Philosophy and
Phenomenological Research

Philosophy and Phenomenological Research
doi: 10.1111/phpr.12520
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What's Aristotelian about neo-Aristotelian Virtue Ethics?

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It is commonly assumed that Aristotle's ethical theory shares deep structural similarities with neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics. I argue that this assumption is a mistake, and that Aristotle's ethical theory is both importantly distinct from the theories his work has inspired, and independently compelling. I take neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics to be characterized by two central commitments: (i) virtues of character are defined as traits that reliably promote an agent's own flourishing, and (ii) virtuous actions are defined as the sorts of actions a virtuous agent reliably performs under the relevant circumstances. I argue that neither of these commitments are features of Aristotle's own view, and I sketch an alternative explanation for the relationship between virtue and happiness in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Although, on the interpretation I defend, we do not find in Aristotle a distinctive normative theory alongside deontology and consequentialism, what we do find is a way of thinking about how prudential and moral reasons can come to be aligned through a certain conception of practical agency.

Introduction

According to the neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics defended most prominently by Rosalind Hursthouse and Julia Annas, what makes certain character traits like justice or generosity count as virtues is that they reliably promote an agent's own flourishing. And, in turn, what makes certain actions count as just or generous is that they are the sorts of actions performed by just or generous agents. These two commitments, taken together, provide an explanation for why it is in an agent's own interests to be ethically good: having a virtuous character and performing virtuous actions is the most reliable path to human flourishing. Although neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics is inspired by Aristotle's ethical theory, and is often attributed to Aristotle himself, neither of these commitments are, I argue, features of Aristotle's own view. This has two significant consequences. First, we do not, as is commonly assumed, find in Aristotle a distinct normative theory alongside deontology and consequentialism. Second, although Aristotle agrees with the virtue ethicist that it is in an agent's own interests to be ethically good, his explanation for *why* this is so is importantly different, and not vulnerable to the same objections that arise for the

* I am grateful for feedback from Hendrik Lorenz, Benjamin Morison, Jessica Moss, Jeremy Reid and Daniel Wodak, as well as audiences at Bowling Green, Glendon College, Princeton, Syracuse University, University of Minnesota, University of Virginia, and Virgina Tech. I am particularly indebted to two anonymous reviewers for their valuable feedback.

virtue ethicist. In particular, on the interpretation I defend, Aristotle's ethical theory is not egoistic either in its description of an agent's motivations or in its explanation of the goodness of virtuous actions.

In §1, I review the structure of neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics. In §2, I defend an interpretation of Aristotle according to which virtuous actions are defined in terms of the good ends they aim to realize, and virtue of character is, in turn, defined as a stable disposition to perform virtuous actions with a full rational appreciation of why these actions are good, and with the corresponding desires and emotional responses. In §3, I sketch a novel explanation for how Aristotle conceives of the relationship between virtue and happiness: when a virtuous agent performs a virtuous action for the sake of its good external results, she is at once *acting virtuously*, engaging in the kind of practically rational activity that is constitutive of her own *eudaimonia.* I close by identifying some consequences of this interpretation for the contribution Aristotle might make to contemporary ethics.

I am by no means the first to challenge whether aspects of neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics are genuinely Aristotelian.[1] However, I believe this challenge is worth developing further for three reasons. First, the view that Aristotle's ethical theory shares deep structural similarities with neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics is still widely held, and so warrants renewed critical scrutiny.[2] Second, several aspects of my interpretation of Aristotle—in particular my

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1 Both Brown (2014) and Vasiliou (2011) argue, as I will, that Aristotle does not endorse a "priority of virtue" view according to which the goodness of virtuous actions is explained by reference to virtue of character. Brown suggests that it might be the responses of the virtuous agent, rather than virtue of character, that is prior to and explanatory of virtuous actions. However, on its own, this is not yet a clear and complete departure from the virtue ethicist's strategy, and, as I argue in §2.1, I do not think it is the most plausible reading of the relevant texts. Vasiliou rejects a common misreading of NE 2.4, but ultimately argues that an action does not count as *fully* virtuous unless it is performed by a virtuous agent; like Brown, he does not seem to me to be fully distancing Aristotle from a priority of virtue reading. Korsgaard (2014), Whiting (2002), and Vasiliou (2011) all offer ways of thinking about how a virtuous agent can perform a virtuous action for the sake of its good results while still choosing it for its own sake. Whiting (2002) also offers a way of understanding how choosing a virtuous action for its own sake is a way of choosing it for the sake of *eudaimonia*; my positive view shares a number of similarities with hers though we differ in the explanation of how being virtuous is a way of achieving *eudaimonia*. Irwin (1985) and Kraut (1989) go further in distancing themselves from a priority of virtue reading: both argue that virtuous actions are good because of their good ends, and not because of the character of the agent performing the actions. But, as I argue in §2.3 and §3.1, neither give a satisfying account of the relationship between virtue and happiness once the priority of virtue reading is rejected. A different sort of approach is defended by Buckle (2002) who argues that Aristotle is not properly described as a virtue ethicist insofar as he defends a "law conception" of ethics that is influenced by his moral psychology; I do not find this reading persuasive, and do not discuss it further in this paper. Mckerlie (1998) argues against an egoistic eudaimonist interpretation of Aristotle's ethics, and instead defends an "altruistic eudaimonism". Nussbaum (1999) suggests that the question of whether Aristotle was a virtue ethicist is ill-formed because there is no single set of concerns that unifies virtue ethicists; for my purposes, virtue ethics is unified by the two commitments I list above, which for all I say here can be motivated by a variety of concerns.

2 For some recent and representative examples of the central features of virtue ethics being attributed to Aristotle, see for example Shafer-Landau in his recent anthology: "There has been a resurgence of interest in virtue ethics over the past three decades, most of it inspired by reconsiderations of Aristotle's ethical thought…[V]irtue ethicists will typically place a kind of explanatory priority on the virtues of character, rather than on moral rules of conduct. Whereas other kinds of ethical theory will ordinarily seek to identify a fundamental moral rule (say, the principle of utility), and then define a virtue as a steady disposition to conform to such a rule, the virtue ethicist will seek to explain appropriate conduct by reference to action that exemplifies virtue. Actions are morally good, for instance, because they exemplify virtuous character traits, and not because they conform to some already specified moral rule" (2013, p. 611). See also James Rachels (2010, p. 182-3); Julia Driver, (2007, p. 137-140).

explanation of how Aristotle conceives of the relationship between virtue and *eudaimonia* in §3—are original, and provide independently important contributions to interpretive debates within Aristotelian scholarship. Third, other discussions of this topic have not been wholly satisfying in large part because they have failed to explain how Aristotle's ethical theory, taken as a whole, remains coherent once certain aspects of the virtue ethicist's interpretation are rejected. I offer the kind of comprehensive treatment of the structure of Aristotle's ethical theory that I think is necessary to vindicate a non-virtue-ethical reading of Aristotle. Admittedly, discussing Aristotle's theory at this level of generality comes with some cost: I cannot, in this paper, do justice to the depth and complexity of many of the relevant interpretive debates about particular aspects of Aristotle's view. I defend my position on some of these debates in more detail in other work. Additionally, where appropriate, I will point the reader to the secondary literature that focuses on the relevant details.

Some final preliminary remarks. There are a number of issues often raised in connection with Aristotelian virtue ethics that I do not address here. For example, I set aside entirely the question of whether Aristotle was a particularist or generalist, or whether Aristotle meant to specify universal moral rules or principles; I take this question to be distinct from the one I am interested in here.[3] I also set aside entirely consideration of other virtue ethical theories, or virtue-centric theories, that do not purport to be Aristotelian.[4] Finally, my interest here is not in assessing the viability of the neo-Aristotelian virtue ethicist's project, taken on its own.[5] Rather, my interest in whether neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics, however compelling it is, is in fact representative of the view we find in Aristotle. Moreover, I am not assuming Aristotle offers us a fully worked out normative theory in the NE; indeed, I do not think Aristotle is centrally concerned with offering an account of the value of virtuous actions. I am interested here in how he conceives of the metaphysical explanation for the value of virtuous actions and their relationship to happiness, and I am assuming we can attempt to reconstruct this from careful consideration of what he does say in the NE.

1.

Rosalind Hursthouse defends what is perhaps the most influential and developed version of neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics, and it will be helpful to say more about the structure of her view to see better how it contrasts with the view I argue we find in Aristotle.[6] She explains neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics as an approach in normative

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3 For discussion of whether Aristotle was a particularist, see Irwin (2000) and Leibowitz (2013). For more general discussions of particularism, see for example Crisp (2007), Dancy (1993, 2004), Hooker & Little (2000).

