

# Practical and Productive Thinking in Aristotle

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## 1. Introduction

My aim in this paper is to understand certain features of Aristotle's conception of *practical* reason, that is, of the kind of reason that he tells us is involved in motivating and guiding human behavior. In two passages, *DA* 3.10, 432b26-433a20 and *NE* 6.2, 1139a35-b5, Aristotle tells us that although reason or thought<sup>1</sup> does not initiate movement, thought of a certain kind does,<sup>2</sup> namely of the kind that he calls 'practical' (*praktikos*).<sup>3</sup> But what makes practical reason *practical*? In the *DA* passage, Aristotle contrasts practical reason with theoretical reason – as the latter is concerned with truth, the former (it seems we are supposed to infer) is concerned with action (*praxis*). Accordingly, it has become

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<sup>1</sup> In the *NE* passage, it is 'thought itself' (*dianoia autē*) that does not initiate movement. In the *DA*, Aristotle refers to 'the reasoning faculty' (*to logistikon*) and 'that which is called intellect' (*nous*) (432b26).

<sup>2</sup> In the *Parts of Animals*, considering whether different parts of the soul are origins or principles (*archai*) of different kinds of change, Aristotle writes the *archē* of locomotion might be a part (*morion*) of the soul that is different from either the nutritive part or the perceptual part. He also tell us that the part in question 'is not the thinking part (*to noētikon*) since locomotion belongs also to other animals than human beings, but thinking (*dianoia*) does not' (*PA* 641b7-8). But although Aristotle thus denies that thinking is the principle of locomotion, he does not deny that thinking of a certain sort, or qualified in a certain way (namely, practical thinking as outlined in *DA* 3.10 and *NE* 6.2), could play the role. This is a familiar move. Thus in the *PA* passage Aristotle denies that the soul *as whole* is the principle of change, but maintains that the soul qualified in certain ways (as its different parts) is the principle of different kinds of change. Similarly, in *NE* 3.2, after concluding that that decision (*prohairesis*) is not a belief in general (1111b34-1112a1), Aristotle nevertheless goes on to investigate whether it is not a specific kind of belief. For further discussion of the *PA* passage, see K. Corcilius, *Streben und Bewegen: Aristoteles' Theorie der animalischen Ortsbewegung* (Berlin, 2008), 174-176. One upshot of the *PA* passage is that, minimally, thinking (of any kind) cannot be the principle of locomotion. Since the passage also rules out the perceptual part from playing the role, the lesson seems to be that there is no *one* part that is the principle of locomotion. For further discussion, see K. Corcilius and P. Gregorić, 'Separability vs. Difference: Parts and Capacities of the Soul in Aristotle', *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, vol. 39. (2010): 81-118.

<sup>3</sup> The meaning of the adjective *praktikos* when applied to reason is not obvious. The basic meaning, suggested by the *-ikos* ending, is 'productive of action'. But that can mean: (1) that action is the activity of practical thought (in the same way in which *theōria* is the activity of theoretical reason); (2) that it is thinking that determines which actions one should perform (in the same way in which judges determine which penalties are to be applied); (3) that it is thinking that determines how actions are to be done (in the same way in which productive thought determines how products are to be made); or (4) that it is thinking which is ultimately actualized in action. It can also be a combination of some or all of these possibilities. For a discussion of the issue of translation, see A. Price, *Virtue and Reason in Plato and Aristotle* (Oxford, 2011), 189.

commonplace in the scholarly literature to discuss practical reason in contrast to theoretical reason, sometimes highlighting their differences, sometimes their commonalities.<sup>4</sup>

