

## Curable and Incurable Vice in Aristotle

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In *Nicomachean Ethics* vii and ix 4, Aristotle describes those with vice in extraordinarily different ways.<sup>1</sup> In *EN* vii, it looks as though those with vice are free from psychic conflict, wholehearted in the pursuit of their ends, and entirely undisposed to regret. In *EN* ix 4, it looks as though they are afflicted with psychic conflict, ambivalent in the pursuit of their ends, and inevitably plagued with regret. Interpreters disagree about whether these discussions can be made consistent, and for those who think that they can, there is disagreement about how consistency is to be achieved.<sup>2</sup>

I argue that Aristotle's view is consistent, though I diverge from existing reconciliatory interpretations. These interpretations attempt to demonstrate the consistency of Aristotle's view by explaining how each of the contrasting claims is true of all persons with vice. The embrace of this strategy is based on the idea that 'Aristotle's person with vice' is one for whom each of these claims is meant to apply. As I show, the descriptions given in vii and ix 4 are not meant to be united in this way. For central to Aristotle's view is a distinction between two paradigmatic varieties of persons with vice—those who are incurable (described in vii), and those who are curable (described in ix 4). Aristotle's view is consistent, then, but not because each of the contrasting claims is true of all persons with vice. It is consistent because in each context, Aristotle is describing different varieties of vice.

In section 1, I establish the puzzle that arises from vii and ix 4, and point out differences between these passages. In section 2, I critique existing interpretive strategies for approaching the puzzle. In section 3, I offer my alternative interpretation. I explain the mechanism by which Aristotle distinguishes these two varieties of vice, and provide a psychological account of

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<sup>1</sup> Translations are my own, and I use the text of Bywater 1894. I have consulted Crisp 2014, Broadie and Rowe 2002, and Irwin 1999. Book, chapter, and line numbers not otherwise identified refer to *EN*. My interest is in Aristotle's account of vice generally, not with any particular vice(s). I treat several terms that Aristotle uses to refer to those with vice, such as κακός, φαῦλος, μοχθηρός, and the corresponding nouns κακία, φαυλότης, and μοχθηρία as interchangeable. On these terms, see Irwin 1999, 352 and 2001, 74n3, Fermani 2014, 242, and Müller 2015, 1n2. I also use 'vice' and 'intemperance' interchangeably, following Aristotle. Brickhouse 2003, 3n1 notes that Aristotle uses the terms μοχθηρία, φαυλότης, κακία, and πονηρία to refer to intemperance at 1140b19, 1150a5, b29-35, 1151a19-28, 1154b28-31, and 1166b13-14. I refrain from using the term 'vicious' because it does not neatly fit any Greek.

<sup>2</sup> Those who see the accounts of vice as inconsistent include Grant 1885, ii 290-291, Gautier and Jolif 1970, ii 733-735, Annas 1977, 553-554, Sparshott 1994, 292, Bostock 2000, 172-174, Thorp 2003, 684, and Roochnik 2007. See also Dirlmeier 1960, 564n5, and Hampton 1990, 30-31. Reconciliatory interpretations are sketched in Irwin 1988, 379-381, Broadie 1991, 161, Pakaluk 1998, 176-177, Irwin 1999, 292, 2001, Broadie and Rowe 2002, 419-420, Brickhouse 2003, Broadie 2009, 164n18, Müller 2015, and Nielsen 2017.

curability and incurability. I conclude with some additional passages in Aristotle that support the curable/incurable distinction, and some passages in Plato that set a precedent for it.

### I. Vice in *EN* vii and ix 4

In vii, persons with vice act on choice (προαίρεσις, 1146b22-23, 1148a16-17, 1150a19-22, b29-31, 1151a5-7). Choice encapsulates wish (βούλησις), and wish is a rational desire for something an agent takes to be good (1111b26-27, 1113a15-16, a23-24, b3, 1136b6-9; *EE* 1223b6-7, 1227a18-31, 1235b23; *Rhet.* 1369a1-4; *Top.* 146b5-6, b37-147a1). Hence, specifying the content of one's wish reveals the things they value as good. What do those with vice value under this description?

There is reason to think that bodily pleasures play a dominant role here, and that those with vice take these to be a central component of the good life. Aristotle claims that the intemperate person pursues pleasures that are excessive and contrary to correct reason “out of conviction (πέπεισται), because he is just the sort to pursue them” (1151a13-14), and that this person acts “believing he ought always pursue the present pleasure” (νομίζων ἀεὶ δεῖν τὸ παρὸν ἢδὲ διώκειν, 1146b22-23). Even when there is little or no appetite for pleasures, since the intemperate values these on rational grounds “he still pursues them and avoids moderate pains” (1148a18-22). Although the intemperate and incontinent pursue the same things, “the intemperate person thinks that it is right (οἰόμενος δεῖν) to do so, while the incontinent does not” (1152a5-6). If the incontinent is like a city that ignores all its good laws, a person with vice is like a city that stands by bad laws (1152a20-24). Clearly, the evaluative outlook of those with vice is severely mistaken. There is nothing they take to be more valuable than pleasure, and there are no desires specifiable in terms of their wish that encourage restraint. They pursue their ends on principle, without hesitation, and in the absence of any conflicting desires or emotions.