4 See for example Arpaly (2002), Driver (2013), Foot (1978), Hurka (2000), Sherman (2004), Slote (1992, 2001), Swanton (2003), Zagzebski (1996).

5 For good discussion that seeks to articulate, and assess, the neo-Aristotelian virtue ethicist's project see, for example, Copp & Sobel (2004), Kawall (2009), Swanton (2013), Watson (1990). See Kamtekar (2004) for a helpful response, on behalf of virtue ethics, to situationist critiques.

6 Hursthouse herself explains that her view is neo-Aristotelian insofar as it "aims to stick pretty close to his ethical writings wherever else it can" although departs with Aristotle when it comes some of his objectionable views about women and slaves. (2001 p. 8-9)

theory that explains the goodness of actions in terms of the concept of virtue, or moral character, rather than in terms of either duties and rules, or the consequences of actions.[7] Central to her project is a commitment to a certain form of ethical naturalism, a "revival" of what we find in Aristotle, which she explains as "broadly, the enterprise of basing ethics in some way on considerations of human nature, on what is involved in being good *qua* human being".[8] The ethical naturalism she proposes is meant to provide criteria for a particular character trait's being a virtue. For a character trait to count as a virtue, it must meet what she calls "Plato's requirements" on the virtues, namely, that the trait (i) benefits its possessor, enabling her to flourish or live a life that is *eudaimon*; (ii) makes its possessor a good human being, because human beings need virtues to flourish *qua* human beings, living characteristically good or *eudaimon* human lives; (iii) these two features must be interrelated in a way that will be apparent to someone with a virtuous outlook.[9] For Hursthouse, virtues are character traits that human beings need in order to flourish or live well; they do this by reliably disposing her to take certain kinds of considerations as reasons for action.[10] And, what she seems to have in mind is not simply that character traits we can independently establish as being virtuous also happen to be needed for a human being to flourish. Rather, the fact that a character trait promotes an agent's flourishing seems to be part of what constitutes it *as* a virtue: character traits count as virtues in part because they are such as to contribute to an agent's flourishing.[11]

Defining virtue of character in terms of human flourishing, Hursthouse suggests that, in turn, we can define what it is for an action to be virtuous in terms of the concept of virtue. So, for example, when the virtue ethicist explains the goodness of giving money to someone in need, she does so in terms of the way in which this action is the generous or charitable action under the circumstance, rather than by identifying the way it accords with some general moral principle, or by appeal to the goodness of its consequences. Indeed, Hursthouse suggests the virtue ethicist can even offer something like ethical rules or principles in terms of the concept of virtue. Specifically, she suggests that an action is right "if and only if it is what a virtuous agent would characteristically (i.e. acting in character) do in the circumstances".[12] This is not meant merely as an epistemological claim: the claim is not simply that we ought to trust the judgement of the virtuous person in determining which actions are good in a given circumstance. Rather, Hursthouse seems to be committed to a stronger metaphysical claim, that part of what *constitutes* an action as good is the fact that it is such as to be performed by a virtuous agent: virtue of character is included as part of the specification of what makes an action good. This is, for Hursthouse,

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7 Hursthouse (2001) p. 1.

8 Hursthouse (2001) p. 192.

9 Ibid. p. 167.

10 Ibid. p. 167, 169.

11 See Copp & Sobel (2004) for a helpful discussion of this commitment, and some challenges it might seem to invite. As they argue, it is unclear whether Hursthouse wants to defend a moralized conception of flourishing such that it is falls out of the definition of flourishing, properly conceived, that virtue is necessary for it, or whether we can specify what it is to live a flourishing life independent of reference to the virtues, and then establish that the virtues are whatever character traits reliably promote flourishing so understood.

12 Hursthouse (2001) p. 28.

what makes the view a distinctive normative theory, alongside deontology and consequentialism: virtue of character plays some central role in explaining the goodness of actions.

The overall picture we seem to find in Hursthouse is one on which we analyze what it is for a character trait to be a virtue in terms of the trait's contribution to human flourishing and, in turn, analyze what it is for an action to be virtuous in terms of the relationship it bears to a virtuous character. These two commitments, taken together, distinguish neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics from other prominent ethical theories in at least two important ways. First, by analyzing the goodness of actions in terms of the goodness of character, neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics offers a distinct normative theory alongside deontology and consequentialism. Second, by analyzing virtue of character in terms of human flourishing, the theory provides an explanation for why it is in an agent's own interests to be ethically good: having a virtuous character and performing virtuous actions is the most reliable path to human flourishing.[13]

2.

In this section, I ask how Aristotle understands the connection between virtuous actions and virtue of character. As we have seen, Hursthouse defends a view according to which virtue of character is prior to and explanatory of the goodness of actions: call this the priority of virtue view. In §2.1, I argue that, on the most plausible interpretation of the relevant passages, Aristotle does not endorse the priority of virtue. In §2.2, I defend an alternative interpretation according to which virtuous actions are good because of the ends they aim to realize. Though much of my discussion in this section develops and extends arguments made by other scholars, I also defend an important piece of the positive view I develop in §3: I argue that Aristotle draws a robust distinction between virtuous actions and what I call "acting virtuously", performing virtuous actions in the way or manner of a virtuous agent.

2.1

One apparently strong piece of evidence in favor of the priority of virtue reading of Aristotle is in NE 2.4, in one of the central passages where Aristotle considers the relationship between a virtuous character and virtuous actions. Here, Aristotle asserts that "actions are called just or temperate when they are the sort that a just or temperate person would do" (1105b7-9).[14] His claim here seems to echo Hursthouse's thought that the virtuous actions are those that a virtuous agent would perform under the relevant circumstances. And, indeed, this is how a number of commentators have read Aristotle's claim. C.W. Taylor in his Clarendon commentary, insists that Aristotle "here assigns definitional priority to the agent over the act" such that, for example, "courageous acts are defined as the sort of thing that the courageous person does"

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13 For concerns that the resulting picture is objectionably egoistic, see, for example, Copp & Sobel (2004), Hurka (2013), Mckerlie (1998). For a response on behalf of virtue ethics, see Annas (2007).

14 Translations are my own, modified from Terence Irwin; *Nicomachean Ethics* Hackett Publishing, 2000. Given the difficult questions about the relationship between the two texts, I do not here discuss Aristotle's views in the *Eudemian Ethics*.

and concludes that the theory is therefore an 'agent-centered', as opposed to an 'act-centered' one.[15]

This reading is a mistake, and to see why, it is important to consider the broader context of the passage.[16] Aristotle begins the chapter by addressing a worry about the acquisition of virtue: on Aristotle's view, we are meant to acquire a virtuous character by performing virtuous actions but, so the worry goes, it is unclear how we can perform virtuous actions before we are in fact virtuous.

Aristotle's response to this worry comes in two parts. First, he draws an analogy between virtue of character and *technē,* the virtue of the rational part of the soul concerned with production,—and then he draws a disanalogy. Consider first the analogy between virtue of character and grammatical knowledge, a kind of *technē*. Aristotle argues that even in the case of crafts, it is not true that an individual counts as having a certain skill or ability—as being grammatical or musical—just so long as she can produce a certain kind of result. Rather, Aristotle insists, someone only counts as being a grammarian (*grammatikos)*—as herself possessing the grammatical *technē*—when she can both produce a grammatical result (*grammatikon*), and do so "grammatically" (*grammatikōs*), which is to say, to produce a grammatical result as an expression of grammatical knowledge she in fact possesses (*kata tēn en hautō grammatikēn*). On the reading I endorse, Aristotle is suggesting that the same holds in the case of virtue: someone can perform a virtuous action without having a virtuous character. However, she only acts "virtuously" when she performs the action as an expression of a character she in fact possesses. If this reading is correct, the first part of Aristotle's response to the worry is simply to deny that, if someone produces a just or temperate action, she thereby counts as being just or temperate.

Admittedly many commentators opt for an alternative, more deflationary reading of this passage. As Marta Jimenez details, these commentators take Aristotle to be speaking loosely here in describing the actions a non-virtuous agent performs as just or temperate: the actions a non-virtuous agent performs are not "strictly virtuous",[17] but rather are vir-

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15 C.W. Taylor (2006) p. 94.