There is no doubt that the contrast between practical and theoretical reason can illuminate the features of practical thought that it shares with, or that divide it from theoretical thinking. The trouble is that the feature by which Aristotle distinguishes practical from theoretical reason is that the former but not the latter reasons ‘for the sake of something (*heneka tou*)’. The idea is familiar. Contemplative thought reasons in order to understand or contemplate the truth of what it is thinking and so, to that extent, has its goal in the activity of thinking itself. It is done for its own sake rather than ‘for the sake of something’ [else]. Practical thought, however, is goal-directed in the sense that its goal is something *beyond* its own activity. But although ‘being for the sake of something’ distinguishes practical from theoretical reason, it is not the feature that makes it *practical* since it characterizes not only practical thinking but also productive thinking (*NE* 6.2, 1139b1-3; *EE* 2.10, 1227a11-13; *De Caelo* 3.7, 306a16). In a way, then, spelling out the contrast between practical and theoretical reason, while illuminating, might not be able to provide us with the right answer to the question of what makes practical reason *practical*.

In this paper, I propose to investigate practical thinking in contrast to productive thinking. My hope is that it is exactly the right contrast to investigate if one wants to find out what makes thinking or reasoning, on Aristotle’s view, practical. As we shall see, the crucial feature is the special connection that such thinking bears to desire. As a general thesis about practical reason, this claim is not particularly surprising.<sup>5</sup> But I hope that by contrasting practical and productive reasoning, I will be able to spell out the precise nature of the connection between reason and desire in practical thinking along with the features of practical thinking that such connection necessitates. The analysis should not only improve our understanding (or dispel various misunderstandings) of Aristotle’s theory of practical and productive

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<sup>4</sup> Most recently, D. Charles, ‘Aristotle on Practical and Theoretical Knowledge’, in D. Henry and K. M. Nielsen, *Bridging the Gap Between Aristotle’s Science and Ethics* (Cambridge, 2015): 71-93; J. V. Allen, ‘Practical and Theoretical Knowledge in Aristotle’, *Ibid.*, 49-70; or J. Cooper, *Pursuits of Wisdom: Six Ways of Life in Ancient Philosophy from Socrates to Plotinus* (Princeton, 2012): 74-78.

<sup>5</sup> So already R. D. Milo, *Aristotle on Practical Knowledge and Weakness of Will* (The Hague, 1966) says that ‘desire is involved in the very notion of practical knowledge’ (37).

reasoning (as well as of the distinction between action and production) but also help us resolve other controversial issues in Aristotle's ethical philosophy. In order to illustrate its usefulness in this regard, at the end of the paper I will turn to *NE* 2.4 where Aristotle explains the difference between merely performing a virtuous action and doing so in a way a virtuous person would do (i.e., virtuously) by drawing certain analogies between the exercise of craft (*technē*) and virtue. As I will hope to show, once we understand the difference between productive and practical thinking, it becomes possible to offer a new interpretation of the distinction Aristotle has in mind, an interpretation which is both philosophically and textually illuminating.

Before I begin I should note that the discussion of productive and practical thinking below is not primarily concerned with the perfected states of the capacities for productive and practical thinking, that is, with craft (*technē*) and practical wisdom (*phronēsis*). Practical wisdom has, of course, been the target of much discussion in the literature, but it seems to me that it might not always be safe to make inferences about practical thinking from features of practical wisdom that might be special to it.

## 2. Productive Thinking

The primary purpose of productive (*poiētikē*) thinking<sup>6</sup> is to compensate for human beings' lack of natural instruments (*PA* 4.10, 686a25-b28) by allowing them to use hands (*PA* 4.10, 687a19-23) to produce whatever instruments they need in order for them to survive and maintain their functioning (*PA* 4.10, 687a23-b4). Productive thinking is thus primarily concerned with devising ways of producing things that are beneficial or useful in view of our needs (*chreiai*) (*Met.* 1.2, 982b20-25).<sup>7</sup> In its perfected state, it takes the form of craft (*technē*) which Aristotle describes as a 'state involving true account (*logos*) concerned with production (*poiētikē*)' (*NE* 6.4, 1140a10).

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<sup>6</sup> The *locus classicus* for Aristotle's distinction between productive, practical, and theoretical thinking is *Met.* 6.1, 1025b25. Aristotle more often talks of productive knowledge rather than thinking, sometimes distinguishing it from the two other kinds (e.g., *EE* 2.3, 1216b16-25; 1221b5-9; *Met.* 6.2, 1026b5).

