

Part One

# Phenomenology and the Tradition



## *Phainomenon* and *Logos* in Aristotle's Ethics

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If we want to know how phenomenology can address virtue ethics, surely we must begin with Aristotle as the first phenomenologist who thought about virtue.<sup>1</sup> How are we to understand him as a phenomenologist? Aristotle seems unique in the Western tradition up until the nineteenth century: for Aristotle, human beings belong in the natural world and are at home in it. There is no other reality than the world we inhabit. Unlike Platonism, medieval philosophy, or even modern philosophy, human existence is not subject to some fundamental flaw (respectively: embodiment, the fall, or common sense) that philosophy is called upon to repair. For Aristotle, the ordinary world of our experience is fully prepared and meant to elicit philosophical understanding. Philosophy, therefore, will begin with how the world *already appears* to us in various ways, *before* we philosophize. Philosophy amounts to an explication, clarification, and improvement of natural experience, especially through gathering patterns and organizing concepts (see *Physics*, 184a1621).

Aristotle's phenomenology is therefore a philosophy that begins with natural and cultural *appearances*, an orientation that can be understood in four main ways:

1. Investigation should begin with observable *phainomena*, through which the search for explanations can properly proceed (*Parts of Animals*, 640a15ff). Phenomena are the "witnesses" and "paradigms" for philosophical inquiry (*Eudemian Ethics*, 1216b26ff). Contrary to speculative metaphysics and etiological stories, Aristotle insists that the "why" and the "what" of things cannot be examined before the "that" (*to hoti*) of things; to reverse this order "is to inquire into nothing" (*Posterior Analytics*, 93a1528). Aristotle takes his point of departure, not from theoretical constructions, but from what is immediately apparent in perceptible encounters. These phenomena

should be understood essentially as *perceptible wholes*, in the way that things (like trees) present themselves to us in ordinary experience—an orientation that distinguishes Aristotle’s thinking from Platonic transcendence and the elemental reductions of earlier natural philosophers and atomists.

2. Investigation will be guided by *language*. Aristotle often begins by consulting what “is said” or what “we say,” by taking certain meanings or usages as given.<sup>2</sup> He then proceeds to think with and through these linguistic inheritances toward clearer and deeper insights. In general terms, Aristotle assumes an intrinsic correlation between language and being; the elements of being cannot be understood apart from what is said of them (*Metaphysics*, 992b1922).<sup>3</sup>
3. Philosophy should consult both “the many” and “the wise,” that is, both common beliefs and refined insights (*Topics*, 100b22ff). The implication is that philosophical findings should be neither so unusual as to violate familiar senses of things nor so familiar as to rest solely with ordinary experience.
4. With respect to “the wise,” Aristotle begins most of his investigations with a survey of historical precedents that have marked philosophical understanding so far, with the aim of sorting out what in these sources is appropriate or inappropriate to phenomena. Contrary to some readings of Aristotle that take his surveys to be simply setups meant to valorize his own thinking by contrast, Aristotle seems to genuinely believe that philosophy should build from beliefs that have already found a place in human thinking (see *Metaphysics*, 993a30ff). For Aristotle, it is hard for human thinking to be entirely in error.<sup>4</sup>

## Aristotle’s philosophy

As opposed to the transcendent tendencies in Platonism and the abstract deductions typical of earlier philosophers, Aristotle was a thoroughgoing realist and naturalist, and his thinking stressed particularity and plurality. Consider Aristotle’s concept of *ousia*, the primary sense of being as the unified reference for descriptions. *Ousia*, for Aristotle—unlike the Platonic conception of being and the connotations of the Latinate “substance”—is primarily a “this something” (*tode ti*), an imminent, concrete presence in experience (*Categories*, 3b1012). Species and genera are *ousia* in a secondary sense, in that they reveal something about being, but not in a primary sense (2b2931). Secondary *ousia* (e.g. the

universal “tree”) does not exist in its own right (hence Aristotle's critique of Platonic Forms). The primary sense of *ousia* suggests the radicality of the “that” over the “what,” the sense of presence in temporal experience.

Aristotle's ontology of nature is essentially about temporal finitude, motion, and change. In the *Physics*, he investigates the explanations and ordering principles of nature (*phusis*), which is directly identified with movement and change (*Physics*, 200b12). Things of nature have an intrinsic principle of movement, as distinct from things brought into being extrinsically by production (192b10ff). *Phusis*, then, has to do with self-manifesting beings. The task of analysis is to make sense out of change and movement, which Aristotle accomplishes by way of the concepts of matter and form, which are given a dynamic quality in the concepts of potentiality (*dunamis*) and actualization (*energeia*). It is important to stress that both *dunamis* and *energeia* are active concepts, for Aristotle. The two together represent a single model of process (201a10ff). *Dunamis* as potentiality is not simply possibility, but an active *power*, a capacity to develop; and *energeia* as actuality is not simply a finished state, but being at work (*ergon*) in the actualizing of potential. Form (*eidos*), then, cannot be understood simply as a static “shape,” but rather as the active self-*organization* of a developing being (194b27). Notice that *energeia* and *dunamis* are coordinated with *telos* (end) in Aristotle's coinage of *entelecheia* (literally “having-an-end-in” one's being), so that the movements of *phusis* involve a being-toward, a self-emerging being on the way toward a not-yet that can-be, which is to say, a coming to presence of an absence (*Physics*, 191b13ff). In thinking *ousia* as a concrete occurrence in natural experience, Aristotle is able to give movement, change, time, and negation their appropriate senses of being.

In Aristotle's text on the soul (*psuchē*, understood as life), we have a phenomenology of an active, temporal movement animated by potentiality. The soul is the form of the body's matter, not as something separate from the body but as the gathered actualization of potentials in a living being, an active capacity to function and develop (*De Anima*, II.1). For Aristotle, the self is essentially an activity, not a static entity. There is a unified coalescence of capacity, activation, performance, and being in human nature in such a way that we *are* a living and a doing (*NE*, 1167b31–1168a10).

