

What is 'the best and most perfect virtue'?

Penultimate Draft

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Samuel Baker

Aristotle famously defines the human good as ‘activity of the soul on the basis of virtue and if there are more than one, on the basis of the best and most perfect [*teleios*] virtue, and moreover in a complete [*teleios*] life’ (*Nicomachean Ethics* [NE] I 7, 1098a16-18).¹ Scholars have often disagreed over how to interpret the phrase ‘the best and most perfect virtue.’ There are roughly two camps.² On the one hand, monists (aka ‘exclusivists’) tend to understand the best and most perfect virtue to be *sophia*, which is the virtue of the theoretical intellect. On the other hand, inclusivists (aka ‘comprehensivists’) tend to understand the best and most perfect virtue to be a group of all or many human virtues. The issue is often presented as one of reference: what does the phrase refer to? or what is Aristotle using the phrase to refer to?³

A particular difficulty arises because several scholars think that even though the best and most perfect virtue is a specific virtue (e.g. *sophia*) or a group of specific virtues and even though Aristotle himself may go on to identify it as such, somehow or another that specific virtue or group of virtues is not being *referred* to at this point in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (I 7, 1098a17-18). For example, Gavin Lawrence thinks that we should not ‘take “the best and most perfect virtue” to refer either to theoretical wisdom (*sophia*) or to the composite of all the recognized virtues,’ but instead ‘to refer either to

¹ All translations are my own, unless otherwise noted.

² I say ‘roughly’ because there are several of positions that do not fit into this schema. Not only do monism and inclusivism not exhaust the interpretive options concerning Aristotle’s theory of the human good (e.g. Scott 1999 and Bush 2008), but a few scholars also argue that inclusivism is compatible with *sophia* being the best and most perfect virtue (e.g. Cooper 1999 and Walker 2011).

³ For example, Walker (2011: 92) speaks of the ‘the reference question,’ but he does not distinguish the two different questions mentioned above. There is also a related translation issue: monists, such as Lear (2004), tend to favour the translation of ‘final’ for ‘*teleios*’, while inclusivists, such as Irwin (2012), tend to favour the translation of ‘complete’. In this paper, I will remain neutral on this question, and so I have opted for the translation of *teleios* as ‘perfect’. Irwin (2012: 508-9), for one, would not consider this translation perfectly neutral, but I believe my argument would go through even if one were to translate *teleios* by ‘complete’.

some single, superlative, excellence *whatever it is*, or else to the composite of all the relevant excellences *whatever they are*' (2001: 451).⁴ Anthony Kenny similarly writes, '... it is not correct to say that in this passage Aristotle is referring to [the virtue of] understanding.' Instead, Kenny, who subscribes to a version of monism, thinks that Aristotle is 'giving a description which he will show only later, in book 10, to be uniquely satisfied by *sophia*' (1992, 18).⁵ Though Lawrence and Kenny seem to be expressing roughly same thought, they differ in at least one respect: Lawrence seems to say that the *phrase* 'best and most perfect virtue' does not refer to a specific virtue, whereas Kenny says that *Aristotle* is not here referring to a specific virtue.

However, Jeffrey Purinton has taken issue with this general line of interpretation. He first understands Kenny and other scholars to be insisting 'that they are not claiming that the definite description 'the best and most *teleios* virtue' refers to *sophia*' (1998, 26).⁶ He then argues in reply,

[I]t does not follow from the (alleged) fact that Aristotle does not tell the reader of *NE* I which virtue will turn out uniquely to satisfy the definite description 'the best and most *teleios* virtue' that that description does not refer to *sophia*—or does not refer to it *yet*. Its reference is timeless; if one says that the reader of *NE* 10 sees in retrospect that 'the best and most *teleios* virtue' is *sophia*, one must also say that the definite description in question referred to *sophia* all along. (1998, 262n.9)

Three comments are in order. First, Purinton speaks of an alleged fact because on his interpretation Aristotle has already given the reader enough information to know what specific virtue is being referred to with the phrase 'the best and most perfect virtue'. (According to Purinton 1998: 265, it is human virtue as opposed to e.g. plant-like virtue.) Second, Purinton assumes that the definite description not only refers but refers

⁴ Lawrence calls the former the 'material interpretation' and the latter 'the formal interpretation,' and he makes it clear that he subscribes to the latter. He also makes it clear that the virtue being referred to is theoretical wisdom (*sophia*). I have taken his words somewhat out of context, but I believe that I have still accurately represented his position.

