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Phronēsis in Aristotle : Reconciling Deliberation with Spontaneity

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A standard thesis of contemporary Aristotelian virtue ethics and some recent Heideggerian scholarship is that virtuous behavior can be performed immediately and spontaneously without engaging conscious processes of deliberative thought. It is also claimed that *phronēsis* either enables or is consistent with this possibility. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, however, Aristotle identifies *phronēsis* as the excellence of the calculative part of the intellect, claims that calculation and deliberation are the same and that it is the mark of the *phronimos* to be able to deliberate well. He also insists that for an action to count as virtuous it must issue from rational choice, which he characterizes as determined by deliberation. It thus seems that any exegetically respectable attempt to explain virtuous action within an Aristotelian framework would need to integrate with some account of deliberative choice. This creates a tension in Aristotelian scholarship. In this paper, I shall formalize this tension in terms of an apparently inconsistent triad of claims and shall examine the merits of at least one prominent interpretation of *phronēsis* with respect to its reconciliation.

Contemporary virtue ethicists emphasize the possibility and merit of virtuous actions being performed spontaneously and directly without recourse to conscious activities of deliberation and choice. They also claim that Aristotelian *phronēsis* (practical wisdom) either enables, is necessarily involved in, or is at least consistent with this possibility. For instance:

> It is a standard thesis of virtue ethics that (except in novel, complex and hard cases) virtuous behaviour is somehow easy, natural or habitual. There is a spontaneity to it rather than a self-conscious conformity to rule characterising the *enkratic* person. But this does not entail that virtuous behaviour is behaviour from inclination *rather* than reason. Practical wisdom [i.e. *phronēsis*] is compatible with spontaneity (except where novel, complex and hard cases confront the virtuous agent) (Swanton 2005: 130)

> As Aristotle noted…virtue involves habituation, and such habituation will make 'stopping and deliberating' redundant on many occasions. Indeed, some of the best examples of *phronēsis* are cases of instantaneous action, done 'without thinking', as it were (Russell 2009: 82)

> It is anyway questionable to what extent Aristotle thinks that actions that manifest excellence – even excellence in the strict sense, which requires practical wisdom – issue from actual courses of thinking, the sort of thing one might call 'deliberation'. He remarks that appropriate actions are better indicators of courage if they are produced in emergencies, when there is no time to work out what to do (1117a17-22). The point surely generalises: actions that manifest excellence, and so display practical wisdom in operation, need not result from actual courses of deliberative thought (McDowell 1998: 25-26)

Some recent Heideggerian scholarship similarly recognizes a relationship between Aristotelian *phronēsis* and spontaneous modes of ethical conduct. This literature emphasizes that the relevant agent is an ordinary, non-ideal fallible person who has yet to achieve full or complete virtue. As Hubert Dreyfus writes, "most of our ethical life consists in seeing the appropriate things to do and responding without deliberation" (2006:45). Francisco Varela illustrates a similar thought when he invites his readers to:

> Consider a normal day in the street. You are walking down the sidewalk thinking about what you need to say in an upcoming meeting and you hear the noise of an accident. You immediately see if you can help. You are in your office. The conversation is lively and a topic comes up that embarrasses your secretary. You immediately perceive her embarrassment and turn the conversation away from the topic with a humorous remark […] [T]hese are true ethical actions; in fact, in our daily, normal life they represent the most common kind of ethical behavior (1999:5)

The possessives and pronouns in these remarks are clearly intended to reference their audience; i.e. ordinary, non-idealized adult persons.

Heideggerian scholarship also emphasizes the idea that the relevant sense of *phronēsis* is to be understood as a *perceptual* capacity. For instance, Dreyfus both endorses and attributes to Heidegger the view that *phronēsis* is "a form of pure perceiving" that enables subjects to "see…the appropriate thing to do and respond…without deliberation" (2006:51). John McDowell similarly insists that

phronēsis "at least includes, and perhaps is even identified with, a proper responsiveness to the details of situations – something Aristotle is willing to conceive is like, and even as a kind of, perception" (1998:21).

At least three theses can be extracted from this literature:

1. *Excellence Thesis:* The virtuous actions of ideally or completely virtuous or excellent persons (a) can be performed without engaging conscious activities of decision-making and deliberative thought, and (b) necessarily involve or engage *phronēsis*[1]

2. *Fallible Thesis:*[2] The virtuous actions of ordinary, non-ideal fallible persons (a) can be performed without engaging conscious activities of decision-making, and (b) necessarily involve or engage *phronēsis*

3. *Perceptual Thesis: Phronēsis* is a perceptual capacity

These theses, while not inconsistent, are not mutually entailing nor necessarily dependent. One may, in principle, accept any one without necessarily accepting the other two, although arguments provided to defend one might well implicate the others. The same exegetical question bears on all three, however. Did Aristotle actually hold these theses?

The excellence thesis can be more readily defended than the fallible and perceptual theses given Aristotle's frequent remark in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that "one cannot be practically wise without being good" (NE 1144a36), where the relevant sense of good is to be understood "in the strict sense" (NE 1103a2); i.e. that of possessing fully developed virtues of character. It is also arguable that Aristotle's methodological aim

[1] Unless otherwise noted, I treat disjunctions inclusively. Thus the extension of necessity ranges over both 'involve' and 'engage'.
[2] That the term 'fallible' is being used to characterize the ordinary, non-ideal person need not entail that ideal persons are infallible (i.e. excellent in every aspect where this extends to omniscience). The distinction is primarily meant to separate the fully virtuous and not yet fully virtuous.

for his *Nicomachean Ethics* was to provide a detailed description of the highest good or "ideal of human perfection" (Cooper 1985: 78).

Establishing that Aristotle also held the fallible thesis is a much harder task. If Aristotle's aim were, indeed, to provide a description of ideal human agency, then characterizing ordinary, fallible modes of agency would not be his direct concern, despite the fact that his idealized description may well be intended to function as a normative guide for fallible agents wishing to attain this objective. If this is right, a defender of the fallible thesis will need to do some interpretive work to establish its plausibility. There are at least two ways that one could try to meet this challenge.[3]

First, one might invoke Aristotle's distinction between actions that are 'from virtue' (or 'done virtuously') and those that are (merely) 'in accordance with virtue' (NE 1105a17-1105b1), where the former are standardly interpreted to require fully developed virtues and the latter not. One might thus argue that the fallible thesis is concerned with actions in accordance with virtue, where actions from virtue are better conceived as the subject matter of the excellence thesis.