Unlike the subject-object bifurcation in modern philosophy, Aristotle's reflections on the soul offer a bipolar conception of self and world. Though sensation and its object are not the same being, they have one and the same *energeia* (*De Anima*, 425b27–29, 426a16–18). In an analogous way, thought is potentially the same as the things it thinks (429a13–17). Thinking is nothing

until it thinks something in the world and what it thinks must *be* in thought (429b3–431a1). The actively thinking soul *is* the things it thinks (431b16–18). In this account of activity, Aristotle alludes (417a15–18) to a discussion in the *Physics* (III.1–3) where he claims that in activity the agent and patient are a *single* process of actualization (illustrated by teaching and learning, building, and a house being built). The agent is not something self-contained in an interior zone, “cut off” (*apotetmēmēnē*) from the object of its activity (202b2). The potential of *both* is actualized in a single bipolar process. Not only does Aristotle accept the existence of the external world without question (*Physics*, 193a2–3), his realism goes so far as to claim that mind and world are a single joint activity, that the mind is *meant* to know the world and the world is *meant* to be known by the mind. We have here a single correlation rather than a relation between two separate spheres. The very being of thought is essentially correlative with what it thinks (*Metaphysics*, 1021a27ff).

The realism of Aristotle is not of a uniform kind. First, there is the plurality of being: “being is spoken of in many ways” (*Metaphysics*, 1003a34). Whatever unity there is in the notion of being will at best be analogical, since being cannot provide a universal genus (1042a23). Different forms of being all “point” to *ousia*, but not in a uniform way (1003a33–34). Aristotle also gives a pluralistic account of truth in Book VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. There he stipulates two basic modes of the soul’s “having *logos*” (*logon echon*): (1) that involving beings whose origins cannot be otherwise (necessary being), and (2) that involving beings whose origins admit of being otherwise (contingent being), which calls for *bouleusis*, or deliberation and decision (1139aff). The “virtue” of each mode is its own proper function or work (*ergon*) in relation to the different spheres of being. What follows is a discussion of five “intellectual virtues”: pertaining to the first mode of *logos* are *epistēmē* (scientific knowledge), *nous* (intuitive grasp of indemonstrable principles), and *sophia* (wisdom); pertaining to the second mode are *technē* (skill in making) and *phronēsis* (practical wisdom or acting well in human affairs). Aristotle then identifies these five virtues of thought with five modes of truth, which are defined as the different functions and dispositions of the different virtues; indeed, the virtues are five ways in which the soul is *alētheuei* or “in the truth” (1139b12–18). Aristotle is here connecting truth with the very being of the soul. Moreover, it is evident that truth is not limited to statements of scientific exactitude; it also applies to inexact modes of discerning appropriate action in spheres such as ethics. For Aristotle, there is truth in human living (*praxis*) that is different from conclusive, demonstrative forms of truth.

Aristotle's ethics is prepared in his analysis of the soul. As indicated earlier, the human soul is not something separate from the body, but the active capacity to lead a natural life. And the capacity (*dunamis*) that moves human life is desire (*On the Soul*, 433b1), understood as a striving toward conditions in the world affecting the actualization of potential. Desire (*oreksis*) cuts across all three parts of the human soul: as appetite in the vegetative part, emotion in the sensitive part, and wish in the rational part (*On the Soul*, III.10). Desire involves the experience of an absence with respect to a desired condition (*orekton*), which opens up the structure of striving toward a desired end (*telos*), as well as the need for deliberation and choice regarding different ways of actualizing potential ends. Deliberation about desire has an essentially temporal structure in considering future possibilities in terms of present aims in the light of past experiences (433b5–10). This brings us to the sphere of ethics.

## Aristotle's ethics

For Aristotle, ethics, like any other area of inquiry, must begin with *phainomena* before relevant questions are sorted out (*NE*, 1145b2–8). In the following passage, notice how a phenomenology of ethics includes the main elements sketched earlier in this investigation (the “that,” language, the many, and the wise):

One ought not to demand an explanation [*aitian*] in all things alike, either, but it is sufficient in some cases for it to be shown beautifully *that* something is so [*to hoti*], in particular such things as concern starting-points [*archē*]: the “that” comes first and is a starting-point. And of starting-points, some are beheld by way of examples [*epagoge*], others by perception, others by becoming experienced in some habit, and others in other ways. So one must try to go after each of them by the means that belong to its nature [*pephukasin*], and be serious about distinguishing them rightly, since this has great weight in what follows. For the starting-point seems to be more than half of the whole, and many of the things that are inquired after become illuminated along with it. And in connection with the starting-point, one must examine it not only from its conclusion and supporting premises, but also from the things that are said about it [*legomenōn*].

... Some of these things are said by many people and from ancient times, others by a few well-reputed men, and it is reasonable that neither of these groups would be wholly mistaken, and that they be right in some one point or at least or even in most of them (1098b1–30).<sup>5</sup>

An additional element in Aristotle's phenomenology of moral life is that we must *already* be ethical to a certain degree before we think about ethics. Here the importance of upbringing and the inheritance of ethical shaping are essential to ethics (1103b22–25). Moreover, the extent to which normative factors are already operating in human life is indicated in the first line of the *Nicomachean Ethics*:

Every art and every inquiry, and likewise every action and choice, seems to aim at some good, and hence it has been beautifully said that the good is that at which all things aim (1094a1–3).