⁵ Broadie (1991: 39), Cooper (1999: 224) and others express similar views.

⁶ Though published afterwards, Lawrence 2001 does not seem to be aware of Purinton 1998.

timelessly, and this is presumably because of unchanging facts about the definite description and about human nature. Third, while Purinton does seem to be contradicting a view like that of Lawrence, according to which the phrase ‘the best and most perfect virtue’ does not refer to a specific virtue, he is not obviously contradicting a view like that of Kenny, according to which it is *Aristotle* who does not here use the phrase to refer to a specific virtue.

Now the way we think about the referent of ‘the best and most perfect virtue’ (*NE* I 7, 1098a17-18) will have ramifications for how we interpret and evaluate Aristotle’s definition of the human good as whole. This is no small matter because the definition is also an ‘outline’ that the rest of the *Nicomachean Ethics* is in some sense attempting to ‘fill in’ (*NE* I 7, 1098a20-22). Consequently, we should want to clarify the dispute between Purinton, Lawrence and Kenny.

To help us do so, I propose that we first appreciate Donnellan’s distinction between two different ways of using definite descriptions: the attributive use and the referential use. When one uses a definite description attributively, one ‘states something about whoever or whatever is the so-and-so.’ For example, an ancient Greek general might say, ‘The wisest man in the army should be my counsellor.’ Here the general is speaking about the wisest man in the army, whoever that may be. However, when one uses a definite description referentially, one ‘uses the description to enable his audience to pick out whom or what he is talking about and states something about that person or thing’ (Donnellan 1966: 285). For example, Agamemnon might look in the direction of Nestor and say, ‘The wisest man in the army told me to send gifts to Achilles.’ Here Agamemnon is speaking about Nestor, even if it turns out that Nestor is not the wisest man in the army. In light of Donnellan’s distinction, I suggest that Aristotle is using the phrase ‘the best and most perfect virtue’ attributively and not referentially at *NE* I 7, 1098a17-18: he is speaking about ‘the best and most perfect virtue’, whatever that may be. I believe this proposal captures the spirit and letter of Kenny’s view and at least the spirit of Lawrence’s view. Purinton does not seem to appreciate Donnellan’s distinction, and this would seem to affect the way he poses his objection.⁷

⁷ There is also reason to think that Purinton (1998) would want to say that Aristotle is using the phrase ‘the best and most perfect virtue’ referentially and not attributively. This is because, as noted above, Purinton

What reasons are there to favour the attributive interpretation? My primary goal is only to clarify a certain difficulty for articulating the ‘attributive’ view—not to defend it—but I will here offer a few such reasons. To begin, Aristotle’s definition of the human good is the conclusion of the *ergon* argument (aka ‘function argument’), and this argument is inspired by a parallel argument in the *Republic* where we read:

[Socrates:] ‘Well then, would the eyes accomplish their work [*ergon*] well if they didn’t have the virtue proper to them [*tēn hautōn oikeian aretēn*], but vice instead of virtue?’

[Thrasymachus:] ‘How so? For perhaps you mean blindness instead of sight?’