Can their mistake be remedied? Or are they incapable of change? There are passages that suggest the latter. In an important remark to which I will return, Aristotle says that the intemperate is “bound to be without regrets (μὴ εἶναι μεταμελητικόν) and thus incurable (ἀνίατος), for anyone without regrets is incurable (ὁ γὰρ ἀμεταμέλητος ἀνίατος)” (1150a21-22). Again, a few lines later:

The intemperate person, as we said, is not the sort to have regrets (οὐ μεταμελητικός), since he stands by his choice. But every incontinent person is the sort to have regrets...the intemperate person is incurable (ἀνίατος) while the incontinent is curable. Vice (μοχθηρία) is a chronically bad condition, and thus like a disease such as dropsy or consumption, while incontinence is not chronic, and thus like epilepsy. And generally vice (κακίας) and incontinence are different in kind, for vice is unconscious of itself (κακία λανθάνει), incontinence is not (1150b29-36).

It thus appears that those with vice are permanently and irremediably what they are, as is indicated by their total lack of regret. Their evaluative outlook is perverse, and from an objective point of view, wrong. This perversion and wrongness is pervasive, uniform, and rationally endorsed. Nothing is likely to disturb their quietude, since they are closed off to entertaining alternate perspectives, and ignorant of their character. Scholars have described this sort of person as a “mirror image” of those having virtue (Roochnik 2007, 211), since in their souls there obtains “a harmony between what they find pleasant and what they take to be good” (Brickhouse

2003, 4). They have come to have “systematically perverted ends” (Annas 1977, 554), and they are how they are “as a matter of principle” (Rorty 1980, 272).

A different picture arises in ix 4. We may start with the relationship between wish and appetite. While in vii there seemed to be no conflict, in ix 4 Aristotle claims that those with vice (φαῦλοι), “are in internal conflict (διαφέρονται) and have an appetite (ἐπιθυμοῦσιν) for one thing, but wish (βούλονται) for another” (1166b7-8). Since the conflict is between wish and appetite, it is between something the agent values *as good*, and something they value *as pleasant*. What do those with vice value under these descriptions?

Aristotle elaborates: those with vice “are like incontinent people, since they choose (αἰροῦνται) pleasant things that are actually harmful, instead of things they take to be good for themselves (ἀντὶ τῶν δοκούντων ἑαυτοῖς ἀγαθῶν, 1166b8-10). This is a striking claim, for it suggests that those with vice are led to pursue pleasures that satisfy their appetites, while simultaneously having a wish that *contradicts* this. In other words, unlike *EN* vii, here it does not look like the wish of those with vice is dominated by a want of pleasures, since they take things to be good that are in tension with this. A similar thought arises a few lines later, when Aristotle describes the conflict that occurs in the soul of one with vice:

one element in it, on account of its wickedness (διὰ μοχθηρίαν), grieves in abstaining from certain things, while the other element is pleased; the one draws them this way, the other that, as if tearing them apart (1166b19-22).

Presumably the element that grieves in abstaining on account of its wickedness is appetite, while the element that is pleased in abstaining is wish. This suggests that even if a significant portion of one’s wish is constituted by a want of pleasures (and this accords with their appetites), there is some portion of their wish that does not approve of this, since abstaining from pleasures is the condition of its being pleased. This is a far cry from *EN* vii, where those with vice believe they should always go for pleasures, think it is right to do so, and pursue them out of conviction.

At 1166b10 we are told that vices such as cowardice and laziness cause their possessors to “shrink from doing what they believe to be best for themselves (οἶονται ἑαυτοῖς βέλτιστα εἶναι)” (1166b10-11), and that “those who have committed many dreadful crimes hate and shun life because of their vice (διὰ τὴν μοχθηρίαν) and destroy themselves” (1166b11-13).<sup>3</sup> People like this always seek company, “for when they are by themselves they remember many disturbing actions and foresee others like them, whereas when they are with others they forget” (1166b15-17). None of these ideas fits neatly with *EN* vii, where those with vice are described as doing precisely what they think is best, and where there is no obvious occasion for suicidal thoughts or distress about past actions, since these people are unwavering in their outlook, and fully endorse their actions as good.

Following the description of the conflicted soul (1166b19-22), the main argument concludes with the claim that a person with vice “wishes (ἐβούλετο) these things (ταῦτα) had not become pleasant for him; for bad people (φαῦλοι) are full of regret (μεταμελείας)” (1166b24-25). Assuming that wish is meant in the same sense as before, the thought is that those with vice have a rational desire not to be the sort of person who ends up dissatisfied even when they obtain things whose value they in some way endorse. As for the claim about regret, for present purposes

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<sup>3</sup> Reading πέπρακται διὰ τὴν μοχθηρίαν, μισοῦσι τε καὶ at 1166b12, following L<sup>b</sup>.

we note that on a straightforward reading, this is in direct contradiction with *EN* vii, where a central feature of vice was the *lack* of any disposition to regret.

The passage is completed with an exhortation to virtue, given the analysis of vice: “If to be like this is the height of misery, we ought to avoid vice (μοχθηρίαν) with all our might and try to be good (ἐπιεικῆ); for this is how one can have a relation of friendship with oneself, and become a friend to another” (1166b26-29). The untroubled depiction of vice is reversed, and Aristotle now insists that a life of vice is a life of conflict and misery. No persons with vice can be a friend to another, nor even to themselves. One ought to strive for virtue in order to avoid such depravity.