The ubiquity of the good means that Aristotle does not pursue metaethical questions such as moral skepticism or the is-ought divide, because human life *is* value-laden all the way down.<sup>6</sup> So the question is not whether ethics can be justified, or whether one should be ethical, but rather *how* one should be ethical.<sup>7</sup> A good deal of Aristotle's ethics is simply stipulated (e.g., the nature of virtue), or taken as given, or accepted from precedents—a phenomenology that can surely frustrate the justification agenda marking so much of Western philosophy. Thinking about ethics, for Aristotle, begins with the recognition that the word “good” indicates a desired end (1094a1–5). And like being, goodness takes a plurality of forms (1096a24–25), and the different goods are not ultimately commensurable.<sup>8</sup> Living well amounts to an organization of different desires in various practical milieus, in such a way as to allow the development of human potential. The unifying term for the good life, for Aristotle, is *eudaimonia*, which is the ultimate end for the sake of which all actions are done (1097b1). The usual translation of “happiness” does not sufficiently capture Aristotle's meaning, which is better rendered as human flourishing—living well (*euzēn*), acting well (*eu prattein*)—the active realization of human potentials and the attainment of various natural goods (1098b13–22). Aristotle maintains that his focus on *eudaimonia* is well attested to because it accords with both long-standing opinion and the claims of philosophers (1098b15–19).

Beginning with the phenomenology of desire, ethics is the consideration of various orderings and judgments concerning better and worse choices—because some desires are necessary (needs) and some are contingent (wants), because some desires come in conflict with each other (*NE*, 1154b20–29), and because experience teaches a distinction between real and apparent goods. *Eudaimonia* will require the exercise of virtue (*aretē*), which is better rendered as human excellence, or a mode of high-level functioning. The moral virtues

are those character traits, habits, and dispositions that disclose appropriate choices and judgments regarding the ordering of desires, all for the sake of living well.

Aristotle's phenomenological ethics is deliberately counterposed to Platonic tendencies toward a rationalistic, universalistic, perfectionist ethics.<sup>9</sup> Reflection on the good cannot bracket tradition and received opinions, but must begin with cultural appearances, which can then be submitted to analysis, clarification, and puzzle resolution (*NE*, 1095b3, 1145b3–7). The good must also be a *human* good, reflecting the finite condition of a desiring being experiencing lacks and limits, and so ethics should not be measured by divine perfection (1096b30–35, 1178a5–15). The good is also particular, not universal (1109b22–23), relative, not absolute (1106b2), contingent, not necessary (1139b7–10), practical, not theoretical (1103b28–30), temporal, not eternal (1096b4), immanent, not transcendent (1196b30–35), and inexact, not precise (1094b20–25).

The good has a decidedly performative meaning for Aristotle, since it is identified with activity and *ergon*, which means function, task, or work (*NE*, 1097b24ff). *Eudaimonia* is called the activity (*energeia*) of the soul in accordance with virtue or moral excellence (1098a15–17). We should think of virtue here in the sense of “virtuosity,” as excellence of performance, as effective, successful action in social life. In fact, Aristotle connects *aretē* in ethics with the excellence of a musician, who develops musical skill only by practicing (*NE*, II.1). Here, Aristotle clarifies that virtues do not arise naturally in people; they require development through practice. But people do have a natural capacity (*dunamis*) to develop virtue, which becomes actualized after practicing settles into a habitual disposition (*hexis*), which could be called “second nature” (1103a31ff). In line with this, Aristotle identifies ethics as essentially a *practical* endeavor, where the goal is not knowledge, but becoming good (1103b26–29). In fact, he chastises people who think moral philosophy is satisfied by mere argument or talk, comparing them to patients who simply listen to a physician without *doing* what is prescribed (1105b12–19).

*Eudaimonia* is also analyzed in terms of a specific temporal structure of activity, as a process of coming into being and thus not as the constancy of a “possession” (*NE*, 1169b29–32). *Eudaimonia* is finally understood in terms of the comprehensiveness of the virtues and the course of a complete life (1098a18–21)—in other words, as the overall temporal structure of a life fulfilling potential, and not simply a focus on particular events or experiences. This is why the familiar association of “happiness” with “good feeling” is so misleading; *eudaimonia* is a comprehensive and ongoing *achievement*, not a “state of mind.” As Aristotle says

in another text, the very end (*telos*) of *eudaimonia* is not a certain “kind of being” (*poiotēs*), but a *life of activity* (*Poetics*, 1450a16–18). In the end, *Eudaimonia* is measured by the fulfillment and achievement of various goods that are naturally beneficial for human beings: goods of the environment, the body, and the soul (*NE*, 1098b13ff).

## Virtue

The virtues are the capacities, dispositions, and habits that enable a person to orchestrate all the various possible goods, measured by the successful performance of a well-rounded life. In this regard, Aristotle insists on the importance of good upbringing prior to mature reflection on the good life. He seems quite pessimistic about the prospects for ethical virtue without the cultivation of good habits and dispositions from early on in life (*NE*, 1095b4ff, 1103b21–25). He connects character (*ēthos*) with habit (*ethos*) and says that virtues arise mostly through teaching and learning, and they require time and the accumulation of experience to develop (1103a14ff). This is why Aristotle points to the limits of rational argument in ethics (1179b1ff). There is just so much you can say to a person inclined to vice, and people open up to ethical matters in ways other than strict analysis of beliefs and their rational justification (1179a34–1180a33).

For Aristotle, each virtue involves (1) a certain situation or context of action, (2) a certain affect, attitude, or capacity for action with respect to that situation, (3) vices of excess and defect with respect to the affect, attitude, or capacity, and (4) the virtue of the appropriate mean between the two vices. So virtues are defined as the capacity to discover a mean (*mesotēs*) between extreme conditions of excess and defect, of too much and too little (*NE*, 1104a25ff). For instance, the virtue of moderation in pleasure-seeking is a mean between overindulgence and ascetic denial or insensitivity. Acting well according to virtue, however, is a performance that does not operate on the basis of theoretical formulas or rules to guide action. Virtuous activity is inexact and can only be executed by a competent person in the context of a particular *kairos*, a particular situation at a particular time (1104a5ff)—indeed, the *telos* of an action is specifically identified with a *kairos* (1110a12–13).

