hand grenade, knowing it would kill him and in order to save his comrades. If an Aristotelian says 'This is a medal for bravery, and we can't know whether his act was brave unless we know whether he would have acted similarly a week before or a week after', we'll throw him out of the room.⁵

Nor is the issue here just one of terminology. 'Virtue' is an evaluative term, in that to call something virtuous is to call it somehow good, and Aristotle's claim that acts not expressing a virtuous character aren't done virtuously implies that they aren't fully good: since they don't involve the 'exercise of virtue', they can't make the same contribution to your good as ones that do. (Perhaps they make no contribution.) And that seems wrong. Considered just in itself and apart from the other things co-present with it in a life, an out-of-character act of generosity or courage seems every bit as good as one based in a stable disposition. The second act may be accompanied by more acts of similar value in the same life, and that life may be better as a whole, perhaps even in part because it contains enduring virtuous dispositions.⁶ But Aristotle's claim that the in-character act is by itself better is unpersuasive. Both analytically and evaluatively, the primary locus of virtue is occurrent desires, actions, and feelings apart from any connection to more stable traits.

THE DOCTRINE OF THE MEAN

A further issue concerns Aristotle's differentia for the virtues among traits of character, his doctrine of the mean. It says that every virtue is a mean between two vices, and every vice an excess or deficiency with respect to the same feeling as concerns some virtue. Thus the virtue of temperance is a mean with respect to the desire for physical pleasure, a desire the excess of which is self-indulgence and the deficiency of which is insensibility. Courage is a mean with respect to fear, of which the excess is cowardice and the deficiency rashness. Many present-day Aristotelians distance themselves from the doctrine of the mean, but I think something like it can be part of an adequate account of virtue. It can't be the whole, however, most clearly because of what it says about vice.

By taking all the vices to involve excess or deficiency, the doctrine implies that there are no basic human impulses that are always evil: each is such that in a proper or medial form it's virtuous and good. But this leaves out the worst forms of vice, such as malice and cruelty, which involve desire for or pleasure in another's evil. No form of these feelings is good; all their instances are bad.⁷ The higher-level account makes traits like malice its central cases of vice because they involve the positively unfitting attitudes of loving an evil or hating a good. However, they're excluded by the doctrine of the mean, and it's therefore no surprise that they don't figure in Aristotle's main catalogue of vices in *NE* II-IV. These books discuss self-indulgence, cowardice, profligacy, and other vices but not the positive desire for harm

to others that's intuitively the worst vice of all. Aristotle does mention this desire in the *Rhetoric* (1382a1–16, 1386b33–1387a1, 1387b22–24), but that work doesn't contain the doctrine of the mean, and when that doctrine appears in the *NE*, vices like malice don't. Aristotle may seem to allow for these vices when he says that not all feelings admit of a mean since some such as spite and envy have names that already imply badness (1107a9–13). But his explanation is that if we attach a name to the excess or deficiency of some feeling, such as 'gluttony' to the excessive desire for food, there will be no mean with respect to it because there's in general no 'mean of excess and deficiency' (1107a25). That's precisely how he understands spite and envy, as the excess and deficiency of another feeling that can be virtuous (1108a35–b6). He continues to assume that our basic impulses all have medial forms and therefore continues to exclude the worst vices.

I said the doctrine of the mean can figure in an account of virtue, and it can in particular express the ideal of proportionality. Thus, a desire can be 'in a mean' if it's proportioned to its object's value, wanting it neither more nor less than its degree of value compared to other objects makes appropriate. As so understood the doctrine can explain 'vices of disproportion' such as cowardice and selfishness. A coward is vicious because he cares much more about his comfort or safety than about some significantly greater good, such as the preservation of several people's lives, that he could secure by risking it. By contrast, a rash person cares too little about his safety because he risks it for much smaller goods, and a selfish person wants his own pleasure much more than the greater goods of other people, which is again disproportionate.

But this use of the doctrine of the mean isn't available to Aristotle because it doesn't fit the general structure of his ethical view. This leads to the most important objection to his account: that it gives the wrong explanation of what the virtues are, resulting in a wrong and even repellent picture of the virtuous person's psychology.

