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External Goods and the Complete Exercise of Virtue in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*

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Abstract: In *Nicomachean Ethics* 1.8, Aristotle seems to argue that certain external goods are needed for happiness because, in the first place, they are needed for virtuous activity. This has puzzled scholars. After all, it seems possible for a virtuous agent to exercise her virtuous character even under conditions of extreme hardship or deprivation. Indeed, it is natural to think these are precisely the conditions under which one's virtue shines through most clearly. I argue that there is good sense to be made of Aristotle's stance on external goods. Drawing on passages in *Politics* 7.13 and *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.1, I develop and defend a distinction between the "mere" exercise of virtue, and the full or complete exercise of virtue. I explain how, on his view, a range of external goods is required for the *full* exercise of virtue, and I show that it is only this full exercise that is constitutive of *eudaimonia*. I argue that, for Aristotle, the distinguishing feature of this distinction is the value of the virtuous action's ends. An action that fully expresses virtue aims at an end that is unqualifiedly good, while an action that merely exercises virtue does not. The external goods Aristotle mentions in *NE* 1.8 are necessary for performing actions with unqualifiedly good ends, and so necessary for the complete exercise of virtue.

1 Introduction

In *Nicomachean Ethics* 1.8, Aristotle seems to argue that certain external goods are needed for happiness because, in the first place, they are needed for virtuous activity.¹ This has puzzled scholars. After all, it seems possible for a virtuous agent to exercise her virtuous character even under conditions of extreme hardship or deprivation. Indeed, it is natural to think these are precisely the conditions under

1 *NE* 1.8 (1099a31–b8). I defend this reading of the passage in Section 2.1.

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which one's virtue shines through most clearly. Why then does Aristotle think that a wide range of external goods is required for virtuous activity, and therefore, for happiness?

I argue that there is good sense to be made of Aristotle's stance on external goods. Specifically, I explain how, on his view, a range of external goods is required for the *full* exercise of virtue, and I show that it is only this full exercise that is constitutive of *eudaimonia*.² Drawing on passages in *Politics* 7.13 and *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.1, I develop and defend a distinction between the "mere" exercise of virtue, and the full or complete exercise of virtue. I argue that, for Aristotle, the distinguishing feature of this distinction is the value of the virtuous action's ends. An action that fully expresses virtue aims at an end that is unqualifiedly good, while an action that merely exercises virtue does not. I argue that the external goods Aristotle mentions in *NE* 1.8 are necessary for performing actions with unqualifiedly good ends, and so necessary for the complete exercise of virtue. In addition to providing a more satisfactory account than existing proposals of the role of external goods in Aristotelian happiness, my interpretation has two additional upshots. First, it brings to light an under-appreciated and independently compelling feature of Aristotle's ethical thought: the value of virtuous actions depends in part on the value of the ends they aim to realize. Second, it finds in Aristotle a distinct and powerful way of thinking about the badness of certain kinds of misfortune and deprivation: they are bad in part because they prevent us from fully realizing our capacity for moral agency, from fully engaging with value in the world.

2 The Puzzle

In this section, I set up the problem of external goods, and identify two desiderata of a successful account.

² The general strategy I will develop in what follows has been defended prominently by John Cooper. Cooper argues that even when a virtuous agent is able to exercise her virtuous character, she is not always able to *fully* exercise or express it unless certain material conditions are present. And, Cooper suggests, it is this full exercise or expression of virtue that is necessary for *eudaimonia*. I will argue that the way Cooper develops the distinction between the "mere" exercise of virtue and the complete exercise of virtue is ultimately unsuccessful, and I develop and defend an alternative.

2.1 External Goods in *NE* 1.8

In *NE* 1.7, Aristotle argues that the highest human good must lie in the characteristic human work or activity, and he identifies this activity with the exercise of the rational part of the soul on the basis of virtue, concluding that the highest human good, *eudaimonia*, “is activity of the [rational] soul on the basis of virtue, and if there are multiple virtues, on the basis of the best and most complete virtue.”³ In 1.8–1.12, Aristotle tests his account of *eudaimonia* against the common or reputable views, arguing in each case that his account preserves, at least in some suitably qualified way, common views about happiness. Amongst the *endoxa* he clearly means to preserve is the idea that an individual cannot be fully happy if he suffers great misfortune or deprivation.⁴

Aristotle’s most explicit discussion of the relationship between external goods and *eudaimonia* comes in *NE* 1.8 (1099a31–b8), following his substantive account of *eudaimonia*:⁵

Nevertheless, it is apparent that happiness also needs external goods (τῶν ἐκτὸς ἀγαθῶν προσδεομένη), as we said, for (γὰρ) it is impossible or not easy to do fine actions (τὰ καλὰ πράττειν) if one is not equipped. For, on the one hand (μὲν γὰρ), many are done by means of friends and wealth and political powers as if by tools, and on the other hand (δὲ), men who lack some things such as good birth, good children, and beauty soil blessedness; for (γὰρ) the man who is very ugly in appearance or of low birth or solitary and childless is not entirely happy, and moreover, he would perhaps be even less so if he had thoroughly bad children or friends, or if his children or friends, though good, had died. Thus, as we said, happiness seems to need this sort of prosperity in addition (ἔουκε προσδεῖσθαι καὶ τῆς τοιαύτης εὐημερίας), and that is why some people identify happiness with good fortune, while others identify it with excellence. *NE* 1.8 (1099a31–b8)

³ See *NE* 1.7 1098a16–18. Translations are my own, modified from Irwin ²1999.

⁴ See for example *NE* 1.8 (1099a31–b8), *NE* 1.10 (1101a8–13), *NE* 1.10 (1101a14–a21); see also *NE* 7.13 (1153b14–25).

⁵ By “external goods” I mean to include both goods of the body and goods that are external to both the soul and the body. See, for example, Aristotle’s use in *NE* 1.8, 1099a31–b8. See Cooper 1985, 176–8, for a helpful discussion of Aristotle’s various uses of the phrase *ta ekstos agatha*. I will be assuming for the sake of argument the interpretation of *eudaimonia* as constituted by excellent virtuous activity alone, although my account is compatible with a more “inclusivist” reading of *eudaimonia*; it should be helpful to an inclusivist picture by setting a principled limit on what supply of external goods is enough for a happy life to count as complete and self-sufficient. Helpful overviews of this debate can be found in Lear 2009. For some prominent defenses of “inclusivism” see Ackrill 1980, Crisp 1994, Hardie 1965, Keyt 1983, Whiting 1986. For defenses of “dominant end” or, in the terminology I prefer, “exclusivist” positions, see: Hardie 1979, Heinaman 1988, 2007, Kraut 1989. For positions that attempt a middle path, see Charles 1999, Lear 2004, Scott 1999.

In this passage, Aristotle insists that happiness needs external goods, and immediately offers an explanation introduced in a γάρ clause (1099a32–33): happiness needs external goods because it is impossible or not easy to do fine actions without a sufficient supply of goods. He then appears to offer two reasons for the latter thesis, in a μέν-δέ clause. First, (μέν at 1099a35) many actions are done using goods as instruments; many virtuous actions are difficult or impossible to perform without wealth, friends and political power. Second, (δέ at 1099b2) the lack of certain goods, such as good birth, good children and beauty, spoils blessedness.⁶ In what immediately follows, Aristotle appears to offer an explanation for the content of this δέ clause, introduced by a further γάρ at 1099b3: the man who is ugly or of low birth does not seem to be entirely happy, and still less so if his children or friends are thoroughly bad, or have died.