There are two exegetical problems with this approach. First, actions in accordance with virtue are often interpreted as deficient relative to actions done from virtue and thus are considered to fall short of acting well (*eupraxia*). Some even suggest that they may be performed accidently, unintentionally or the result of blind obedience to instruction. They are thus thought not to qualify as praise-worthy conduct for which we hold agents morally responsible (see Korsgaard 2008). It is not obvious that

[3] A third possibility might be derived from reflection on Aristotle's remark in the *Eudemian Ethics*: "But since practical wisdom is knowledge and something true, it may behave like knowledge; one might act foolishly though possessed of wisdom, and commit the errors of the foolish." (EE 1246a27-1246b3; Thanks to Daniel Vecchio for bringing this to my attention). The claim seems to be that the *akratēs* or incontinent person may act with practical wisdom but unintentionally use it towards vicious ends. If we identify the fallible person with the *akratēs* then *akrasia*, or some form of it, may entail the fallible thesis. This, however, would undermine the central claim of the fallible thesis; namely, that ordinary, fallible agents may perform virtuous actions (properly, not accidentally or deficiently).

Aristotle held this view. But if he did, this interpretative route would inadequately support the fallible thesis, which concerns the 'virtuous actions' of ordinary folk. If it were the case that actions in accordance with virtue are somewhat less than virtuous or do not properly count as actions for which the agent can be held responsible, then such conduct falls outside the scope of the *explanandum*. The second problem with this approach is that it excludes the possibility of explanatory appeal to *phronēsis* to account for the virtuous actions of ordinary folks. If we concede that *phronēsis* is an excellence possessed by the excellent person but also deny that our *explananda* are actions that express or involve excellences (i.e. 'from virtue') then we are not warranted to appeal to *phronēsis* to explain the actions of the not-yet-excellent. This interpretative strategy thus serves to oppose rather than support the fallible thesis.

One might alternatively attempt to support the fallible thesis by challenging the relevant characterization of *phronēsis*. One might argue, for instance, that the very possibility of explaining the excellence thesis requires a prior analysis of the more general capacities that ordinary agents engage in action and that are engaged excellently by the fully virtuous. If *phronēsis* is an intellectual excellence then an explanation of how it is engaged in the actions of the excellent person requires prior explanation of the ordinary intellectual capacity of which it is an excellence. If this is right, we may be warranted in distinguishing *phronēsis* qua practical wisdom and *phronēsis* qua (e.g.) practical intelligence, where the former is understood as the excellence of the latter. This would be a rational reconstruction of Aristotle's thought, but one that has both philosophical and exegetical merit.

Philosophically, this distinction offers a way of addressing an objection of circularity that is sometimes directed against the relationship between *phronēsis* and virtues of character. Aristotle remarks, "we cannot be really good without practical

wisdom, or practically wise without virtue of character" (NE 1144b30-3). Several attempts have been made to explain why this claim is not circular or, if it is, why the circle is not vicious. Considered simply as a claim about modal co-extension there is no problem. The claim might be false (a possibility we have yet to investigate) but not fallacious. If, however, the claim is contextualized as a developmental concern with how an agent might *acquire* these otherwise distinct capacities then there *does* seem to be a circle of the vicious kind. This is because the coming-to-be of these capacities would imply a relationship of dependence, which this claim seems to violate. It is not obvious that Aristotle has this developmental concern in mind. Nevertheless, insofar as developmental issues are relevant to a thoroughgoing defence of Aristotle's ethical views, the concern has relevance. It might be appeased if one were to admit practical intelligence as the not-yet-perfected capacity, the perfection of which (viz. practical wisdom) requires fully developed virtues of character.

Some exegetical support for this distinction can be derived from general reflections on the ways in which the word *phronēsis* is used elsewhere in Aristotle's canon. According to Terence Irwin, the verb *phronein* is best understood as indicating intelligent awareness in general, where both Plato and Aristotle use the noun *phronēsis* in this general sense. In Irwin's view, it is only in *Nicomachean Ethics* that Aristotle specifically employs the term in a sense that is dependent on, and a condition for, complete virtue of character (1999:345).[4] His observation is also in keeping with Aristotle's idiosyncratic employment of key terms in both 'broad' or general and 'strict' or more specific senses.[5] If this is right, we might be exegetically

[4] Irwin is not alone in holding this view. See also Shields 2007: 413

[5] Some additional support may be derived from Aristotle's reference to the practical wisdom of certain animals. In the *Metaphysics*, for instance, Aristotle claims "those animals with memory are more intelligent (*phronimōtera*) and apt to learning than those without; those that are incapable of hearing

justified in using the expression 'practical intelligence' to denote the more general capacity that, when perfected, is more strictly denoted 'practical wisdom'. One could thus argue that the sense of *phronēsis* involved in the fallible thesis is practical intelligence, more generally, and not practical wisdom, more specifically. While these considerations do not establish that Aristotle actually held the fallible thesis, they do give reasons for thinking that certain aspects of it are not inconsistent with his thought and thus the fallible thesis can be presented as a plausible rational reconstruction.

The perceptual thesis is much more controversial. It takes a stand on the specific nature of *phronēsis* (whether excellently or more fallibly interpreted); viz. that it is a perceptual capacity. A certain degree of exegetical support might be derived from Aristotle's claims that *phronēsis* is concerned with particulars (NE 1141b14), where 'particulars' are identified as the proper object of perception. Aristotle also claims that *phronēsis* is concerned with the "last thing", where the last thing is both "what is done" (NE 1142a24) and the "object of perception" (NE 1142a30). Finally, and most frequently cited in this context, Aristotle describes *phronēsis* as the "eye of the soul" (NE 1144a30) and the *phronimos* as one who is able to "see correctly because experience has given them the eye" (NE 1143b14).

While Aristotle clearly makes the above remarks, I believe and shall argue that he also provides a much more extensive and systematically related set of claims that push against this interpretation of his considered position. These claims centre on a conception of *phronēsis* (whether excellently or more fallibly construed) as a deliberative capacity that is inextricably related to 'rational choice' (*prohairesis*). I shall argue that these claims not only oppose the perceptual thesis but also challenge

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sounds are intelligent (*phronima*) though they cannot be taught, e.g. the bee, and any other race of animals that may be like it" (MP 980b; see also NE 1141a27-28)

the 'spontaneity conjuncts' (i.e. the clauses (a)) of the excellence and fallible theses. In what follows I shall analyse the relevant issues in terms of an inconsistent triad of claims. I shall then examine a prominent contemporary interpretation of *phronēsis* in terms of its potential to resolve the trilemma thus generated.