<sup>7</sup> Aristotle here agrees with Plato, *Rep.* 341c-e.

An interesting feature of productive thought is that although one typically engages in it because one wants to make or produce something, productive thinking *as such* is entirely separable from one's wants, desires, or beliefs. One does not need to take into account one's desire to produce a shoe in order to find out how to produce a shoe. Even if one desires to produce it in a particular way, all one needs to take into account are the particular constraints that that way imposes on the production. Insofar as the production of a given artifact (or, at any rate, of a given product) is concerned, one's desires and beliefs play no role. Correspondingly, in its idealized form, productive thinking proceeds through hypothetical necessity: if A is to be made, then, given what A is, B must be done, making no reference to one's desires, beliefs, or values. Unsurprisingly, Aristotle repeatedly connects reasoning through hypothetical necessity to production.<sup>8</sup>

(A) The healthy thing, then, comes to be as the result of the following train of thought: since *this* is health, if the thing is to be healthy *this* must first be present, e.g. a uniform state of body, and if this is to be present, there must be heat; and one goes on always thinking in this way until one brings the matter to a final step which he himself can produce. Then the process (*kinēsis*) from this point onward, i.e. the process towards health, is called production (*poiēsis*). (*Met.* 7.7, 1032b6-b10)<sup>9</sup>

An important consequence of this feature of productive thought is that its results – recipes how to produce or make something – are universal (*Met.* 1.1, 981a12-24). They are not tied to any particular individual and are valid and true for anyone who wishes to produce the relevant products and is capable

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<sup>8</sup> See, for example, *Phys.* 2.9, 199b34-200b8; *PA* 1.1, 639b19-640a9; and *De Motu* 701a17-23 (discussed below).

<sup>9</sup> This passage is often taken to be about deliberation (e.g., J. Cooper, *Reason and Human Good in Aristotle* (Indianapolis, 1986), 20-22). But Aristotle does not mention deliberation anywhere in the context (1032a27-b21). Rather, he is discussing generation of things, both natural and artificial. Perhaps scholars have been misled by the similarity that this passage bears to passages such as *NE* 3.3, 1112b15-27 in which Aristotle does describe deliberation. But note that in the *NE* 3.3 passage he does not state that the form of deliberative reasoning is 'given what X is, if X is to come about or occur, Y must be done' as he does in the passage in *Met.* 7.7. Rather, he says that we search for the means or things that will promote our desired ends and that we do so until we have discovered particular step or steps that we can take ourselves so as to begin the process. Here Aristotle draws an analogy between a person who deliberate and a geometer who analyzes a diagram (1112b20-24). The point seems to be twofold. First, they both reason about how to achieve a preconceived end. Second, they both stop inquiring once they figure out the right sequence of actions (or construction moves). Neither point commits Aristotle to deliberation having the form of reasoning by hypothetical necessity.

of following instructions about how to do so. In fact, since knowledge that constitutes craft is universal, productive thinking is more like *theōria* than like *praxis*: it contemplates the form of contingent things that lack internal nature from the point of view of their construction or coming to be (*NE* 6.4, 1140a10-15) and, hence, also their destruction or passing away (*Met.* 9.2, 1046b4-11; *NE* 5.1, 1129a14-26).<sup>10</sup> The consequence is that productive thought (and knowledge gained by it) is motivationally inert (*Met.* 9.5, 1048a8-11). Although it is goal-directed thinking, it neither presupposes (or considers) its goal as an object of desire nor provides reasons for making it an object of desire. Such reasons (say, the further use of what one is constructing or the goal one wants to achieve by destroying something) are extraneous to it.

