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‘Heidegger’s Perversion of Virtue Ethics, 1924’ Forthcoming in *Heidegger and the Classics* (Ed. Turner, SUNY Press)

Heidegger’s debt to Aristotle is, of course, vast: Volpi went so far as to ask whether *Being and Time* was a translation of the *Nicomachean Ethics*.¹ In this chapter, I want to investigate a fundamental divergence between the two, a rejection by early Heidegger of one of the central tenets of Aristotelian ethics. This rejection begins in the years before *Being and Time* and the forces behind it extend into the post-war period. I will focus in particular on GA18, 1924’s *Basic Concepts of Aristotelian Philosophy*: what Heidegger’s Aristotle rejects there, in effect, is the notion of character.

What makes this rejection so complex and so revealing is that Heidegger’s interpretative approach forces him to present disagreement as discovery, as an insight into a true Aristotle who has remained concealed. My claim here is not the familiar one that Heideggerian history of philosophy is exegetically ‘violent’ or that it frequently tells us more about Heidegger than about its supposed target. Rather, it is more specific. Texts such as *Basic Concepts of Aristotelian Philosophy* present a unique exegetical situation. This is because Heidegger lacks several of the interpretative tools that will justify his radical reading of Kant just a few years later: I will examine in particular his changing conception of “philology”. The result is that, whilst commentators routinely talk of Heidegger’s “appropriation” of Kant, Heidegger’s early use of Aristotle is simultaneously more complex and less refined.² “Perversion” is, one might think, scarcely a rigorous term, but it is, I will argue, the best description of what follows.

Before proceeding, a few words on scope. I cannot remotely do justice to the breadth of the Aristotle-Heidegger relationship in this chapter. Instead, I will keep the exegetical focus tight, concentrating on GA 18. I will not discuss GA 19, the *Sophist* lectures from the same

¹ Franco Volpi, “Being and Time: A “translation” of the Nicomachean Ethics?”, in Theodore Kisiel and John Van Buren (eds.), *Reading Heidegger from the start* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 195-211.

² For example, Béatrice Han-Pile, “Early Heidegger’s Appropriation of Kant”, in Hubert L. Dreyfus & Mark A. Wrathall (eds.), *A Companion to Heidegger* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005); William Blattner, “Laying the Ground for Metaphysics: Heidegger’s Appropriation of Kant”, in Charles B. Guignon (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

year, in any detail, although I believe what I say here harmonises with them. I will also not discuss wider issues such as Heidegger's appeal to phronesis-like judgements in *Being and Time*: that would require a far fuller analysis of authenticity [*Eigentlichkeit*] than I can offer here.³

I begin by highlighting some of the relevant aspects of Aristotle's story on virtue acquisition (§1). I will then provide a similar overview of the nearest parallel in Heidegger's own early philosophy, the transition to authenticity (§2). With this background in place, I turn directly to GA 18, focusing on Heidegger's treatment of "hexis" (§3). In particular, I examine his introduction of classically hermeneutic themes into Aristotle, themes which exert a radical and distorting influence on his reading of virtue (§4). I close with an assessment of some of the philosophical and exegetical consequences of these results (§5).

(§1) Aristotle on Virtue Acquisition

I want to start by highlighting a few aspects of Aristotle's account of what we now call "moral" virtue acquisition or the acquisition of virtues of character – for example, courage. All of what follows is, of course, open to vast debate but we need an orthodox Aristotelian position on the table to see how Heidegger's reading differs.

There are five aspects of the standard Aristotelian story I want to highlight. For simplicity, I focus solely on the *Nicomachean Ethics*, ignoring complexities introduced by the *Eudemian*.

First, virtue acquisition occurs via habituation, with agents becoming temperate or courageous by performing temperate or courageous actions (NE:1103a17-b1). As such, it mirrors the acquisition of other, more mundane, capacities such as lyre playing or building (NE:1103a26-b2). Indeed, Russell goes as far as to say that Aristotle:

[D]oes not offer any special theory of acquiring the virtues because he thinks that there is no special problem involved in understanding how virtues are acquired.

³ For a particularly sophisticated assessment see Denis McManus "Heidegger and Aristotle on Reason, Choice and Self-Expression", in Matthew Burch & Irene McMullin (eds.), *Transcending Reason* (London: Routledge, 2020), 125-50; and Denis McManus, "Authenticity, Deliberation and Perception: On Heidegger's Reading and Appropriation of Aristotle's Concept of 'Phronêsis'", *Journal of the History of Philosophy* (Forthcoming), 173-98.