EXPLANATORY EGOISM

The general structure of Aristotle's ethics is set out in *NE* I. In every act we aim at some good, and therefore, he argues, aim at a single chief good. This chief good is *eudaimonia*, and though he doesn't say so explicitly, it seems clear that for each person the relevant good is just her own *eudaimonia*. (There are passages where Aristotle imagines an agent aiming at the *eudaimonia* of all, but the most common reading of his ethics gives it the egoistic structure I've described.⁸) *Eudaimonia* turns out to involve the active exercise of virtue, which consists in part in acts expressing moral virtues such as courage and liberality. Our ultimate reason to perform these acts is therefore that doing so is part of exercising virtue, which is what we must do to achieve the *eudaimon* or good life that's our ultimate goal.

This sketch of Aristotle's ethics should be familiar, but it doesn't allow the claim that states of other people such as their pleasure or knowledge are good in a way that by itself gives me sufficient reason to promote them. Any good playing that role must either be or contribute to a chief good that's my own *eudaimonia*, and states of other people can't do that: my life can't be better or more *eudaimon* because of something true of you. Aristotle therefore can't use claims of this kind to explain his doctrine of the mean. He can't say courage is in a mean and virtuous because it cares proportionally about goods outside the self such as the preservation of another's life, whereas cowardice and selfishness are vices because they care too little about others' goods. He can't value proportionality among goods that he can't recognize in the first place.

This isn't to say he can't include courage and liberality among his virtues and cowardice among his vices. He can assert that the former are good, in the sense of contributing our *eudaimonia*, and the latter bad. But these will be, and in the *NE* notoriously are, just assertions with no supporting rationale; he never makes a persuasive connection between his general claims about each person's good in *NE* I and his list of specific virtues in II–IV. More specifically, he can't say, as the higher-level account does, that the other-regarding virtues are virtues because they respond fittingly to independently good or bad states of others while the other-regarding vices respond unfittingly. He can't say these things because he doesn't think states of another have value from my point of view, or are relevant to my moral thought. And because he can't say them, he can only assert what the higher-level account explains.

This points to the central flaw in Aristotle's account of virtue: its underlying explanatory egoism. Imagine that you're suffering pain and I can act to relieve your pain. Presumably I ought to do so, but what's the ultimate explanation why? Aristotle's explanation is that relieving your pain can make my life more desirable. If I do so from the right motive, my act will exercise virtue and so contribute to my *eudaimonia*; it will make my life better. But that's surely not the right explanation, which is that relieving your pain will make *your* life better. My reason to aid you isn't just superficially but fundamentally other-regarding, concerning you rather than my good. Aristotle's conception of the good life isn't hedonistic; he's not saying I should relieve your pain as a means to something like pleasure for myself. His ideal is a *eudaimonia* of which virtuous action is an intrinsic constituent. Even so, my *eudaimonia* is necessarily a state of me and located in my life; it's my *eudaimonia* rather than someone else's. And that means his view grounds all my oughts or reasons in considerations about *my* good. That was the main criticism of his and other ancient ethical views by H. A. Prichard: that their egoism distorts duties concerning other people by making them really about oneself.⁹ And the criticism extends to those present-day virtue-ethical views that, like Anscombe's, define the virtues as traits a person needs in order to flourish or live well.¹⁰ This definition relates the virtues not to external

values such as others' pleasure or pain but to my own good or flourishing; it therefore goes with the view that any reason I have to act virtuously likewise relates to my good. But that's the wrong definition and the wrong reason. What makes something like benevolence a virtue isn't its benefiting me but its caring properly about goods in other people's lives.

EGOISTIC MOTIVATION

The underlying egoism of Aristotle's account seems to imply a similarly egoistic picture of the virtuous person's motivation. If my ultimate goal is my own *eudaimonia*, shouldn't I, while relieving your pain, have the desire for my *eudaimonia* as my ultimate motive? But isn't helping you from concern for my good precisely not virtuous? Some present-day Aristotelians say that though my ultimate aim is my *eudaimonia*, this aim isn't one I can achieve by trying to. *Eudaimonia* requires virtuous action, which is action motivated by concern for others, and I won't have that if my primary desire is for a state of me.¹¹

Though this is a possible move it makes the resulting ethical view 'self-effacing' because it tells people not to believe or be guided by its own foundational claims.¹² Rival views such as utilitarianism can also be self-effacing, but the Aristotelian one will be so in an especially troubling way. If utilitarianism tells people not to think in utilitarian terms, it's because of the contingent psychological fact that their attempt to do so won't succeed. But the proposed eudaimonist view tells them not to be guided by itself because that's intrinsically objectionable or contrary to virtue, which is an odd thing for an ethical view to say.