On a natural reading, the first γάρ clause at line 1099a32 governs the μέν-δέ clause that follows. Otherwise put, on a natural reading, Aristotle is offering two reasons for thinking that external goods are important for virtuous activity and *therefore* for happiness. He is not claiming that the lack of good birth, good children and beauty directly affect our happiness; rather, he is claiming that their lack impedes our ability to perform virtuous actions and therefore, indirectly, impedes our happiness.⁷ What role do goods like good birth, good children and beauty play in promoting virtuous activity and therefore happiness? In the next section, I consider a strategy defended by John Cooper, and identify some problems with the way he develops his proposal.

2.2 Two Desiderata

The strategy proposed by John Cooper is *prima facie* promising for explaining why Aristotle would think we need to be well-supplied with a wide range of external goods in order to achieve *eudaimonia*. Cooper argues that even when a virtuous agent is able to exercise her virtuous character, she is not always able to *fully* exercise or express it unless certain material conditions are present. And, Cooper suggests, it is this full exercise or expression of virtue that is necessary for *eudaimonia*. Cooper finds support for this reading of Aristotle in the ancient commentators who seem to distinguish between the circumstances that allow for

⁶ I do not consider in this paper whether blessedness or *makarios* is distinct from happiness or *eudaimonia*. It might be that blessedness is a particularly exalted form of *eudaimonia*, and it is only this exalted form of happiness that requires external goods. I am here interested in what role external goods play in promoting the form of happiness for which they are necessary.

⁷ See Brown 2006, 230–33, for a helpful discussion of this passage.

the full exercise of virtue and those that do not.⁸ Cooper has proposed that certain external goods provide the “normal and expected contexts for the exercise of the virtues”. These goods, he argues, put the virtuous person “in the position where the options for action that are presented to him by circumstances allow him to exercise his virtues fully and in ways that one might describe as normal for the virtues.”⁹ So, for example, Cooper argues, someone who lacks physical beauty will be impeded in exercising his temperance in a wide range of circumstances.¹⁰ A less attractive individual will have a narrower range of sexual opportunities available him, and so also a narrower range of circumstances in which to exercise control over his sexual desires. As such, Cooper suggests, the individual will not be able to exercise his temperance *fully* and in the ways normal and expected for the virtue of temperance.¹¹

However, it is unclear what constitutes the “normal and expected contexts for the exercise of the virtues”. Cooper suggests that the virtuous agent can neither be too poorly *nor* too well equipped with external goods for her to fully express her virtue: it is only “in some vaguely marked out middle ground” that the virtuous agent will achieve *eudaimonia*. But his explanation seems to give very differ-

8 Arius Didymus offers an account of *eudaimonia* as “the *proēgoumenē* use of virtue in a complete life.” (Stobaeus II, 51.12 Wachsmuth) Here, as Cooper argues, we should take *proēgoumenē* as meaning something like “coming first” in the estimation and choice of the virtuous agent herself. (Aspasius 19. 10 f., trans. Cooper 1985). Alexander of Aphrodisias seems to provide a similar reading. In offering an argument against the Stoics on behalf of the Peripatetics, he argues “[A]ctivity in accordance with craft covers in each case two things. On the one hand there is activity in primary circumstances, as for the flute-player if he is healthy in body and has flutes of the kind he wishes for and nothing external troubles him; on the other hand there is activity in circumstances he does not wish for, that is, in circumstances the opposite of those just mentioned. So, just as the ends of the other crafts lie in activities with wished for things and in primary circumstances, so also for virtue, supposing it too is a craft.” (Book 2 *De Anima* 160.31–161.3, following the translation of Cooper 1985).

9 Cooper 1985, 182f. Cooper in fact defends an inclusivist interpretation of *eudaimonia* in the paper, but thinks that external goods are only included in Aristotle’s conception of *eudaimonia* because they are needed for virtuous activity.

10 On his view, such a person can fully develop the virtue of temperance and exercise it in ways that are appropriate to the circumstances, but “the circumstances themselves are restricted by his ugliness and the effects this has on others” with the consequence that “his virtue is not called upon to regulate his responses and choices in all the sorts of circumstances that the more normally attractive person would face”; the upshot of this restricted range of circumstances is that the agent’s exercise of temperance “is not as full and fine a thing as that more normally attractive person’s would be.” Cooper 1985, 183.

11 For discussion of this case see Botros 1987, 113, who memorably dismisses Cooper’s solution for explaining the necessity of good looks as being “ludicrously contrived”.

ent results when we consider different virtues. It is arguable in the case of temperance or magnificence that being very well-supplied with external goods — beauty and wealth respectively — will allow for a greater range of opportunities to exercise one's virtue. But in the case of other virtues, like courage, it seems plausible that good fortune could actually *limit* an agent's ability to exercise her virtue. The political prisoner who is captured and tortured has a wide range of opportunities to exercise her courage; indeed, she seems much better able to exercise her courage than she would be under conditions of peace and stability. Cooper's proposal does not seem to give us a principled explanation for why *in general* a virtuous agent can only fully exercise her virtue when she is well-supplied with external goods.

A second, further liability for Cooper's interpretation is that it does not allow Aristotle to capture the way in which certain external goods are necessary for *eudaimonia* because they are intrinsically valuable. On Cooper's reading of Aristotle, external goods are required for *eudaimonia* either because they are instruments for virtuous actions, or because they provide the necessary antecedent conditions for the full exercise of virtue. Good children are an example of the latter. It is not the fact that Hector is intrinsically valuable to Priam that explains why Priam's happiness is marred by Hector's death. Rather, on Cooper's view, losing Hector mars Priam's happiness because "it prevents the subsequent activities he might have engaged in together with them".¹² This is a surprising result. It is intuitive to think that, when Priam loses his beloved child, this is surely bad for Priam in part because his child is valuable in and of himself, and not simply because the loss of his child impedes his future virtuous actions. On Cooper's interpretation, Aristotle holds an implausibly instrumental explanation for why external goods make a difference to our happiness.¹³

¹² Cooper 1985, 189.

¹³ See also Kraut 1989, 256. Brown 2006 offers an alternative psychological model: virtuous agents naturally wish for good things, and when these wishes are frustrated, virtuous agents naturally experience pain. This pain undermines our capacity for virtuous activity because virtue demands that we act with pleasure. I worry that Brown's proposal merely pushes back the problem: virtuous agents wish for good things *because* they are good. If we want to explain why their loss is bad, we should appeal to the value of the goods themselves, rather than the emotional responses of the virtuous agent which track their value. Cashen 2012 defends a somewhat different psychological solution, according to which severe misfortune and psychological distress will be detrimental to a virtuous agent's character itself. Here, I think Cooper is right to worry that this kind of psychological mechanism doesn't explain why an agent who continues to be virtuous despite misfortune is still less happy than he otherwise would be, as is suggested by the example of Priam.

Here then are two desiderata for explaining the role Aristotle accords to external goods in *eudaimonia*. First, a successful account should give us a principled explanation for why, in general, good fortune and moderate prosperity better equip an agent to fully exercise her virtue than misfortune and adversity. Second, an account should capture the way in which the intrinsic value of certain goods, like good children, is part of the explanation for why they are necessary for *eudaimonia*. The suggestion from Cooper I develop in what follows is the idea that, without a sufficient supply of external goods, a virtuous agent cannot *fully* exercise her virtue. I appeal to a neglected passage in *Politics* 7.13 to motivate and develop an alternative account.