. For my own views see Sacha Golob, "Heidegger on Kant, Time, and the 'Form' of Intentionality", *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 21, 345-67.

On the contrary, Aristotle thinks of that process as a particular instance of something people do all the time: getting better at something through practice and training.⁴

I will not assume this strength of reading, but the fact that it is possible will be useful to bear in mind. The end result of the process is a relatively robust set of motivational and epistemic capacities. Of particular importance will be the idea that virtue requires what Crisp renders as “a firm and unshakeable character”, Sachs as “being in a stable condition and not able to be moved all the way out of it” and Irwin as a “a firm and unchanging state” (NE: 1105a29-35).⁵ I follow Irwin in using “state” for “hexis” and its cognates: as Annas notes, this has become the “established translation”.⁶

Second, Aristotle’s model faces familiar ‘internalisation’ problems. How can merely performing a given action, no matter how often, yield the kind of robust, multi-faceted, internal state which Aristotle posits? This in turn threatens the analogy with ordinary skills: as Broadie observes, “the more he stresses the differences, the more one is entitled to wonder how merely performing the actions leads to moral character”.⁷ One consequence is that Aristotle’s theory naturally lends itself to the idea of partial or imperfect or failed internalisation: cases, such as the *Nicomachean Ethics*’s “civic courage”, say, or the courage characteristic of Sparta discussed in the *Politics*.

Third, as a process of habituation, virtue acquisition is necessarily temporally extended: it cannot happen overnight. Many contemporary Aristotelians regard this as almost a conceptual truth given their attendant picture of moral psychology. Here, for example is Annas:

If we think of habits, we can see that there is no shortcut. I cannot become generous overnight, however genuine my conversion from meanness to generosity, just as I cannot stop worrying overnight. In each case my feelings change as a result of modifying my behavior.⁸

⁴ Daniel C. Russell, “Aristotle on Cultivating Virtue”, in Nancy E. Snow, (ed.), *Cultivating Virtue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 17-48, here 18.

⁵ *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Roger Crisp (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Joe Sachs (London: Hackett, 2002); *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence H. Irwin (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1985).

⁶ Julia Annas, *The Morality of Happiness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 50.

⁷ Sarah Broadie, *Ethics With Aristotle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 104. There is also a widely discussed ‘external’ problem: how does one specify the set of just acts to be performed prior to acquiring the corresponding virtue?

⁸ Annas 1993: 57.

She elaborates on this rejection of a ‘conversion model’ elsewhere:

Scrooge may have been converted suddenly to compassion and kindness on Christmas Eve, but the story is careful to tell us that he continued over time the process of becoming a compassionate person. Coming to see that being loyal or brave is a worthwhile way to live is just the first step. Becoming virtuous requires habituation and experience.⁹

Forth, the stable state produced by habituation must have a particular structure: it is not sufficient that non-rational parts of the soul merely happen to desire what is rationally appropriate (NE:1102b33-1103a1). Rather, our desires should so aim *on account of* their obedience to reason, accepting its authority, as a child accepts the authority of their father or a servant their master (NE:1138b11).

Fifth, Aristotle’s account has direct pedagogical consequences. Most obviously, the centrality of long-term habituation and the fact that one can still learn by copying actions even without a mature understanding of them, places the focus squarely on the education of the child under the guidance of a teacher. As Aristotle puts it:

It makes no small difference, then, to be habituated in this or that way straight from childhood, but an enormous difference or rather all the difference. (NE:1103b.24-5)¹⁰

This chimes, of course, with the rejection of a ‘conversion model’: the primary aim is to develop the young rather than, as Annas puts it, to “jolt and shock” the mature out of existing habits.¹¹

(§2) Heidegger on Anxiety and Authenticity

I now want to introduce the nearest parallel in Heidegger’s own early philosophy, the transition from inauthenticity to authenticity. I am not, of course, claiming that this equivalent to virtue acquisition. Nor is the account that follows intended as anything like a complete analysis: in particular, I deliberately gloss over Heideggerian technicalities, such as the relationship between human and Dasein, when they are not relevant here. But it will prove a useful foil.

⁹ Julia Annas, *Intelligent Virtue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 12.

¹⁰ I use Sachs’ translation here.

¹¹ Annas 1993: 55.