The overall contrast with *EN* vii is plain. As one scholar has described the situation, the portrait given in *EN* ix 4 “could not be more different from the psychically stable and harmonious virtuous soul” (Brickhouse 2003, 5), which seemed to be the model for vice in *EN* vii. In the former discussion vice appeared to manifest itself in a single-minded pursuit of perverse goals, while here it manifests itself in “hypocrisy, secrecy, deception and lying, denial, distraction and ambivalence” (Pakaluk 1998, 177). Hence the worry of inconsistency.

## II. Existing reconciliatory strategies

I consider the three current approaches to the apparent conflict of *EN* vii and ix 4. Two involve prioritizing one text over the other, and the third tries to show that the shift from vii to ix 4 expresses Aristotle’s view of how vice develops over time.

According to Broadie 1991, 161, and 2002, 420, while wish in *EN* vii refers to a rational desire for something the agent takes to be good, in ix 4 this refers to an impractical, motivationally inert kind of desire—the sort of thing Aristotle has in mind when he says that we may wish for impossible things, such as immortality (1111b22-23). Unlike wishes described in *EN* vii, these wishes never turn into choices, and so they pose no practical conflict for the agent. Hence, as vii would lead us to expect, those with vice remain practically unified. For when they act, they act on the basis of the sort of choices described in vii, and these *do* encapsulate practical, motivationally efficacious wishes that are *not* at odds with appetite. The only conflict that cannot be completely avoided is between *impractical* wishes and appetite. Embracing this non-standard construal of wish in ix 4 serves to prioritize the view of vii.

There is reason to doubt that the wishes described in ix 4 are of the kind this view requires. In the first place, there is an issue concerning the object of wish. Focusing on 1166b24-25, Broadie takes the wishes of those with vice to be directed at their character—they dislike who they are, and desire not to be such. She does not adequately account for the fact that a few lines earlier (1166b8-10 and b19-22), the wish of those with vice is directed at abstaining from pleasures, not at facts about their character. Moreover, here the wish that conflicts with appetite does not appear to be impractical and motivationally inert, insofar as Aristotle leaves open the possibility that the “draw” or “pull” (ἔλκει) from wish may overpower appetite, leading the agent to act on their wish. Furthermore, concerning 1166b24-25, it is not clear that this wish should be construed as a sort of dissatisfaction towards what cannot be otherwise, on a par with the desire for impossibilities. Broadie is here assuming the doctrine of vii—specifically the claims about incurability—but ix 4 says nothing to indicate that vice cannot be reformed. As I argue below, there is something interesting about the way wish in ix 4 operates, but to suggest that this is

impractical and motivationally inert is to downplay its psychological efficacy beyond what Aristotle intends.<sup>4</sup>

By contrast, Müller 2015 has argued in favor of prioritizing ix 4. On his view, those with vice have no real commitments, and lack a conception of the good or guiding purpose in life. Their beliefs about the good change according to what seems pleasant, and they are moved to act not by any rationally grounded principles, but by current interests and pleasures.

A major difficulty with Müller's view concerns his understanding of wish, though the problem here is different than Broadie's.<sup>5</sup> On Müller's view, in both vii and ix 4, the content of wish for those with vice is *determined* by what they find pleasant, and circumstantial considerations. Put otherwise, those with vice have no desires about what is good for them that are not reducible to an explanation of a thing's being perceived by them as pleasant now (Müller 2015, 472, 475). While their actions may *embody* a principle according to which they should always pursue pleasure, "this principle is derived by us from the observation of their lives", and in fact the reason of such a person "does not exercise any command over her non-rational desires" (Müller 2015, 465). For example, when a person like this is sick, they see health as the good—not because they judge it to be so as such, but because being healthy now strikes them as the most pleasant (or least painful) way to be. And for the sake of this, they might do things they previously found burdensome and still find intrinsically undesirable (exercise), and forego things they normally find enjoyable (sweets). But even here, the reason such a person will now go in for exercise and refuse sweets is not because they have made a reasoned judgment about the value of these things, or see them as part of a good life. It has to do with the simple fact that this strikes them as the most pleasant or least painful course of action, given their current situation. As Müller 2015, 472 notes on the example of health specifically, even though this is a good, for those with vice, "their commitment to any such value is always conditioned by them finding it pleasant".<sup>6</sup>

This is an extremely thin conception of wish, and I do not think it can be Aristotle's, for it allows for a desire to count as a wish in the absence of any endorsement or recognition of a thing's goodness, as distinct from its pleasantness. More generally, if those with vice described in vii are as Müller suggests, it is hard to make sense of the idea that these people think their acts are *right*, or that they resemble a city that has bad laws but stands by them. On Müller's view, we need to imagine that those with vice think their acts are right just because they perceive them as pleasant now, and that in comparing such people to a city that stands by its bad laws, Aristotle intends for us to understand that rampant, haphazard legal change is the norm. But Aristotle says nothing to suggest this is his meaning.