3 The “Mere” Exercise of Virtue and the Complete Exercise of Virtue

In this section, I look at passages from *Politics* 7.13 and *NE* 3.1 to develop and defend the distinction between the “mere” exercise of virtue, and the full or complete exercise of virtue. I argue that, for Aristotle, the distinguishing feature of this distinction is the value of the virtuous action’s ends.

3.1 *Politics* 7.13

Consider in full the relevant passage in *Politics* 7.13:

We say (and we defined in the *Ethics*, if those discussions are of some help) that happiness is the activity and complete exercise of virtue (ἐνέργειαν εἶναι καὶ χρῆσιν ἀρετῆς τελείαν)¹⁴ and the exercise must not be conditional (ταύτην οὐκ ἐξ ὑποθέσεως), but unqualified (ἀλλ’ ἀπλῶς). I mean by conditional what is necessary (λέγω δ’ ἐξ ὑποθέσεως τἀναγκαῖα), and by unqualified, what is noble (τὸ δ’ ἀπλῶς τὸ καλῶς). For example, in the sphere of just actions, just penalties and punishments are indeed from virtue (ἀπ’ ἀρετῆς), but they are necessary (ἀναγκαῖαι δέ), and the nobility they have is of necessity (καὶ τὸ καλῶς ἀναγκαίως ἔχουσιν) (for it would be more choiceworthy if no man nor city needs these sorts of things), while the actions that aim at honors and advantage (αἱ δ’ ἐπὶ τὰς τιμὰς καὶ τὰς εὐπορίας) are most noble, and unqualifiedly so. For the former destroy something bad (τὸ μὲν γὰρ ἕτερον κακοῦ τινος ἀναίρεσις ἐστίν), but the latter actions do the opposite (αἱ τοιαῦται δὲ πράξεις τούναντίον). For they are preparatory and productive of good things (κατασκευαῖαι

¹⁴ I am taking ἐνέργειαν καὶ χρῆσιν ἀρετῆς as a conjunctive phrase meaning the “activity and exercise” of virtue.

γὰρ ἀγαθῶν εἰσι καὶ γεννήσεις). The excellent man would make noble use of poverty and disease and other kinds of misfortune,¹⁵ but blessedness lies in the opposite (and this definition is in accordance with the ethical works: the excellent man is of such a sort for whom, because of his virtue, good things are unqualifiedly good; it is clear that his use of these things must also be unqualifiedly good and noble). This is why it is thought that external goods are the cause of happiness, just as if the brilliant and fine performance on the kithara is because of the instrument rather than the craft.¹⁶

Aristotle, in this passage, distinguishes between two ways of exercising virtue, only one of which is constitutive of happiness. And, he seems to affirm that it is only when external conditions are favorable in some sense that virtuous activity constitutes happiness.¹⁷ As Robert Heinaman interprets this passage, Aristotle is telling us that an agent's virtuous activity only counts as *eudaimonia* when certain further conditions are met: the virtuous agent's activity must be pleasant, it must be successful; and it must be something that is intrinsically valuable and is also not, at the same time, intrinsically evil.¹⁸ And, he suggests, these conditions will be only fulfilled when the "immediate" circumstances of an agent's action are "favorable". So, for example, punishing someone, though sometimes demanded by justice, is always an action that is, in a way, intrinsically evil. As such, administering just punishment always falls short of the unconditional exercise of virtue. Heinaman connects this discussion in *Politics* 7.13 with Aristotle's discussion of mixed actions in NE 3.1.¹⁹ For Heinaman, punishing is an example of a mixed action: it is choiceworthy *only* relative to the other options available to the agent. Heinaman finds further support for his reading in following passage from *Politics* 7.14:

[T]he whole of life is further divided into two parts, business and leisure, war and peace, and of actions some are necessary and useful, and some are noble. In these matters the same principle of preference that applies to the parts of the soul must apply also to the activities of those parts: war must be for the sake of peace, business for the sake of leisure, things necessary and useful for the sake of things noble. (*Politics* 7.14, 1333a30–37)

¹⁵ I translate χρῆσις here as "make use of" rather than "exercise" as in 1332a7–8. When Aristotle talks about the χρῆσις of a capacity or a state, like virtue, I think the natural way to translate the word is "exercise". However, this translation is awkward when Aristotle talks about the χρῆσις of tools or instruments; as such I prefer "make use of".

¹⁶ *Politics* 7.13 (1332a7–a28); translation is my own, modified from C.D.C Reeve 1998.

¹⁷ See also Price 2011, esp. 59–65, for discussion of the relevance of this passage to the role of external goods.

¹⁸ Though not directly interested in the question of external goods, Robert Heinaman offers an interpretation of this passage in the context of arguing that not all virtuous actions contribute to an agent's *eudaimonia*.

¹⁹ Heinaman 1993, 49.

Here, Aristotle distinguishes between the part of life that involves war and business, and the part of life that involves peace and leisure. Further, he distinguishes between the kinds of actions that are necessary, and the kinds of actions that are noble. As Heinaman understands it, it is the actions that occur during times of peace and leisure that are, typically, noble rather than merely necessary.

There is something very natural about Heinaman's reading of these passages. As Heinaman understands Aristotle's discussion, some circumstances are choiceworthy and wished for, others are unfavorable and painful. The former allow noble actions, while the latter often require actions that are, at least in some respect, undesirable or intrinsically evil. Still, Heinaman's interpretation is difficult to square with Aristotle's ethical theory more broadly. Specifically, some virtues do not seem to meet the three criteria he sets out: that the action be choiceworthy for its own sake, and be performed in circumstances the man of practical wisdom would wish to find himself in. Virtuous actions ranging from giving away money to abstaining from pleasures are not obviously intrinsically valuable in some way beyond their being exercises of one's virtuous character; moreover, they typically involve some sacrifice on the part of the agent, a sacrifice worth making in part because of the good ends the action aims at beyond the acting itself.²⁰ If we are to take seriously Aristotle's distinction in *Politics* 7.13 between the complete and conditional exercise of virtue, we should expect that *some* virtuous actions, and especially the virtuous actions that Aristotle treats as paradigmatic, *do* count as the complete exercise of virtue.

This worry comes out most clearly in Heinaman's discussion of courage. One consequence Heinaman draws from his view is that many standard cases of courageous actions will count as only conditional exercises of virtue, and so not constitutive of *eudaimonia*. Courage is often demanded in painful and dangerous conditions, which is to say, the sorts of conditions no one with practical wisdom would wish to find himself in. Moreover, Heinaman argues, the exercise of courage often involves a choice amongst intrinsically evil options: either a soldier abandons his army and flees the battlefield, or he stands his ground and fights. If he flees, he acts out of cowardice. If he stands and fights, he does something courageous, but he also performs the kinds of actions — killing and harming — that are not intrinsically valuable or worth choosing for their own sake.

²⁰ Elsewhere, I address the apparent tension between Aristotle's claims that virtuous actions are themselves ends, and the idea that virtuous actions typically aim at ends beyond themselves. I argue that, once we distinguish between virtuous actions and "acting virtuously" — performing a virtuous action on the basis of a virtuous character — we see that while acting virtuously is itself an end, it depends for its realization on actions that aim at ends beyond themselves. See Hirji 2018.