Whether or not this move is acceptable, Aristotle's own view seems not to be self-effacing because his picture of the virtuous person is at many points precisely egoistic, involving a primary focus on his own virtuous action.

This is clearest in his account of the proud person or *megalopsychos* in *NE* IV.3. The *megalopsychos* is said to have every virtue but also has an unattractively self-centered concern with his standing in virtue, especially compared to other people. He likes to give benefits but not receive them because 'the one is the mark of a superior, the other of an inferior' (1124b9–11). He's also a person of few deeds, not doing ordinary acts of virtue but holding himself back for great and notable ones (1124b23–26). If you ask him to help you with a heavy package, he'll say he doesn't do trivial favors; he'll only respond to something really serious like a threat to your life. Again, he's less concerned with what an act will do for you than with what it means for his own status as exceptionally virtuous.¹³

It's not that all concern for your virtue is objectionable. The higher-level account says that if your virtuous desire for another's welfare is good, desiring or taking pleasure in it is also good. However, the account has two grounds for limiting these attitudes. One is its claim that a virtuous attitude has less

value than its object, so your desire to relieve another's pain is less good than the relief it aims at. The other is its ideal of proportionality, which says you should care less about lesser goods. Together they imply that you should care less about your virtuous desire for another's relief from pain than you do about the relief, which is precisely what the *megalopsychos* doesn't do. By caring more about his own virtue than about any benefits it can give others, he divides his concerns in a disproportionate and even vicious way.

Defenders of the higher-level account have found the *megalopsychos* repellent. Rashdall noted 'Aristotle's revolting picture of the high-souled man', while Ross said the description of the *megalopsychos* 'betrays somewhat nakedly the self-absorption which is the bad side of Aristotle's ethics'.¹⁴ That self-absorption appears often in the *NE*.

In his discussion of courage Aristotle says 'the end of every activity is conformity to the corresponding state of character' (1115b20–21), as if a courageous person's main aim is to express his own courageous disposition. He also says that the more virtuous a person is, the more he'll be pained at the thought of his death because 'life is best worth living for such a man, and he is knowingly losing the greatest goods' (1117b9–12; also 1170a26–28). So does a courageous person think while on the battlefield about how virtuous he is?

Or consider the account in IX.8 of the self-lover or *philautos*. Like the *megalopsychos* he cares that he more than anyone else should act justly and temperately (1168b25–26). He too prefers one great and noble act, such as dying for others, to many trivial ones (1169a25); mustn't he then hope others' lives will be threatened? He'll sacrifice his wealth for a friend, but only because he thereby gains nobility and 'assign[s] the greater good to himself' (1169a28–30). He'll also let his friend do virtuous deeds rather than do them himself, but his reason is that it may be 'nobler to become the cause of his friend's acting than to act himself', so he again 'assign[s] to himself the greater share in what is noble' (1169a33–36). If his friend has the same competitive motive, they can engage in an Alphone-and-Gaston routine where each tries to get the other to do the virtuous deed so as to gain the 'greater share' of nobility for himself. Or the friend can say that while it's nobler to let a friend do a virtuous deed, it's even nobler to let a friend let you do it, leading to an infinite regress of nobler lettings. Even within friendship Aristotle imagines virtuous agents competing in virtue and more concerned with their comparative virtuousness than with any benefits they can give to others; E. F. Carritt rightly condemned 'the egoistic self-righteousness of Aristotle's *philautos*'.¹⁵

CHOOSING ACTS FOR THEIR OWN SAKES

Nor is it only in his descriptions of particular characters that the egoism of Aristotle's view comes out. Consider his well-known claim in *NE* II.4 that in order to act virtuously you must choose your acts 'for their own sakes'

(1105a33; also 1176b5–8). This is appropriate if you're choosing to keep a promise, tell the truth, or do some other act required by a deontological duty, and even in non-deontological cases it's better than choosing an act just as a means to your own wealth or pleasure. These last aren't, however, the only or the best alternatives. Often a virtuous person will choose an act primarily as a means, but to a good state of some other person. If she virtuously relieves another's pain, it will be mainly as a means to an outcome in which the other is free of pain. She may also choose the act for itself, for example, as one that's virtuously motivated, but if her attitudes are properly proportioned this will be a secondary motive, with less importance in her psychology than the desire to do her act as a means. But Aristotle seems to make it the primary motive, as if virtuous agents always choose their acts above all for themselves, which makes virtue excessively self-concerned.