Exegetical challenge: phronēsis necessarily involves deliberative choice

An exegetical challenge to the three theses we are investigating arises from the fact that Aristotle characterizes *phronēsis* as the excellence of the calculative part of the intellect (NE 1139a5-15), claims that calculation and deliberation are the same (NE 1139a5-150), and that it is the mark of the *phronimos* to be able to deliberate well (NE 1140a25, 1141b10). According to prominent Aristotelian scholarship, these remarks establish that *phronēsis* somehow '*involves*'[6] or '*is*'[7] a capacity for good deliberation. Setting aside the issues of excellence and fallibility in practical intelligence, it would seem that any exegetically respectable account of *phronēsis* would need to integrate with some account of deliberation (*bouleusis*).

Aristotle also insists that virtuous action properly issues from rational choice (*prohairesis*, NE 1105a28-33, 1113b1-14) and that rational choice is determined by deliberation. For instance, he claims that choice involves reason and thought (NE 1112a15), its object is desired after deliberation (NE 1113a5), and is determined as

[6] "Practical wisdom *involves* the ability to deliberate" (Sorabji 1980: 205); "[P]ractical wisdom is *a disposition to use* one's deliberative skill in order to find the mean" (Sorabji 1980: 211); "Aristotle defines practical wisdom as the virtue *by which* one deliberates well; i.e. reasons well in a practical way (1140 24ff). What is practical reason? It has two aspects: the rational choice (*prohairesis*) on which a person acts, and the process of deliberation or reflection by which a rational choice is formed." (Broadie 1993: 179); "[Practical] wisdom *shows itself in* good deliberation, and deliberation is plainly a kind of reasoning." (Broadie 2002: 47); "One thing that seems uncontroversial about the text is that most of what it tells us regarding what practical wisdom *involves* is about *deliberation*" (Hursthouse 2006: 298); "In Aristotle's ethics, *phronēsis* is a virtue *concerned with* deliberation and decision" (Russell 2009: 4) my italics.

[7] "[Practical] wisdom *is* a deliberative virtue" (Irwin 1975: 570-571); "For practical wisdom *is primarily* a deliberative capacity" (Reeve 2006: 205); "[P]ractical wisdom *must be* excellence in deliberation" (Hursthouse 2006: 299) my italics

the result of deliberation (NE 1113a10). These claims are not isolated but are repeated in *Eudemian Ethics* and *Magna Moralia*. There is also good evidence to think that, for Aristotle, the relevant sense of deliberation is to be understood as a conscious activity of discursive thinking. This is most clearly suggested in *Eudemian Ethics*, where Aristotle remarks:

> [Rational] choice is not simply picking [*airesis men estin*] but *picking one thing before* [*pro*] *another*; and this is impossible without consideration and deliberation; therefore [rational] choice arises out of deliberate opinion (EE 1226a6-9, my italics)

In *Magna Moralia* it is also claimed:

> Since, then, [rational] choice, as was said before, is concerned with goods that contribute to the end and not with the end, and with the things that are possible to us, and with such as afford ground for controversy as to whether this or that is desirable, it is *evident that one must have thought and deliberated about them beforehand*; then when a thing appears best to us after having thought it over, there ensues an impulse to act, and it is when we act in this way that we are held to act on [rational] choice (MM 1189a25-30, my italics)

It would thus seem that any exegetically respectable Aristotelian account of virtuous action would need to integrate with some account of rational choice, where rational choice is to be understood as the result of, or otherwise subsequent to, deliberation. This is reinforced by Aristotle's claim that "some of our voluntary actions we do with rational choice, namely, those that are the consequence of previous deliberation; others, those that are not the consequence of such deliberation, we do without rational choice" (NE 1135b8-11). Moreover, "we describe actions done spontaneously as voluntary, but not as done in accordance with rational choice" (NE 1111b9-10).

Taken together, these claims suggest (at least) that *phronēsis* necessarily involves deliberation and rational choice (where, we might now say, practical intelligence is their generic mode and practical wisdom their excellence). If this is right, it follows that any exegetically respectable attempt to explain virtuous action within an

Aristotelian framework (as interpretation or rational reconstruction) would need to integrate with some account of deliberation and rational choice (henceforth 'deliberative choice' for short). This puts significant pressure on all of the theses that we are considering. Not only is it contrary to the perceptual thesis, it also creates tension for the conjunction of *phronēsis* and spontaneity within the excellence and fallible theses. This tension can be articulated in terms of an apparently inconsistent triad of claims.

1. Virtuous actions necessarily involve or engage *phronēsis*
2. Virtuous actions can be performed without deliberation[8]
3. *Phronēsis* necessarily involves or is deliberative choice

Can this trilemma be resolved in terms that are consistent with *all* of the theses we have been considering? Is the idea of *phronēsis* being necessarily involved or engaged in *spontaneously* virtuous actions (whether of fully virtuous agents or ordinary folk) exegetically plausible within an Aristotelian framework? Moreover, can this trilemma be resolved in terms that permit a conception of *phronēsis* as a perceptual capacity?

There are several ways in which we can approach these questions. One possibility might be to embrace the trilemma as a decisive *reductio* against the exegetical plausibility of the above theses. That is, one might take it to decisively establish *deliberative* action as Aristotle's paradigm of virtuous action relative to which non-deliberative behaviour could only be somehow deficient.[9] On this approach, the

[8] Note the modality of this claim. The theses I am investigating are concerned with establishing possibility, not necessity. It is no part of this project to deny that agents (whether excellent or fallible) *can* engage in deliberative thought nor that there are cases where they *should* engage in deliberative thought. The aim is to resist the necessity of this assumption by providing an account that warrants the alternative possibility.