This consequence of Heinaman’s interpretation — that many of the most impressive courageous actions will only be conditionally exercises of virtuous, and so not constitutive of *eudaimonia* — is striking, and difficult to square with what Aristotle actually says about courageous actions in wartime. In *NE* 10.7, in arguing for the superiority of the life of contemplation over the life of practical action, Aristotle insists that, of virtuous actions, political and military actions are in fact preeminently fine and great, notwithstanding that they lack leisure and are not choiceworthy for their own sakes. These features of political and military actions make them less valuable than contemplation, but Aristotle still seems to treat them as amongst the most valuable kinds of virtuous actions. In what follows, I defend an alternative interpretation of the *Politics* 7.13 that avoids the problems facing Heinaman’s account.

3.2 The Distinction

Consider again the *Politics* 7.13 passage. Aristotle begins by claiming that *eudaimonia* is the activity and complete exercise of virtue at 1332a7–9, and glosses the complete exercise of virtue as what is not conditional but unqualified at 1332a9–10. He explains that the conditional is what is necessary and that the unqualified is what is noble (1332a10–11).²¹ At 1332a11–16 he proceeds to illustrate this distinction by distinguishing between two kinds of actions that are both from virtue (ἀπ’ ἀρετῆς): on the one hand, there are actions that are necessary, while on the other hand there are actions that aim at honors and advantage (ἐπὶ τὰς τιμὰς καὶ τὰς εὐπορίας).²² The former actions are noble in a necessary way (τὸ καλῶς ἀναγκαίως ἔχουσιν) since (γάρ) it would be more choiceworthy if these actions weren’t needed, whereas the latter actions are most noble, and unqualifiedly so. At 1332a16–18 Aristotle goes on to explain (γάρ) that while the former actions destroy bad things, the latter supply and are productive of good things. Putting this all together, we may understand the distinction between the complete and the conditional exercise of virtue as follows: the former involves actions that are most noble, or unqualifiedly noble, and supply and produce good things, whereas the latter involves actions that are necessary, have nobility only “of necessity”, and destroy bad things.

²¹ See Rogers 1994, esp. 296–298, for discussion of Aristotle’s distinction between the necessary and the noble.

²² The term *euporia* is somewhat surprising here; more common phrases translated as “advantageous” are terms like *ophelimon* or *sumpheron*. Perhaps with *euporia* Aristotle wants to pick out goods that serve as resources *haplos* rather than goods that are advantageous only relative to the circumstances, but not absolutely.

Recall that, as Heinaman reads this passage, the complete exercise of virtue is possible only in circumstances that are wished for, and this complete exercise involves performing actions that are intrinsically good and choiceworthy for their own sakes. By contrast, actions such as administering punishment fall short of the complete exercise of virtue because they are not actions one would choose to do for their own sake but instead are actions that are intrinsically evil, albeit demanded by non-ideal circumstances. Here, Heinaman seems to me to be reading more into the passage than what Aristotle actually says. Aristotle does not explicitly draw the distinction between unqualifiedly noble actions and necessary actions on the basis of whether the circumstances of a particular action are “wished for”, or on the basis of whether a particular action is intrinsically good as opposed to intrinsically evil. Instead, his final explanation of the distinction between unqualifiedly noble and necessary actions at 1332a16–18 seems to be on the basis of the *ends* at which the two kinds of actions aim. Aristotle claims that the most noble actions — presumably those that allow for the complete exercise of virtue — *aim at* honors and advantage, whereas the actions involved in the conditional exercise of virtue are only necessary.²³

If all this is right, what the passage seems to tell us is that actions are unqualifiedly noble — and so complete or unqualified exercises of virtue — when they aim to achieve ends that have positive value, such as honors and advantage. Actions

²³ Admittedly, the language Aristotle uses here — *epi* combined with the accusative — is not his standard teleological language. Still, there is clear precedent for Aristotle using *epi* combined with the accusative to pick out the ends of actions; for example in *Metaphysics* Delta 17, 1022a8, Aristotle explains that one meaning of the term *πέρας* is the end or *τέλος* of a thing, and glosses the *τέλος* as “that to which motion and action aim (τοιούτων δ’ ἐφ’ ὃ ἡ κίνησις καὶ ἡ πρᾶξις); here Aristotle uses *epi* combined with the accusative as a gloss for the end or *τέλος* of an action. See Bonitz, *Index Aristotelicus*, 268f. For another example of this kind of construction in the *Politics* referring to the end of an action, see *Politics* Book 8, 1339b29–30, where Aristotle describes people who seek amusement not so much for anything further (οὐχ ὅσον ἐπὶ πλεόν ἄλλὰ) but for the pleasure itself (καὶ διὰ τὴν ἡδονήν). In what immediately follows (1339b30–31) he goes on to describe how it has come about that men make amusements an end (συμβέβηκε δὲ τοῖς ἀνθρώποις ποιεῖσθαι τὰς παιδιὰς τέλος). Here again, I think it is natural to take the *epi* combined with accusative in 1339b29 to refer to the end at which an action aims. Moreover, given that the context of *Politics* 7.13 is one in which Aristotle is talking about virtuous actions — actions that must be done voluntarily and with knowledge — it seems plausible he is referring to the ends of the virtuous agent’s actions, rather than simply the results, whatever they happen to be. Likewise, in the lines that follow (1332a16–18), although Aristotle does not explicitly say that unqualifiedly noble actions *aim at* supplying and producing good things, and that necessary actions *aim at* destroying bad things, it seems natural to read him this way insofar as these lines are meant to explain the preceding ones. Finally, as I will suggest in Section 4.3, we find a similar distinction in *NE* 3.1 that again seems to be drawn on the basis of the ends of actions.

are only conditionally noble — and so only conditional exercises of virtue — when they aim to achieve ends that are only choiceworthy relative to the circumstances, such as the destruction of something bad, or the avoidance of some greater evil. So, presumably, a just penalty, though an exercise of justice, falls short of being unqualifiedly noble because it does not realize an end of positive value. It is unclear exactly how Aristotle is thinking about punishment here. But, if we think of corrective justice as aiming at equalizing inequalities of goods and evils resulting from interactions, it seems plausible that punishing someone destroys something bad by rectifying an existing inequality.²⁴ Or, perhaps, Aristotle is thinking that the immediate consequence of the punishment is that the individual punished is hurt or pained.²⁵ In either case, it is plausible that punishing someone, unlike an unqualifiedly noble action, does not aim at an end with positive value.

We might wonder at this point whether there really is a viable distinction between the actions that are preparatory and productive of good things, and the actions that remove or destroy something bad. We might think that anything good can be equally well thought of as the absence of something bad: safety is the removal of a threat, pleasure is the removal of pain, knowledge is the destruction of ignorance, and so on. But there is good evidence that Aristotle does countenance a distinction between goods that are unqualifiedly good, and goods that are only good relative to the circumstances. For example, in *EE* 7.2, he distinguishes between goods that are good *haplos* and goods that are only good *tini*.²⁶ Examples of the former will be goods like virtue, knowledge and things conducive to health; examples of the latter will be things like operations and medicine.²⁷ It isn't entirely clear what the basis for the distinction is. Some goods that are good *haplos* seem to be good for anyone in any condition: Aristotle offers as an example the enjoyment of health.²⁸ Other goods that are good *haplos* seem to be good for someone only so long as they are in a good condition: Aristotle offers as examples honor and wealth, goods that are subject to fortune and which the

24 For a defense of this interpretation of Aristotelian justice, see Brickhouse 2014.

25 If Aristotle is thinking about punishing in this way, it is interesting to compare his view with the discussion of punishment in the *Gorgias*. In the *Gorgias*, Socrates argues that punishing someone justly is in some way good for the person being punished. Socrates insists that “in doing something for the sake of something else” we do not will “those things which we do” but rather “that other thing for the sake of which we do them”. Perhaps this is consistent with Aristotle's idea that punishing someone might not achieve an unqualifiedly good end, but it is still choiceworthy relative to the alternative. See *Gorgias* 468b–e.