We might better understand Aristotle’s sense of virtue by substituting an oscillating *balancing act* for the notion of a mean, because a mean suggests some “middle point” between two poles that distorts the sense of virtuous

action displayed in Aristotle's texts. The ethical mean, for Aristotle, is not like a numerical or spatial mean, which would be uniform for all cases (*NE*, 1106a27ff); it is more like a process of tightening and loosening a tension (1138b23). As indicated above, virtuous action varies according to the context, the specific individual, and the particular situation. Sometimes, the mean will be closer to one of the extremes than to the other (*Eudemian Ethics*, 1222a22ff); for instance, some situations might demand more or less generosity; sometimes, degrees of deficiency or excess can be praiseworthy (*NE*, 1109b16ff), as in the case of certain strong passions that might be useful in leadership. A general account of the mean is difficult to articulate, since it is relative to particular cases and perceptions (1126b3–4).

Even if we consider specific discoveries of the mean by particular individuals, what would tell them that they had found some “middle point?” If there is no general formula for finding the mean, why formalize the matter at all by suggesting some measure borrowed from mathematics? Instead, we can call virtue a balancing act in the midst of counterforces, in the manner of an oscillating attunement. This would be consistent with Aristotle's remarks about finding the mean by tending toward the extremes (*NE*, 1109b2ff). The measure of virtuous action would not be some generalizable or even particularizable locus of precision, but more a mode of discovery that unfolds as an experiment in learning how to live well, an experiment that proceeds by experiencing conflicting forces and possibilities, and then discovering balances that foster successful living. As Aristotle says, individuals have different natural tendencies and aims, and they come to learn what works well by tending in conflicting directions and gauging the appropriate path (1109b2–28). We might say that the Aristotelian “doctrine” of the mean does not so much define or locate a proper action, as much as set the negative boundaries for what is out of line (the vices), and open space for individual discovery somewhere *between* these boundaries.<sup>10</sup> Virtue as a balancing act within these boundaries is a general guideline that can only be actualized in concrete cases and in different ways. The specificity of virtuous action entails that there is no external or formulaic support for ethical action, which is thus “ungrounded” in the sense of being revealed only in the immediate present. The general character of virtue (“Find the appropriate balance between extremes”) does not justify or explain virtuous action (what the appropriate balance *is* in a certain situation); rather, the definition of virtue simply points to the task of its discovery. This would fit Aristotle's account of his ethics as a rough outline (*tupō*) of the parameters of virtue rather than an exact description of virtuous acts (1103b35ff).

## The *logos* of virtuous living

A central term in Aristotle's ethics is *logos*, usually translated as "reason." But it must be stressed that the "rationality" of ethics in Aristotle should not be understood in terms of modern models of reason that are based on abstract principles and the reflective posture of the thinking subject detached from action in the world. The soul's bipolar relation with the world suggests that living well is environmentally responsive—that is, the movements of the soul are likewise the opening up of the world—as opposed to the modern theoretical model of constructing moral principles and applying them to experience as rules for action. We noted that a virtue becomes a *hexis*, a settled, habitual disposition to act and function well (*NE*, 1106a12ff). The word *hexis* is related to *echein*, having, and in another text, Aristotle defines *hexis* as both activity (*energeia*) and having, and in both cases, he assigns a bipolar structure *between* having and the thing had, also between making and the thing made (*Metaphysics*, V.20)—which recalls the bipolar structure of activity and knowing discussed earlier. In another chapter, *hexis* is even something that can "possess" the haver, as when a fever "possesses" a person (V.23). All this suggests that virtue is not simply an agent-centered phenomenon, but an environmentally responsive power that "blends," as it were, the agent with its world—where virtuous action and its situation in the world are co-disclosed.

The structure of desire indicates complex intersections of self and world that call for appropriate ordering in practice, rather than some kind of theoretical governance. This is why ethical thinking, for Aristotle, has neither the precision nor the operative procedures of modern conceptions of reason. The Greek word *logos* has a rich array of meanings, and there are occasions where Aristotle clearly takes *logos* to mean a kind of proportional ordering and attunement (*NE*, 1119b16).<sup>11</sup> Let us explore this idea in more detail.

The practical virtue of *phronēsis* (sometimes translated as "practical wisdom") is central to Aristotle's ethics. Since *phronēsis* does not exhibit demonstrative certainty, it is better to see its "rationality" as an emergent ordering and balancing of desires in the midst of contingent practical environments. Aristotle characterizes *phronēsis* as the ability to discover the mean (*NE*, 1107a1–2). Rather than some kind of rationalized subjective agency, *phronēsis* is "being in the truth" (1140b5), in the sense of disclosing an appropriate path in pursuit of an aim in the midst of conflicting forces. *Phronēsis* and the mean are also identified with *orthos logos* (1103b32–34, 1138b20–25, 1144b25–30), which is

often translated as “correct reason.” But *orthos logos* is connected with aiming at a target and with a tightening and relaxing that suggests either a bow string or tuning a lyre string (1138b21–25); at another point (1109b24–27), Aristotle says that finding the mean is facilitated by tending toward the excess and defect, again suggesting a “tuning.”