It may be replied that this critique misreads Aristotle's view. Any act that's worth doing has properties that make it so, and to choose it for those properties is to choose it 'for its own sake'. If an act is worth doing because it will free another from pain, someone who chooses it for that reason chooses it for its own sake.¹⁶

But this reply ascribes to Aristotle a view he never explicitly states, though he easily could. It also threatens to make his 'for their own sakes' condition vacuous. If choosing an act because it will result in another's freedom from pain is consistent with choosing it for its own sake, why isn't the same true of choosing an act because it will result in your having money or in a table's being made? Shouldn't all cases of choice on instrumental grounds be treated the same? The proposed reading therefore seems to imply that every act is chosen for its own sake, and that is not Aristotle's view. He thinks it's distinctive of 'doing', of which virtuous action is an instance, that it 'itself is its end' and is chosen for itself, whereas 'making' 'has an end other than itself' and is chosen as a means (1140b6–7). How on the proposed reading can there be any cases of making?

In one passage Aristotle does, admittedly, take a different line. In *NE* X.7 he gives as one reason for the superiority of contemplation to moral virtue that, while the former has no end beyond itself, 'from practical activities we gain more or less apart from the action', so a statesman 'aims at despotic power and honors, or at all events happiness, for him and his fellow citizens' (1177b21–25). The reference to others' happiness here suggests a more attractive view than in II.4, but now Aristotle *denies* that virtuous action is 'loved' or 'desirable' for its own sake, and in fact does so twice (1177b2, b18). This denial is puzzling since it contradicts the II.4 claim that virtuous agents do choose acts for their own sakes.¹⁷ But it confirms my reading of the earlier passage since it assumes that when you act as a means to an external goal you don't choose your act for itself.

It's therefore hard to see how choosing an act 'for its own sake' is consistent with choosing it for how it will affect others. Even if it is consistent, however, there's another objection to Aristotle's view. If a truly virtuous per-

son does what will free another from pain, her main concern is that the other be free from pain, and she desires her own act derivatively, as a means to that end. But then she'll have various other attitudes concerning the other's pain. If she can't relieve that pain herself, she'll hope it gets relieved in some other way. And if it is relieved, perhaps because someone else relieves it or because it goes away by itself, she'll be pleased by that fact. She'll care as or almost as much about goods of another that don't result from her action as about ones that do. But nowhere in his main discussion of virtue in *NE* II–IV does Aristotle ever say that a virtuous person will have hopes or feel pleasures or pains about things that happen to other people independently of her own acts: it doesn't occur to him to make this point. These attitudes are surely central to virtue; it's surely a key part of being virtuous that you care about states of others just as states of them and apart from your role in producing them. But this kind of caring seems not to figure in Aristotle's account.

This isn't because he thinks virtue involves only dispositions to act. He often says moral virtue is concerned with pleasures and pains and involves being pleased and pained by the right things (1104b4–28, 1105a4–16, 1106b18–22, 1121a3–4, 1152b1–6, 1172a21–23). His example of virtuous pleasure, however, is always pleasure in your own virtuous action: he says virtuous acts are pleasant to the lover of virtue (1099a10–20) and identifies virtuous people in part as ones who delight in acting temperately or courageously (1104b4–8; also 1110b12–13). This is especially evident in a passage that comes close to the higher-level account I have contrasted with his. In *NE* X.5 he says that if an activity is good, pleasure in it is also good, whereas if the activity is neutral, so is pleasure in it; likewise, if the activity is bad, pleasure in it is bad (1175b24–1176a3). He here recognizes that things can have value independently of our attitudes to them and that their values can make some attitudes to them good and others not. But the things he considers are only activities rather than states of a person such as her being free of pain, and they're only your own activities rather than someone else's; this is implied in his calling the pleasures 'proper to' the activities and so closely tied to them that it's hard to tell the two apart (1175b30–33; also 1174b24–1175a2). While he recognizes that there are virtuous feelings, he again doesn't include among them feelings about states of other people independent of your virtuous action.