26 See Gottlieb 1991 for a helpful discussion of this distinction.

27 *EE* 7.2, 1235b32–35; see also *EE* 7.2, 1237a4–5, *Topics* 115b29–35, *Topics* 3.1, 116b8–10.

28 *Topics* III.1, 116b8–10.

unjust person tries to acquire.²⁹ By contrast, what is good *tini* is only good for someone in a particular condition: a diet of thin broth is healthy for someone recovering from an illness, but not for human beings as such and in general. Presumably, the idea here is that it is in the nature of certain kinds of goods that they are good always or for the most part for human beings given facts about human nature.³⁰ By contrast, goods that are only good *tini* are not, by their nature, good for human beings always or for the most part, but can be beneficial to human beings in particular circumstances.³¹

Setting aside the details, it seems clear Aristotle makes a principled distinction between goods *haplos* and goods *tini* and, it seems plausible that the unqualifiedly noble actions that he describes in *Politics* 7.13 will be those that aim at ends that are good *haplos*. By contrast, necessary actions will aim at ends that are only good *tini*.³²

Consider again Aristotle's subsequent discussion in *Politics* 7.14 (1333a30–37). Again, Heinaman takes the distinction between the two parts of life and the

²⁹ *EE* 8.3, 1248b31–4.

³⁰ As I understand it, the distinction between goods *haplos* and goods *tini* is distinct from the way in which what is best for someone in a particular circumstance involves hitting the mean between excess and deficiency. As Lesley Brown has argued, the mean should be understood as what is appropriate to achieving a certain kind of outcome, relative to features of a particular situation: the mean is “a normative notion, the notion of something related to human nature, needs or purposes, and which is the object of a certain kind of expertise or judgement”. (Brown 1996, 78). Just as the trainer hits the mean by correctly determining what diet and exercise best promotes the health of his trainees, so also the virtuous agent hits the mean by determining what feelings and actions are appropriate in some circumstance. In the case of the trainer, what makes his prescribed diet and exercise count as appropriate — what makes it the case that they hit the mean — is that they are conducive to his trainees' health. The ends of particular actions — a friend's happiness, victory, health, and so on — are the analogues to health: they are what make the virtuous agent's actions and feelings appropriate under a particular circumstance. The upshot is that, even once we have established that a particular good is good *haplos* there will be a further question of whether, in what way, and to what extent it is good for a particular person in a particular situation. So for example, knowledge is presumably unqualifiedly good: it is good in virtue of its nature, as a first actuality of a human being's potential for knowing. However, we can imagine cases where knowledge might not be good for a particular person at a particular time; certain kinds of knowledge in the hands of someone incurably vicious could be dangerous or destructive.

³¹ So, for example, there is nothing about the nature of losing a limb that makes it good for human beings; however the amputation of a limb can benefit human beings in certain conditions.

³² Throughout the paper, I use the language of an action *aiming* at an end so as to reflect the language Aristotle uses in this passage. In fact, there is some reason to think that, for an action to be the unqualified exercise of virtue, it must actually accomplish the end of the action, and not merely aim at it. But it would be beyond the scope of this paper to defend this in any detail. For the purposes of this paper, I hope to remain as neutral as possible on this question.

distinction between the two kinds of actions to correspond to each other such that necessary and useful actions are those that occur in military and business contexts, while those that are noble occur in peace and leisure. He takes this as further confirmation for the idea that many standard cases of courageous actions will be merely necessary and not unqualifiedly noble. But here again Heinaman seems to be reading more into the passage than what Aristotle actually says. Aristotle does not explicitly say that the actions that are necessary occur in business and military contexts, while those that are noble occur in times of peace and leisure. Rather, after drawing these distinctions, Aristotle insists that we should prefer actions that are noble over those that are necessary and useful, in the same way that we should prefer the better part of our soul over the worse, concluding: “there must be war for the sake of peace, business for the sake of leisure, things useful and necessary for the sake of things honorable.” (1333a36–7) Aristotle’s central point here seems to be that we ought to choose actions in war *for the sake of* achieving peace, to choose actions in business *for the sake of* leisure, and more generally to choose what is necessary and useful *for the sake of* what is honorable. But notice this is not equivalent to saying that actions in wartime are necessary rather than noble. Again, I have argued that what makes an action necessary rather than unqualifiedly noble is the quality of the *end* at which it aims. And here, Aristotle is specifying that the correct end of war is peace. My suggestion here is that, if peace is noble, and if courageous actions in wartime aim at peace, then these actions should count as unqualified exercises of virtue.³³ I am proposing then that so long as actions in business and war aim at the *right* kinds of ends, they are the right kinds of actions to count as unqualifiedly noble for Aristotle.

3.3 NE 3.1 and Mixed Actions

So far, I have supported my interpretation of the distinction between the complete and conditional exercise of virtue by appeal to *Politics* 7.13. Further evidence is found in *NE* 3.1. Here, Aristotle considers a puzzle that arises from his distinction

³³ There are two different kinds of cases of military action that will not meet this condition. First, as Aristotle claims in *NE* 10.7, a military action that is chosen “for the sake of being at war” is not courageous, and indeed would be “absolutely murderous”. Second, a military action might count as courageous but fall short of the complete exercise of courage if the end the agent aims at is not victory or peace, but merely the least bad amongst a range of bad options. In Section 4 I consider the example of a courageous agent faced with certain defeat in battle; he chooses to die fighting rather than surrender and be enslaved. His action is courageous but, I suggest, falls short of the full or complete expression of courage.

between voluntary and involuntary actions. Voluntary actions are those where the moving principle is in the agent herself; they are, as such, actions that are the appropriate objects of praise and blame.³⁴ By contrast, involuntary actions include those that are forced; the moving principle is external to the agent, and the agent herself contributes nothing to the action.³⁵ The puzzle arises for actions that appear to be coerced or of necessity: these seem voluntary insofar as they are chosen by the agent at the time of the action, but involuntary insofar as the agent only chooses them because of some sort of external force or threat; the actions are not “in themselves” choiceworthy. Aristotle provides two examples. First, a man who obeys the command of a tyrant to do something shameful in order to protect his family from being killed and, second, a captain who throws his cargo overboard in a storm to prevent himself and his crew from drowning. These actions are “mixed” insofar as they appear both voluntary and involuntary.