Aristotle makes this clear in *Met.* 9.2, where he distinguishes between rational (*meta logou*) and non-rational (*alogoi*) psychological powers (*dunameis*). He asserts that non-rational powers are ‘of one thing’, whereas rational ones (i.e., crafts) are ‘of opposites’ (*Met.* 9.2, 1046b11). A non-rational power works always the same way, producing the same result. Consequently, whenever it is in appropriate circumstances, it is activated and produces the result for which it is a power. A rational power, of which Aristotle’s only example is craft, is productive of contrary effects and so it cannot be activated in the same way. If it were, it would produce incompatible results at the same time and that is not possible (*Met.* 9.5, 1048a8-11). Consequently, in order to initiate production, productive thinking needs to be given a direction – whether it is to operate towards the construction of its product or away from an already constructed product towards its destruction. As Aristotle says, there must be something that sets it towards a particular outcome in the particular circumstances: ‘That which directs (*to kurion*), then, must be something else; I mean by this, desire (*orexis*) or decision (*prohairesis*)’ (*Met.* 9.5, 1048a10-11).

Before moving on to practical thinking, a quick remark is in order. Although Aristotle tells us that crafts are ‘for opposites’, he also thinks that every craft has its proper product. Crafts are concerned *per se*

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<sup>10</sup> In this respect, productive thought is similar to the study of coming to be and passing away of natural things – the study of the life-cycle of, say, lions involves the causes of both birth and growth into a healthy individual as well as of sickness, decay and death. Hence, it is no coincidence that Aristotle often draws analogies between generation of natural things and production – they both display the same kind of logical structure, namely hypothetical necessity (e.g., *Phys.* 2.9, 199b34-200a14).

only with one of the opposites, namely, with the positive one (*Met.* 9.2, 1046b10-12). This positive opposite is the goal or purpose for the sake of which a given craft *exists* – medicine for health, shoemaking for shoes, house-building for houses, and so on. Aristotle’s claim is not causal (as the positive outcome is not necessary), but about explanation. For example, in order to explain why a doctor cures, we do not need mention anything besides her possession of the art of healing. Her activity is fully intelligible from the point of view of her being a doctor and it is a perfectly good explanation of why she heals to say that she does because she is a doctor. If she were to use of her knowledge to *harm* somebody, her activity would not be similarly intelligible – one cannot say that she *harms* because she is a doctor. If she harms, there must be something else, something distinct from her being a doctor, that explains what she does. We will return to this point towards the end of the paper.

### 3. Practical Thinking

Aristotle maintains that unlike productive thinking, practical thinking can initiate movement and that this is its distinctive feature. Aristotle characterizes the kind of thinking that can initiate action or, in general, cause one to move in two closely related passages:

(B) Both of these then are capable of originating local movement, thought and desire (*nous kai orexis*). But thought that reasons for the sake of something (*ho heneka tou logizomenos*) and is practical (*ho praktikos*). It differs from contemplative thought in its end (*telos*). And every kind of desire is for the sake of something (*heneka tou pasa*). For the very thing that the desire is for is the principle (*archē*) of practical reason (*tou praktikou nou*) and the last step [of reasoning] is the principle of action (*archē tēs praxeōs*). So it is reasonable that these two appear as movers, desire and practical thinking (*orexis kai dianoia praktikē*). For that which is desired (*to orekton*) moves, that is, thinking moves on its account (*dia touto*) since (*hoti*) that which is desired (*to orekton*) is its principle (*archē autēs*). (*DA* 3.10, 433a13-20)

(C) Thought (*dianoia*) itself moves nothing, but one that is for the sake of something and is practical (*hē heneka tou kai praktikē*) does. For this thought is also the principle of (*archei*) productive thought. Every producer produces for the sake of something (*heneka tou*) where that something is in relation to something and for something [else] and not an end (*telos*) without qualification (*haplōs*) which is not something that can be made (*to poiēton*), as opposed to being achieved in action (*to prakton*). For doing well is the end (*eupraxia*), and the desire (*orexis*) is for it. That is why decision (*prohairesis*) is either thought issuing in desire (*orektikos nous*) or desire issuing in thought (*orexis dianoētikē*). (NE 6.2, 1139a35-b5)