Aristotle does briefly discuss these feelings in *NE* VIII and IX, under the heading of 'goodwill' (1155b31–1156a10, 1159a5–12, 1166b30–1167a20), but he says that, except in relation to a close friend, goodwill is too weak an impulse to ever issue in action (1167a1–2, a7–9). And another discussion in these Books further highlights the egoism of his view. In IX.7 he says that just as craftsmen and poets care especially about what they themselves have created, so do virtuous benefactors. Since 'that which they have treated well is their handiwork' and even 'is, in a sense, the producer in activity . . . to the benefactor that is noble which depends on his action, so that he delights in the object of his action' (1167b34–1168a18). But this gets genuinely

virtuous motivation precisely backward! A truly virtuous person cares first that another be free of pain and only secondarily about an act of hers that may produce that result. Aristotle's benefactor cares first about her own virtuous action and only derivatively about its effect on others, as something she brought about. She may be pleased that another is free from pain, as making her own act of seeking that outcome successful and therefore a greater contributor to her *eudaimonia*.¹⁸ But she's pleased by it only or mainly because it was produced by her.

In fact Aristotle often prioritizes virtuous action over its effects. In *NE* VIII.1 he is arguing that friends are necessary for a good life and gives as one reason that rich people in particular need friends since money is useless 'without the opportunity of beneficence, which is exercised chiefly and in its most laudable form towards friends' (1155a6–9; also 14–16). This argument seems to value friends, like money, primarily as means to one's own exercise of virtue. A notorious argument in the *Politics* criticizes the proposal for communal ownership in Plato's *Republic* by saying it removes the opportunity for liberal uses of private property.¹⁹ Like similar arguments by present-day neo-conservatives against the welfare state, it assesses a scheme of property relations only by its effect on virtuous action by the rich and not at all by its implications for the condition of the poor.

CHOOSING ACTS AS *KALON*

As well as saying virtuous agents choose acts for their own sakes, Aristotle says they act for the sake of the *kalon*, often translated the 'noble' or 'fine' but with aesthetic connotations of the beautiful.²⁰ This raises some additional as well as some familiar issues.

Because *kalon* is an evaluative concept, to choose an act as *kalon* is to be motivated by an explicitly evaluative thought, as you need not be if you choose an act for its own sake. If Aristotle thinks motivation by the *kalon* is necessary for virtuous action, his account excludes a kind of action allowed as virtuous by the higher-level account and on many views paradigmatically virtuous: where you choose an act for properties that make it right but without thinking of them as right-making, as when you relieve another's pain just because you want it to end and without any thought of your act as required. If Aristotle denies that this kind of act is virtuous, his account is excessively intellectualist in the same way as Kant's, which finds moral worth only in acts done from duty and not in ones that are simply compassionate.²¹

Another issue concerns the aesthetic connotations of *kalon*. Is choosing an act for its beauty not again choosing it for an inappropriately self-centered reason, one focused on the aesthetic quality it can add to your life rather than on any benefits it will give others? Sidgwick read Aristotle this way, saying his virtuous agent makes 'a deliberate choice of virtuous acts for the sake of their intrinsic moral beauty, and not for any end external to

the act', so 'The limits of Aristotle's Liberality are not determined by any consideration of its effect on the welfare of its recipients, but by an intuitive sense of the noble and graceful quality of expenditure that is free without being too lavish; and his Courageous warrior is not commended as devoting himself to his country, but as attaining for himself, even amid pains and death, the peculiar *kalon* of a courageous act'.²²

The objection implied here is, however, too quick. Since being *kalon* is a supervenient property, any act that's *kalon* has non-evaluative properties that make it so, and to choose it as *kalon* is to choose it believing it has those properties. What are they?