16 I discuss this passage, and the significance of the distinction between acting virtuously and virtuous actions in more detail in Hirji (forthcoming). See also Brown (2014), esp. p. 78-79 on the interpretation of this passage and its relevance for determining whether Aristotle subscribes to the priority of virtue thesis we find in neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics. Brown suggests that it is the responses of the virtuous agent, rather than virtue of character, that is prior to and explanatory of virtuous actions. This is still a version of the priority of virtue view, and one that does not seem well-supported by the text. It seems more natural to think it is acting virtuously that is defined in terms of virtuous actions and not vice versa. See also Jimenez (2016) esp. p. 12-24, and Vasiliou (2011), p. 173-183. Jimenez defends something like the distinction I argue for here between a virtuous action and acting virtuously. As part of her account of the mechanism of habituation, Jimenez argues that, although a non-virtuous agent does not fully meet the conditions of acting virtuously, she will often perform virtuous actions with much of the same motivation as a virtuous agent, choosing the action for the sake of the noble. On my view, an action is virtuous in virtue of objective features it has independent of the motivations of the agent performing the action. Vasiliou, in many ways, defends a similar reading of this passage, but ultimately defends a version of the "deflationary account" according to which a virtuous action performed by a non-virtuous agent does not count as *fully* virtuous.

17 Hardie (1968) p. 104-5.

tuous "in an equivocal sense"[18] or "in a minimal sense",[19] not "in the same full sense as those which we do when our *hexis* is fully formed".[20] On this reading, Aristotle is identifying further conditions that must be met for an *action* to count as virtuous, namely that it be done with knowledge, for its own sake, and from a firm and unchanging character. If the deflationary reading is right, it seems to count in favor of the priority of virtue interpretation: Aristotle is defining virtuous actions at least in part in terms of virtue of character.

Part of the motivation for this more deflationary reading is to make sense of the second part of Aristotle's response to the original puzzle. Here, Aristotle draws a disanology between ethical virtue and *technē*: they differ in that, in the case of a *technē*, producing a grammatical result without the grammatical *technē* still results in something that has been "produced well". The same is not true in the case of virtue because, Aristotle explains, for an action to count as having been "done well"—justly or temperately—the agent performing the virtuous action must be in the right state when she performs the action: she must perform the action with knowledge, choose to perform it "for its own sake" and she must perform it "from a firm and unchanging state."[21]

However, there are good reasons to resist this deflationary reading, and so also be skeptical of the priority of virtue interpretation.[22] First, the deflationary reading does not make good sense of the argument of the chapter as a whole. If the purpose of the disanalogy is to identify the further conditions that must hold for an action to count as genuinely virtuous, it is hard to see what the purpose of the prior analogy was. Why would Aristotle bother drawing a distinction between a just action and acting justly if he meant in what immediately follows to collapse the distinction? It makes better sense of the passage overall to read Aristotle as assuming this distinction between a virtuous action and "acting virtuously" in this second part of his response. On this reading, Aristotle is not identifying further conditions that need to be met for an action to count as a fully just or temperate action. Rather, Aristotle is identifying further conditions that need to be met for a just or temperate action to count as having been done justly or temperately. The point of the contrast then is to show that what we care about in the case of crafts—what the point is of having a technical skill in the first place—is the quality of the product that results; a *technē* is for the sake of its product, and the value of its exercise derives from the value of the product it results in. By contrast, there is more to what we care about—

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18 Stewart (1892) p. 183.

19 Vasiliou (2007) p. 51. In his 2011 paper, Vasiliou defends a sophisticated version of the deflationary reading. He argues that Aristotle cannot endorse the "metaphysical priority of the agent" on which virtuous actions are virtuous because they are performed by virtuous agents: some actions are "to be done" in certain circumstances independent of the state of the agent. But, he argues, Aristotle also does not seem to entirely accept the "metaphysical priority of the act" according to which virtuous agents are virtuous because they perform virtuous actions. Vasiliou suggests that requirement an action be chosen for its own sake affects both the agent and the action, such that whether an action is chosen for its own sake affects the nature of the action itself (p. 181). This is where my view differs from that of Vasiliou. I do not see why we should think the action itself is different when it is chosen for its own sake; instead, when a virtuous action that is not chosen for its own sake has not been done virtuously.

20 Joachim (1951) p. 79.

21 NE 2.4, 1105a26-1105a34.

22 Jimenez (2016), especially p. 18-24. I agree with Jimenez that the deflationary view is mistaken, although Jimenez puts this distinction to a rather different purpose.

more to what virtue of character is *for*—than merely reliably producing a certain kind of action.

A second reason to resist the deflationary reading is that we find the distinction between a virtuous action and "acting virtuously" elsewhere in the NE, and this gives some evidence for thinking Aristotle is not simply speaking loosely in this passage. For example, in NE 6.12, Aristotle distinguishes between performing a just action (*ta dikaia*) and performing a just action in the state of a virtuous person (*to pōs echonta prattein*); a non-virtuous agent can do the former, but only a virtuous agent who possesses practical wisdom can do the latter.[23] Again, the lesson seems to be that a non-virtuous agent can perform a virtuous action, but only a virtuous agent can perform it "virtuously", in the way or manner of a virtuous agent.[24]

We should then resist the deflationary reading. Rather, on a natural reading of the passage, virtuous actions are defined independently of virtuous agents, and virtuous agents are individuals who perform virtuous actions virtuously: with knowledge, choosing them for their own sake, and acting from a firm and unchanging character. Return now to Aristotle's claim that "actions are called just or temperate when they are the sort the just or temperate person would do" at 1105b7-9. An alternative reading, more plausible in light of what has come before, is that Aristotle is making a kind of epistemological claim.[25] He is not asserting that virtuous actions are constituted as such by the relationship they bear to a virtuous character. Rather, he is suggesting that the best way to identify which actions are virtuous is by relying on the judgement of the virtuous agent. The details of particular circumstances are so variable that no general rule can be applied to particular circumstances in order to identify the virtuous action. Indeed, in the following sentence, Aristotle qualifies his initial claim: "[b]ut the just and temperate person is not one who [merely] does these actions, but the one who does them in the way in which just or temperate people would do them".[26] Here again, Aristotle suggests a view opposite to that of the virtue ethicists: we define what it is for a character to be virtuous in terms of what it is for an action to be virtuous. Specifically, virtue of character is a stable disposition to correctly identify and be moved to perform a good action in a particular circumstance with a full appreciation of the reasons for doing so, and with desires that align with the judgements of one's reason.

2.2

If what I have argued is right—if Aristotle does not endorse a priority of virtue view—what explains the goodness of virtuous actions on his ethical theory? In fact, there is good evidence that Aristotle endorses a remarkably common-sense view about the source

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23 As Jimenez argues, Aristotle offers a parallel distinction between performing unjust actions and being unjust in NE 5.6, 1134a17-23. (Jimenez 2016, p.12, note 10)

24 For a similar distinction between virtuous actions and acting virtuously, see Jimenez (2016), esp. p. 4, 15-18, 21-22. See also Meyer (2016) for a similar distinction between virtuous actions and virtuous agency, or acting virtuously.

25 For a version of this epistemological reading, see also Brown (2014) esp. 78-79, and Vasiliou (2011) esp. 176-179. Vasiliou helpfully distinguishes "definitional priority" understood as epistemological thesis from the issue of "metaphysical priority". See also Morisons's criticisms of Taylor's view on the question of definitional priority, as well as a version of this suggestion, in his book review: 2007, p. 243-245.

26 1105b99-11.

of value of virtuous actions: namely, that they aim to achieve good ends in the political community, either for the agent herself or for others.