I want to argue that Aristotle's usage of *orthos logos* does not readily fit what we would expect “correct reason” to mean, that is, an explanation or justification that can satisfy intersubjective criteria for a logical argument. Aristotle's phenomenology of virtue seems to offer something different from modern conceptions of rationality. At one point (*NE*, II.2) *orthos logos* is correlated with action (*praxis*) as opposed to knowledge—and right here Aristotle talks about the “inexact” nature of this inquiry, that only virtuous agents themselves can discover in each specific case (*kairos*) what is *orthos*. It is not clear how such specificity could satisfy familiar criteria for rational adjudication. We have noted that Aristotle sometimes employs *logos* as a kind of proportional ordering. He also connects *logos* with the essential being (*ousia*), function (*ergon*), and active capacity (*dunamis*) of a living being as a whole (*On the Soul*, 412b10–413a10); indeed, “actuality (*entelecheia*) is the *logos* of potential being” (415b15). These usages all suggest something substantive rather than discursive. In the same text (425b26ff), when discussing sensation and its object having one and the same actualization, he describes proper sensation as the *logos* between extreme conditions that destroy the sense (426a27ff), for instance, an excess of brightness or darkness with respect to vision. Here *logos* has nothing to do with “reasoning,” but rather the *nature* and bipolar structure of disclosure. Likewise, the ethical mean could be called the virtuous disclosure of proper action (and like the sensation case, it can involve the bipolar actualization of virtuous action together with its situation in the world).

The point is that *logos* here would not mean a “rational account” but the very character and nature of an immediate virtuous act. Aristotle does use the word *logos* at times pertaining to an articulate account and reasoning, but at other times, *logos* pertains to the very form or essence of something.<sup>12</sup> Accordingly, *orthos logos* need not be understood as a rational account or guide for action, but as the very form of an *achievement*.<sup>13</sup> If we consider the examples of archery or music that Aristotle uses to illustrate *orthos logos*, we can see the futility of certain “rational” questions in this context: How did you (know how to) hit the bull's-eye? How did you know that the instrument was tuned properly? The best one can say is: “I just did.” Virtuous action, for Aristotle, seems to be a similar

case. As we will see, this is not to exclude *logos*-as-articulation from ethics. But it seems that *orthos logos* can be more like skillful action and direct engagement than an explanation or rational account.<sup>14</sup>

Relevant to this discussion are the several times Aristotle calls virtuous discernment a mode of perception (*aisthēsis*).<sup>15</sup> Indeed, in one passage (*NE*, 1143a35ff), Aristotle identifies this kind of ethical perception with *nous*, in the sense of an immediate insight not derived from reasoning (*logos*). Moreover, the phenomenological character of this kind of insight is shown in the following passages:

The person of serious moral stature discerns each thing correctly [*orthos*], and in each kind the truth shows itself to this person [*talēthes autō phainetai*] . . . [who] is distinguished most of all perhaps for seeing [*horan*] what is true in each kind, since such a person is as it were a rule and measure for what is noble and pleasant. (1113a30–35)

What appears [*to phainomenon*] to the person of serious moral stature truly is the thing . . . . And what appear to be pleasures to this person truly are pleasures. (1176a17ff)

It seems that a virtuous person directly “perceives” the right path, which is different from a reasoned inference. *Phronēsis* is specifically identified with perception because unlike scientific knowledge (*epistēmē*), *phronēsis* apprehends “ultimate particulars” in direct experience (1142a24ff), ultimate (*eschaton*) in that like intuitive insight in *nous*, such perception requires no further justification. In general terms, virtuous perception attends to the specific features of a concrete situation that figure in ethical discernment (as opposed to generalizations).

With respect to *orthos logos*, we should also consider the range of meanings in the word *orthos*.<sup>16</sup> It can indeed mean “correct,” but also straight, upright, safe, happy, and prosperous. The word also associates with seeing straight, hearing attentively, restoring to health and happiness, guiding rightly, honoring, and exalting. The word is derived from *orthoō*, meaning to set up straight or stand up from a reclined or fallen posture. *Orthos* can also mean real, genuine, or steadfast. If we think of steadfast as a capacity to stand against falling back, we can think of *orthos* marking a steady capacity for proper action. We can see here the many shades of *orthos* connecting with Aristotle’s sense of virtuous action, in ways that are different from the meaning of “correct.” And *orthos*, as “straight” versus “crooked,” can have the sense of “direct” versus “roundabout” or “missed,” which certainly captures Aristotle’s metaphor of hitting a target—which is a direct achievement rather than a cognitive claim.

*Orthos* can also connote succeeding at an aim, especially in the word *katorthōsis*, variants of which Aristotle uses several times pertaining to virtuous action (*NE*, 1106b26 and 31, 1107a15, 1142b30). Consequently, *orthos logos* can refer to successful action in a practical environment, accomplished by an attunement of the soul with its environment, something very different from “correct reason.” *Phronēsis*, then, is much more suggestive of an active self-world attunement than something like rational agency. *Phronēsis* could be called a capacity for practical discernment, or an ethical finesse, a cultivated aptitude to uncover the appropriate balancing and ordering of practical possibilities. Aristotle specifically says that *phronēsis* is not mere knowledge—it must include action (1152a8–9). Moreover, as a developed disposition and “having” (*hexis*), it is registered in a person’s very being, and so it cannot be “forgotten,” as can factual knowledge (1140b28–30). And with respect to *phronēsis* as a *hexis*, we should note that Aristotle describes it as a disposition to act not simply “according to (*kata*) *orthos logos*”—which carries a more inferential meaning—but “in the midst of/along with (*meta*) *orthos logos*” (1144b26ff)—which suggests a more constitutive meaning.