Aristotle is characteristically disappointing on this topic, making only vague and even contradictory statements. Sometimes he suggests that an act is made *kalon* by properties it has just as an act and independently of its motive, as when he says a liberal person will 'give for the sake of the noble, and rightly; for he will give to the right people, the right amounts, and at the right time' (1120a24-6; also 1120b3-4, 1121b3-7, 1147a29-32, 1151b18-21, 1177b16-18). At other times whether an act is *kalon* seems to turn on its motive, as when he says the end of courageous action is conformity to a courageous state of character, which is noble (1115b20-22), or that it's especially noble to act in the face of great danger, which you're then not deterred by (1115a24-31, 1169a21-26), or to benefit another without a view to repayment (1162b36; also 1171b20-23, *Rhetoric* 1366b35-67a5). And of course an act could need both types of property to count as *kalon*, though Aristotle never explicitly says this. It's surely central to an adequate account of virtue to specify clearly what non-evaluative properties a virtuous person chooses her acts for, but Aristotle's discussions of the *kalon* do not do that.

We can, however, consider the two main possibilities. One is that an act is made *kalon* by properties it has apart from its motive, which can include its being likely to benefit another person.²³ Even if this is Aristotle's view, however, it still faces the objection that the agent's primary concern is his own giving of the benefit rather than the resulting state of the other, such as her being free of pain. (Recall that in X.7 the benefactor thinks the effect he produces is noble because it depends on his action.) And the view is hard to reconcile with the aesthetic aspect of the *kalon* since merely instrumental properties, though they can by themselves make an act worth choosing, don't usually by themselves make it beautiful. (This may have been part of what motivated Sidgwick's reading.) If I cut off your leg to save you from dying or upbraid you harshly because that's the only way to improve your character, what's remotely beautiful in what I do? There can be aesthetic quality in achieving an end in an especially elegant or efficient way, but not all instrumentally good acts do that. An act can also be beautiful if it's 'fitting' to its situation, as an act of gratitude can be to a previous benefit; Ross suggested this reading for all ancient ethical uses of *kalon*.²⁴ But as C. D. Broad argued, while the concept of the 'fitting' is appropriate for some

moral considerations such as gratitude and promise-keeping, it isn't appropriate to that of promoting good consequences, which involves the different concept of 'utility'.²⁵ To choose an act just because it will have good effects, as a virtuous person often does, isn't to choose it for a property that can plausibly make it *kalon*.

The other possibility is that acts are made *kalon* by their motive. This better fits the aesthetic side of the *kalon* since the motive of an action is intrinsic to it, and a good motive can be said, at least on the higher-level view, to 'fit' the value of its object. Moreover, several commentators have ascribed this kind of view to Aristotle.²⁶ But as well as still not addressing the objection about valuing virtuous acts over their effects, the view makes virtuous motivation implausibly complex. A virtuous person, it holds, first has a base-level virtuous desire, for example, to relieve another's pain. Then he sees that an act done from that motive will be *kalon* and forms a second, higher-level desire to do it because it will be *kalon*, or because it will have that initial virtuous motive. Must virtuous action always have this self-reflective, double motivation? Does it even often have it?

And there's again a question about self-centeredness. If the virtuous agent has two desires, one to relieve another's pain and the other to do an act motivated by that desire and therefore *kalon*, which is his main or most strongly motivating desire? A parallel question can arise after he acts: what's he most pleased by then, that he relieved another's pain or that he acted from the virtuous desire to do so? Aristotle's answer to both questions seems to be that the higher-level, self-reflective attitude is the stronger one. He says countless times that virtuous agents act for the sake of the *kalon*, which on the view now under consideration is to do an act because it will have another virtuous motive, and speaks much less often of agents' doing acts because they'll benefit others. Bernard Williams called an agent 'morally self-indulgent' if 'what the agent cares about is not so much other people, as himself caring about other people', or if he 'focuses disproportionately upon the expression of his own disposition'.²⁷ If Aristotle's virtuous person chooses an act primarily as *kalon*, where that depends on its having another virtuous motive, he's self-indulgent in Williams's sense.

It's therefore not only Aristotle's descriptions of characters such as the courageous person on the battlefield, the *megalopsychos*, the *philautos*, and the benefactor especially pleased by what he produced that give an unattractively self-centered picture of virtuous motivation. The same follows from some of his more general claims, such as that a virtuous person chooses his acts 'for their own sakes' or for having the quasi-aesthetic quality of being *kalon*. My main argument has been that this self-centeredness isn't a lapse on Aristotle's part but an expectable consequence of his overall ethical view.