The clearest evidence that Aristotle defines what it is to be a virtuous action in terms of the ends of the action and not in terms of virtue of character comes in Aristotle's detailed account of the virtues in Books 3-5. As Jennifer Whiting argues, "each of the canonical virtues is associated with a certain sort of external result at which stereotypically virtuous actions of the relevant sort typically aim".[27] So, for example, the generous agent that Aristotle describes in NE 4.1 is one who gives in the right amounts to the right people at the right times, and does not give to the wrong people, or for the wrong reasons, or at the wrong times. And what sets the standard of correctness for paradigmatically generous actions—what makes the generous agent's use of wealth appropriate in a particular circumstance—seems to be the way in which the generous agent's spending benefits others.[28]

As Irwin and Kraut have also argued, something similar holds in the case of other paradigmatic virtues.[29] The courageous agent is one who experiences the appropriate amount of fear with respect to the right things, with the right aim, in the right way and at the right time. And the greatest demonstrations of courage are in battle, where the courageous agent is willing to face the prospect of death in order to secure the safety and security of the polis. Likewise, the temperate agent is one who experiences the appropriate pleasures and pains with respect to bodily appetites. Specifically, he has a moderate desire for the things that are conducive to health and good condition, and for other pleasant things that are not hindrances to these ends.[30] What sets the standard of correctness for the temperate agent's pleasures and pains is in part what is conducive to some external end, in this case the health and good condition of the body. So also in the case of justice, Aristotle claims that paradigmatically just actions are those that aim a proportionate distribution of benefits and harms necessary to ensure the stability of the polis.[31] As Whiting argues, justice aims at a particular kind of external result, namely, "the state of affairs in which each person has his or her fair share of beneficial and harmful things."[32] In the case of each of these virtues, Aristotle's characterization of the paradigmatically virtuous actions is, in part, in terms of the kinds of externals ends at which they aim. We find an even stronger statement of this idea in Book 1 of the *Rhetoric,* albeit in a passage where Aristotle is reporting the *endoxa* or common opinions. Here, he claims that virtue is typically understood as being a capacity to "provide and preserve good things", and "to confer many great benefits, and benefits of all kinds on all occasions".[33]

An additional piece of evidence in favor of explaining the goodness of virtuous actions in terms of the goodness of their ends is the way Aristotle describes virtue of character itself. Roughly speaking, Aristotle characterizes the virtuous agent in terms of two kinds of excellence: an excellence in her non-rational desiderative states, and an excellence in her practical reason. On the non-rational side, the virtuous agent exhibits

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27 Whiting (2002) p. 280.

28 1120a23, 1120b1-3.

29 See Irwin (1985), especially p. 131-138; see also Kraut (1989), Ch. 2.

30 1119a15-18.

31 1132b31-33a2.

32 Whiting (2002) p. 278-9.

33 *Rhetoric* 1.9, 1366a36-1366b4.

the emotional responses and pleasures appropriate to particular circumstances; her emotions hit the mean with respect to excess and deficiency. This part of the soul, though not itself capable of reason, is rational in a way insofar as it is obedient to reason. On the rational side, the virtuous agent exhibits an excellence in deliberation, which involves an ability to determine the best means of accomplishing a given end, as well as excellence in decision, which involves a grasp of the correct reasons for performing a given action.[34] And, though Aristotle treats virtue of character and *phronesis* separately, it becomes clear by Book 6 that both are exercised, and moreover work in concert, when a virtuous agent performs a virtuous action. In what follows, I treat acting virtuously as the exercise of both character virtue and *phronesis*, taken together.[35]

Significantly, Aristotle characterizes *phronesis* as a developed capacity that is directed towards "human goods" in the realm of what is achievable in action.[36] And, elsewhere Aristotle argues that we define a capacity in terms of its corresponding activity, and we define the activity in terms of its proper objects.[37] So, for example, the capacity for sight is defined in terms of the activity of seeing which is in turn defined in part in terms of visible objects. Likewise, the capacity for theoretical rationality is defined in terms of the activity of contemplation which is in turn defined in part in terms of intelligible objects. Without evidence for thinking that virtue is an exception, we should expect that a virtuous state is similarly defined in terms of its proper activity, virtuous activity, and that this activity is itself defined in part in terms of its proper objects.[38] And, Aristotle suggests, the proper objects of virtue are the human goods achievable in action: goods like pleasure, happiness, knowledge, wealth and so on. These are precisely the sorts of goods that appear to be the ends of virtuous actions in the passages discussed above.[39]

2.3

So far, I have argued against a priority of virtue reading of Aristotle. In its place, I have argued that the goodness of virtuous actions is explained in terms of the goodness of the ends they aim to achieve. The elements of my interpretation so far are not wholly original, but they remain controversial. Before we proceed, it will be helpful to forestall some potential objections.

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34 For a recent and compelling discussion of interpreting *orthos logos* in the NE as the grasp of an explanatory account, see Moss (2014).

35 See 6.13 (1144b30-1145a2) and NE 6.2 (1139a33-35). I mean to remain neutral, or as neutral as possible, on the question of how virtue of character and *phronesis* are related. For some recent discussion of this question see Lorenz (2009), Taylor (2006, p. 106).

36 See for example NE 6.5, 1140b20-1.

37 The most explicit statement of this commitment is in the *De Anima* 2.4 (415a16-415a20). In NE 2.5 Aristotle insists that virtues are not *dunameis* because "we are neither called good nor bad, nor are we praised or blamed, insofar as we are simply capable of feelings" and that "while we have capacities by nature, we do not become good or bad by nature." (1106a6-10). Aristotle is not, I take it, denying that virtue of character is a *dunamis* in the broad sense of the term, but rather is only denying that virtue of character is a *mere dunamis*. Rather, like *technē* it is a *hexis*, a developed state of a *dunamis*.

38 Because "acting virtuously" is defined in part in terms of virtuous actions, I don't think it matters much whether we think of the proper activity of virtue as "acting virtuously" or as virtuous actions.

39 Santas (1996), p. 69 argues along similar lines although he suggests that virtue of character be defined in terms of virtuous activity; he does not seem to think there are any proper objects of virtuous activity with respect to which the activity is defined.

First, we might worry that the view I am defending conflicts with a claim Aristotle makes in the NE 2.4 passage we saw earlier. Again, in this passage, Aristotle insists that, amongst the conditions for acting virtuously, a virtuous agent must choose to perform the virtuous action *for its own sake*. If the virtuous agent chooses just or generous actions for their own sake, it seems that these actions should be choiceworthy in and of themselves, regardless of their consequences, when they are performed by the virtuous agent. But, on the view, I am defending, virtuous actions are *not* choiceworthy for their own sake. Rather, they are choiceworthy for the sake of the good ends they aim to realize.

In fact, it is a mistake to read Aristotle's claim here—that the virtuous agent chooses the virtuous action for its own sake—as meaning that the virtuous agent chooses the action as valuable independent of its results or consequences. Rather, the intended contrast here is between performing an action for the sake of the reasons that make it good and performing it for some other reason incidental to its being virtuous.[40] This is clear in NE 6.12 where Aristotle again invokes the distinction between performing a virtuous action, and performing it virtuously. Aristotle argues that "some people who do just acts are not necessarily just, i.e. those who do the acts ordained by the laws either unwillingly or owing to ignorance, or for some other reason and not for the sake of the acts themselves" and, as in NE 2.4, insists that "in order to be good one must be in a certain state when one does the several acts, i.e., one must do them as a result of choice and for the sake of acts themselves".[41] The contrast here is between choosing just actions for their own sake, and choosing just actions for some other reason besides their being just.[42] If this is right, the virtuous agent's choosing the virtuous action for its own sake is compatible with its being for the sake of an end beyond itself.

A second objection is that Aristotle seems to suggest alternative explanations for the goodness of virtuous actions: for example, he claims that virtuous actions consist in a mean or intermediate between extremes,[43] and also claims that they are choiceworthy for the sake of the fine or *kalon*.[44] Why think it is their good results, rather than the fact they are a mean, or that they are *kalon*, that explains why virtuous actions are good? In fact, there is good reason to think neither of these descriptions captures what actually makes virtuous actions good. Consider first Aristotle's characterization of virtue as a mean. As Lesley Brown has argued, the mean here 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".[45] Just as

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40 As Whiting (2002) p. 274-6 argues, we find this same distinction in Aristotle's discussion of friendship. She argues we should think of an agent choosing an action for its own sake as analogous to the way a virtuous friend chooses her friend for her own sake—for the sake of those features that make her good —rather than for the sake of the utility or pleasure the friend provides.

41 NE 6.12, 1144a11-20.

42 As Whiting (2002) p. 280 argues, "[T]alk of choosing a virtuous *action* for itself is thus elliptical for talk of aiming at a certain sort of *result* for *it*self – elliptical, that is, for talk of aiming at a certain sort of result simply for the sake of that *result*". See also Vasiliou (2011) p. 182-3.

43 Aristotle describes virtue of character as a mean state (NE 2.6 1106a14-15) and insists that virtue finds and chooses what is the mean in both feelings and actions (1106b16-18, 1107a2-6). For discussion of the doctrine of the mean, see for example Brown (1997, 2014), Curzer (1996), Hardie (1964), Leighton (1995).

44 See for example, NE 3.7 1116a12-15, 4.3 1123a24-6, 8.13 1162b36-1163a1. For discussion of the way virtuous actions are for the sake of the *kalon* see Irwin (1985), Lear (2004), Rogers (1999).

45 Brown (1996) p. 78. See also Brown (2014).

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. What we want in the case of virtue is the analogue to health: we want to know what makes the virtuous agent's actions and feelings appropriate under a particular circumstance; to say that virtue is a mean and that the virtuous agent hits the mean does not yet answer this question.