In both passages, Aristotle maintains that although thought (*nous* or *dianoia*) itself does not move one to act, thought of a certain kind does, namely one that ‘reasons (*logizomenos*) for the sake of something (*heneka tou*) and is practical (*praktikos*)’. What does Aristotle mean by ‘for the sake of something’ and ‘practical’? One possibility is to take the ‘and’ in ‘and is practical’ to be epexegetic.<sup>11</sup> In that case, Aristotle would be saying that the kind of thought that initiates action or moves is one which is done for the sake of action, that is, one whose end (*telos*) is action. This would distinguish it from the kind of thought that does not move, namely contemplative thought whose end (*telos*) is truth (DA 3.9, 432b26-29; Met. 1.1, 982b20-27).

One problem with this interpretation is that Aristotle usually associates that for the sake of which something is done with the goal or end at which one aims in doing something rather than with what one does.<sup>12</sup> In the case of deliberation (*bouleusis*) – the paradigmatic form of practical thinking – this association is explicit. Deliberation is about (*peri*) what to do (i.e., action), but it is done for the sake of (*heneka*) an end that one aims at:

<sup>11</sup> In translation, this view is adopted by R. D. Hicks, *Aristotle: De Anima* (Cambridge, 1907), *ad loc.*, as well as by K. Corcilius, *Über die Seele: De anima. Übersetzt, mit einer Einleitung und Anmerkungen* (Hamburg, 2017), *ad loc.* For further discussion, see A. Price, *Virtue and Reason in Plato and Aristotle* (Oxford, 2011): 189-195. Note that the epexegetic reading is somewhat less likely in the NE passage (C).

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, *APo* 85b27-86a3; *DA* 2.4, 415b15-20; *NE* 3.7, 1115b13-14; 3.9, 1117b2-5; *EE* 1.8, 1218b10-18; 2.10, 1226a8-17; *Rhet.* 1363b16-17. For a contrary view concerning passages B and C, see R. A. Gauthier and J. Y. Jolif, *L'Éthique à Nicomaque. Introduction, traduction et commentaire* (Louvain-la-Neuve, 2002): 444.

(D) Since one who deliberates always deliberates for the sake of something (*heneka tinos*), there is always some aim (*skopos*) in relation to which the deliberator investigates what is useful. And so no one deliberates about the end (*telos*), this being rather the principle and hypothesis (*archē kai hupothesis*), just like the hypotheses in theoretical sciences. We have spoken about these briefly in the beginning of this work and in detail in the Analytics. Investigation (*skepsis*), both one involving and one not involving craft, is about (*peri*) what promotes the end (*pros to telos*), for example, when deliberating whether they should go to war or not. But there will first be the reason why (*to di' ho*), and this is that for the sake of which (*to hou heneka*), for example, wealth or pleasure or anything else of the sort that happens to be that for the sake of which (*hou heneka*) [one deliberates]. For the deliberator deliberates, when considered from the point of view of the end (*apo tou telous eskeptai*), either how he could get hold of what conduces to it [i.e., the end] or what he can do to promote the end. (*EE* 2.10, 1227a5-18).<sup>13</sup>

Another problem is that if the interpretation were correct, then ‘being for the sake of something’ would be a sufficient condition for thought to cause action or movement. But that would make productive thought capable of causing motion as well. As Aristotle points out at 1139b1-3 (passage C) as well as 1227a12 (passage D), productive thought is also for the sake of something and since that would mean (on the current interpretation) that it is concerned with production (*NE* 6.4, 1140a16-17), then productive thought could move one to production. However, it is Aristotle’s thesis that productive thought by itself cannot move one to produce anything (e.g., *Met.* 9.2, 1046b4-23).