[9] While this approach would clearly oppose the perceptual thesis, it is not obvious that it opposes the spontaneity conjuncts in the excellence and fallible theses. One might argue that the possibility of spontaneously virtuous action need not be denied if such conduct were demoted to deficient cases which may or may not involve *phronēsis*. (Thanks to Agnes Callard for the suggestion at the Midwest Ancient Philosophy Conference, June 2013). Following this suggestion, the trilemma could thus be

answer to each of the above questions is: No. In this paper I shall take a more charitable approach and treat the above as the challenge to be met. I shall approach this challenge by examining the philosophical and exegetical merit of interpretations of *phronēsis* available in modern and contemporary commentarial literature. My framing question shall be: can this literature shed exegetical and philosophical light on the above trilemma and can it provide material for a resolution?

Several interpretations of *phronēsis* have been offered in commentarial literature that could serve as the basis for an attempt to reconcile this trilemma. In this paper I shall examine the interpretation that dominates contemporary discussions of spontaneously virtuous action; namely, *phronēsis* understood as some kind of skill. I shall evaluate this interpretation both in terms of its exegetical merit but also its potential to accommodate all three of the theses we have been considering; i.e. the excellence, fallible and perceptual theses. I shall provide a reconstruction of this view and shall demonstrate both its exegetical and philosophical merit for resolving this trilemma. The paper will conclude, however, with some reservations regarding its scope of application.

Phronēsis as a skill

That Aristotle conceived of *phronēsis* as a kind of skill is most prominently defended by Julia Annas (1993, 1995). According to Annas, all ancient theories share a conception of virtue modelled on skill, stressing a difference between being a learner

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resolved if the *explanandum* in the second claim were modified to range over 'deficiently virtuous action'. While it could be objected that this possibility rules out the excellent thesis, which assumes that the relevant agent is ideally virtuous, this objection could be resisted if the relevant agent were qualified as 'perfect but nevertheless fallible in the manifestation of their perfected qualities'. Even with this qualification, however, this interpretative approach denies the *explanandum* of all the theses being investigated; namely, that the relevant *actions* are genuinely and non-deficiently virtuous.

and being morally mature (1993: 90-91). According to this conception, the person acquiring virtue has to "put effort into considering, thinking about and working out the various factors relevant to acting (for although he has the right ideas about what to do, they are still not fully internalised)" (90). In the case of "fully virtuous persons" however, these factors "will be fully internalized" (90) as the result of improved moral reasoning. "[T]he better one's moral reasoning gets, the less one is aware of it in one's life. The better I get at deliberating and working out what to do, the less I will need to deliberate, for the more obvious it will become to me what the morally salient features of the situation in front of me are" (91).

This somewhat general description of the process skill-acquisition is familiar in contemporary accounts of skilled action (both within an Aristotelian framework and without). It is frequently employed to characterize the transition of an agent from novice to expert in various practices or contexts. The 'novice', who is in the early stages of acquiring a skill, is assumed to require deliberation about what to do in particular situations by the light of the rules and goals of the practice. With 'experience and time', however, the rules and goals are said to be somehow 'internalized' or made 'implicit' such that the agent is thereafter able to respond spontaneously and without thinking.

On the face of it, the skill model of *phronēsis* might seem, at best, to explain only the excellence thesis but not the fallible thesis. This is because spontaneity is assumed to distinguish the expert from the novice and thus, analogously, one who is excellent or possesses full virtue from the ordinary, fallible person (who needs to pause and figure out what would be the right thing to do). This assumption may not be essential, however. One does not need to be a master pianist in order to spontaneously place one's hands on a keyboard and play a melody. One need not be an expert car driver,

capable of performing the Scandinavian flick, in order to spontaneously perform the series of actions required to change gears in response to a change in pitch of the engine as one drives along. Of course, in the initial stages of learning these particular skills, there may have been moments where one had to pause and think about what comes next. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to suppose that there is a threshold in the acquisition of any skill where an agent can act spontaneously without having acquired full or complete mastery of the practice. If this is right, then there is no principled reason to suppose that the ordinary person cannot perform virtuous actions spontaneously. Thus, the skill model of *phronēsis* may well be compatible with both the excellence and fallible thesis.

Even if Annas is correct in her view that the skill model of *phronēsis* accurately represents Aristotle's intended views, Aristotle at no point makes this intention explicit (which, of course, Annas clearly recognizes). There are also some superficial exegetical obstacles to this interpretation. Aristotle contrasts, rather than identifies, *technē* (skill) to *phronēsis*. He makes a specific point of connecting *technē* with deliberation, arguing that we deliberate *more* in such cases than in the theoretical sciences because when particularities are at issue there is increased room for doubt (NE 1112a31-1112b10). Moreover, all of the citations that lend exegetical support to the claim that Aristotle recognizes spontaneity in action relate exclusively to the case of virtue rather than *technē*. Rather than appealing to the case of generic skilled actions for analogical explanation of virtuous action, it would seem that the order of explanation is quite the reverse.

One might reasonably respond by insisting that these concerns trade on superficialities in the translation of Aristotle's key terms into English (viz. *technē* as 'skill'). A proper assessment of whether the skill model of *phronēsis* resolves our

trilemma in favour of either the excellence or fallible theses should consider the philosophical and exegetical merit of the relevant form of practical intelligence. It is unclear how this is to be understood, however. Terms such as 'habituated', 'internalized' and 'made implicit' are often invoked to explain the transition from the form of rationality engaged by the novice (consciously discursive deliberative thinking) and that involved in the spontaneous actions of an expert. An adequate resolution to our trilemma will need to explain precisely what these notions amount to in terms consistent with the claims that spontaneous actions necessarily involve or engage *phronēsis* and *phronēsis* necessarily involves deliberative choice. What is the relevant sense of practical intelligence involved in spontaneous actions? Aristotle does not answer this question. As Annas notes, "[Aristotle] moves from the problem-solving picture of the learner to the immediate sensitivity picture of the fully virtuous without following through the question of what the structure of the fully virtuous person's thinking will now be" (1993:94) Following through on this question is crucial for resolving our trilemma.