Aristotle’s solution to the puzzle is to argue that, although these actions have characteristics of both voluntary and involuntary actions, they are ultimately more like voluntary actions insofar as the action the agent performs is for the sake of an end that the agent deems to be choiceworthy *relative to the circumstances*. As Aristotle says, “they are worthy of choice at the time when they are done (αἰρεταὶ γὰρ εἰσὶ τότε ὅτε πράττονται), and the end of an action is relative to the occasion (τὸ δὲ τέλος τῆς πράξεως κατὰ τὸν καιρὸν ἐστίν).”³⁶ He suggests these actions are “in themselves” involuntary (καθ’ αὐτὰ μὲν ἀκούσια ἐστὶ), but “now and in return for these gains” (νῦν δὲ καὶ ἀντὶ τῶνδε ἐκούσια) voluntary, concluding that “[w]hat sorts of things are to be chosen in return for what it is not easy to state; for there are many differences in the particular cases.”³⁷

There are two conditions then that seem to have to be met for an action to count as mixed: first, the action is choiceworthy under the circumstances and, second, the action would not normally be choiceworthy; it is not choiceworthy as such or in general. And, crucially, what makes the action choiceworthy in the particular circumstance is that the *end* of the action is conditionally choiceworthy: the end of the action is only choiceworthy in order to avoid some greater evil. So, for example, the man under the tyrant’s control is forced to choose between harm to his family, and performing a shameful action. The ship’s captain is forced to choose between destroying valuable cargo and losing his own life and that of his crew. The ends these agents accomplish — a shameful thing, the destruction

³⁴ NE 111a22–24.

³⁵ NE 1110a1–3.

³⁶ NE 3.1 1110a12–14.

³⁷ NE 3.1, 1110b3–b8.

of wealth — are *only* worth choosing because the alternative is even worse; there is nothing intrinsically valuable about what these actions accomplish.³⁸ Indeed, they accomplish ends that are intrinsically disvaluable, but that help avoid some further evil, or achieve something valuable down the road.

To be sure, there are important differences between the context of the *Politics* 7.13 passage and that of *NE* 3.1; in the former, Aristotle is interested in what actions constitute the complete exercise of virtue, whereas in the latter he is interested in the prior question of which actions count as voluntary in the first place.³⁹ Despite the difference in context however, as in 7.13 and 7.14, we seem to get a distinction between the kinds of actions that aim at ends that are unqualifiedly good, and the kinds of actions that aim at ends that are only conditionally good, which is to say relative to the other options available.

4 External Goods and the Complete Exercise of Virtue

In this section, I argue that unless a virtuous agent is sufficiently supplied with the goods of fortune, she is likely to frequently encounter circumstances where the best action available to her is only conditionally good.

4.1 Actions and Ends

Return now to the question with which we initially started: why, if *eudaimonia* is constituted by virtuous activity, is a sufficient supply of external goods necessary to achieve *eudaimonia*. So far, I have argued that the complete exercise of virtue lies in performing actions that are unqualifiedly noble, which is to say, it lies in actions that aim to achieve ends of positive value. Where do external goods fit in? We have seen some suggestion already in both *Politics* 7.13 and *NE* 3.1. In the former, Aristotle directly ties the distinction between the unqualified and condi-

38 There is, admittedly, a difficult question of how Aristotle means to specify the ends of actions. Why think that the end of throwing the cargo overboard is the destruction of cargo rather than the preservation of life? This is a difficult question for Aristotle's philosophy of action and not one I attempt to answer here. Suffice it to say Aristotle does seem to think there is some privileged description of the end of some particular action.

39 Aristotle's interest in voluntary action is, after all, in the context of better understanding the nature of virtuous actions.

tional exercise of virtue to material conditions; he claims that the excellent man will make noble use of poverty, disease and other misfortunes, but that “blessedness lies in the opposite”. The suggestion here is that wealth and health are needed for the unqualified exercise of virtue and so also for blessedness. Likewise, we saw in *NE* 3.1 how misfortunes ranging from a bad storm to the threats of a tyrant can put a virtuous agent in a position where the best options available to her are mixed actions.

My proposal, in a nutshell, is that conditions of hardship or deprivation are likely to make it the case that the best actions available to a virtuous agent are only qualifiedly noble, aiming at ends that are choiceworthy relative to the circumstances, but not absolutely. Unless a virtuous agent is sufficiently supplied with goods of fortune, she is likely to frequently encounter circumstances where the best action available to her is simply the least bad amongst a range of bad options. Notice how this differs from Heinaman’s suggestion that conditions of hardship or difficulty will always result in actions of only conditional value. On my interpretation, conditions of hardship or difficulty — such as those encountered in wartime — may indeed make possible the finest, most noble actions. What matters, on my view, is whether the material conditions allow the virtuous agent to aim at an end that is unqualifiedly good. So long as conditions in wartime are such that the virtuous agent can stand his ground for the sake of peace and security in the *polis*, his action will count as an unqualifiedly courageous one. But compare this to a case where the virtuous agent, in wartime, is faced with certain defeat at the hands of an opposing army. Here, he may choose to fight to the death rather than surrender and be enslaved. In doing so, he does not stand his ground for the sake of victory; rather, he stands his ground merely to avoid a greater evil. His action might count as genuinely courageous but, I am suggesting, it falls short of being an unqualifiedly good action, and so an instance of the complete exercise of virtue. Or, consider a different kind of case: that of a virtuous agent who has been unjustly imprisoned. We can imagine he is faced with a choice between beating another inmate on the orders of a sadistic guard, or being beaten himself. Courage may demand that the agent submit to a beating rather than harm another inmate. If the virtuous agent chooses to endure a beating, he does not accomplish an unqualifiedly good end, but instead merely avoids an even greater bad. These are, I submit, the sorts of cases where a virtuous agent’s courage is not fully expressed. And this is not simply because the antecedent conditions themselves are not ideal, but because the options that are available to him as a result of these conditions compel him to perform actions that are only good in a qualified way.

The upshot is that, once we understand the complete exercise of virtue in terms of certain kinds of *ends*, it turns out that, unlike on Heinaman’s view,

adverse or painful conditions do not necessarily preclude the full exercise of virtue. What matters for the complete exercise of virtue is whether the conditions in question restrict the ends available to the virtuous agent such that the best ends available are only conditionally good. In this respect, my account agrees with Heinaman's: when the options available to an agent are all bad — enslavement, an ignoble death, and so on — even the most virtuous agent will not be able to engage in the *complete* exercise of virtue. By contrast, if the virtuous agent can perform an action with an unqualifiedly good end, even under the most adverse circumstances, her action counts as an instance of the complete exercise of virtue.