It thus seems better to take *heneka tou* and *praktikos* as two independent characterizations that only jointly explain what kind of thinking can move or cause motion. The meaning of *heneka tou* seems clear from passage D – it is a kind of thought in which one reasons about how to achieve some end or goal. The obvious meaning of *praktikos* would then be that in addition to being for the sake of a goal or

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<sup>13</sup> See also *EE* 2.11, 1227b36.



end (just like productive thought), the thought is also directed at action, as opposed to, say, production or contemplation. But this obvious meaning is not helpful unless we know what it means for thought to be directed at action. I suggest that Aristotle explicates what it means for goal-oriented thought to be practical in the following way: it is thought whose starting-point or principle (*archē*) is a desire whose object is the very thing that one reasons about how to promote (passage B at 433a15-17).

In order to see the significance of this feature of practical thought, we need to distinguish the roles played by *heneka tou* and *archē* in relevant contexts (passages B and C). As we shall see, the distinction has important implications for Aristotle's understanding of the difference between productive and practical thinking and, consequently, between action and production. It can be best brought out by an example. The basic premise goes as follows. Luca asks his friend Joe who is a house-builder to figure out for him how to attach an additional room to his house. Although Joe does not desire the additional room in Luca's house, he wants to help his friend and so devises a plan for Luca that, once enacted, would do the job.

Let us start with Joe. First, his *productive* thinking starts from the idea of the additional room in Luca's house. This is the goal that for the sake of which (*heneka tou*) he (productively) reasons. But although it is what he productively reasons about, it is not what moved Joe to think about it. It does not explain *why* Joe engages in productive thinking about it. After all, Joe does not want the room at all even though he wants to figure out how to make it. Rather, he wants to help his friend Luca and *that* desire (to help) is what got him thinking about the room. It is the *archē* (principle) of his thinking since it explains *why* he engaged in the thinking that he did.<sup>14</sup> In sum, the end or goal of productive thinking (i.e., that for the sake of which one reasons) and that which motivates one to think productively turn out to be two distinct things. In a way, this should not be surprising – it is the lesson of *Met* 9.2 and 5 discussed at the end of the previous section.

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<sup>14</sup> Aristotle compares the role of *archē* to that of hypotheses in theoretical sciences: they are explanations that give the reason why (*APo* 85b28-86a3).

Second, Joe's productive thinking about how to construct the room (where the construction is the *heneka tou* of that thinking) is best understood as initiated by his *decision* rather than just a desire to work out the plan in order to help Luca since, presumably, his desire to help Luca is a long-standing feature of his friendship with him rather than a momentary desire tied to the occasion. We can put the matter in this way – Joe desires *to help Luca* (S1) and so decides *to work out a plan for the additional room* (P1) as a way of helping him. Notice that for Joe, his action (P1) is *a way* of doing what he desires to do (S1). Practical reasoning led him from S1 to the discovery of P1. Interestingly, what Joe thought about practically (*heneka tou*), namely how to help his friend, is the very thing that he wants to do and that explains (i.e., is an *archē*) why he is thinking about it. The identity of what one reasons about with the reason that explains why one reasons about it is a particular feature of practical thinking. We can see it present also in Luca's decision (i.e., the result of Luca's *practical* thinking) to build the additional room (P2). Assuming that Luca is a standard rational agent, he must have decided to build the room for some reason or purpose. For example, he wanted to make the life of his growing family more comfortable (S2). This purpose is both that for the sake of which (*heneka tou*) he reasoned (i.e., what he was thinking about how to promote or achieve) but also that which explains (is an *archē*) why he engaged in thinking about how to promote it. Luca is thinking about how to make the life of his family better *because* that is what he wants to do.

In sum, in practical thinking, the *archē* of one's thinking (that which explains why one engaged in the particular episode of thinking) is a desire for the very thing that one reasons about or for the sake of (*heneka tou*). In productive thinking, they come apart: what one reasons about (*heneka tou*) and what gave rise to and explains why one is thinking about it (*archē*) are distinct. It will be useful to summarize the results of our analysis of the example in a table:

	Productive Thinking	Practical Thinking
		<b>Goal (<i>heneka tou</i>):</b> making the life of his family more comfortable.