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<sup>4</sup> It might be possible to get a 'pull' from wish that is impractical and motivationally inert by supposing that the enactment of this pull requires, but does not receive cooperation from other basic, non-rational desires. Setting aside the point that at 1166b8-10 and b19-22 wish does not look to be impractical and motivationally inert, here the lack of cooperation from other non-rational desires does not seem to be the main obstacle in the way of wish being enacted. Rather, it seems that the wish itself is not as explicit and consciously available as it should be.

<sup>5</sup> A similar, and in a way corresponding objection might be raised concerning Müller's view of the choice of those with vice, for which see Nielsen 2017, 19-22, and Elliott 2016.

<sup>6</sup> So, on Müller's view, while it may not be the case that the wishes of those with vice slavishly follow their appetites, it is the case that the content of their wish is always subject to change based on what the agent currently finds pleasant.

In thinking about ix 4, the same sort of problem concerning wish applies. Even if we allow that those with vice in this context are somewhat ambivalent in their evaluative outlook, since they have wishes, there must be some things that they value under the description of their being good, and not merely pleasant now. And we need not insist that these people have a well worked-out view of the good, or an entirely unified set of wishes to doubt Müller's view. For given the hard line he takes, if those with vice in this context have a single desire about what is good for them that is not reducible to an explanation of a thing's being perceived as pleasant by them, this would count as evidence against his view. The reading of ix 4 provided above indicates that those with vice do have wishes like this.<sup>7</sup>

A final variety of interpretation turns on the idea that vii and ix 4 represent different developmental stages of vice, with ix 4 representing the later. This sort of view is endorsed by Irwin 1999, 292, and Brickhouse 2003.<sup>8</sup> Two things are true about those with vice, according to this view:

- A. They have a conception of the good (expressed in their wish) that requires they satisfy their appetites for pleasure. To do this, they must exercise judgment and foresight, and be willing to stick to long-term plans.
- B. They have strong appetites for immediate pleasures. If these grow strong enough, they can disrupt one's more prudent plans.

At an early stage of development, those with vice will forego immediate pleasures and stick to their principles, avoiding conflict and regret. But as their appetites for immediate pleasures grow, these disrupt their reasoned plans, which causes a conflict between wish and appetite. This is construed as a conflict between (A) and (B). When this happens, unruly appetites *reshape* the direction of wish, and those with vice end up giving *rational* priority to immediate pleasures. Throughout their lives, then, those with vice act in accordance with wish and choice. But at a later developmental stage, the kind of wish and choice they act on is different from that which they *would have* acted on earlier, before their appetites got out of control. This explains their regret: these people regret the necessity of acting on the wishes and choices they must now act on, for there is a sense in which they would prefer to act on wishes and choices that give priority to (A) over (B).

While there is much to be said for this variety of interpretation, it is not without difficulties. In the first place, even if we accept that vii and ix 4 depict two distinct stages of vice, it is not clear that ix 4 must come later. For it is not implausible that those with vice begin conflicted, and struggle to obtain pleasure in a way that reflects their rational plans. To cite one of Brickhouse's key passages, it may be at an earlier developmental stage that the appetites of those with vice are "large and intense," and that they "expel rational calculation" (1119b10). Once these people learn that it is better to pursue pleasure guided by wish, however, they will happily forego immediate pleasures. *Now* they have become calculating, unregretful, and

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<sup>7</sup> Nielsen 2017, 19-22 has criticized other aspects of Müller's view. I have found her analysis of the passage at 1146b22-23, as well her discussion of the ἀρχή of those with vice at 1151a15-17 and 1140b17-20 to be particularly insightful.

<sup>8</sup> Pakaluk 1998, 176-177 conjectures at such a view, and Kraut 2022, Section 4 assumes it. Irwin has discussed Aristotelian vice in 1988, 379-381, and 2001, though the analysis that I focus on here is his most plausible take on the issue of reconciling vii and ix 4.

psychologically unified. The possibility of a reverse developmental story like this is a strike against this view.

Moreover, I do not think (A) and (B) captures the conflict between wish and appetite that Aristotle intends in ix 4. As I have argued, that conflict is between a portion of wish that encourages abstinence from pleasures, and the appetitive drive for pleasures (1166b8-10, and b19-22). Developmentalists must take these passages to say that wish and appetite are *both* directed at pleasure, and that the conflict has not to do with the object pursued, but with the desire that leads the way in the pursuit. The difficulty is that this fails to account for the fact that in these passages just cited, the element that is or would be pleased, namely, wish, is or would be pleased in *abstaining* from pleasures, not pursuing them.

A final objection: on this view, the regret of those with vice is ultimately to do with their failure to live up to their own standards. They regret not being sufficiently disciplined, or as disciplined as they once were. But the description of vice in ix 4 seems too strong for this. Those with vice cannot stand to be alone, lest they remember what they have done, and they are horrified to think of what they might do next. They hate what they have become, and sometimes commit suicide. This does not strike me as someone who regrets not having been more disciplined. And I take it that the exhortation to virtue that concludes ix 4 implies as much. These words would not amount to much of an advertisement for virtue if we are to think that the regret that those with vice suffer could have been avoided if they were better at sticking to their original principles.