## Measuring virtue

Discovering the mean is relative to a particular person’s situation (*NE*, 1106b1), which makes virtuous action difficult, because it is context-dependent. Formal compliance with a rule is easy; judging the proper balance and appropriate action in a certain situation, in a certain way, at a certain time, to a certain degree, for a certain purpose, is hard (1109a24ff). For example, generosity could vary in its suitability or vary in degrees according to the circumstances, persons, resources, prospects, and so on. What is appropriate can only be rendered at the time and in the situation of a particular agent, and it demands an *experience* of particulars, which is neither exact nor universal (1109b22ff). Consequently, Aristotle’s ethics does not involve moral axioms or formulas that can transcend and govern the specificity of experience. To be sure, ethics can involve certain generalizations presented in an unqualified (*haplōs*) form (e.g., “It is good to be generous”), but ethical practice will always have to confront qualifications in experience (1134a25ff).<sup>17</sup>

Aristotle appears to be advocating a kind of decisionism or intuitionism in ethics, because the measure of virtuous action is the virtuous person (*NE*,

1113a25ff); the measure of the good is that which appears to the good person (1176a17ff). An ethical decision cannot be arbitrary, however, since it must be responsive to the environment at hand and shaped by past experience. But *as* contextual, a decision is saturated with contingency (1112b8ff)—which is exactly why ethical actions involve *choice* rather than necessary outcomes. To be educated in ethics is not to have decisive knowledge; indeed, the mark of an educated person is seeking only the degree of precision that the nature of an endeavor will allow (1094b23–25). As we have noted, the discipline of ethics cannot issue exact rules and measures; it can only be sketched in broad outline with an eye toward enactment by virtuous persons in concrete circumstances. Truth in ethics can only be judged by way of *performances* in life (*ta erga kai ton bion*); otherwise, it is mere words (1179a18–23). Aristotle is certainly not an ethical relativist or subjectivist. The proper action is “objective” in the sense of being duly responsive to the environment at hand, such that anyone in this situation would do the same thing. So there *is* a kind of “correctness” in virtuous action, but its immediacy does not issue an “objective standard” that anyone *outside* this situation would likewise grasp.

In Aristotle, a virtue becomes a mode of the soul’s being, a *hexis*, or “having” (*NE*, 1106a13), a capacity to make appropriate choices that with practice becomes habit, or second nature (see 1152a31–34). An ethical habit, for Aristotle, is not some mechanical operation or instinctive drive, but an acquired capacity to act well that eventually can become relatively unforced and natural. As a settled way of *being*, we could call habit a mode of in-habiting an ethical environment. Aristotle seems to be saying that a truly virtuous person will act well without much analysis or difficulty.

It is important to note that genuine virtue, for Aristotle, is *rare* (*NE*, 1109a29). A summary of Aristotle’s conception of true virtue can be gleaned from his discussion of *akrasia*, or weakness of will (*NE*, VII.1–10). Aristotle distinguishes persons as being virtuous, morally strong, morally weak, and vicious. A virtuous person does the good habitually, even with pleasure (1099a6ff). A morally strong person knows what is good but struggles to do it. A morally weak person knows what is good but fails to do it. A vicious person acts badly without regret. We would tend to call the morally strong person virtuous in many respects, but Aristotle would not. Aristotle’s ideal, though difficult to achieve, seems to be a person who moves through life with ethical composure and facility, whose desires have become properly attuned, and who possesses all the virtues as a unified whole (1145a1–2). Aristotle claims that most people fall in between the morally weak and morally strong (1150a9–16, 1152a25–27). Morally weak

people merely speak the right words (*logous*), like actors reciting their lines. A truly virtuous person is “co-natural” (*sumphuēnai*) with the proper path, where belief, desire, and proper action are coordinated together (1139b4–5, 1147a18ff). Here *phronēsis*, good character, and acting well are all fused in a single package (1144a, 1144b30–32).

### *Logos*, deliberation, and action

Now I must confront the question of how my account can accord with elements of Aristotle's ethics that seem to reflect reasoning procedures and logical inferences: the so-called practical syllogism and the role of deliberation in virtuous living.

The practical syllogism seems to explain virtuous action as a result of logical inferences, with premise-conclusion structures patterned after theoretical syllogisms. When Aristotle gives examples of practical syllogisms, they usually pertain to action scenarios that are not exactly ethical in nature (e.g., navigation), but I will focus on one segment of the *Nicomachean Ethics* that is pertinent to ethics and illustrative of the complex questions at hand: *NE*, 1147a24ff, which is part of the analysis of *akrasia*. This segment immediately follows the claim about the “co-natural” character of the truly virtuous person cited above. Aristotle then moves to investigate *akrasia* “in terms of nature” (*phusikōs*), that is, not according to logical argument but in terms of human nature. This is where an example of a practical syllogism about eating sweet things is introduced: If one ought to taste sweet things, and this thing here is sweet, then one must immediately taste it.<sup>18</sup> It would seem that the conclusion would more likely be “then one ought to taste this,” which would be followed by the action. But it looks like the conclusion *is* the action, which is confirmed in another text, *On the Movement of Animals*, 7: the conclusion of a practical syllogism “becomes the action” (*ginetai hē praxis*), something done *euthus*, immediately (701a13–15), as in the case of “Every man ought to walk; one is a man; immediately one walks.” Returning to the tasting syllogism (*NE*, 1147a25–31), the major premise is a general belief about a good, the minor premise involves a *perception* of a particular, and then, just as in a theoretical syllogism, where the soul must affirm the conclusion, here the soul is compelled (*anankē*) to *do* the conclusion immediately (*prattein euthus*). Again, there is something logically peculiar about the practical syllogism; the conclusion seems to be not “cognition,” but an action.

In any case, Aristotle then depicts the logical structure of *akrasia* (*NE*, 1147a32ff), where the major premise concerns not consuming sweets (as in a diet, perhaps), and the conclusion is not to taste the sweet thing—but with *akrasia*, desire overrides the conclusion. Aristotle says that from the standpoint of physiology (*phusiologōn*), the akratic person is like someone drunk or asleep, whose desire runs contrary to *orthos logos*, and who thereby is precluded from “proper knowledge.” In context, it seems that the akratic person is constitutionally contrasted with the “co-natural” condition of the truly virtuous person noted in this segment of the text. I want to suggest that here the practical syllogism is more like a logical *reconstruction* of an ethical scenario, rather than a “causal” account of ethical action, and I say this for two reasons: (1) the conclusion seems to *be* the action rather than the cause of the action; and (2) the “natural” factors in the analysis seem to stress the very *being* of the agents rather than their reasoning.