Annas' notion of "fully internalized" moral reasoning admits several explanatory possibilities. In this paper I shall discuss two.[10] The first takes the relevant sense of internalization to consist of 'rendering unconscious' the otherwise consciously engaged activities of deliberative thought of the novice. This may be analyzed as accepting the third claim of the trilemma but clarifying the second. *Phronēsis* is a capacity for deliberative choice but the phenomenal lack of discursive thinking in virtuous action does not entail an absence of deliberation. Deliberation *is* occurring in both cases; when it is not consciously occurrent it is nevertheless occurring

[10] There are further possibilities for analyzing *phronēsis* as a skill. Moreover, as should become clear by the end of the paper, the two possibilities I investigate do not reflect my final view on how our trilemma could be best resolved. Nevertheless, I shall argue that the second is a plausible candidate, both exegetically and philosophically.

unconsciously. Contemporary philosophical support for this move might be derived from connection with a Fodorian philosophy of mind, according to which 'apparently' non-deliberative automatic behaviour is explained as the product of explicit reasoning (hidden beneath normal consciousness) in terms of sentence-like propositions that accord with (similarly hidden) explicit rules of appropriate behavior.[11] If exegetically and philosophically plausible, our trilemma may thus be resolved.

There are both exegetical and philosophical problems with this attempted resolution, however. Exegetically, there is no evidence that Aristotle recognized the idea of the 'unconscious' let alone the possibility of unconscious deliberation. While he certainly recognized various modes of cognitive functioning with respect to both human animals and non-human animals, it seems anachronistic to insist that deliberative choice is occurring unconsciously in cases where there is a phenomenal lack. There are also philosophical problems with this idea. When engaged in conscious activities of deliberative thought, we are (in some sense) 'naturally' constrained by the information that occurs in our conscious mind for consideration. It is not clear what the equivalent constraint would be in the case of unconscious deliberation. Without some such a constraint, the underlying reasoning process would need to consider every possibility known to the agent in view of a given situation. This seems computationally intractable. Even if it were tractable, moreover, it is not clear why the unconscious cases of deliberation should be so much faster than those that are conscious to result in spontaneous actions. Given the lack of relevance

[11] The term 'explicit', here, is not to be read as synonymous with 'conscious' but refers to what is represented in a cognitive system. See J Fodor, 'The Appeal to Tacit Knowledge in Psychological Explanation', *Journal of Philosophy,* 65 (1968).

constraints in the case of unconscious deliberation one should expect the reverse. A more sophisticated analysis of 'internalization' is required.[12]

An alternative reconstruction might involve interpreting deliberative choice as a causal determinant for *phronēsis*, where the latter is conceived as engaged in spontaneously virtuous action. On this approach, deliberation retains its literal status as a conscious activity of discursive thought and 'rational choice' as the result of deliberation, so construed. *Phronēsis* thus necessarily 'involves' deliberative choice in the sense of deliberative choice being a necessary causal antecedent. This causal version of the skill model of *phronēsis* is arguably consistent with all of the theses that we are investigating insofar as it makes no commitment about the precise nature of practical intelligence involved at the time of action. This appears to resolve the trilemma. Virtuous actions are enabled by *phronēsis* and can be performed without deliberation but only insofar as deliberative choice is a necessary cognitive event in their causal history.

I believe, and in what follows shall demonstrate, that this 'causal skill model of *phronēsis*' has both exegetical plausibility and philosophical merit.[13] I shall argue that it provides a reasonable solution of our trilemma in favour of all our theses and, as such, secures the possibility of spontaneously virtuous actions within an Aristotelian framework. Nevertheless, it faces certain problems. I shall conclude by raising certain issues that would need to be resolved by one who accepts this explanatory account.

Exegetical Support for the Causal Skill Model of Phronēsis

[12] This is not to deny that some such analysis may be in the offing. The point is that simply rendering conscious activities of deliberative thought unconscious is not going to be explanatorily sufficient.

[13] That I call this approach the 'causal skill model' need not entail that the analysis I shall provide is the only way to causally analyze the skill model. My intention is simply to distinguish this approach from the 'rendering deliberation unconscious' alternative and to make clear that there are several ways of analyzing the skill model of *phronēsis*.

The causal skill model of *phronēsis* may be developed and gain exegetical support in relation to an argument developed by G.E.M. Anscombe (1981). This argument attempts to reconcile (another) apparently inconsistent triad of claims concerning Aristotle's views on *akrasia*. Anscombe presents this trilemma as follows:

1. Choice is what is determined by deliberation (cf. NE 1113a4)
2. What the uncontrolled man does *qua* uncontrolled, he does not choose to do (cf. NE 1142b18)
3. The uncontrolled man, even when acting against his convictions, does on occasion determine what to do by deliberation (1981: 66)

Anscombe attempts to resolve this trilemma by differentiating two different senses of deliberation based on two different attitudes a subject can take towards an objective or end that he or she seeks to achieve by acting. The first sense of deliberation (D^1) is conducted with a view to obtaining an object of 'desire' (*epithumia*). The second (D^2) is conducted with a view to obtaining, what Anscombe calls, an object of 'will' (Anscombe's translation of *boulēsis*). Anscombe then distinguishes two different senses of 'choice' that determine these respective ends. The end of D^2 is determined by choice *qua* deliberative or rational choice (i.e. *prohairesis*), which requires prior activities of deliberation or reflective thought. The end of D^1 is determined by a more ordinary or executive sense of choice or intention that Anscombe thinks is evident in Aristotle's remark that the uncontrolled man "gets what he 'proposes' (προτιθεται)" (1981:69) According to Anscombe, "this latter verb [i.e. *protithetai*] expresses a volition, or perhaps, an intention" (69), given which she thinks "Aristotle ought, we may say, to have seen that he was here employing a key concept in the theory of action…he did not do so; the innocent unnoticeable verb he uses receives no attention from him" (69). Whether or not Anscombe is correct in this remark, her distinction

between choice qua rational choice (*prohairesis*) and choice qua ordinary, executive volition can be supported by reference to the distinction Aristotle marks between *prohairesis* and *hairesis* when remarking "choice (*prohairesis*) involves reason and thought. Even the name seems to suggest that it is what is chosen (*haireton*) before (i.e. *pro*) other things" (NE 1112a16). That there is some such distinction between *prohairesis* and *hairesis* is also reflected in recent translations of *prohairesis* as specifically 'rational choice' (Crisp 2000) or 'decision' (Irwin 1999, Rowe 2002) rather than choice *simpliciter*.