Something similar holds for Aristotle's characterization of virtuous actions as being for the sake of the *kalon*. For Aristotle, an action's being chosen for the sake of the *kalon* is compatible with it being chosen for its own sake, which is to say, for the features that make it good; although not identical with the good or *agathon* it seems that for Aristotle, if something is good it is fine and vice-versa. And, as Gabriel Richardson Lear has argued, the concept of the *kalon* seems to invoke the idea of symmetry or proper arrangement: we should perhaps understand the *kalon* as a kind of aesthetic property that the good has, that gives pleasure to the virtuous agent.[46] But again, this is not yet to identify the good-making feature of virtuous actions; whatever the *kalon* is, it seems to be a property that all good actions have, in virtue of their goodness.[47]

Consider now a third, more serious, objection that I think explains much of the reluctance to fully endorse the kind of interpretation I have defended so far. If what I have argued is right—if what it is to for an action to be virtuous is characterized independent of any reference to the virtuous agent's character or her flourishing we are left with the question of how virtue and happiness are related. This is a problem because, at least until NE 10.7-8, Aristotle seems to present a life of ethical virtue as the way to achieve a happy life. Indeed, on a standard reading of the NE, Aristotle is a eudaimonist: he holds that an agent *ought* to choose all things for the sake of her own *eudaimonia*.[48] But on the view I have defended so far, the virtuous agent chooses virtuous actions for the sake of their good external results, many of which have nothing to do with her own well-being. The upshot is that, on the view I have defended so far, it isn't clear how being virtuous reliably promotes an agent's own *eudaimonia*.

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46 Lear (2006). See also Rogers (1994) who argues that the *kalon* should be understood both in terms of what is appropriate and what is praiseworthy. But, as with the mean, I do not think we should take this as substantive characterization of the *kalon:* we should expect Aristotle to have some explanation of what makes certain kinds of actions appropriate or fitting in a particular situation. Owens (1981) by contrast argues that the *kalon* carries it a sense of force or obligation; what is *kalon* ought to be done. I do not see evidence for this view in Aristotle's texts.

47 See also Irwin (1985), esp. p. 129-136, who argues that the *kalon* is closely related to the common good.

48 Irwin (1985), for example, insists that we are used to "the assumption that Aristotle's ethical theory is eudaimonistic, deriving claims about the virtues from claims about the human good, happiness, which is the goal of virtuous action"; he claims that, properly understood, this assumption is "uncontroversial" (p. 120). Although there is broad consensus that Aristotle is committed to some form of *eudaimonism*, there is a disagreement about the details. Some take *eudaimonism* to be a psychological thesis: an agent does, or ought to do, all things for the sake of her own *eudaimonia*. Some take it as a metaphysical thesis: what *makes* an action good is that it promotes an agent's own *eudaimonia*. Some take it as both. For an influential discussion of *eudaimonism*, see Vlastos (1991). For further discussion calling into question Aristotle's commitment to various forms of *eudaimonism*, see Heinaman (1993), Mckerlie (1998), Roche (1992).

One initially attractive strategy in the face of this puzzle is to argue that, properly understood, the good of others is part of an individual's own good. Terence Irwin, for example, argues that (i) *eudaimonia* consists in the full realization of an agent's rational capacities, (ii) an agent is only able to *fully* realize her rational capacities in the context of close friendships and a good political community, and (iii) close friendships and a good political community are only possible when an agent has genuinely altruistic motives in acting for the sake of her friends and community. Although Irwin seeks to justify ethical behaviour in light of an agent's own self-interest, he is careful to avoid attributing to Aristotle an unsophisticated ethical egoism. He suggests that Aristotle's discussion of close friendships provides a model for understanding the virtuous agent's altruistic concerns more broadly. The virtuous agent cares to develop and preserve close friendships because of the way they are good for her, but the friendship itself involves the virtuous agent seeking to promote the good of her friend for the friend's own sake, because of the qualities that make her good. Irwin suggests that we can extend this framework to understand how the virtuous agent can seek to promote the good of the political community as a whole. The virtuous agent is benefitted by her friendships and her political community, but she only realizes the full benefits in the form of rational activity when she chooses the good of her friends and political community for their own sake.

Although I think Irwin and others are right to characterize virtuous actions in terms of way they benefit others, this sort of strategy is, I think, ultimately unsuccessful. One worry that Irwin himself acknowledges is the limited textual evidence for thinking that Aristotle means to model relationships in the political community along the lines of a close friendship. A second worry is whether such an interpretation can give a coherent account of the virtuous agent's motivations. Irwin argues that friendship provides us a way to see how self-love and altruism are not necessarily in tension: when we love our friends for their own sake, we make possible relationships that provide us security and assistance, as well as beneficiaries and collaborators in our virtuous actions. Extending this to the political community as a whole, Irwin's picture seems to be one where we choose to cultivate altruistic concerns for our fellow citizens because of the way the community will ultimately benefit us. The worry here is how to spell out the virtuous agent's motivations in a way that isn't either objectionably egoistic—treating her friendships and political community as ultimately instrumental to her own well-being—or as implausibly self-effacing—being motivated by altruistic concerns only by ignoring the self-interested reasons she in fact has.[49] As Richard Kraut wonders, it is unclear how an agent's self-interest can provide a coherent justification for her choosing the good of another for their sake:

> But how can benefiting another person for your own sake provide a reason for benefiting him for his sake? Your own good can of course provide a reason for benefiting another person—but it cannot provide a reason for benefitting that person *for his sake*. To benefit another for his sake is to take his good as something that *by itself* provides a reason for action. But if one takes the good of another as a reason for action because promoting his

[49] Interestingly Annas embraces the conclusion that the virtuous agent will have self-effacing motives, although she holds that it is not a problematic form of self-effacingness. See for example Annas (2008) p. 205-21, esp. 212. Whatever one thinks of self-effacingness as a feature of a theory, it is hard to see how Aristotle could think that the virtuous agent has self-effacing motives. The virtuous agent is characterized, in part, by a correct grasp of reasons for action.

> good serves one's own, then one does not in fact take his good as something that *by itself* provides a reason for action.[50]

Even if Irwin can give a coherent account of the virtuous agent's motivations, there is a third worry: Irwin's interpretation does not seem to provide Aristotle with a stable basis for his ethical theory. Irwin's strategy is to argue that we have both prudential reasons and moral reasons to care about our friends and political community, and that these align because of the way our altruistic concern in these relationships allow us to exercise aspects of our rational nature. But, even if Irwin is right that the virtuous agent has *some* reason to perform virtuous actions insofar as it is in an agent's own interests to preserve the well-being of her political community, it isn't clear that the virtuous agent will always have *most* reason to perform the virtuous action in cases where her own interests come into conflict with the good of others.[51] After all, Aristotle seems to acknowledge situations where an agent's immediate self-interest can conflict with the interests of others.[52] Although Irwin's view shows how virtue and happiness are not *necessarily* in tension, it does not seem to draw a tight enough connection between an agent's prudential reasons and her moral reasons to explain why being virtuous is the *most* reliable path to human flourishing.

3.

Let's take stock. I have argued that what it is for an action to be virtuous is prior to and explanatory of what it is for a character to be virtuous. Virtuous actions are characterized in terms of the good ends or results they aim to achieve. Virtuous character traits equip an agent to reliably identify and be moved to perform virtuous actions for their own sake, which is to say, for the sake of the features that make them good. If this is the right way to interpret Aristotle, we are left with the puzzle of how being virtuous is the most reliable path to being happy. At a metaphysical level, we want an explanation for how the virtuous agent's reasons to care for others for their own sake aligns with her prudential interests. At a psychological level, we want a description of the virtuous agent's motivations that captures how she can be moved by the reasons she in fact has without her conceiving of her virtuous actions as ultimately instrumental to her own happiness.

3.1

Although I have presented the above puzzle as a potential objection to the interpretation I have been defending, a version of this puzzle arises for anyone hoping to find in the NE a consistent view about the nature of virtuous actions. As many commentators have noticed, Aristotle himself seems to make inconsistent claims about the relationship between virtuous actions and an agent's *eudaimonia*. Sometimes, as in 10.6, Aristotle insists that actions done on the basis of virtue are choiceworthy for their own sake, and so the right kinds of activities to be constitutive of *eudaimonia*. Likewise, in NE 6.4, Aristotle seems to identify virtuous actions are *praxeis*, the sorts of activities that are ends, rather than

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50 Kraut (1989), p. 137.