### III. A new interpretation

Unique as they are, existing reconciliatory views agree that the interpreter's task is to unify the portraits of vice in vii and ix 4, in the belief that 'Aristotle's person with vice' is one for whom each of the contrasting claims is meant to apply. I embrace the opposite approach. I argue that we should *distinguish* these two portraits of vice, rather than liken them. Central to my view, then, is a distinction between two paradigmatic varieties of persons with vice, the incurable and the curable, described separately in vii and ix 4. I argue that this distinction can be made in a principled, non-arbitrary way that has support from the text, and is philosophically plausible.<sup>9</sup>

#### A. The criterion for incurability (and failing to meet it)

If there are two varieties of persons with vice, we must have a reliable way of distinguishing them. Consider two passages we have already seen: 1150a21-22 and b29-36. Here Aristotle articulates what I will call the 'criterion for incurability'. The function of this criterion is straightforward: it sets a standard. If a person with vice meets this standard, they should be

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<sup>9</sup> Aristotle does not seem to notice the apparent contradiction between vii and ix 4. This might be viewed as a constraint on interpretation, insofar as the interpreter must go beyond what is said in reconciling claims that Aristotle does not see as needing reconciliation. I think that if an author (a) says contradictory things, (b) is unaware of this, and (c) has no available theoretical machinery that might help to resolve it, it may be appropriate to conclude that their position is inconsistent. As I try to show, however, I do not think that the third condition applies in the present case. So, while Aristotle might not be aware of the puzzle that vii and ix 4 presents, this need not prevent an attempt at reconciliation.

viewed as incurable, if they do not, they should be viewed as curable. The criterion thus allows us to distinguish these varieties of vice from one another.<sup>10</sup>

How should we construe the criterion? In the earlier passage, Aristotle says that the intemperate person is “bound to be without regrets, and thus incurable, for anyone without regrets is incurable”. The later passage repeats the same idea: the intemperate person is “not the sort to have regrets... But every incontinent person is the sort to have regrets...the intemperate person is incurable, while the incontinent is curable”. These passages make it clear that lack of regret determines incurability—the person with vice described here is incurable precisely on this basis.<sup>11</sup> So perhaps the criterion should state that if a given person with vice has no regrets, they are incurable. If that is right, when Aristotle describes a person with vice in ix 4 who *does* have regrets, we should read this as a description of someone who *fails* to meet the criterion, which thereby makes them curable and distinct from the person described in vii.

Yet there is a difficulty here. For suppose that we take lack of regret to be indicative of incurability, but it turns out that the lack of regret in vii is not directed at the same thing that the felt regret in ix 4 is. Say, for instance, that the lack of regret in vii is directed at particular actions—and so *this* is what makes one incurable—but the felt regret in ix 4 is directed at something else, where particular actions are excluded. In this case, these characters will not differ from one another in the way that would permit a clear distinction between them, since the character in ix 4 does not experience regret about the same thing that the character in vii fails to regret. We can frame this as a challenge to my view: show that there is a *match* in the object of what is and is not regretted for the persons with vice described in each context, and formulate the criterion accordingly, or else give up the distinction.

Let us first get clear on what the person with vice in vii does not regret. The standard thought here (with which I agree) is that their lack of regret is directed at particular actions. As is familiar, these passages are part of an extensive contrast between intemperance and incontinence. Incontinent agents abandon their choice when they act, and so they end up regretting what they did when they were overwhelmed by passion. By contrast, intemperate agents act in accordance with choice, and so the natural inference here is that they do not regret the acts they have done. Here then is a construal of the criterion for incurability, I suggest: For any given person with vice, if they have no regrets about the actions they have done, then they are incurable.<sup>12</sup> Accordingly, if we are to view the character described in ix 4 as *curable* in their vice, and

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<sup>10</sup> This conceptual analysis might not hold absolutely in practice. For instance, the criterion is not meant to account for possible catastrophic events that might somehow stimulate reform in an extremely bad person. It is a tool that gives us a clear-cut way of distinguishing persons with vice who are curable and incurable in most circumstances. In the practical domain, everything is a ‘for the most part’ case.

<sup>11</sup> This is a standard way of reading these passages, though to my knowledge, no one has taken them to amount to a criterion for incurability. Non-standardly, Curzer 2012, 368 reads 1150b29-36 to say that those with vice are incurable because “they lack knowledge of their own moral failings”. Aristotle does make the point that those with vice are unaware of their character, but this is not why they are incurable.

<sup>12</sup> Broadie 2009, 164 comes close to this in a comment on 1150a21-22: “where, and only where, there is regret over what one has done, can there be reform or ‘cure’”. However, she thinks the regret in ix 4 is directed at something else, see n13 below.



distinct from the character described in vii, the content of their regret must be spelled out in terms of particular actions. What does the person with vice in ix 4 regret?<sup>13</sup>

I have already argued against the idea that this regret is directed at the failure to be sufficiently disciplined. Another possibility is that it is directed at one's character, but not necessarily at any particular actions.<sup>14</sup> The passage certainly portrays those with vice as disapproving of themselves in a way that extends beyond particular actions, and it seems right to say that they regret having become what they are. But this does not prevent us from concluding that particular actions are also in view here. In fact, it is hard to see how experiencing regret about the sort of person one has become can be independent of experiencing regret about particular actions one has done, since for Aristotle, doing actions of a certain kind produces characters of that corresponding kind (1103a34-b2), and everybody knows this (1114a9-10).<sup>15</sup> So, if the character described in ix 4 regrets what they have become, since they have become what they are by doing actions of the corresponding kind, and they *know* this, they must also regret the particular actions.