As I suggested in Section 2.1, there is something initially surprising about this view. It is natural to think that the virtues of character are essentially remedial: they help us deal with the conditions of hardship and deprivation that come with our embodied state. It is natural to think that, not only can a virtuous agent exercise her virtue under conditions of extreme hardship, but that these are precisely the conditions under which her virtue is most fully expressed. However intuitive this view might seem to us, I am suggesting it is not what we find in Aristotle. Rather, Aristotle seems to conceive of virtue of character as a capacity directed towards valuable goods in the realm of what is achievable in action, and as fully expressed in acting so as to realize goods with unqualified value.⁴⁰

It is illuminating to consider the analogy Aristotle draws with crafts in his discussion of fortune in *NE* 1.10. In this chapter, Aristotle is considering the extent to which the virtuous man's happiness is vulnerable to misfortune or chance events. He insists that small positive or negative changes in fortune will not affect one's happiness, but that a multitude of great events will make a virtuous man's life more blessed (εὖ μακαριώτερον τὸν βίον ποιήσει), explaining that these great events are themselves adornments of a life, but also that the virtuous agent's use of these events will be noble and good (ἡ χρῆσις αὐτῶν καλὴ καὶ σπουδαία γίνεται).⁴¹ By contrast, the opposite — many bad events — negatively affect an agent's blessedness (θλίβει καὶ λυμáίνεται τὸ μακάριον) because they bring pain and impede an agent's activities (ἐμποδίζει πολλαῖς ἐνεργείαις).⁴² Aristotle goes on to explain that, if activities are what determines the quality of a life, no blessed man can become miserable because a virtuous agent would never perform vicious actions; he will bear misfortunes well and make the best of bad circumstances (ἐκ τῶν ὑπαρχόντων ἀεὶ τὰ κάλλιστα πράττειν). Aristotle likens this to the way a good

⁴⁰ For example, Aristotle describes *phronesis* as “a capacity grasping truth involving reason to act with respect to human goods (ὥστ' ἀνάγκη τὴν φρόνησιν ἔξιν εἶναι μετὰ λόγου ἀληθῆ περὶ τὰ ἀνθρώπινα ἀγαθὰ πρακτικῆν)”. (*NE* 6.5, 1140b201)

⁴¹ 1100b25–28.

⁴² 1100b28–30.

general will make the best use of the army at his command, and likewise a shoemaker will make the best shoes out of the materials given to him.⁴³ Still, Aristotle insists, although a virtuous agent will never be miserable, he will also not attain blessedness if he experiences misfortunes like that of Priam.

We may appreciate Aristotle's position by considering the example of shoemaking. A shoemaker's art is for the sake of a certain kind of product, a shoe. We can imagine a shoemaker who is compelled to practice her art with only the most meagre of materials: she fashions shoes out of scraps of poor quality leather. Although she is using her skill to make the relevant kind of product, there is, I submit, an intuitive sense in which she isn't fully expressing or realizing her ability as a shoemaker; she isn't making the beautifully crafted and durable shoes that her technical skill equips her to make. This is not to suggest that, when she produces mediocre shoes using meagre materials, she is not expressing a high degree of skill; she surely is. Rather, it is to suggest that the art of shoemaking has, internal to it, a certain kind of normative standard: its fullest expression is not just in producing shoes, but in producing excellent shoes. The talented shoemaker falls short of the normative standard internal to her craft when she produces a mediocre shoe, even if it is the best shoe she could produce given the limited materials available to her.⁴⁴

Just as the art of shoemaking is directed at shoes, and its fullest expression lies in excellent shoes, so also we might think that virtue of character is directed at practical action, and its fullest expression is in acting well: performing virtuous actions with knowledge, for their own sake, and from a firm and unchanging character.⁴⁵ Like the shoemaker who makes the best shoe with the limited resources available to her, the virtuous agent who experiences many great misfortunes can perform the best actions available to her, actions that are genuine expressions of her virtue, but she does not fully realize or express her virtuous character in these actions. Plausibly, this is reflected in the quality of her acting. When the virtuous agent chooses to renounce her political commitments on the orders of a tyrant in order to save her family, she surely recognizes that this action

⁴³ This echoes the analogy with crafts Alexander draws, quoted in Section 2.2, note 6.

⁴⁴ Of course, the analogy here is not perfect. In the case of shoes, we can distinguish between better and worse shoes; the best exercise of the craft of shoemaking will be in the production of excellent shoes. In the case of virtue, I have suggested we can make a further distinction between actions that are unqualifiedly good and those that are only conditionally good. Because of the way in which virtue of character is a capacity directed towards human goods, the fullest expression of virtue, I am arguing, will be in actions that aim to realize unqualifiedly good ends, not merely better ends than the alternative available actions.

⁴⁵ *NE* 2.4, 1105a30–34.

is not unqualifiedly choiceworthy. Although she knows it is the best action available to her, we can suppose the quality of her *boulēsis* and *prohairesis* are different from what they would be if the action were unqualifiedly choiceworthy. Her choice and desire are, perhaps, not as wholehearted as they otherwise would be. Likewise, although she presumably takes pleasure in the action knowing that it will achieve something good down the line, we can imagine her pleasure is not as great as it otherwise would be or, indeed, is mixed with some pain.

4.2 Beauty, Good Birth, and Good Children

So far, I have argued that unless a virtuous agent is sufficiently supplied with goods of fortune, she is likely to frequently encounter circumstances where the best action available to her is only conditionally good. Conditions of hardship or deprivation often prevent a virtuous agent from fully expressing her virtue, performing actions with unqualifiedly good ends. Do all the external goods that Aristotle mentions fit with my analysis? How does my view explain the necessity of the goods Aristotle mentions in *NE* 1.8: beauty, good birth and good children?

Consider the role of beauty first. As we saw, Cooper's general strategy is to argue that goods like beauty are necessary to provide the normal and expected contexts for the exercise of various virtues. I argued that Cooper's strategy was not fully satisfying. Still, Cooper's idea that beauty makes sexual partners available might be connected to the way in which beauty makes possible intrinsically desirable ends. Specifically, beauty might be necessary to secure the *romantic* partner of one's choice.⁴⁶ It is a familiar and sometimes dismaying feature of romantic attraction that it typically requires, in addition to an appreciation of a person's character and intellect, some physical attraction. Indeed, Aristotle seems sensitive to the ways in which incidental features of a person might prevent the formation of a complete friendship between two virtuous agents; in the *EE*, he considers the possibility that an individual who smells terrible might be unable

⁴⁶ I use the example of a romantic partner because this is the clearest case of a friendship that requires some physical attraction but it seems to me plausible that Aristotle thinks good looks are needed even for platonic friendships for the reasons I describe below. I also do not mean this suggestion to be exhaustive of the role of beauty in a happy life. Presumably, there are multiple ways in which beauty might contribute to virtuous activity and therefore happiness. For example, we can imagine that, in the context of Greek politics, someone who isn't reasonably attractive would not be viewed as a leader or moral exemplar and so would be cut off from a range of unqualifiedly good actions in the political context. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for this suggestion.

to maintain virtuous friendships.⁴⁷ My suggestion is that beauty, though not the *basis* for complete friendships — including close romantic relationships — might be a *necessary condition* for such friendships; the pain caused by one’s ugliness might outweigh the pleasure caused by one’s goodness.⁴⁸ And, I want to suggest, complete friendships make possible frequent opportunities for the complete exercise of virtue. When a virtuous individual treats her spouse with generosity and respect, she does so in accordance with her spouse’s desert, and for the sake of an unqualifiedly good end, namely, the *eudaimonia* of her spouse; as such, her actions towards her spouse are complete exercises of her virtue. By contrast, my suggestion is, an ugly person might be unable to form complete friendships. Instead, she might be left to settle for lesser friendships based on utility or pleasure, and these friendships will not provide plentiful opportunities for the complete exercise of virtue. These friendships might be better than the alternative — being friendless — but as Aristotle describes them, may often involve requesting or rendering services that are morally degrading; as such, these lesser friendships — and the actions they involve — might count as conditionally but not unqualifiedly good.⁴⁹

Turn now to good birth (εὐγένεια). In the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle explains good birth as consisting in being a member of a state or race that is “indigenous or ancient” and of which the earliest leaders were distinguished men, and that continues to produce distinguished men with many admired qualities. Good birth implies that “the founders of the line have been notable for excellence or wealth or something else which is highly prized, and that many distinguished persons belong to the family (ἐκ τοῦ γένους)”.⁵⁰ One need only reflect on how, even in the present day, being born from certain backgrounds can effect one’s opportunities or choices to see how lacking a good birth might prevent one from engaging in the best kinds of virtuous actions. The race or class of an individual’s family can have an enormous affect on one’s access to opportunities and material resources, the respect and trust of others, and indeed one’s own self-esteem.⁵¹ We can imagine

47 *EE* 1237b5–7.