[Socrates:] ‘Whatever their virtue is; for I am not yet asking this, but whether things accomplish their work well by their proper virtue, badly by their vice.’
(353b14-c7)

Socrates here uses ‘the virtue proper to the eyes’ attributively, speaking about this virtue, whatever it may be.⁸ This approach is reflected in Aristotle’s *NE ergon* argument especially when he notes that ‘each work [*ergon*] is completed well on the basis of the proper virtue [*tēn oikeian aretēn*]’ (I 7, 1098a15). This is a general statement that concerns a thing’s proper virtue, whatever that may be, and since Aristotle intends to apply this to the human case, he must have in mind the virtue proper to a human, whatever that may be. (Thus, when Aristotle says in *NE* I 7 that the human good is ‘activity of the soul on the basis of virtue...’ it is clear that he is already talking about human virtue with this first use of ‘virtue,’ *contra* the reading of Purinton.) Similarly, in the *Eudemian Ethics*, soon after giving its *ergon* argument and immediately before examining the nature of virtue, Aristotle says,

thinks that Aristotle has already given the reader enough information to know which virtue he is referring to by ‘the best and most perfect virtue’—namely, ‘human virtue.’ Purinton (1998: 265n.16) concedes that this interpretation makes the addition ‘unnecessary,’ but also argues that only his interpretation allows the full definition of the human good to follow from the premises of the *ergon* argument (268-269). However, for a recent and different interpretation of the *ergon* argument that allows the full definition to follow from the argument’s premises, see Baker 2015.

⁸ Compare the use of this passage by Lawrence (2001: 450).

For we are now in the condition of one who describes health as the best condition of the body, or Corsicus as the darkest man in the marketplace; for what either of these is we do not know, but yet for the attainment of knowledge of either it is worthwhile to be in this condition. (*EE* II 1, 1220a18-22)⁹

Here Aristotle seems to be saying that after we have arrived at the definition of happiness by means of the *EE ergon* argument, it is as though we can say that Coriscus is the darkest man in the marketplace, whoever that man happens to be.

Moreover, as we noted earlier, Aristotle presents his definition of the human good as a sketch that needs to be filled in (*NE* I 7, 1098a20-22), and he then seems to *investigate* what might be the ‘most perfect virtue’. By means of such investigation he identifies general justice as the ‘perfect virtue in relation to another’ (*NE* V [= *EE* IV] 1, 1129b31) and later seems to identify *sophia* as the unqualifiedly perfect virtue (*NE* VI [= *EE* IV] 13, 1145a6-11; X 7, 1177a12-18);¹⁰ thus, Aspasius, our earliest commentator on the *NE*, writing in the first half of the second century AD, identifies ‘the best and most perfect virtue’ (I 7, 1098a17-18) as ‘the contemplative virtue’—that is, *sophia*.¹¹ In the *Eudemian Ethics* Aristotle eventually identifies the ‘perfect virtue’ as nobility-and-goodness (*kalokagathia*), which is a single virtue that arises out of all the virtues both practical and intellectual (VIII, 1249a16);¹² thus, the author of the summary of Peripatetic ethics (‘Doxography C’), probably writing in the first century BC, identifies two perfect virtues: justice and nobility-and-goodness (*kalokagathia*).¹³

⁹ The translation is that of J. Solomon in Barnes 1995. The text is partly corrupt and ‘describes’ seems to have been based on a conjecture of Russell. However, I think the passage would still support my argument, even if one adopts a different conjecture and translation, e.g. ‘knows.’

¹⁰ Broadie (1991: 39) suggests that a reader will naturally identify ‘best and most perfect virtue’ differently at different points in the *NE*: *phronēsis* in book VI and *sophia* in book X. In reply, Lawrence (2001: 451n.13) correctly observes that *NE* VI 12-13 ‘clearly shows the greater finality of theoretical wisdom.’ Nevertheless, I think Broadie’s core suggestion can perhaps be retained insofar the reader will have some reason to identify general justice as ‘perfect virtue’ when reading book V.

¹¹ Heylbut (1889: 19.2). See Konstan (2006) for a translation.

¹² Woods (1992: 90) notes this identification. In light of this, it is also worth observing that inclusivists, e.g. Ackrill (1980), often support their position by claiming that it is the same as the view expressed in the *Eudemian Ethics*. However, this is not obviously the case: the *EE* identifies perfect virtue not as all the virtues but as a single virtue that arises out of all the virtues.

¹³ Wachsmuth (1884: 131.16-17). A translation may be found in Sharples (2010).