Here it is also important to recall that when these people are by themselves, "they remember many disturbing actions and foresee others like them" (1166b15-16). The backward-looking reason to avoid reflection, memories of past actions, suggests that there is something about these actions that those with vice find deeply upsetting, even if they cannot understand why. It seems that even if they regret being such as to have done certain things, this regret is also directed at the simple fact that they *did* them. The future-looking reason to avoid reflection suggests a similar point: when these people anticipate acting *in character*, they anticipate that they will end up doing certain actions that they will later regret, and they shudder to think that this is just who they are. Thus, I conclude that in ix 4, when Aristotle claims that those with vice are full of regret, this regret must be spelled out at least in part in terms of particular actions. Accordingly, this variety of person with vice fails to meet the criterion for incurability, and so should be viewed as curable.

To conclude the present argument, consider a passage from ix 3, where Aristotle wonders whether it is ever necessary to try to reform a friend who has acquired vice:

If we accept another person as good, and he turns out to be a person with vice (μοχθηρός) should we continue to love him? Or is that not possible, if not everything is worthy of love, but only what is good? ...Should it then be dissolved immediately? Or is this required not in all cases, but only when they are incurable in their vice (ἀνιάτοις κατὰ τὴν μοχθρίαν)? If they could be reformed (ἐπανόρθωσιν) we should save their character more than their property, in so far as character is better and more a part of friendship (1165b13-20).

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<sup>13</sup> Without argument, Grönroos 2015, 150 claims that while the lack of regret in vii explains why those with vice cannot change, in ix 4, the felt regret of someone with vice "does not imply that she can be reformed". I argue that this is in fact the case.

<sup>14</sup> So, Broadie 2009, 164n18: "This regret is a global rejection of what one is...as distinct from a selective repudiation of particular episodes or strands of one's behavior." See also Müller 2015, 468n17, Price 1989, 129, Pakaluk 1998, 177, and cf. Curzer 2012, 372.

<sup>15</sup> Everybody except the "utterly senseless" (1114a10). On this phrase, see Bondeson 1974.

Here Aristotle *rejects* the idea that in all cases when a friend has acquired vice, it is unnecessary to come to their aid. For some persons with vice can be reformed. In these cases, one should make every effort to save their character. But if the friend has become *incurable* in their vice, the friendship should be dissolved. For people like this are incapable of reform, and so no assistance will help them.

Here we have a distinction within the category of vice, though it is unclear how one might spell it out except by the criterion for incurability. With it, the passage is entirely straightforward. Those persons with vice who can be reformed are the ones who regret what they have done, and so are capable of change, as described in ix 4. Those who are incurable in their vice are the hopeless cases, as described in vii. One need not come to their aid because any attempt at reform is bound to fail, and we can be sure that it will because they have no regrets about what they have done.

## B. The psychology of curability and incurability

If the view I have proposed is correct, persons with vice can be either curable or incurable, and we have a reliable way of distinguishing them that accords with the text. The question that remains is this: why are those who are curable prone to psychic conflict and regret, but those who are incurable are not? While I have stressed how important regret and its absence are for determining curability and incurability, these are ultimately just symptoms of some larger psychological differences between these two paradigms of vice. Having achieved clarity on the symptoms, I now discuss the ailments.

I begin with another distinction, this one being threefold:

1. The totality of one's beliefs and desires about the good.
2. One's operative, action-guiding beliefs and desires about the good.
3. One's non-operative, non-action-guiding beliefs and desires about the good.

The second and third are subsets of the first. For ease of reference, I shall call the first 'total outlook', the second 'operative outlook', and the third 'non-operative outlook'.

Those who are curable and those who are incurable are identical concerning their operative outlook.<sup>16</sup> Both have a sufficiently large and internally consistent set of beliefs and desires about the good that guide them in their daily life.<sup>17</sup> Where they differ is in the quality of those beliefs and desires that are part of their non-operative outlook, and in the relationship that these stand to those that are part of their operative outlook. For the incurables, the quality of beliefs and desires in their operative and non-operative outlook is the same. Their operative outlook is directed at maximizing pleasures, and there is nothing in their non-operative outlook that is in tension with this. Hence, their total outlook is thoroughly corrupted, and entirely consistent. What is unique about the curables, however, is that the quality of beliefs and desires in their operative and non-operative outlook is not the same. For although their operative outlook is directed at maximizing pleasures, there is some element in their non-operative outlook that is

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<sup>16</sup> This is the common element that situates both those who are curable and those who are incurable in the category of vice.

<sup>17</sup> Let 'beliefs and desires' stand for 'beliefs and desires about the good'. I will not here discuss non-evaluative beliefs and desires that those with vice might have.

not. This element lacks the strength to make an impact on action, but it is plenty powerful to cause psychic tension. Hence, the total outlook of the curables is *not* entirely consistent, for even though their operative outlook is wholly perverse, their non-operative outlook is not. This difference explains why those who are curable are subject to psychic conflict and regret, while those who are incurable are not.