Anscombe's resolution of Aristotle's '*akrasia* trilemma' thus involves supposing that *prohairesis* may occur prior to action and be causally related to the action without actually executing the action. Akratic actions are the result of D^1 and not D^2 and thus are executed by *protithēmi* (intention or volition) or *hairesis* directed towards an object of desire. Conduct counts as akratic action when the agent has actually exercised *prohairesis* toward some object of will but acts as the result of *protithēmi* or *hairesis* directed towards some other object of desire. Anscombe's trilemma is thus resolved as follows:

1* Rational choice (*prohairesis*) is the result of D^2

2* The acts of an *akratēs* are not the *direct* result of rational choice *but necessarily have it in their causal history*

3* The acts of an *akratēs* may, on occasion, result from D^1

The key move of Anscombe's resolution is to assume that *prohairesis* is a necessary causal antecedent of akratic actions but temporally prior to the occasion of action. This presupposes that *prohairesis* can, *in general*, be exercised at some time prior to the actions that are implicated by it. If Anscombe is right, her account lends support to the causal skill model of *phronēsis*. Even if *phronēsis* necessarily involves

deliberation and rational choice (*prohairesis*), this need not be incompatible with the idea that *phronēsis* necessarily enables spontaneously virtuous actions. Of course, we need not take Anscombe's word on this. However, the systematicity gained by resolving two apparent trilemmas in Aristotle's thought lends weight to this characterization of *prohairesis*.

Anscombe's study introduces a further idea; namely, that the relevant sense of *prohairesis* has specifically evaluative criteria (one's ethical outlook) as its proper object. As we have seen, Anscombe distinguishes two kinds of deliberation relative to two distinct kinds of ends (i.e. that of desire and that of will) determined or selected by two distinct kinds of choice (i.e. volition, intention or choice and rational choice). Anscombe additionally distinguishes will from desire by insisting that the objects of will are *general conceptions* about how to live (or "final objectives" (66)) whereas the objects of desire are more specific, local or "*particular* purposes" (66) that can be achieved by action. As she writes, "however much calculation may have gone into determining it, if it is of what is only a means to the objects of a man's επιθυμιαι, his 'desires', then unless his "will in life *is* to satisfy these desires (as holds of the licentious man) it is not a 'choice' [in the sense of *prohairesis*]." (69) Anscombe additionally argues that the proper object of will (i.e. the final objective) for which *prohairesis* is exercised is that of "ἐυπραξια, 'doing well'" (70). *Eupraxia*, in Anscombe's view, is a general conception or view about what constitutes living a good life in general (*eudaimonia*) when analysed into more specific views about what action-types (i.e. "descriptions under which what is done" (77)) count as particular instantiations of living such a good life. (cf. 1981:75) An action that properly follows from *prohairesis* thus instantiates *eupraxia* (doing well) under some specification about what counts as living a good life in general, given an agent's deliberative choice

(in the sense of endorsement or commitment) to act in ways that fit this general outlook. This implies that while ordinary actions may result from volition or intention with a view to some object of desire, and akratic actions are those that additionally oppose some object of will towards which the agent previously exercised *prohairesis*, *virtuous* actions are those that accord with some object of will towards which they had previous exercised *prohairesis*. That is, virtuous actions express particular aspects of some general *ethical* outlook (i.e. the agent's views on acting well, *eupraxia*, and living well, *eudaimonia*), which is wanted because chosen (endorsed, committed to, in place) as the result of some prior reflective thought.

If Anscombe is right, the above provides a plausible way of reconciling our own 'spontaneity trilemma' in favour of the excellence and fallible theses. It could be argued that the excellent or fallible person merely needs to have deliberatively chosen (reflectively endorsed or committed to) the aspect of their ethical outlook in virtue of which their actions count as virtuous (leaving open whether or not they were correct in the evaluative criteria thereby endorsed). No reasons have yet been given to deny that the relevant sense of *phronēsis* that is actually engaged in action could be conceived as a perceptual capacity. It need merely be causally implicated by prior acts of deliberative choice.

Philosophical Support for the Causal Skill Model of Phronēsis

Anscombe's study of the *akrasia* trilemma helps develop and provide (rationally reconstructed) exegetical support for the causal skill model of *phronēsis* as a resolution to our spontaneity trilemma. The *philosophical* merits of this approach might be developed by appeal to certain contemporary approaches to action theory and ethical theory. In particular, this interpretation of Aristotle aligns with certain contemporary neo-Kantian reflective endorsement theories of moral agency.

According to Christine Korsgaard, for instance, reflective endorsement is required to transform mere "motives and inclinations" (1996:89) into "moral motives" (17) or "reasons that have normative force" (133). Korsgaard goes so far as to argue that reflective endorsement "*is morality itself*" (89); it is what imparts the normative, moral quality to what is done. This view has often been interpreted as requiring the engagement of conscious activities of deliberative or reflective thought at the time of action. According to Korsgaard's more recent views, however, reflective endorsement need merely be a necessary causal antecedent of moral action and not necessarily a cognitive event that must occur at the time of action (see Korsgaard 2006, 2008, 2009). This seems consistent with the causal version of the skill model of *phronēsis* that we are considering and, thus, with the excellence and fallible theses.

It is not yet clear how prior activities of deliberative choice might actually bear on spontaneity in virtuous action as supposed by the causal skill model of *phronēsis*. What is the relevant form of practical intelligence involved in spontaneously virtuous actions and might it plausibly be conceived as a perceptual capacity? If this can be positively explained, then the neo-Kantian appropriation of the causal skill model of *phronēsis* might well provide an adequately philosophical resolution of our trilemma.

It seems to me that the most plausible explanation of how prior activities of deliberative choice might bear on spontaneity in action can be derived by integrating the account with a Michael Bratman-style planning model of action (cf. 1987, 2007). Plans, according to Bratman, are propositional attitudes that are settled in advance of deliberation and function to frame or filter what counts as a relevant consideration without the plan, itself, featuring within this process. It could be argued that the ethical outlook chosen or endorsed as the result of reflective thought functions in a similar way.

Consider, for instance, riding a bicycle with a plan to arrive at a certain destination (say, Kodaiji Temple in Kyoto). There are many possible roads one could ride down but only some of them will lead to Kodaiji. In certain circumstances one may need to deliberate about which road to take (particularly if one has never been to Kodaiji). Given one's objective or plan, however, one will only consider those roads that lead to Kodaiji and not those that lead away from it. Moreover, the size of the set of roads that one could ride down and still be heading towards Kodaiji will vary given certain agent-relative contextual features. For instance, if Kodaiji is just around the corner from where one is currently located, only one or two roads may feature as relevant possibilities. If one is on the opposite side of the city, however, an indefinitely large number may present themselves as relevant possibilities. The crucial point is that one need not decide, from within the deliberative process, what counts as a relevant possibility. Plans perform this function; they constrain, filter, and frame the deliberative process such that the only considerations that actually appear as options for thought are those possibilities that fall within the scope of the plan.