51 As Kraut (1989) insists, "[S]etting aside one's own projects in order to help others may involve some gain, but it also involves loss, and if we simply appeal to intuition to compare their magnitude, we have done too little to satisfy the egoistic critic of morality" (p. 370).

52 See Kraut (1989), Ch. 2.

being for the sake of ends beyond themselves, explaining that acting well is itself an end. Other times, however, Aristotle seems to explicitly deny that virtuous actions are ends. For example, in 10.7, in arguing for the superiority of the life of contemplation to a life of practical action, Aristotle argues that while contemplation is loved for its own sake, and that it gives rise to nothing beyond itself, virtuous actions, to a greater or lesser extent, bring into being something beyond the action itself. Similarly, in concluding the discussion, he insists that political and military actions, although preeminently fine and great amongst virtuous actions, *do* aim, to greater or lesser degrees, at ends beyond themselves and are not choice-worthy for their own sake (NE 10.7 1177b16-20).[53]

In fact, I do not think Aristotle is making inconsistent claims about the nature of virtuous actions, and understanding how his claims are consistent will shed light on the more general puzzle of the relationship between virtue and happiness.[54] Recall in §2.1, I argued a careful reading of NE 2.4 suggests a distinction between virtuous actions—actions that are good because of their good external ends—and acting virtuously—choosing to perform a virtuous action with knowledge, for its own sake, and from a firm and unchanging character. I want to suggest that, in passages like 10.7 where Aristotle describes virtuous actions as for the sake of ends beyond themselves, he is referring to the particular political or military actions (*hai politikai kai polemika*), analogous to the just or temperate actions (*ta dikaia kai sōphrona*) in NE 2.4 and NE 6.12, that can be performed even by a non-virtuous agent and that count as virtuous because of certain features of actions themselves, namely the kinds of ends they aim to achieve. By contrast, I want to suggest that in passages where he seems to describe virtuous actions as ends, he is in fact referring to the activity of *acting virtuously* rather than to virtuous actions. For example, in 10.6 (1176b6-9) Aristotle argues that the actions on the basis of virtue (*hai kat' aretēn praxeis*) appear to be the sorts of things from which nothing beyond the activity is sought, explaining that doing fine and good actions (*ta kala kai spoudaia prattein*) is choice-worthy for its own sake.[55] Likewise, in the NE 6.5 (1140b4-7) passage where Aristotle contrasts a *praxis* with a production or *poiēsis*, his explanation for why a *praxis* has no further end beyond itself is that "acting well" or *eupraxia* is an end. Here again, plausibly, Aristotle has in

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53 For some important discussion of the relationship between virtuous actions and their ends see Ackrill (1978), Charles (1986) esp. 65-66, Heinaman (1996), Lear (2004, 2009), and Whiting (2002). For commentators who have maintained that Aristotle's discussion in 10.7-8 is in tension with the rest of the NE, see for example, Ackrill (1980), Adkins (1978), Cooper (1975) p.156-164, Hardie (1967), Jaeger (1948) p. 439-440, Ross (1915) p. 233-4, White (1981) p. 242-3, and Wilkes (1980) p. 341, 351-2. For attempts to render 10.7-8 consistent with the rest of the NE see, for example, Cooper (1987), Devereux (1981), Keyt (1983), and Whiting (1986). Commentators who have embraced an "intellectualist" reading of Aristotle according to which, strictly speaking, *eudaimonia* consists in contemplation alone include: Ackrill (1980) p. 15-6, 31-2, Devereux (1981) p. 260, Heinaman (1988) p. 45, Kenny (1978) p. 209, Lear (2009), White (1981) p. 225-45. I won't weigh in directly on the debate between inclusivist and intellectualist interpretations of the NE, though my positive account is compatible with versions of either interpretation. Most inclusivists take excellent rational activity to have a central place in a happy life. Most intellectualists will allow that the exercise of ethical virtue is, at least, a secondary form of *eudaimonia*. An intellectualist interpretation does not, it seems to me, resolve the broader question of the relationship between ethical virtue and happiness.

54 I explore this puzzle, and develop this solution in more detail, in Hirji (forthcoming).

55 Even on a purely linguistic level, both of these formulations – the *kata* followed by accusative, and the infinitive phrase – are plausibly picking out the *acting* rather than the action, which is to say that the activity that is the exercise of virtue, rather than the particular fine or good action that is successfully realized. See Irwin (1991) p. 390-1 for a discussion of different readings of the *kata* plus accusative phrase in Aristotle..

mind by *eupraxia* the acting rather than the action; we can read *eupraxia* as equivalent to the other adverbial phrases that pick out acting virtuously, rather than a virtuous action.

Suppose this is right—Aristotle is not in fact inconsistent in his descriptions of virtuous actions. Rather, he describes acting virtuously as an end, whereas he describes virtuous actions as being for the sake of ends beyond themselves. How does this help with our initial puzzle, to explain how being virtuous benefits others while promoting an agent's own *eudaimonia*? A first step towards resolving the puzzle is to appreciate that it is *acting virtuously* rather than virtuous actions that is constitutive of *eudaimonia*. What we need to understand then is how acting virtuously is an end, and how it is related to virtuous actions, such that Aristotle has a coherent story about the relationship between virtue and *eudaiomnia.*

It is tempting to think that what makes acting virtuously an end is that it is chosen for its own sake, for the features that make the activity good, and not for some incidental reason. But here I think we run into something like the problem for Irwin's view. What it is to act virtuously, I've argued, is to perform virtuous actions with knowledge, choosing them for their own sake, and from a firm and unchanging character. For acting virtuously to be an end in this sense, we have to imagine the virtuous agent choosing to perform the virtuous action for its sake—for the sake of the features that make it good—*for the sake of* acting virtuously. But to choose the virtuous action for its own sake is precisely to choose it for the features that make it good, and not for some other reason. How then does she choose it for its own sake *for the sake of her acting virtuously*?[56]

There is, however, another way to understand how acting virtuously is an end that avoids this difficulty. Sometimes when Aristotle talks about an action being chosen for its own sake, he has in mind the distinction we have seen between choosing an action for the sake of the features that make it the kind of action that it is, and choosing it for some other, incidental, reason. But, in other passages, Aristotle seems to draw a different distinction. Specifically, in various passages throughout his corpus, Aristotle distinguishes between actions like seeing and contemplating that are or contain their own ends, and actions like learning or housebuilding that aim at some end beyond themselves.[57] While

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[56] Whiting (2002) suggests that the virtuous agent chooses the virtuous action for the sake of *eudaimonia* in the sense of choosing it as a component of *eudaimonia*; Whiting relies on the idea that choosing X for the sake of Y can be understood as choosing X as a component of Y. One worry for her account is whether there really is strong textual evidence for thinking that the "for the sake of" relation can pick out the relationship between a part and a whole. That being said, her account is, as I understand it, roughly compatible with my own though the distinction between virtuous actions and acting virtuously helps explain how choosing virtuous actions for their own sake can be constitutive of *eudaimonia*, and does so in a way that helps address some of the worries she acknowledges her account raises, including what motivates the virtuous agent.

[57] The locus classicus for this distinction is the infamous and textually fraught "Passage" in *Metaphysics* θ 6 (1048a18-36). However, the distinction also appears in some form in *Metaphysics* θ 8 (1050a23-b2), and in Aristotle's discussion of pleasure in Books 7 and 10 of the NE (1153a7-12, 1173a29-b4, and 1174a14-31). The distinction is also referenced in *De Sensu* 6 (446b2-6) and the *Sophistici Elenchi* 22 (178a9-28). I think the same distinction is being referenced in NE 1.1 (1094a3-6), in EE 2.1 (1219a8-18) and in Book 6 of the NE in the distinction between *praxis* and *poiēsis*, though I will not argue for this here. See Heinaman (1986) for skepticism about understanding a praxis as a kind of complete activity. In fact, I think the arguments in this paper – especially the distinction between virtuous actions and acting virtuously – go a long way towards resolving the worries he raises. As Heinaman (1986, p. 74) himself admits, there is good evidence for thinking that the *praxis-poiēsis* distinction is at least a species of the distinction between complete activities and incomplete actions (he references as evidence *Metaphysics* 104b22-33, 104b18-22, NE 1139b1-4, *Physics* 2.6 197b1-8). If we can resolve the problems he raises, we should treat the distinctions as relevantly similar. See also Charles (1986, p. 128) and Penner (1970, p. 403).

the former are complete at any moment, the latter take time in order to be complete, and can be done quickly or slowly.[58] And, although it is tempting to suppose that here again Aristotle is drawing a kind of psychological distinction between two ways that an agent can conceive of the value of an action, there are good reasons to deny this psychological reading: there are good reasons to think the notion of *telos* Aristotle is appealing to in this distinction is not the goal of an agent in performing an action, but rather a metaphysical feature of the action itself. Aristotle uses similar examples throughout his corpus to illustrate each side of the distinction, and with no suggestion that these examples admit of exceptions: actions like seeing and understanding are consistently described as ends, whereas actions like learning and housebuilding are paradigmatic examples of actions that are for the sake of ends beyond themselves. This suggests that certain actions are *always* for the sake of ends beyond themselves, while others are not. Moreover, it isn't clear that appealing to an agent's motivations *can* make good sense of the examples Aristotle gives. While Aristotle might well think that certain actions like housebuilding or learning are nearly always performed with particular goals in mind—agents rarely engage in acts of building without the goal of realizing some finished product—this doesn't seem a plausible explanation of other examples Aristotle offers, such as walking and seeing. After all, it is easy enough to imagine walking aimlessly, with no clear goal or purpose in mind. Likewise, it is surely common for agents to engage in an instance of seeing with some further goal in mind.