Concerning the curables, where ought we locate that non-operative, non-action guiding belief or desire that conflicts with their operative outlook? I suggest that this is to be located in their wish. As we have seen, those who are curable have many operative wishes for pleasures that guide them in their daily lives, and appetites that correspond with these. But not all of their wishes are like this, for they have at least one that does not approve of the pursuit of pleasures, and instead prefers that the agent abstain. This, I suggest, is what causes the curables to experience conflict and regret. The incurables have no wishes like this, which is why they avoid conflict and regret.

The idea is perhaps best explained in developmental terms. Consider Cavin and Isaac. Both grew up with a strong attachment to pleasure, and were given ample opportunity to indulge. With time and the maturation of reason, they both came to adopt a conception of the good according to which maximizing pleasure played a central role.<sup>18</sup> Throughout his life, Isaac never had any exposure to virtue that might have initiated a change in him. He is now unwavering in his convictions, and is never led to think that there might be better ways of living. Isaac has developed a completely consistent set of views about the good that are expressed in his wish, and not just in the sense of his operative outlook. For there is nothing in his non-operative outlook that would ever encourage him to refrain from pleasures, or assign non-instrumental value to anything that contradicts his operative outlook. His *total* outlook is entirely consistent. This protects him from conflict and regret. Isaac is incurable.

By contrast, part of Calvin's developmental story does involve an exposure to virtue. This was impactful enough to lead him to develop a wish contrary to his operative outlook, and this new wish was directed at refraining from pleasures. However, this wish eventually faded into psychic latency, and it is now part of his non-operative outlook. How has this happened? One possibility: while on vacation, Calvin was unexpectedly exposed to a culture where overindulgence was alien, socially shunned, and proscribed by law. To fit in, Calvin had to restrain his overindulgent desires. Through a difficult process of habituation, behavioral alterations, and explicit instruction from his new peers, he eventually gained an appreciation for not overindulging, and rationally endorsed the value of moderation. Calvin formed a wish to refrain from pleasures, and while on vacation, he acts on it.<sup>19</sup> Upon returning home, however, there was little felt need for him to continue acting on this wish. As a result, it failed to gain traction in broader psychic system, and it never became fully integrated into his overall conception of the good. The many corrupt beliefs and desires in his operative outlook take over, and the one good thing in him is subdued.

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<sup>18</sup> That the quality of early habituation has serious cognitive and evaluative consequences is plain. Burnyeat 1980 focusses on virtue, though passages such as 1140b17-20, 1144a31-35, and 1151a15-17 make clear the distorting effects that bad habituation can have, leading one to develop a false conception of the good. For discussion, see Barney 2019.

<sup>19</sup> The wish is thus motivationally efficacious for a time, and capable of outpulling the desires that conflict with it. It is not 'impractical' in the sense that Broadie's interpretation requires.

Today, as Calvin lives in accordance with his operative outlook, this non-operative wish from long ago continues to make its presence felt in his psychic system. To be sure, Calvin consistently acts to satisfy the desires of his operative outlook. But something has gone terribly wrong. Though he cannot articulate it, he can sense that his behavior is disgusting and perverse. Even when he gets what he wants (in the sense of his operative outlook), he ends up dissatisfied and confused. Having no clear idea of how he can act in such a way that leaves him *ultimately* content, he shudders to think about what he will do next, and avoids reflecting on the past. Calvin's total outlook is *nearly* consistent. But this non-operative wish from long ago prevents complete consistency. This wish is the only decent thing in him. But since it exists alongside a much larger set of operative wishes that are deeply entrenched in his overall conception of the good, its mere existence makes him prone to severe conflict and regret. Calvin is curable.<sup>20</sup>

In a comment on ix 4, Pakaluk 1998, 177 claims that the person with vice described here seems to have “some residual recognition of what virtue is and what it requires, with enough psychological force, even to impel him to commit suicide”. I have tried to provide Aristotle with a philosophical explanation for why this is so.<sup>21</sup>

### C. Additional textual evidence; Platonic precedent

I conclude with a passage from *Categories* viii that reinforces the legitimacy of the curable/incurable distinction, and some passages in Plato that provide a precedent for it. In *Cat.* viii, Aristotle distinguishes conditions (διάθεσις) from states (ἕξις), a pair of dispositional qualities.<sup>22</sup> Two criteria are at play here: length of time and changeability. Dispositional qualities that are long-lasting and hard to change are states, while those that are short-lasting and easy to change are conditions. As Aristotle puts it, “a state differs from a condition in that the one is easily changed, while the other lasts longer and is harder to change” (*Cat.* 9a8-9). Read in isolation, this might be taken to suggest that vice is not in principle unchangeable, since Aristotle here talks about the difficulty of changing a state, not the impossibility of doing so. At a key point in the discussion, however, Aristotle claims that one is rightly said to have a condition, “unless indeed even one of these were eventually to become through length of time part of a man's nature and incurable or very hard to change (ἀνίατος ἢ πάνυ δυσκίνητος), then one would perhaps call it a state” (*Cat.* 9a2-4).