In a similar way we might contend that the deliberative choice *qua* reflective endorsement of certain aspects of one's ethical outlook (i.e. particular values, commitments and conceptions of virtue) functions to frame, filter or constrain what counts as a relevant possibility for action. All that would be required for action is a capacity to perceive the particular features of situations that are relevant with respect to aspects of this outlook without needing to think about those values each and every time one acts appropriately with respect to them.

For a somewhat analogous evaluative case, consider my (in fact) current practice of vegetarianism. One might reasonably say that it is because of a reflectively endorsed or deliberatively chosen commitment to being a vegetarian and, thereby, to

instantiating the standards of this practice in behaviour, that meals containing meat no longer afford the possibility of eating as an appropriate kind of response; i.e. certain items on a menu no longer appear as possible options for choice. Indeed, it is frequently the case that when I pick up a menu I skim quickly through the list to those items that are, in fact, relevant possibilities for ordering without needing to think about and/or choose to disregard the other items; I simply overlook or ignore them. Moreover, given a certain period of time, it is frequently the case that I entirely forget that I am filtering relevant options in a way that is not the culturally-specific statistical norm and, hence, fail to mention this fact in relevant circumstances (such as forgetting to request a 'special' vegetarian meal when booking a long-haul flight). While vegetarianism is perhaps more properly characterised as a practice informed by values rather than a value commitment itself, one might argue that the example can readily generalise to the various aspects of one's ethical outlook.

Bratman's planning theory also suggests a way in which we might characterise the transition process from deliberative to non-deliberative action. For instance, it would seem that the more detailed and elaborate one's plan (e.g. if organised in terms of a nested hierarchy of sub-plans), the more focused or limited will be the set of options available for consideration and, hence, the more efficient one's deliberative process. For instance, if one plans to get to Kodaiji with a sub-plan of (e.g.) utilizing the Higashi Oji Dori, one will significantly reduce the number of possibilities relevant for consideration. If one plans to get to Kodaiji with a sub-plan of utilizing the Higashi Oji Dori and with a further sub-plan of (e.g.) stopping for some okonomiyaki along the way, the set of possibilities will be further reduced. It would be consistent with Bratman's view to argue that in cases where the set of relevant options is reduced to a

unique option, given a highly sophisticated and detailed plan, deliberation will not be required; one will simply 'see' the thing to do and just do it.

One might analogously extend Bratman's planning model to characterise the transition from deliberative to non-deliberative forms of *virtuous* action on the assumption that virtuous action presupposes (at least) reflective endorsement or deliberative choice in its causal history. Just as the elaboration of a plan functions to reduce the set of what is relevant for consideration in any particular case, one might argue that increased specification and refinement in one's ethical outlook functions to reduce the set of what is relevant for consideration. Learning to differentiate courage from impetuosity, empathy from indulgence, humility from servility, for instance, might lead one to exclude certain response-types as relevant possibilities with respect to certain perceived situations and, hence, reduce the set of options one needs to consider as ways of responding to such situations. One might further argue that the refinement and revision of one's ethical outlook may, eventually and ideally, function to afford a single, unique possibility for action which, in certain kinds of circumstance, one simply 'sees' as 'the' thing to do and does it.

Lingering issues…

The causal skill model of *phronēsis* provides both an exegetically and philosophically plausible resolution to our spontaneity trilemma. If Anscombe is right in her study of *akrasia*, the causal skill model of *phronēsis* rationally reconstructs Aristotle's views on virtuous action in terms consistent with a plausible reconstruction of his views on *akrasia*. The systematicity thus gained provides exegetical strength to the causal skill model of *phronēsis*. By connection to neo-Kantian moral theory and planning theories of action, the causal skill model of *phronēsis* also provides a philosophically respectable theory of action and ethical agency that admits the possibility of

spontaneity in ethically good action. Moreover, and most importantly for our purpose, it provides a way of reconciling our trilemma in terms that are consistent with the excellence and fallible theses. This is a substantive outcome.

Despite its strengths, the causal skill model of *phronēsis* (and its neo-Kantian connections) has certain problems. These problems have ultimately led me to seek an alternative resolution to our trilemma. I shall not here attempt to develop such an alternative. Rather, I shall conclude by outlining some of the most pressing issues that would need to be resolved by a defender of the causal skill model of *phronēsis*.

There are several exegetical obstacles to Anscombe's reconstruction of Aristotle's views on deliberation and rational choice. First, her resolution of the *akrasia* trilemma involves claiming that rational choice is a necessary causal antecedent of akratic actions without being their executive cause. Moreover, she analyses rational choice as a commitment to, or reflective endorsement of, some aspect of one's general outlook on life. This cognitive event is distinct from that which executes action in a particular situation. Such a distinction appears to be in tension with Aristotle's claim that "The origin of action – its efficient, not its final cause – is [rational] choice, and that of [rational] choice is desire and reason with a view to an end" (NE 1139a31-35).

Second, Anscombe analyzes the relevant sense of deliberation that determines rational choice as a form of reflection on one's general evaluative outlook. This is arguably in tension with Aristotle's framing assumptions. The race-course metaphor offered in NE 1.4 suggests that Aristotle *assumes* a certain evaluative outlook as the proper starting place for his ethical inquiry. This outlook is thought to frame his inquiry and not constitute its subject matter. Reflection on one's evaluative outlook would also permit the possibility of a revisionary challenge given concerns of coherence or overall consistency. There is no evidence that Aristotle admits the

possibility of such revisionary challenge. While I think there are good reasons to think that Aristotle *should* admit this possibility (few contemporary philosophers would accept his inherited views on slaves and women, for instance), I agree with McDowell when he writes "Intelligible though it is, I believe this line of thought is foreign to Aristotle." (McDowell 2009:37).