48 It is worth noticing that although Aristotle mentions beauty in the *NE* 1.8 passage (ἐνίωον δὲ τητῶμενοι ῥυπαίνουσι τὸ μακάριον, οἷον εὐγενείας εὐτεκνίας κάλλους), he goes on in what immediately follows to explain that a man who is extremely ugly (ὁ τὴν ιδέαν παναίσχητος) would not be altogether happy. It may be then that what he has in mind by beauty in this passage is something more like being decent looking. (*NE* 1.8, 1099b4–5)

49 See *NE* 1159b. We can imagine, for example, an individual who lavishes praise on someone undeserving of honor or respect in order to maintain a friendship of utility.

50 *Rhetoric* 1.5, 1360b32–b38.

51 It is not clear whether Aristotle thinks that good birth is intrinsically valuable. If he does, this will be a point where we are likely to disagree.

someone born in a poor black neighborhood who has, against the odds, managed to fully develop his virtuous character. However, in trying to provide for his family, he is faced with only bad options: work a demeaning job for less than a living wage, or break the law and risk his own life selling drugs. Whatever the virtuous agent chooses to do in this situation, his action is surely not unqualifiedly choiceworthy. Rather, it is an action that is made necessary by the limited possibilities or resources available to him. By contrast, someone who is born well, who is respected and trusted by others, will have the opportunity to work in noble professions where he can hope to accomplish ends that are unqualifiedly good. For example, someone who is well-born has a significantly better chance of serving in politics, where he can work to make life better for his political community; here, he is fully exercising his virtue by aiming at ends that are unqualifiedly good.

We can imagine a somewhat different story for the importance of having good children. Good children, as they become adults, can provide us with some of the most intimate and long-lasting friendships. And, as I suggested earlier, virtuous friendships provide opportunities for the complete exercise of virtue: the best kinds of friendships are, for Aristotle, ones where we wish and act well towards our friends for their own sake, because of their good characters. The end we seek to accomplish in a complete friendship is an unqualified good, namely, the *eudaimonia* of our friend. By contrast, a parent with a “bad” child, one who is vicious and resistant to moral education, may only have bad options to choose from: punish the child in order to improve his character or allow the child to continue to develop his vicious nature. Although punishment might be the best option available to the parent, and may count as the just action under the circumstances, it is, as we have seen, an example of an action that is not noble or choiceworthy in an unqualified way. Rather, I have suggested, punishing someone “destroys something bad” by rectifying an injustice or improving the bad character of the wrong-doer, but it does not accomplish an end that is unqualifiedly good.⁵²

One worry I raised for Cooper’s interpretation is that it cannot capture the way in which certain external goods are necessary for *eudaimonia* because they are intrinsically valuable. But, on the view I am defending, there is a way in which Cooper’s explanation — that good children provide opportunities for the full exercise of virtue — is consistent with the idea that good children are intrinsically valuable. I have argued that the value of virtuous actions depends in part on the value

⁵² The case of punishment or *κόλασις* is perhaps different from that of revenge or *τιμωρία*. Aristotle describes the former as being in the interests of the wrong-doer, while the latter is in the interests of the person who inflicts the suffering. Revenge provides the wronged party with satisfaction, and perhaps Aristotle thinks that this is an unqualifiedly good end in the right circumstances. See *Rhetoric* 1369b12–14 for this distinction.

of their ends; virtue of character is a capacity that equips an agent to respond appropriately to value in the world. The relationship Priam has with his child Hector is, we can imagine, an intimate friendship between two virtuous agents. The actions that Priam performs towards Hector are virtuous actions, and they are virtuous in part because Hector is good, and deserving of being a beneficiary of his virtuous actions. When Priam loses his son, he loses something of great value and as such, also loses the opportunity to engage in virtuous ways with this object of value. This is not to reduce the value of the child to the value of the virtuous activity that Priam engages in. Rather, it is to recognize the ways in which the best kinds of virtuous actions depend on the presence of valuable goods with which the virtuous agent can engage.

More generally, we have a principled explanation for how deprivation or misfortune can effect even the most virtuous agent's happiness. I have suggested different mechanisms in the case of the above goods. Sometimes, the good in question, such as beauty or good birth, provides the antecedent conditions under which an agent can perform unqualifiedly noble actions. At other times, such as with good children, the good is itself, in a way, the end of unqualifiedly virtuous action: as I suggested above, a parent acts for the sake of the well-being of her child when her child is good. What unites these explanations is the idea that, under certain conditions, a virtuous agent is prevented from performing the best kinds of actions and, as such, is prevented from fully realizing or expressing her virtuous character, and so also from fully achieving *eudaimonia*.

Notice how the role of goods like beauty, good birth and good children differs from the role of goods like wealth and political power. On my view, the latter serve as resources or instruments in accomplishing some given end, whereas the former effect what sorts of ends are available to an agent in the first place. Consider an agent who wants to help her virtuous friend cover medical expenses. The end she aims to accomplish is unqualifiedly good: to promote the well-being of her deserving friend. The extent to which she is able to accomplish this end will depend on the money she has available; money here serves as an instrument in her virtuous action. By contrast, consider again an individual who lacks virtuous friendships. Even if she has plenty of money available, she does not have the opportunity to spend this money accomplishing unqualifiedly good actions towards her friends; the actions available to her in the context of her lesser friendships will be, at best, only conditionally good.⁵³ The upshot is that we get an

⁵³ This is not to say that Aristotle's categorization of these goods is hard and fast. After all, we can imagine cases where wealth, for example, plays the latter role: someone in poverty, just like someone born from the wrong family, might be forced to choose between degrading or unlawful

explanation for the badness of certain kinds of deprivation and misfortune that goes well beyond just the mere lack of resources to accomplish one's ends.

In this paper, I have defended, in outline, an explanation for the role of external goods in Aristotle in a way that avoids the central challenges of other nearby interpretations, and does justice to Aristotle's various discussions. In doing so, I have also hoped to identify and motivate an independently interesting feature of Aristotle's ethical thought: that the goodness of virtuous actions depends in part on the value of the objects they engage with. More generally, I have hoped to suggest that the importance Aristotle places on certain goods like beauty, good birth and good children is not, as is often thought, hopelessly aristocratic. Indeed, if what I have argued is right, Aristotle is not only deeply sensitive to the ways in which our well-being depends on our material conditions and opportunities, he also offers us a distinct and compelling explanation for why we need a moderate supply of external goods in order to be happy: without certain goods, we are unable to fully express our capacity for practical agency, to fully engage with value in the world.

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employment in order to make a living. Likewise, we can imagine cases where good children serve the former role, as instrumentally useful for virtuous activity: good children can, for example, serve as collaborators in our virtuous actions. I take it that Aristotle is making a generalization in NE 1.8 about the kinds of roles these goods typically play. Plausibly, the role that these goods play will depend in part on the context.

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