In particular, I want to highlight a specific mood [*Stimmung*]. In GA 18, Heidegger equates such states with Aristotelian *pathe*: through both we become orientated towards the world, encountering specific objects or goals as “mattering” to us in various ways (GA 18: 169-71: BT: 140, 188). Withy has provided an extremely helpful overview of this alignment of the *pathe* and Heideggerian *Befindlichkeit*.¹² My concern though is not with the broad issue per se, but with one very specific case: anxiety.

Heidegger identifies anxiety as central to the process of becoming authentic: it “provides the phenomenal basis” for understanding our “originary wholeness of being” and thus for the self-understanding or “self-transparency” which he equates with authenticity (BT: 182, 7).¹³ Such anxiety consists in a sudden experience of a loss of meaning and import: our world “collapses”, the goals to which we have been committed appear as “utterly insignificant” (BT: 186-187). As Dreyfus and Rubin put it, “all meaning and mattering slip away”; Withy summarises it as “a crisis or rupture in our everyday lives”; Blattner as a “condition in which nothing matters”.¹⁴ Pippin aptly locates the state within a broad modern focus on “radical” and “complete” failures of meaning, comparing it to Melville’s *Bartleby*.¹⁵

If we now juxtapose even this brief sketch with the Aristotelian account of virtue acquisition, several points are striking.

First, anxiety, at least in the episodic, global form to which Heidegger ascribes such philosophical significance, is presented as a sudden onset state: a “collapse” of meaning (BT: 186).¹⁶ It is not the product of habituation: indeed, SZ’s only mention of “habit” is to dismissively assert that authenticity “can hardly be confused with an empty ‘habitus’” (BT: 300).

¹² Katherin Withy, “Owned Emotions: Affective Excellence in Heidegger on Aristotle”, in Denis McManus (ed.), *Heidegger, Authenticity and the Self* (London: Routledge, 2015), 21-36. I return to Withy’s text below.

¹³ I remain neutral here on whether imagining an experience anxiety would suffice for Heidegger: for helpful discussion, see R. Matthew Shockey, “Heidegger’s Anxiety: On the Role of Mood in Phenomenological Method”, *Bulletin d’Analyse Phénoménologique* XII (2016), 1-27.

¹⁴ Hubert L. Dreyfus & Jane Rubin, “Kierkegaard, Division II, and Later Heidegger” in Hubert L. Dreyfus (ed.), *Being-in-the-world: A Commentary on Heidegger’s Being and Time*, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991), 332. ; Katherine Withy, *Heidegger on Being Uncanny* (London: Harvard University Press, 2015), 90; William Blattner, *Heidegger’s Temporal Idealism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 80.

¹⁵ Robert Pippin “Necessary Conditions for the Possibility of What Isn’t: Heidegger on Failed Meaning”, in Jeff Malpas & Steven Crowell (eds.), *Transcendental Heidegger* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 210.

¹⁶ I say “full blown form” to differentiate from the background awareness of anxiety that Heidegger believes is constantly present and almost always suppressed: I discuss the distinction further in Sacha Golob, “Methodological Anxiety: Heidegger on Moods and Emotions” in Alix Cohen & Robert Stern (eds.), *Thinking about the Emotions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2017), 253-69.

Second, whilst Heidegger recognises some complex sense in which we can be “ready” for anxiety, this is absolutely not “a particular instance of something people do all the time”, raising “no special problem”, as Russell maintained about Aristotelian training.¹⁷ On the contrary, achieving this readiness in *Being and Time* requires appeal to complex existential notions such as “wanting-to-have-a-conscience” (BT: 287). Later lectures, such as GA 29/30 on the – for Heidegger - closely related, state of profound boredom, admit that such readiness is a “strange or almost insane demand” (GA 29/30: 118). Notably, any idea of becoming authentic by copying the acts of the authentic is deeply problematic in a Heideggerian context. This is because Heidegger is profoundly worried by agents who, lacking direct, personal engagement with some phenomenon, repeat what they have seen others do or say with regard to it: in the absence of a “primary relationship” with the object, this amounts simply to “gossip” or “passing the word along” (BT: 211). Heidegger’s sympathies here are with Luther rather than Aristotle: mimicry of the target behaviour by agents without the relevant internal state is closer to hypocrisy than learning.

Third, the status Heidegger allocates to anxiety immediately problematises the priority of anything like “rational” over “non-rational” parts of the soul. Of course, Heidegger himself is suspicious of the distinction and his own ‘moral psychology’ has no corresponding divide. However, one can see the problem if we ask why should we take the experience of anxiety to be veridical or significant? Why is the sudden belief that all options lack significance, a significance to which every previous training and argument has attested, not simply a sign that the agent is akratic or worse? It is hard for an Aristotelian to see such bursts of anxiety as respectful of reason’s paternal authority.