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<sup>20</sup> The general phenomena I have in mind is what occurs when a person of established vice develops a wish that contradicts their operative outlook, but eventually migrates to their non-operative outlook. Once there, though it fails to be action-guiding, its presence causes severe psychic discord. I have tried to devise this example in the spirit of *Categories* 13a19-36—a commonly cited passage on the possibility of reform from vice.

<sup>21</sup> For brief but sensible remarks on this passage, see Vasiliou 1996, 792n48. Since my interpretation allows that some people with vice can have contradictory wishes, it might be objected that this violates a doxastic construal of the principle of non-contradiction, given the close connection between wish and belief. I do not think that the objection holds, however, for those with vice who hold contradictory wishes hold them in different respects, while a doxastic construal of the principle of non-contradiction rules out the holding of contradictory beliefs at the same time and in the same respect (*Meta.* 1005b19-20).

<sup>22</sup> Here it should be remembered that both virtues and vices are states (e.g., 1105b28-1106a13, *EE* 1120b18-20).

The passage makes two points. First, conditions can turn out to be states if they persist for an extended period and become engrained in one's nature. Second and more importantly, though, it provides a further specification of the changeability criterion as it is relevant for classifying a dispositional quality as a state. Elsewhere states are said to be "more stable" (*Cat.* 8b28) and "harder to change" (*Cat.* 9a10) than conditions; justice and temperance are said to be "not easily changed" (*Cat.* 8b34). But now Aristotle gives a more fine-grained analysis, claiming that a dispositional quality counts as a state just in case it is "incurable *or* very hard to change" (*Cat.* 9a3). Since incurability implies unchangeability, to say that a state is very hard to change is quite different from saying that it is incurable. Of course, some states that are very hard to change may never end up being changed, and in this way, they resemble incurable states. Conceptually, however, a state that is *πάνυ δυσκίνητος* is different than one that is *ἀνίατος*.<sup>23</sup> The key takeaway from the disjunctive claim is that dispositional qualities that meet *either* of these standards of changeability count as states.<sup>24</sup>

I suggest that the distinction between those who are curable and incurable in their vice tracks the two standards of changeability in *Cat.* viii. The incurables are those whose state meets the 'incurable' standard of changeability, while the curables are those whose state meets the 'hard to change' standard. This also tracks the distinction in ix 3 between those who are called incurable in their vice, and those who have vice but "could be reformed" (1165b19).<sup>25</sup> The basis for separating these two varieties of vice and explaining their differences, as I have argued, must involve an appeal to the criterion for incurability, together with the corresponding account of the psychology of curability and incurability sketched above.

One can find a precedent for the curable/incurable distinction in Plato. In the myth of the *Gorgias*, Plato explains that it is appropriate for anyone who is rightly punished to either improve from it or be made an example of, so that others can improve by observing the one being punished (525b). Those among the wicked who can be improved through punishment are deemed curable (*ιάσιμος*), while those who cannot are incurable (*ἀνίατος*, 526b-c; cf. 525b-e). The myth in the *Phaedo* tells of the judgment that awaits the wicked, and again distinguishes between those who are incurable (*ἀνίατος*) on account of their crimes, and those who have committed "great but curable (*ιάσιμα*) crimes" (113e). As an example of the latter, Plato refers to those who have committed violence against their parents in a fit of rage, but "have felt regret (*μεταμέλον*) for the rest of their lives" (113e-114a).

The *Laws* lays a good deal of practical importance on the difference between those who are curable and not. Serious criminal offenders are to be viewed as incurable, and their appropriate punishment is death (854a-e, 862c-e, 942a). It is also important that citizens be aware of those who are curable and not, for they are to take pity on those whose wickedness is

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<sup>23</sup> Perhaps 'incorruptible' is an appropriate term for virtues that are unchangeable, though this is not an appropriate translation of *ἀνίατος*.

<sup>24</sup> To say that there are different standards of changeability that a given dispositional quality can meet in order to count as a state does not imply that any dispositional quality that is to count as a state must come in both varieties.

<sup>25</sup> It also coheres with *EE* 1230b7-8, where Aristotle says the term intemperance can be ascribed to those who are "hard to cure" (*δυσίατοι*) and to those who are "altogether incurable by punishment" (*ἀνίατοι πάμπαν διὰ κολάσεως*). Cf. *EE* 1230a36-b8. I shall not here pursue the interesting question of the reformative power of punishment. See 1104b17, *EE* 1220a34-39, 1214b29-35, and *Rhet.* 1369b13-14.

curable, control their anger, and deal with the wrongdoer gently. For those who are incurably bad, however, citizens are to give free rein to their anger, since a passionate commitment to what is right requires a spirited fight against what is wrong (731b-d).

These passages do not amount to a worked-out view of a distinction between those with vice who are curable and incurable. But they do indicate that such a distinction exists for Plato, and the passage from the *Phaedo* sets an obvious precedent for the criterion for incurability. With Plato, Aristotle feels the need to differentiate between the wicked who are maximally and irremediably bad, and those who fall short of this. Like his teacher, however, Aristotle does not provide a particularly detailed discussion of this distinction. But the theoretical machinery for a distinction between curable and incurable vice is there, and a sophisticated story of the psychological differences between these two paradigms of vice is available. What I have tried to do is expand upon what Aristotle does say, to establish what I believe he intends, namely, a distinction between curable and incurable persons with vice.<sup>26</sup>

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