The reconstructive character of the practical syllogism can be gleaned from the *Movement of Animals* passage cited above. Here the premises involve a posited good and a current capacity (*dunatou*) to act on it (701a25). Then, Aristotle says that with obvious premises (“one is a man”), “thinking (*dianoia*) does not stop and consider” them (701a26–27). But then, Aristotle speaks even more generally about immediate actions done without analysis upon the apprehension of some good:

What we do without reflection we do quickly. For with the activation [*energēsē*] of a perception or an imagination or a thinking of the for-the-sake-of-which, what is desired is done immediately. For the *energeia* of desire is a substitute for inquiry or thinking. (701a27–33)

The point is that ethical action need not stem from rational inferences—indeed it can be a “substitute” for reasoning—and so the practical syllogism can be read as a reconstruction of an action rather than a determination of it (who ever moves to walk by *inferential* steps?). This would accord with a passage from the *Nicomachean Ethics* that distinguishes between an action following examination and an immediate action in sudden situations that stems not from examination but a settled *hexis* (1117a18ff). Generally, I want to say that at least with regard to a fully virtuous person in unexceptional circumstances, a *logos* of ethical action need not mean rational justification, but rather an articulation that helps us *make sense* of an action that is not schematized in advance.<sup>19</sup>

Next, we should consider the role of deliberation (*bouleusis*) in Aristotle’s ethics (*NE*, III.3). Deliberation leads to *proairesis*, which can be called decision

or resolve (1113a9ff).<sup>20</sup> The question is whether deliberation fits typical models of rational analysis that justify or explain ethical decisions. I want to argue that ethics, for Aristotle, certainly includes examination and articulation, and that decisions can indeed follow upon such discursive practices—but that such practices are not a necessary condition for ethical action (especially with full virtue) and that even when such practices are in play, they will not likely satisfy familiar expectations for rational justification.

Deliberation, for Aristotle, is not about a good end (*telos*), but about the means toward that end (*NE*, 1112b13ff, 1113b3ff)—so a physician does not deliberate about *whether* to heal a patient, but *how* to heal a particular patient. The ethical *telos* seems *already* in place by way of *boulēsis*, a wish or aim (1116b27–28). In deliberation, one “assumes” the end (1112b16). The nondeliberative is associated with the “immediacy” of the good person’s ingrained comprehension of what is worthy in life, which pertains not to ratiocination, but a person’s very being, as indicated in the following account of a practical syllogism (1144a31–37), where the *telos* is the major premise:

For deductive reasoning about things done [*sullogismoi tōn praktōn*] has as a starting-point (*archēn*, i.e., the major premise): “Since such-and-such is an end [*telos*] and the best [*ariston*],” . . . and this does not show itself [*phainetai*] except to a good person; for vice warps a person and produces error about the sources [*archas*] that govern action. So it is clear [*phaneron*] that it is impossible [*adunaton*] to have practical judgment [*phronimon*] without being good.

Moreover, there is no deliberation about direct perceptions (*NE*, 1113a1–2), which presumably play a basic role in ethical action. Deliberation concerns contingencies pertaining to actions that aim toward an *assumed* good (1141b10ff), especially when the right means is uncertain or indeterminate (1112b8ff). Upon deliberation, ethical decision or resolve is a function of desire, or desire fused with thought (1113a10, 1139b4–5); thus resolve is different from mere cogitation, and even from true belief (1112a5). Resolve is identified with virtue, which is called *hexis proairetikē*, a settled disposition of resolve toward the mean (1106b36). Ethical decisions are measured as good or bad, not true or false as in the case of belief; and decisions mark who we *are* as constitutive of our character, which is not the case with mere cognition (1111b31ff).

Deliberation is associated in certain ways with *orthos logos*. In *NE*, VI.9, deliberating well (*euboulia*) is “a kind of” *orthotēs*, but not the kind in *epistēmē* or true belief. Yet deliberation is a *logos*, a thinking things through (*dianoias*), which is not an assertion but an investigating (*zētei*) and reckoning (*logizetai*). The

*orthotēs* in deliberation concerns what is advantageous or fitting (*sumpheron*) for a particular *telos*; and *phronēsis* is the “true comprehension” (*alēthēs hupolēpsis*) of what is advantageous or fitting. That *orthotēs* here might involve what I earlier called a “successful completion of an aim” can be gleaned from another discussion, where Aristotle examines the main objects of pursuit (*aireseis*): the noble, the advantageous, and the pleasant (1104b30ff). The good person “goes right” with these pursuits, while the bad person “goes wrong.” The two terms here are *katorthōtikos* and *hamartētikos*, with the former having a meaning of setting straight or successful accomplishment, and the latter a meaning of missing the mark or failure. The point is that deliberation and resolve are not of an entirely different order from features of *orthos logos* discussed earlier in this essay—that is to say, something more achievement-based than discursive.<sup>21</sup>

Nevertheless, it is important not to exclude discursive practices, articulation, and reasoning from Aristotle’s ethics. But even so, such elements cannot fully determine—and cannot be separated from—the more nonrational features of virtuous discernment we have examined.<sup>22</sup> Surely, examination and deliberation are part of ethical life, although I would surmise that they more likely function in the spheres of morally weak and morally strong persons, since genuine virtue seems to be “second nature” to the truly good person. In any case, one can articulate ethical actions in various ways and even supply a set of reasons. Yet, the sheer specificity of virtuous discernment suggests limitations on rational discourse:

Why did you give him the money?  
 Because it was the generous thing to do.  
 How did you know it was the generous thing to do?  
 Because it was a mean between stinginess and extravagance.  
 How did you know it was a mean?  
 Because he needs the money and will not squander it.  
 How do you know that?  
 Because I know him.  
 How do you know him? . . .