There are, then, plausible reasons for thinking that Aristotle is using the phrase ‘the best and most perfect virtue’ attributively, but now I think we should also note that Purinton’s own quoted remarks about the referent of ‘the best and most perfect’ virtue can actually be understood as compatible with those of Kenny. Here it will be helpful to look at our question from a different perspective by appreciating the Gricean distinction that Kripke (1977) draws between speaker’s reference and semantic reference—a distinction that he formulates in response to Donnellan.¹⁴ (For our purposes, one need not subscribe to all the details of Kripke’s account, and what follows is the gist of his distinction.) Semantic reference is what a *word* or a group of *words* refers to, and this is determined by certain conventions of the speaker’s language. Thus, when Agamemnon uses the phrase ‘the wisest man in the army’ (or rather the corresponding phrase in ancient Greek), the semantic reference will be determined by the conventions of Agamemnon’s language or idiolect.¹⁵ On the other hand, speaker’s reference is what the *speaker* wishes to talk about and uses the word or group of words to talk about, and this is given by a specific intention of the speaker. Thus, when Agamemnon says that ‘the wisest man in the army’ told him to send gifts to Achilles, Agamemnon uses the phrase to refer to Nestor (speaker’s reference), and this is determined by a specific intention of Agamemnon. This also remains the case even if the phrase itself refers not to Nestor but to someone else (semantic reference). Kripke’s distinction helps us see how it is possible that a speaker might not use a phrase to refer to X, even though the phrase does refer to X. Applying this to *NE I 7*, we can see how it is possible that Aristotle is not using the phrase ‘the best and most perfect virtue’ to refer to a specific virtue (speaker’s reference), even though the phrase itself does refer to specific virtue (semantic reference) and even though Aristotle himself may go on to say which specific virtue that is. Consequently, the comments of Kenny and Purinton about the referent of ‘the best and most perfect virtue’

¹⁴ Salmon (2004: 238-9) argues that even though Kripke’s characterization of the speaker-semantic distinction and Donnellan’s characterization of the attributive-referential distinction are parallel, they are importantly different. This is because they presuppose a different account of semantics. Kripke does, but Donnellan does not, think that the semantic attributes of expressions are intrinsic to the expressions themselves. This ‘expression centered conception takes seriously that expressions are symbols, and that as such they have a semantic life of their own’ (2004, 238). Aristotle too would seem to understand expressions as symbols (see *De Interpretatione* 1, 16a4-5 and *De Sensu et Sensibilia* 1, 437a12-15), and so in this respect he would seem to be closer to Kripke than Donnellan.

¹⁵ Kripke understands semantic reference as Russellian denotation, but I do not think this matters one way or another for the purposes of this paper.

appear compatible since Kenny seems to be making his point about speaker's reference while Purinton seems to be making his point about semantic reference. On this proposal, Lawrence would be right insofar as he seems to be intending to make his point about speaker's reference but he would be wrong insofar as he actually makes his point about semantic reference. In general, when scholars have discussed the referent of 'the best and most perfect virtue', it has not been very clear whether they are discussing speaker's reference or semantic reference.

I hope to have given some helpful guidance for how to think about the referent of 'the best and most perfect virtue', and I now close with a few clarifications. First, Aristotle has no word for reference as opposed to meaning, and so it is not obvious to me how exactly he would have discussed the subject of this paper. Second, as both Donnellan and Kripke emphasize, a speaker can use a phrase attributively even if that speaker has a belief about what the phrase refers to. Thus, Aristotle can use the phrase 'the best and most perfect virtue' attributively, even if he has a belief or opinion about what specific virtue the phrase refers to. Third, it seems to me that Aristotle's entire definition of the human good ('activity of the soul... [etc.]') is also used attributively, and consequently the truth-value of the whole assertion is independent of any other beliefs and thoughts about the human good that might be in Aristotle's mind when writing that definition. The truth-value is also independent of whether or not Aristotle goes on to correctly identify the best and most perfect virtue later in the *NE*. Nevertheless, the truth-value would not be independent of the conventions of Aristotle's language—for example, the convention in his idiolect that 'the human good' signifies the teleologically best achievement of a human (*NE* I 2, 1094b7).¹⁶

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