Instead, I follow other scholars in thinking that we should understand the distinction as a metaphysical one, about the nature of the actions themselves.[59] And, although there is no consensus in the literature about what makes certain kinds of actions ends, the precise account need not trouble us. On any of the prominent metaphysical interpretations of this distinction, it seems plausible that acting virtuously will be an end. Lear, for example, argues that what makes something the end of an action is that it plays a certain normative role for the actions leading up to it: "an end is the good of an activity that determines its form and what it is to be a successful instance of that activity."[60] Supposing something like Lear's view is right, there is, plausibly, nothing beyond the activity of acting virtuously that sets the standard for its success; indeed, this is, I suggested, what Aristotle means in NE 2.4 when he claims that the products of crafts "have their goodness in themselves" whereas the goodness of having a virtuous character is not simply in reliably producing virtuous actions, but in acting virtuously. Robert Heinaman offers a

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58 There is now a fair amount of consensus that the distinction is not, as was once commonly thought, a merely linguistic one. See Ryle (1966) for this linguistic reading of the distinction, and Ackrill (1997), Penner (1970), and Potts (1965) for some problems that arise on this reading. For some recent non-linguistic treatments of the distinction, see Beere (2009), Bostock (1988), Burnyeat (2008), Heinaman (1994), Kosman (1969, 1984). I think the most fruitful way to think about the distinction is as taking the difference in the internal temporal structure of these actions as reflecting a difference in the way they are related to their ends: actions like building and learning are for the sake of ends beyond themselves and therefore necessarily take time in order to be completed, whereas actions like contemplating and seeing accomplish their end instantaneously and at every moment. Given the number of ways we can describe the same action, I think it is a mistake to treat the "tense test" as a reliable indicator of whether an action is an end or for the sake of an end beyond itself.

59 (NE 10.6 1176a35-1176b6). I move freely between talking about actions and activities; were it not for the awkwardness of the translation, I would prefer to use "action" throughout in translating both *energeia* and *praxis*, as well as the related terms. It is not obvious in the NE that Aristotle uses the term *energeia* in the narrow sense in which it is contrasted with *kinesis*, and I avoid assuming as much here.

60 Lear (2004), p. 33-34.

somewhat different proposal, noticing that all the examples Aristotle gives of activities that are ends are psychic activities.[61] Aryeh Kosman, drawing on a much-discussed passage from DA 2.5 suggests that activities that are ends are the exercises of first actualities.[62] On either of these proposals, the activity of acting virtuously—the exercise of character virtue and *phronesis* working in harmony—is a psychic activity, and moreover, one that is the exercise of two "first actualities".

The upshot is that, on any of these accounts, acting virtuously is the right kind of activity to be an end and choiceworthy for its own sake. Moreover, it seems to be a good candidate for being a constituent of *eudaimonia* given Aristotle's substantive account in NE 1.7 as the activity of the rational part of the soul on the basis of virtue. While character virtue is the excellence of the part of the soul that is "in a way" rational insofar as it is obedient to reason, *phronesis* is the excellence of the part of our soul that reasons about action. And, roughly speaking, on any of the above interpretations, the explanation for why acting virtuously is an end is that it has a certain kind of perfectionist value independent of an agent's goals or motivations: acting virtuously is valuable for its own sake because, more generally, there is something valuable according to Aristotle about developing and exercising certain kinds of characteristically human capacities.

3.2

We are now in a position to resolve the puzzle with which we began this section: how, when a virtuous agent performs a virtuous action for the sake of its good external results, does she also promote her own *eudaimonia*? Consider an example of a generous action: a virtuous agent builds a house for someone in need. On the view I am defending, what makes this *action* good, a species of virtuous action, is that it aims to achieve a good end in the political community; if there wasn't someone in need of shelter who stood to be benefitted, then this action would not be appropriate or called for in the circumstances. And what motivates the virtuous agent is precisely this end: in performing this generous action, the virtuous agent is responding to the fact that someone deserving in the *polis* can be benefitted by having access to shelter. When she performs the action, she does so with a full rational appreciation of why this end is good, and with desires in accordance with her rational judgment. Moreover, she effectively deliberates about the best way to achieve this end.

What I want to suggest is that when a virtuous agent performs this virtuous action, she is at the same time engaging in an instance of "acting virtuously," and this "acting virtuously" is a form of the excellent rational activity constitutive of happiness; specifically, "acting virtuously" is the full expression of her nature *qua* practically rational. Indeed, I want to suggest that it is *only* when a virtuous agent performs a virtuous action, and moreover does so with knowledge, for its own sake, and from a firm and unchanging character, that she fully expresses this aspect of her essential nature. It might strike us as odd to talk about practical reason as being fully expressed in *acting* in certain ways, rather than merely in believing or knowing. But, as we have seen, Aristotle's descriptions of character virtue and *phronesis* suggest a more expansive conception of practical reason

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61 See Heinaman (1990) p. 83-102, esp. 94-98.

62 For worries about this reading, see Ackrill (1965) p. 161-62) and Burnyeat (2008) p. 272 n. 130. See also Heinaman (2007) and Bowin (2011).

that is more akin to a kind of practical agency. Again, the proper objects of *phronesis* are goods that are achievable in action in the ethical domain. The appropriate response to these goods is to desire them, to take pleasure in them, and to act so as to acquire or realize them. This is importantly different from the case of theoretical rationality. To fully realize one's capacity for theoretical rationality, all that is necessary is that one grasps the nature of intelligible objects in one's mind. Virtue, unlike theoretical wisdom, is essentially practical: it is a capacity not merely to identify or understand value in the world, but to actually act so as to realize that value in the world.

If something like this view is right, we can explain how the virtuous agent's prudential and her moral reasons come to be aligned when she performs a virtuous action. Although a virtuous action and an instance of acting virtuously have two distinct sources of value, the value of acting virtuously depends for its realization on the value of the virtuous action.[63] Specifically, it depends on the virtuous agent choosing to perform the virtuous action for the sake of the features that make it good, independent of the way it benefits her.[64]

To be sure, more needs to be said about the dependence relationship between virtuous actions and acting virtuously. I have been suggesting these are metaphysically distinct actions—actions with metaphysically distinct ends—that coincide in the same event when a virtuous agent performs a virtuous action. We do not find in Aristotle an explicit discussion of how an activity that is itself an end might depend on an action that is for the sake of an end beyond itself.[65] However, even outside of the details of my specific proposal, there is good reason to think Aristotle needs some such account. As a number of scholars have argued, it seems easy enough to imagine cases where a *praxis*—the sort of activity that is an end—takes the form of, or involves, a *poiēsis*—the sort of action that is for the sake of an end beyond itself. Ackrill gives the example of a just man who repays a debt by building his neighbor's fence: the man acts justly, engaging in a *praxis*, but he does so by engaging in a *poiēsis*.[66] I cannot here attempt to offer a detailed proposal. But, on my view, the *poiēsis* in this example is the building of the fence. This productive act is just because it is serves to repay a debt. The *praxis* in this case is the

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63 This view helps with another potential worry. If X is choiceworthy for the sake of Y, Aristotle thinks, Y is more valuable than X. Thus, if virtuous actions are choiceworthy for the sake of their good external ends, the good external ends are more valuable than the actions. This might seem like a problem for Aristotle's view, but it isn't once we appreciate that *acting virtuously* is not choiceworthy for the sake of anything beyond itself, and it is this activity that is constitutive of *eudaimonia*. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for raising this concern.