It seems that the articulation of virtuous action zeroes in on an immediate and unique discernment, in the face of which articulation runs out. So virtuous action can involve reasoning, but it need not proceed *from* reasoning, and even with reasoning, there is a limit to what can be *communicated* for explanatory purposes. The word *logos* can apply to the full range of elements here because it can refer both to articulation and to the substantive form of a virtuous act.

Within Aristotle's ethical naturalism, there is a sense in which human actions are value-*laden*; such meanings *can* be articulated but they need not be. Reasoned articulation can prepare and make possible the co-natural inhabitation of full virtue that can develop over time—and then function *without* reasoned articulation. The double-sense of *logos* thus helps us ascertain the complicated interplay of articulation and direct action in Aristotle's ethics. One could say that the intellectual virtue of *phronēsis*, the metavirtue of ethical virtues, is itself a balancing act between extremes, between sheer cognition and sheer perception, between sheer reflection and sheer action. Such is Aristotle's rich account of how ethical discernment shows itself in human life.

## Notes

- 1 Portions of this essay are drawn from my book, *Ethics and Finitude: Heideggerian Contributions to Moral Philosophy* (Hatab 2000). Extended passages from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (hereafter *NE*) are taken from the following translation (occasionally modified): Aristotle. 2002. *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Joe Sachs. Newburyport, MA: Focus Publishing.
- 2 For example, *NE* 1094a3, 1095a16. See also *Categories* 2b31, *Physics* 191b2ff, *Metaphysics* 1003a34ff.
- 3 Consider how the basic concept of being is deployed as *both* the bearer of properties and the subject of predication (*Categories* 1–5). For a focused treatment of the scholarship on the language-being correlation, see Long 2011, 49–56.
- 4 See Long 2011, 56–71.
- 5 The word *archē* in this passage is often translated as “principle” or “first principle.” But that suggests a *governing* conception that does not always fit Aristotle's phenomenology. *Archē* also means “beginning” or “origin.” I think “starting-point” fits the context of Aristotle's ethics because he is clearly not using *archē* as some kind of rational principle, but rather as the ways in which we already have senses of the ethical: “For the *archē* is *that* something is so (*to hoti*), and if this is sufficiently apparent (*phainoito*), there is no additional need for the reason why” (1095b7–8).
- 6 Indeed, the very nature of language, for Aristotle, seems to be originally the making manifest (*dēloun*) of normative concerns (*Politics* 1253a10ff).
- 7 See Burnyeat 1980, 69–92.
- 8 *NE* 1164b2–6, 1096a30ff; *Eudemian Ethics* 1243b22; *Politics* 1283a3–10.
- 9 For a rich and extensive study of the differences between Aristotle and Plato on the good life, see Martha Nussbaum (1986).
- 10 One of the meanings of *mesos* is “between,” and on occasion, Aristotle will use a more specific meaning of “between” (*metaxu*) in relation to virtue (e.g., 1138b23).

- 11 For details on the complex and varied meanings of *logos* in ancient Greek, see Guthrie 1962, 420–4.
- 12 See, for example, the former usage in *Metaphysics* 1029b20–22, and the latter usage in 1035b26–31.
- 13 See Glidden (1992). Glidden says that Aristotle’s call for *orthos logos* is like a baseball manager telling a pitcher to “throw strikes,” which is an ideal that cannot be a “rule” independent of achievement.
- 14 At one point, Aristotle indicates that the *orthos logos* of virtue is a mean between extremes marked by a certain *horos* (1138b18–34). The word *horos* is usually translated as “standard” or “criterion,” but it also means “limit” or “boundary” (sometimes *between* two places). If *horos* is a “standard,” we run into the problem of Aristotle not seeming to provide one. On this, see Peterson (1988). But it may be that there *is* no communicable “standard,” only the shaping of a “limit,” of a “place” between extremes in a particular case that only a virtuous person can gauge.
- 15 See *NE* 1109b18–24, 1113a1, 1126b2–4, and 1147a26.
- 16 Aristotle himself says that *orthotēs* has more than one meaning (1142b18).
- 17 The word *haplōs* also carries the meaning of “simple,” which is connected with *archē* in *Metaphysics* 1059b35. As noted earlier, *archē* can be translated as “starting-point,” which fits a good deal of Aristotle’s ethics. Once we have been schooled in the meaning and importance of the virtues, our minds can have in place simple, unqualified guidelines—such as “Be generous”—that “start” our ethical sense; but these up-front conceptions are not governing “principles” that determine when, whether, or how to be generous.
- 18 For a thorough examination of this text, see Bogen and Moravcsik (1982).
- 19 See McDowell (1999), especially 134–7 and note 22. With the Greek word *logos*, its most basic meaning can be called an articulation that makes sense to an audience. See Ferrari (1997).
- 20 See Heidegger 2009, 97.
- 21 For an analysis of nondiscursive elements in Aristotle’s approach to ethical practice, see Wiggins (1981).
- 22 It is crucial not to construe “nonrational” elements in Aristotle as “noncognitive.” Aristotle does not separate cognition from perception or even from emotion. Perception and emotion are not “thoughtless,” because they can in their way deliver knowledge. For an insightful analysis of the nonrational features of virtue that are yet not outside cognition, see Moss (2011). Moss takes on “intellectualist” readings of Aristotle that surmise a rational determination of moral ends in *phronēsis*, in order to hold off a purported Hume-style demotion of reason in ethics. She ably shows how Aristotle’s texts do not support such readings. *Phronēsis*, she argues, is the discernment of how to fulfill virtuous aims that are already inculcated in the soul through habituation (emphasizing the key text of *NE* 1144a6–9). For an account of how emotions figure in ethical discernment, see Kosman (1980).