Fourth, the surrounding pedagogical landscape will clearly be very different. It is hard to think of an Aristotelian topic on which Heidegger has less to say than children: *Being and Time* never uses the term and GA 18 excises childhood from Aristotle’s own text, mentioning them only in passing (GA 18: 294). One obvious reason is the Christian influences which push Heidegger towards the ‘jolt and shock’ side of Annas’ distinction: commentators have frequently stressed the influence of *phronesis* on Heidegger’s account of resolute choice, but there is, of course, also the strong influence of Luther’s *Augenblick*, the instant in which we are all changed (BT: 327).

¹⁷ Russell 2015.

(§3) Heidegger on *Hexis*

With this background in place, I want now to turn directly to GA 18, 1924's *Basic Concepts of Aristotelian Philosophy*. Heidegger's avowed aim is to reconstruct the distinctive contours of the Greek experience of being through an analysis of Aristotle's fundamental concepts:

We are pursuing...the clarification of the being structure of the being-there of human beings, for Aristotle. In his explication, that which was already vital in the history of the Greek interpretation of being-there explicitly comes to fulfillment (GA 18: 44-5)

Aristotle is thus taken as a representative spokesperson for Greek thought: hence Heidegger talks casually of "infer[ing] the meaning, for Aristotle and the Greeks" of theoretical research (GA 18: 39) or grasping "their basic possibilities of speaking to their world" by analyzing "the basic Aristotelian concepts" (GA 18: 41).

Given this premise, Heidegger's task is to piece together, as accurately as possible, Aristotle's own position. The famous 'violence' of Heideggerian history of philosophy is not trumpeted here, as it will be in 1927 when he moves to Kant. Instead, Heidegger presents his project as philological rather philosophical:

Here, we offer no philosophy, much less a history of philosophy. If philology means the passion for knowledge of what has been expressed, then what we are doing is philology...The lecture has no philosophical aim at all; it is concerned with understanding basic concepts in their conceptuality. The aim is philological in that it intends to bring the reading of philosophers somewhat more into practice. (GA 18: 5)

Unsurprisingly, the situation is far more complex than this suggests.

The place to begin is with Heidegger's remarks on "*hexis*". What, Heidegger asks, "does it genuinely mean to come into a determinate *hexis*?" In particular, in what sense is "habituation" the path to it? (GA 18: 188).

What is striking is that Heidegger's answer rejects any appeal to training, practice or the skill analogy. Here is one of the key passages. It is best understood as three claims, each following from the previous and separated by the ellipses: first a definition of training, then of action, then a conclusion regarding their consequent incompatibility.

Training has the precise sense of reducing deliberation...It is essential to action that it proceeds by deliberating...With training, the possibility of action [*Handlung*] is ruled

out: deliberating and resolving, the how of action - precisely that on which it depends.
(GA 18: 189 - original emphases; translation modified)

The claim is that “training”, which he immediately equates with “practice” [*Übung*], is at odds with action insofar as the latter requires deliberation and resolution.

Heidegger now explains this claim: action based on training or “frequently undergoing” [*Öfter-Durchmachen*] or “skill” is insufficiently flexible, insufficiently adjusted to the demands of the given moment. He contrasts it to what he dubs “repetition” [*Wiederholung*], a repetition which does not imply the stability one associates with Aristotelian virtue states.

The manner and mode of habituation [*Gewöhnung*], in the case of action, is not practice but repetition. Repetition does not mean the bringing-into-play of a stable state or skill [*feststehenden Fertigkeit*], but rather *acting anew in every moment on the basis of the corresponding decision* [*entsprechenden Entschluss*]...Every state as stable routine breaks down in the face of the moment [*Augenblick*]. (GA 18: 189-90 - original emphases; translation modified)

The idea of repetition will eventually be reworked in *Being and Time*'s theory of historicity, for example when authentic Dasein draws on past exemplars (BT: 339). But here the only positive content it receives is acting “anew” in each situation, i.e., in a way that meets the specific demands of that moment. I will say more on this in §4. Skill and practice, in contrast, are presented as rote or routine behaviours.