64 In fact, more evidence for this view comes from the way Aristotle seems to tie the complete exercise of virtue with the goodness of the ends of virtuous actions. See for example *Politics* 7.13 (1332a7-28). I discuss this connection in depth in (Hirji MS).

65 We do find discussion however, for example in Physics 3.3, for how two activities that are metaphysically distinct—different in being—can be "same in number", coinciding in the same event. So the sort of dependence relationship I am imagining is at least not prima facie implausible.

66 Ackrill (1978) p. 595. Ackrill is pessimistic about making sense of this sort of case, suggesting that Aristotle does not have an adequate ontology of actions. But the problems he identifies for Aristotle only arise if we do not distinguish between a virtuous action and acting virtuously; Ackrill thinks that what makes mending a fence count as a just action and so a *praxis* is the motivations of the agent performing the action. David Charles attempts a solution to this problem by arguing that a *praxis* and *poiēsis* are not really the same event: they are merely members of an appropriate equivalence-class; however, Charles' view depends on somewhat controversial views about the way Aristotle differentiates actions. Charles (1986), especially p. 65-66. See Irwin (1986) for concerns about the details of Charles' proposal.

agent's acting justly, choosing to perform this action *because* it repays a debt, and not because he is required to by law, or because he hopes to win favor with his neighbor. And, plausibly, the *poiēsis* and *praxis* are metaphysically distinct actions in virtue of being exercises of different capacities: the *poiēsis* is an exercise of the agent's productive capacity, whereas the *praxis* is the exercise of his character virtue and *phronesis* taken together. As we have seen, because of the essentially practical nature of virtue, his acting justly necessarily depends on his performing some just action: the full expression of his capacity for practical agency depends on the exercise of his productive capacity. Though the details remain to be filled out, the proposal is, at least in principle, consistent with Aristotle's metaphysics of action while avoiding the concerns that we saw on Irwin's psychological reading of the relationship between actions that are ends and actions that are for the sake of ends beyond themselves.

3.3

Return now to the initial question of this paper: what's Aristotelian about neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics? I suggested that neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics is characterized by two central commitments: (i) the virtues of character are defined as traits that reliably promote an individual's flourishing and (ii) virtuous actions are defined as the sorts of actions a virtuous agent reliably performs under the relevant circumstances. The view offers a distinct normative theory, explaining the goodness of virtuous actions in terms of the concept of virtue of character. And, the view offers an explanation for why it is in an agent's own interests to be virtuous: it is true almost by definition that having a virtuous character and performing virtuous actions is the most reliable path to an agent's own flourishing.

I have argued that neither of these two commitments are features of Aristotle's view. Instead, I have offered an alternative interpretation of the structure of Aristotle's ethical theory that, I believe, goes some way towards resolving a central interpretive debate about the relationship between virtue and happiness. Consider now three consequences.

First, on the view I have defended, we do not find in Aristotle a distinct normative theory alongside deontology and consequentialism. Aristotle does not, for example, explain the goodness of a generous action in terms of the goodness of generosity; rather, he explains the goodness of a generous action in a fairly common sense way in terms of the way it benefits the recipient of the action. This explanation is, broadly speaking, a consequentialist one: it is an explanation that appeals to the goodness of the results or consequences of the action. However, the view Aristotle seems to defend is not maximizing or impartialist in the manner of many consequentialist theories. Likewise, it shares with certain deontological theories a central concern with practical rationality and human agency. Even if Aristotle is not providing an entirely new normative theory, his view does give us a way of thinking about how elements of the two dominant approaches might be combined in an attractive package.

Second, although Aristotle draws a close connection between being virtuous and being happy, his view is neither substantively nor formally egoistic. This is a departure not just from neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics, but also from a common reading of Aristotle as endorsing a strong form of eudaimonism, the view that an agent ought to choose all actions for the sake of her own *eudaimonia*. On the view I have defended the virtuous

agent is *not* always motivated to perform virtuous actions chiefly out of a concern for her own *eudaimonia*. In fact, more strongly, the virtuous agent, if she is to engage in right sort of activity to count as *eudaimonia*, cannot always be motivated chiefly by a concern for her own *eudaimonia*. Part of what it is for an agent to successfully engage in activity on the basis of ethical virtue is to choose good actions with a full rational appreciation of their goodness. And, as we have seen, their goodness is explained in terms of the good external ends at which they aim. This is not to say a virtuous agent cannot be motivated in part by her own self-interest. She may well recognize that by performing a virtuous action on the basis of her ethical virtue, she will be engaging in the sort of activity constitutive of *eudaimonia*, and this thought may well be part of her motivation for performing the action. But in order for the virtuous agent to fully realize her capacity for practical agency, she has to be properly responding to value in the world. In the case of virtue, this means she must be choose to perform the virtuous action for the sake of its good external results, and moreover, to desire and take pleasure in the goodness of the action. The upshot is that virtuous agent's motives are neither self-effacing nor does she treat her virtuous action as merely instrumental to achieving her own happiness: her normative reasons and her motivating reasons are aligned when she performs a virtuous action.[67]

Third, despite the important differences in their views, Aristotle captures one central motivation of the virtue ethicist's project: to explain why it is important not just to perform certain kinds of actions, but to have a certain kind of stable character. On the interpretation I have defended, although a non-virtuous agent can successfully perform a virtuous action, she cannot thereby engage in the practically rational activity that is constitutive of her own happiness. Her acting involves an exercise of her practical reason, but it does not count as an instance of her *fully realizing* her capacity for practical rationality. This is because she hasn't yet fully developed the capacity, in the form of virtue of character and practical wisdom, and as such the resulting exercise is not the full realization of her capacity as a practical agent. One consequence is that a non-virtuous agent may well have purely self-interested motives for trying to acquire virtue of character. That is, a non-virtuous agent might come to learn that it is only by actually acquiring virtue of character that she can come to be happy. She might, with a view to becoming virtuous, perform the sorts of actions that virtuous agents perform with the goal of ultimately being happy. However, as she acquires the excellence of her practical reason and her non-rational desiderative states through the process of habituation, she will come to have a full rational appreciation and corresponding desires for the good ends that her virtuous actions realize. Indeed, it is only by doing so that she will be engaging in right sort of virtuous activity to actually achieve *eudaimonia.*

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[67] To be clear, the view does not require that *every* virtuous action a virtuous agent performs is for the sake of ends that are good independent of her own good. For example, when a virtuous agent exercises her temperance in choosing a salad over a donut, her goal is to preserve the health of her own body. In performing this action with the correct reasons and desires, she engages in the sort of activity constitutive of *eudaimonia*. Notice however that even in this example the way in which the action of eating a salad, considered as a virtuous action, is good for the virtuous agent is different from the way in which her exercise of virtue in "acting virtuously" is good for her. The action of eating a salad benefits the virtuous agent because it promotes the health of her body; the activity that is the exercise of her temperance—an activity that depends on performing this action but is not identical to it—benefits the virtuous agent by being the sort of excellent rational activity constitutive of *eudaimonia.*

Conclusion

To reiterate: my interest here has not been to assess the viability of the neo-Aristotelian virtue ethicist project taken on its own, but rather to evaluate the extent to which the virtue ethicist picture is reflective of the view we find in Aristotle. Neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics has been so influential in recent decades that there is a real risk we begin to read Aristotle's own work in the light of the theories his work has inspired and, in doing so, lose sight of what is unique and distinctive about his own project.

If what I have argued here is right, Aristotle's view, though often misunderstood, is coherent, sophisticated, and importantly distinct from what we find in the neo-Aristotelian tradition. Is it compelling? We might worry that Aristotle's account of *eudaimonia* depends on an implausible natural teleology. We might also worry that it is overly narrow, failing to accommodate the diverse ways in which humans can live flourishing lives. Although I am sympathetic to these concerns, I think there is something in the vicinity of the view Aristotle defends that we might find plausible. We might, for example, be willing to accept that (i) one of the essential components of a good life is successfully exercising one's capacities and that (ii) amongst these capacities, one of the most important is a certain kind of capacity for practical agency. That is, we might find plausible the idea that one of the chief components of a good life is being able to correctly identify and appropriately respond to genuine value in the world, including genuine moral value. If we find this plausible, we may well agree with Aristotle that being virtuous is indeed an essential component of living a good human life. Though many of the details remain to be filled out, I have hoped to show that, on one plausible interpretation of the NE, we find in Aristotle a unique and compelling package of views that deserves renewed and serious consideration in its own right, independent of our evaluation of the neo-Aristotelian project.

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