On that view, recall, all my acts are chosen as means to a chief good that's my *eudaimonia*, so anything choiceworthy for me must contribute to my *eudaimonia*. But no state of another person, such as her being free from pain, can do that; my life can't be better because of something true of someone else, and as

a result no such state can be good in a way that by itself gives me a reason to act. What can give me a reason is only something true of me, such as that an act will be one of my relieving your pain, or one in which I act from a virtuous motive. It therefore can't be surprising that those are the primary foci of Aristotle's virtuous agent. He isn't pleased or pained by states of others unconnected to his own agency because those states aren't relevant to his good. And he doesn't first want a good of another, such as her being free from pain, and only then want to do an act that will produce it; he first wants to do that act and will only value its result because it's one he produced. The whole structure of Aristotle's view pushes his virtuous agent to look mainly at his own acts and own motives in a way Ross said involves 'self-absorption'.

There's a natural explanation for these facts. As C.C.W. Taylor has argued, Aristotle developed his account of virtue in a society still influenced by a Homeric conception of the good or admirable person as essentially competitive, wanting to be superior to others in aspects of life attended with honor, pleased with himself when he is superior, and therefore more self-focused than anyone we today could see as fully virtuous. Hence Aristotle's jarring-to-us descriptions of 'virtues' like magnificence and *megalopsychia*, while foreign to our ethical outlook, fit that of his Greek society.²⁸ I would extend Taylor's point by saying the same influences led Aristotle to posit an ultimate goal for ethical life that's similarly egoistic, involving for each person only features of his life and not giving ground-level importance to what happens to others. Like more specific features of his account of virtue, the underlying structure of Aristotle's view reflects an agonistic Greek ethos that's some distance from our moral thought today.

CONCLUSION

I've argued that Aristotle wrongly thought virtue is praised and vice blamed, wrongly made the primary locus of virtue dispositions rather than occurrent mental states, and wrongly excluded, with his doctrine of the mean, the worst moral vices. But my main criticism has been that his account of virtue is objectionably egoistic, especially as compared to the higher-level account. This last contrast is worth making more abstractly.

We can distinguish two general approaches to the concept of virtue, which can be called the outside-in and the inside-out. The outside-in approach takes there to be values or, more generally, normative factors outside a person's motives and attitudes and holds that the virtues involve appropriate responses to those factors. What makes an attitude virtuous is its relation to something outside itself and often outside the agent, as when its object is another person's pleasure or freedom from pain. This externally-based explanation of what makes the virtues virtues goes with a picture of virtuous motivation as likewise externally focused, so a virtuous person cares most about his virtues' objects, such as another's pleasure or pain, and only

secondarily about his own virtuous motives in pursuing them. The inside-out approach, by contrast, doesn't relate the virtues to external values since it doesn't recognize any. It just says the virtues are good states of the person, or intrinsic constituents of an overall good or *eudaimon* life for him. It therefore can't explain why a given virtue such as benevolence is one; it can only assert that it is. And it goes with an internally-focused picture of virtuous motivation, where the virtuous person cares primarily about his own virtue and its expression and only secondarily about the states of others his acts can, if successful, bring about.

The higher-level account illustrates the outside-in approach and Aristotle's the inside-out, and I've tried to show that on several crucial points the former is more attractive. It gives better explanations of why the virtues are virtues and of why we should treat others in the way the other-regarding virtues would lead us to: the ultimate reason isn't that this will make our lives better, but that it will make the others' lives better. It also gives a better picture of the virtuous person's motivation as externally rather than internally focused. For a long time the work of Rashdall, Moore, Ross, and other moral philosophers of their era was ignored and even denigrated. As a result their higher-level account of virtue was also ignored, and accounts modeled on Aristotle's attracted the bulk of philosophers' attention. But the higher-level account is by far the more illuminating of the two; in comparison, Aristotle's is a dead end.