It is worth pausing to address the complex translation issues in play here. Metcalf and Tanzer render “*feststehende Fertigkeit*” as “settled completeness”. This obscures the link to the ordinary German use of *Fertigkeit* for “skill”: one might easily render “*feststehende Fertigkeit*” as “established skill”. However, it has the great benefit of foregrounding the tie with “*hexis*”, typically rendered in English as “stable disposition” or “state”, and with the idea that such states emerge from habituation, captured via the links between “*fertig*” and “complete” or “finished”. To do justice to this characteristically Heideggerian polyphony, I have left both “stable state” and “skill” in the translation.¹⁸

What is evident is that Heidegger is pushing against practice, the skill analogy and the resulting idea of stable states or dispositions. This immediately requires him to embark on an

¹⁸ One could push matters further, exploiting the links between “*fertig*” and “ready” to yield “stable readiness”, a phrase that would also function as a very Heideggerian reading of “*hexis*”. I am indebted to Joachim Aufderheide here for very helpful discussion.

extensive re-working of Aristotle's claims. For example, Aristotle's talk of becoming virtuous by "acting-frequently" does not supposedly "mean 'often' in the sense of a duration", i.e., a regularly performed behavior. Instead, again, it is really a reference to the "moment": what precisely that amounts to we will shortly see (GA 18: 191).

Before proceeding, I want to set aside one possible, but I think mistaken and uninteresting, explanation for Heidegger's remarks.

On that explanation Heidegger would have equated training, skill or "stable states" with unthinking automaticity, what Sherman called the "mechanical view" on which Aristotelian virtue is devoid of rational engagement, a "mindless process" as Broadie puts it.¹⁹ His point would then simply be that Aristotelian virtue is not like this – and hence should not be understood be understood in terms of training or the resultant stable states.

This reading is uninteresting because Heidegger would simply be echoing a standard observation made by almost all Aristotle commentators. Furthermore, he would be expressing that point in mangled and misleading way: rather than arguing that training, skill or stable states need not imply mindlessness, he would be assuming that they do and thus separating Aristotle from them. This would, furthermore, be an extremely odd assumption for him to make. This is because the only people who naturally do so are those, most famously Kant, who assume that the only alternative to mindlessness is reflection and who thus conflate anything below the level of reflection with mechanistic routine.²⁰ But Heidegger, whose entire philosophy of mind rests on a rejection of reflection's primacy, is an unlikely candidate for the error: indeed, in GA18 itself he warns that "reflection is but a certain outré form in which being-there is conscious of itself" (GA 18: 247).

Yet if Heidegger is not making a bizarrely mangled version of a stock point, what is he doing?

(§4) Heidegger's Aristotle on Hermeneutics and the Good

To understand see the answer, we need to introduce two other pieces of the puzzle. The first is Heidegger's hermeneutic epistemology, the second his rejection of a substantive notion of the

¹⁹Nancy Sherman, *The Fabric of Character: Aristotle's Theory of Virtue*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 157-9; Broadie 1991: 109.

²⁰Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), Ak.409.

good. Crucially, as we will see, he projects both on to Aristotle. I will take them in turn. The basic of Heidegger's epistemology is well illustrated by the following remark:

It was an error of phenomenology to believe that phenomena could be correctly seen merely through unprejudiced looking. But it is just as great an error to believe that, since perspectives are always necessary, the phenomena themselves can *never* be seen and that everything amounts to contingent, subjective...standpoints. From these two impossibilities, we obtain the necessary insight that our central task and methodological problem is to arrive at the *right* perspective. We need to take a preliminary view of the phenomenon but precisely for this reason it is of decisive importance whether the guiding perspective is adequate to the phenomenon, i.e., whether it is derived from its substantial content or not (or only constructed). It is not because we must view it from some perspective or other that the phenomenon gets blocked off to us, but because the perspective adopted most often does not have a genuine origin in the phenomenon itself. (GA 34: 286; original emphasis)

In short, "our central task" is to engage in a continuous process of adjusting and recalibrating our standpoint in order "to arrive at the right perspective". The "mode of discovery" must be "as it were, regulated and prescribed by the entity to be discovered and by its mode of being" (GA 24: 99).²¹ Heidegger places particular emphasis on the fact that familiar principles or concepts or tools will often be unsuitable because they are not sufficiently attentive to the dynamics of the domains in question (BT: 36); for example, one cannot simply appeal to modal logic without recognising that the notions of modality appropriate to different entities are not even coextensive (BT: 143–4).

This same model is central to Heidegger's Aristotle. It is for example, how he understands "*paideia*", echoing *Being and Time*'s insistence on avoiding 'off the shelf' categories in favour of those tailored to the situation.