Now, one could reasonably make the case that the causal skill model of *phronēsis* is consistent with a well-motivated neo-Aristotelian revision of Aristotle's considered position. I would be sympathetic to this move. The particular rational reconstruction of *phronēsis* that we are considering has some philosophical problems, however. Most significantly (and decisively for me), one might doubt whether conscious activities of deliberative choice need *always* be part of the causal history of action for it to count as virtuous or good or ethically appropriate.[14] This is not to deny that there may be *some other* causal relationship between spontaneously virtuous actions and an ethical outlook that was in some way acquired, learned or inherited (I shall return to this). The causal skill model of *phronēsis* that we are discussing, however, adopts a literal construal of deliberative choice as a conscious, first-personal activity of decision-making. It seems too demanding to insist that for an action to count as virtuous, the agent of the action must have actually first-personally reflected at some time in the past on its appropriateness with respect to some aspect of their ethical outlook, which in turn must have been endorsed as fitting their general view about how to live a good life. This analysis may well capture *some* intuitive cases of virtuous action (e.g. those

[14] John Cooper (1985) raises a similar concern when he writes: " [One may try to resist this conclusion] by the plea that not all the deliberation that leads to action need be carried out immediately before the action is itself done; a person can have deliberated quite some time back what to do in a certain type of situation, and then all that is necessary is for him to decide what to do is recognise that he is in such a situation. But though this is true, and something that Aristotle, as we shall see, wants to insist upon, it still seems too much to claim that all actions done by virtuous persons for moral reasons are done after deliberation." (Cooper 1985: 7-8)

involving promises, contracts, or commitments such as my case of vegetarianism). The point is that it excludes many others that intuitively qualify as virtuous. Consider, for instance, comforting a grieving friend with a warm embrace or giving a nervous public speaker an encouraging smile or making room for someone to enter a crowded elevator. These actions do not so clearly trace back to a cognitive event of reflective endorsement or deliberative commitment to acting in such ways, under such descriptions, in such circumstances. They might, but not necessarily so. The problem is that if they don't, the causal skill model of *phronēsis* excludes them from the class of virtuous or ethically appropriate action. This, in my view, is too demanding for a theory of virtuous action.

It might be conceded that these actions do not causally trace to conscious cognitive events of committing oneself to act under these *particular* act-descriptions. It could nevertheless be argued that they casually connect to the conscious endorsement of some more *general* description, such as to (e.g.) 'act well' or 'be a good person' where these descriptions subsume the former. This reply, however, introduces vagueness into the sense of practical intelligence involved in specific instances of virtuous action. It also deflates the normative force of insisting on prior causal events of deliberative choice for actions to qualify as virtuous. Neo-Kantians argue that such prior first-personal events of reflective endorsement ground agency and thus confer value on particular actions. Without some way of connecting particular act-descriptions to the reflective endorsement of more general evaluative act-type categories, it becomes unclear how one would ascribe agency and ethical merit in particular cases within this framework.

Of course, one might well question whether Aristotle's insistence on the involvement of rationality in virtuous action need be equated with an insistence on

conscious cognitive events of discursive thought. Several alternative interpretations of *phronēsis* in current literature do not accept this presupposition. More than one may be construed causally and/or as some analysis of a skill model of *phronēsis*. For instance, some prominent Aristotelian scholars generalise the relevant senses of deliberation and rational choice involved in *phronēsis* to 'rationality' and 'volition', more generally (see McDowell 2007, Russell 2009). Accordingly, virtuous actions are said to necessarily involve *phronēsis* only insofar as they are in some sense rational and volitional (according to some analysis). These alternative analyses of *phronēsis* might be characterized as variant causal skill models of *phronēsis*. Nevertheless, they would be different to the account investigated in this paper and would need independent arguments to assess their exegetical and philosophical merits.

One final reason why one might resist the version of the causal skill model of *phronēsis* examined in this paper concerns its adequacy at accommodating the perceptual thesis. It is not clear how this account can explain the truth of this claim. On the account developed above, spontaneity in behavioural response is explained as the causal product of a nested hierarchy of plans and sub-plans. When generalized to virtuous actions, it is explained in terms of increased propositional specificity in the reflectively endorsed values constitutive of one's general evaluative outlook. When an agent acts spontaneously, these plans or endorsed values are assumed to constrain the deliberative process to such a specified extent that they afford a single, unique possibility for action in view of a certain circumstance. While the phenomenology of such action might be described in perceptual terms (i.e. they 'see' the thing to do) it is not clear that the relevant form of practical intelligence *is* a perceptual capacity rather than, say, a deliberative capacity functioning as a sophisticated deliberative capacity does and should. Now, this might be right. One might insist that Aristotle's references

to perception in the context of action were only ever intended metaphorically. Deliberative choice remains the operative mode of practical intelligence; it simply requires more or less movement of thought given the range of possibilities made available for consideration. While this might turn out to be the correct reading of Aristotle, it does undermine a literal version of the perceptual thesis and thus fails to resolve our trilemma in a way that preserves *all* of the theses under consideration. While this may, perhaps, be inevitable, this approach does exclude an interesting possibility before its exegetical and philosophical merits have even been examined and assessed.

Conclusion

Much contemporary Aristotelian and Heideggerian scholarship holds that virtuous actions can be performed spontaneously and without involving conscious activities of deliberation, decision-making or discursive thought. It is insisted that this is consistent with Aristotle's claim that virtuous actions necessarily involve *phronēsis* (practical wisdom or practical intelligence). Moreover, it is argued that these claims are consistent with an interpretation of *phronēsis* as a perceptual capacity.

In this paper I have analysed these claims into three theses (which I called the excellence, fallible, and perceptual theses) and demonstrated that they are all in tension with a more systematically related set of remarks in Aristotle's writings. I articulated this tension in terms of a trilemma and investigated the exegetical and philosophical plausibility of one interpretative approach at its resolution. Despite its merits, I have also given reasons for considering it inadequate and to motivate the search for some alternative. The trilemma thus remains unresolved in terms that support all of the above theses.

This need not be taken as a sceptical conclusion. Nor is it decisive. There are other interpretations of *phronēsis* to investigate, failing which there is the possibility of developing an original alternative. *Some* rational reconstruction of Aristotelian *phronēsis* may yet provide grounds for resolving this trilemma. The objective of this paper was simply to motivate the trilemma as a significant problem to be resolved and demonstrate the limitations of some prominent interpretations of *phronēsis* with regards to its resolution. Contemporary virtue ethicists and recent Heideggerian scholars take as a central Aristotelian assumption the idea that virtuous action is somehow easy, natural or habitual and enabled by *phronēsis*. While easy to assume, I have shown that this idea is difficult to defend.

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