NOTES

1. Anscombe, 'Modern Moral Philosophy'.
2. Rashdall, 'Professor Sidgwick's Utilitarianism', and *The Theory of Good and Evil*; G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica*; W. D. Ross, *The Right and the Good*; Franz Brentano, *The Origin of Our Knowledge of Right and Wrong*. I give a present-day elaboration and defense of the account in *Virtue, Vice, and Value*.
3. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (NE). All references to the NE are to this translation.
4. Aristotle recognizes this at 1137a5-9, where he says acting 'as a result of a certain state of character is neither easy nor in our power'.
5. I develop this argument more fully in 'Virtuous Act, Virtuous Disposition'.
6. Ross held that what's virtuous or morally good is not only occurrent 'acts of will, desires, and emotions' but also 'relatively permanent modifications of character even when these are not being exercised' (*Foundations of Ethics*, 292). However, he saw the value of the latter as only an addition to the value of occurrent virtuous attitudes, not something that increases their value when they're present.
7. That the doctrine of the mean excludes vices like cruelty and malice is also noted by C. C. W. Taylor in *Aristotle: Nicomachean Ethics Books II-IV*, xix, 113.
8. For readings of Aristotle in which each person's ultimate ethical goal includes the *eudaimonia* of others see Krant, *Aristotle on the Human Good*, and McKerlie, 'Friendship, Self-Love, and Concern for Others in Aristotle's Ethics'.
9. Prichard, 'Duty and Interest', 21-49; for a similar criticism of Plato see Brown, 'Glaucon's Challenge, Rational Egoism and Ordinary Morality', 42-60.
10. Anscombe, 'Modern Moral Philosophy', 18.

11. Annas, *The Morality of Happiness*, 118, 127–128, 224; Whiting, ‘Eudaimonia, External Results, and Choosing Virtuous Actions for Themselves’, 286. Though I lack the space to elaborate, I don’t think Annas’s attempt to answer the egoism objection in *Intelligent Virtue*, 52–63, addresses the main points.
12. Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, 24.
13. For criticism of this last feature of the *megalopsychos* see Sherman, ‘Common Sense and Uncommon Virtue’, 105–106. Sherman thinks the *megalopsychos* is unrepresentative of Aristotelian virtue; I think he’s all too representative.
14. Rashdall, *The Theory of Good and Evil*, 208.
15. Carritt, ‘An Ambiguity of the Word “Good”’, 69. Taylor also notes the ‘self-referentiality’ of Aristotle’s *megalopsychos*, *philautos*, and other virtuous agents in *Aristotle: Nicomachean Ethics Books II–IV*, 88–92.
16. Whiting, ‘Eudaimonia, External Results, and Choosing Virtuous Actions for Themselves’, 280.
17. Henry Sidgwick took Aristotle to be simply inconsistent on this point; see *Outlines of the History of Ethics*, 67–68.
18. Whiting, ‘Eudaimonia, External Results, and Choosing Virtuous Actions for Themselves’, 286–289.
19. Aristotle, *Politics*, 1163b11–14.
20. Richard Kraut argues that *kalon* has aesthetic connotations in ‘An Aesthetic Reading of Aristotle’s Ethics’ (forthcoming).
21. Taylor also makes this criticism of Aristotle on the *kalon*; see *Aristotle: Nicomachean Ethics Books II–IV*, 90–91.
22. Sidgwick, *Outlines of the History of Ethics*, 59; and ‘Hedonism and Ultimate Good’, 90. Another objection is that an aesthetic concept like *kalon* doesn’t line up perfectly with moral rightness since there can be beauty in wicked acts; Sidgwick made this point in the second edition of *The Methods of Ethics*, 100, as did Carritt in ‘Moral Positivism and Moral Aestheticism’, 141.
23. Kraut claims that for Aristotle it’s necessary for an act to be *kalon*; that it benefit either the agent or someone else (‘An Aesthetic Reading of Aristotle’s Ethics’, 15 in the typescript). But this is again something Aristotle doesn’t explicitly say; on the contrary, he contrasts the *kalon* with the beneficial as, alongside the pleasant, one of the three main objects of choice (1104b30–31).
24. Ross, *Foundations of Ethics*, 54.
25. Broad, *Five Types of Ethical Theory*, 218–220.
26. Korsgaard, ‘From Duty and for the Sake of the Noble: Kant and Aristotle on Morally Good Action’, 216–219; Price, *Virtue and Reason in Plato and Aristotle*, 74–76.
27. Williams, ‘Utilitarianism and Moral Self-Indulgence’, 45, 47.
28. Taylor, *Nicomachean Ethics II–IV*, xx–xxi; also 88–92.

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