The decision lies in the *paideia*, whether the access [to a phenomenon] is originary or whether the speaker has access only from hearsay...He who has the right instinct, the right *paideia*, will be able to decide whether it makes sense to treat logic mathematically or to set up the history of Christianity with categories from art

²¹ For full discussion see Sacha Golob, "Was Heidegger a Relativist?", in Katherina Kinzel, et al. (eds.), *The Emergence of Modern Relativism: The German Debates from the 1770s to the 1930s* (London: Routledge, 2020).

history...Today, this *hexis* is entirely neglected; it is also difficult to appropriate, and even more difficult to obtain. (GA 18: 210)

Note *hexis* being aligned with the capacity for a situation-specific response: the “neglected” *hexis* is one that would allow the right approach to a phenomenon, avoiding the careless imposition of inappropriate categories. Indeed, for Heidegger’s Aristotle the need to avoid “presupposed theories”, i.e., assumptions not drawn from the phenomenon itself, becomes *the* foundational metaphysical requirement:

Exposing nature in its being-there depends upon our way not being blocked by presupposed opinions and theories (GA 18: 228)

Likewise with aporias, the key is whether the speaker has “a definite fundamental experience of the matter itself” or “lack[s] the right perspective on the matter about which he speaks” (Ga18:160). Heidegger particularly stresses the role of affect in this process of calibration and orientation (GA 18: 170).

As Heidegger develops this hermeneutic picture, he increasingly uses Aristotle’s talk of “the mean” to make the same point. For example, he uses it to gloss the comment on affects just cited:

One understands what “coming into the genuine frame of mind” means: coming into the mean, coming from the aforementioned degrees into the mean. The mean is nothing other than the *kairos*, the entirety of circumstances, the how, when, whither, and about which. (GA 18: 171)

This notion of the “entirety of circumstances” in turn is aligned with a full grasp of the situation or moment before us – and this ties back to *hexis*, now understood as the capacity for a situation-specific response.

This being-composed, this being-oriented toward the moment, is the sort of possibility that has seized being-there itself *on the basis of its particular situation*....In the manner and mode that we, correspondingly, are present to our being in the full presence of the situation encountered, we grasp *hexis*. (GA 18: 180-1, original emphases)

Note how far we are now from the standard model of *hexis* as a stable, i.e., *cross-situational*, state or disposition. Instead, it is precisely a *variable* openness to the distinctive nature of each “*particular situation*” – above all, an openness unhampered by any “presupposed opinions and theories”.

In aligning the mean with a hermeneutic engagement with each situation, Heidegger inevitably also separates it from the idea of a cross-situational good grounded in teleological facts about human nature. Here is a clear example:

For our being, characterized by particularity, no unique and absolute norm can be given. It depends on cultivating the being of human beings, so that it is transposed into the aptitude for maintaining the mean. But that means nothing other than seizing the moment. (GA18:186, original emphasis)

Heidegger's point is not the trivial one that Aristotle rejects rigid moral rules. Instead, he is making a much stronger claim: the only substantive norm identifiable is "seizing the moment", that is reacting appropriately, in the hermeneutic sense, to the demands of the situation.

Once again, he fuses this back to his new reading of *hexis*:

Aristotle says of *hexis* - more precisely of the ability to have the moment at one's disposal in the proper mode - that it "preserves the mean"; it brings me into the genuine being that corresponds to the circumstances. (GA 18: 262)

Hexis has now been fully hermeneuticised: it is the ability to respond to the specifics of each distinctive situation.

For in *hexis* lies the primary orientation toward the *kairos*: "I am there, come what may!" This being-there, being on- the-alert in one's situation, in relation to its matter, characterizes *hexis*. (119)

We can understand see why Heidegger was so skeptical of habituation. The complaint was not the Kantian one that habituation is unreflective. Rather, it is the hermeneutic one that habituation, by establishing a set pattern of action, implies an inflexibility, a settled cross-situational state set prior to and independent of each of the phenomena we encounter. From a hermeneutic point of view, that cannot be acceptable. *This* is why:

Every completeness as stable routine breaks down in the face of the moment [*Augenblick*]. (GA 18: 189 - original emphases)

We can also see how the instabilities characteristic of Heidegger's own work will emerge: for example, the tension between the hermeneutic and the existentialist. If this grip on "the moment" is authorised by an experience of anxiety that seems to elude verbal expression, to what extent is it compatible with an open giving and exchange of reasons? Exacerbated by Heidegger's suspicions about public discourse as mere "idle talk", his hermeneutics is,

ironically, often on the point of collapsing into voluntarism, simultaneously eulogising attentive interpretation while privatising the resources for interpretation's justification.²²

(§5) The Perversion of Virtue Ethics

We are now finally in a position to see how Heidegger has reconfigured the Aristotelian text – and his stance on *hexis* is the key. Heidegger's collapse of the mean into "the moment" implies that the only source of normativity is the "full presence of the situation encountered" and the need for a response that does it justice in the hermeneutic sense (GA 18: 180-1). There is no other "no unique and absolute norm", no *telos*, for example, grounded in Aristotelian biology.

A direct consequence is that Heidegger places enormous emphasis on flexibility, on a capacity to avoid imposing assumption that say more about the viewer than the phenomena viewed. In his own early work, he expresses this in terms of "reticence" [*Verschwiegenheit*]: "a potentiality-for-hearing" or as McManus nicely puts it, a "readiness to judge *rather than pre-judge* one's situation" (BT: 165).²³ In his later work, this theme of receptivity interweaves with that of submission to being: as Davis observes, thinking itself becomes "receptive listening...obedient [*gehorsam*] to the voice of being".²⁴

Now consider the orthodox reading of Aristotelian virtue from this perspective. Virtue is, to borrow a phrase from Williams, *a moral incapacity*, a carefully acquired inability to see things other than in a certain way. As Aristotle famously put it, habit produces a new nature. In McDowell's modern idiom, the virtuous person is simply deaf to certain considerations:

Reasons to act contrary to what virtue demands are silenced...[T]he dictates of virtue, if properly appreciated, are not weighed with other reasons at all, not even on a scale which always tips on their side. reasons for acting otherwise [than virtuously] are silenced.²⁵

This makes ethical and epistemological sense if there is a substantive notion of the good: the virtuous person blinds themselves to factors that might distract from it. But once the good and the mean has been replaced by the particular circumstances of "each moment" or the "full presence of the situation encountered", such blindness starts to look like prejudice. Why is an

²² I am indebted to an anonymous referee for discussion here.

²³ McManus, Forthcoming: 14.

²⁴ Bret Davis, *Heidegger and the Will* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 226.

²⁵ John McDowell, "Virtue and Reason", *Monist* 62 (1979), 331-50, here 332.

inflexibility, an inability to tailor our stance to the matter in hand, desirable? It is this thought which underlies so much of Heidegger's work on Aristotle ethics.

The basic point is similar to one Heideggerians often made against narrative visions of authenticity. Agents who seek to maintain narrative consistency will often do so only by forcing the world around them into a set mould – rather than genuinely responding to it on its own terms. As Fisher suggests in an acute discussion of Malick's *The Thin Red Line*, for Heidegger the truly authentic person:

[D]oes not appropriate the situation to his life by projecting a life-gestalt in order to make sense of it. On the contrary, he allows his life to be appropriated for the sake of the situation.²⁶

What makes Heidegger's Aristotle so *unique* is the combination of this move with his supposed commitment to utter textual fidelity, to "philology" rather than philosophy (GA 18: 5). The result is that Aristotle's text is subjected to almost continuous pressure, line by line, as it is gradually forced in a direction quite alien to it. *Hexis* lies at the epicentre of this process. On the one hand, Heidegger seeks to separate it from any stable, i.e., cross-situational, commitments: this is what we saw in §3. On the other hand, now equated with a notion of the mean severed from any substantive good, it plays a key role in articulating Heidegger's hermeneutic vision of normativity, of "genuine being that corresponds to the circumstances". This is what we saw in §4.

Suppose what I have said is right: what are the broader philosophical and exegetical consequences?

First, note the distinctive nature of Heidegger's position. He is not denying, as Sartre or contemporary situationists like Doris do, the existence of character traits in the Aristotelian sense. Instead, he is rejecting them as *undesirable* in his reconfigured epistemology. Withy, in a hugely insightful discussion of Heidegger on Aristotelian affects, sees the key point: "Heidegger's driving intuition is that habits, tendencies and settled dispositions are opposed to human excellence".²⁷ But I disagree when she explains this in terms of "Heidegger's Kierkegaardian aversion to conformity" or worries about "averageness".²⁸ The root is the

²⁶ Tony Fisher, "Heidegger and the Narrativity Debate", *Continental Philosophy Review* 43 (2010), 241-65, here 262.

²⁷ Withy 2015a: 27.

²⁸ Withy 2015a: 27.

hermeneutic model sketched above. What Heidegger tacitly rejects is not a model of average agency but rather one of exemplary agency, the Aristotelian virtuous man.

Second, we can now understand the central relevance of anxiety in Heidegger's account of individual development. Anxiety serves to distance an agent from even their deepest commitments: all are rendered "utterly insignificant" as the agent sees that they cannot be "at home" in them (BT: 187; 189). The original Aristotelian aspiration to *hexis* is precisely an aspiration to the kind of stability, the kind of being at home, that anxiety undermines. We can also see why *Being and Time* itself presents the justification for taking anxiety seriously as circular, i.e., as interwoven so closely with his other Heidegger's commitments (BT: 194, 315). There is no way to defend it, no way to explain why the man who suddenly experiences all meaning slipping away is not simply akratic or worse, without introducing large parts of the apparatus above, as well, ultimately as a much broader story about anxiety's capacity to expose the structure of Dasein.²⁹

Third, what of the philosophical plausibility of Heidegger's account? One immediate way to boost that is to read Aristotle 'thickly'. Heideggerian anxiety distances agents from the concrete web of the world, of identities, tools, social structures, which define them. It can thus serve as a useful corrective in cases where agents over-identify with contingent aspects of their society: if Aristotelian virtue is taken to include the full complacent package of Athenian social arrangements, from natural slaves to feminine virtues, a dose of anxiety starts to seem attractive. But, of course, no contemporary Aristotelians defend this. So, the problem for Heidegger is to explain the preference for his model over one that recognises a substantive but more general Aristotelian vision of our telos.

A full confrontation on this issue is evidently beyond the current paper: it would require, amongst other things, a close treatment of authenticity and Heidegger's understanding of finitude. But the key to the *Basic Concepts of Aristotelian Philosophy* is the unanalysed hermeneutic notion of 'doing justice to the particular situation'. In some ways the driving intuition is a simple one: once we accept the basic hermeneutic premise that our commitments and interest determine what is visible to us and how we interpret it, it becomes plausible that any cross-situational commitments, beyond a meta-level commitment to reticent openness, will blind us in at least some cases. One can invert a McDowellian theme here: there are dimensions of a situation – angles, vulnerabilities - where a willingness to look with an evil eye opens up

²⁹ For detailed discussion see Golob 2017.

a fineness of grain that the virtuous miss. As Nietzsche put it, only he who is himself decadent, for example, who can fathom a decadent society.³⁰ At this juncture, the Aristotelian will naturally want to press on the notions of perception or “full grasp”: in what sense does an agent genuinely perceive or fully grasp another’s weakness if their motivational response is to exploit it? Such questions remain unaddressed by Heidegger in 1924.

I want to close by returning to the word “perversion” in my title. Heidegger’s reading amounts to a rejection of the role of stable, cross-situational character traits in virtue ethics - with the exception again of a meta-level commitment to reticent openness, to flexibility. Yet he presents this as a piece of pure “philology”, a simple reclamation of Aristotle’s views. The result is a continuous process of distortion, passage by passage.

Yet what is striking is the crudeness of the exegetical framework Heidegger employs. Compare his reading of Kant a few years later. That is avowedly “violent”, rejecting Kantianism to align Kant with Heidegger’s own agenda.³¹ But crucially Heidegger then draws a distinction precisely between what *he* is doing and ‘*mere*’ philology: the laws of a true “dialogue”, he states, are quite different from those of “historical philology” (GA 3: xxvii). This allows him to separate out two voices: the supposed “concealed, inner passion” of Kant’s work, which is essentially Heideggerian, and an official Kant who “shrunk back” from his insights, burying them in a conventional rationalism (GA 3: 201; BT: 23). The problem is that in 1924 Heidegger lacks this distinction. Hence, the treatment of Aristotle, whilst no less “violent”, is presented throughout as an exercise in scrupulous “philology”. The result is a perversion of Aristotelianism, as its language is forced, line by line, against its own purpose: an analysis of *hexis* becomes a rejection of *hexis*. Perhaps the most extraordinary thing about the *Basic Concepts* is that there is no sign Heidegger himself realised what he was doing.³²

³⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*, trans. Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010): EH, ‘Wise’, 1.

³¹ For detailed discussion see Sacha Golob, “Heidegger on Kant, Time, and the ‘Form’ of Intentionality”, *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 21 (2013), 345-67.

³² I am indebted to an anonymous referee for their extremely helpful comments: sadly, restrictions on space meant I am unable to take all of them up here, in particular the relationship to Schmidt.