Luca	Outsourced to Joe	<b>Result:</b> decision to build an additional room. (P2) <b>Principle (<i>archē</i>):</b> desire <u>to make the life of his family more comfortable (S2)</u>
Joe	<b>Goal (<i>heneka tou</i>):</b> additional room for Luca's house (R). <b>Result:</b> construction plan (W) for (R) <b>Principle (<i>archē</i>):</b> decision to work out the plan (P1) in order <u>to help Luca (S1)</u>	<b>Goal (<i>heneka tou</i>):</b> helping his friend Luca <b>Result:</b> decision to work out the plan (P1) <b>Principle (<i>archē</i>):</b> desire <u>to help Luca (S1)</u>

The example allows us to observe yet another difference between practical and productive thinking – unlike practical thinking, productive thinking can be outsourced to someone else. Joe's decision (the result of his practical thinking) is followed by productive thinking about how to construct the room. But although Luca's decision (to build the room) requires that such thinking be done, Luca outsources it to Joe. Productive thinking thus does not bridge the gap between one's initial desire for something and one's decision but, rather, stands apart from it. We can observe its place on Joe's case – his productive thinking is part of his *action*. It is what he decided *to do* in order to help Luca.<sup>15</sup> This is not a coincidence. In passage C, Aristotle already told us that practical thought is the principle of productive thought while in passage B he insists that the conclusion of practical thought (decision) is a principle of action. *De Motu* offers a clear illustration:

(E1) I need a covering and a coat is a covering. I need a coat. What I need I have to make and I need a coat. I have to make a coat. The conclusion 'I have to make a coat' is an action (*praxis*).

<sup>15</sup> It would be a mistake to think that Joe's productive thinking just is his action. Joe's action includes working out the construction plan but such thinking is embedded in the context of his decision to work out the plan *for* Luca. His action, in other words, involves not only the actual productive thinking about how to construct the room, but also, among other things, his aim to do so for Luca and, presumably, giving the plan to Luca. These latter features of Joe's action are not part of his productive thinking as such.

And one then acts from the principle (*archē*). (E2) If there is to be a coat, there must first be this, and if this then this—and straightaway one does this. (*De Motu* 701a17-23).<sup>16</sup>

Section E1 refers to reasoning that starts from one's realization that one needs a covering and ends in a decision (here referred to as 'conclusion') to the effect that one will make a coat. This is reasoning about what to do vis-à-vis one's need or desire. Once it is concluded, it is followed by an action (done from one's decision) which includes productive reasoning (section E2) about how to make the coat. Productive thinking is here thought of as part of one's *action* that follows one's decision. As Aristotle has already told us, there must be something else that activates productive thinking and this can be either desire or decision (*Met.* 9.5, 1048a10-11). And if decision is the principle of action, then productive thought can and in fact does occur as part of action.

There are two objections to the claim that the special feature of practical (but not of productive) thinking is that its *archē* (that which explains why one engaged in the particular episode of thinking) is a desire for the very thing that one reasons about or for the sake of. Answering them will help us sharpen the account. First, could there not be a case in which one's thinking about how to, say, construct a model of a ship in a bottle is motivated by the desire for doing just *that* (i.e., it is one's hobby, something one likes to do). In such a case, would not that which one productively reasons about be the same thing that motivated one to think about it? Second, one might think that sometimes figuring out how to produce or make something is crucial to deciding whether or not one wants to produce it. Hence, productive thinking can be part of one's practical thinking rather than stand apart from it.

We can begin by observing that, in practical thinking, there is *no necessary* connection between the initial desire and the action decided upon as a way of satisfying it (i.e., in the example, between S1 and P1, and S2 and P2). It is a matter of various contingent factors of a particular case – for example, Joe's abilities, desires, and beliefs, Luca's circumstances and needs – that it is P1 that will do as a way of

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<sup>16</sup> My understanding of this passage owes a great deal to A. Price, 'Choice and Action in Aristotle', *Phronesis* vol. 61, No. 4 (2016): 435-462.

doing or achieving S1. At another time, S1 might be fulfilled by, say, lending Luca some money or cooking him a nice meal. The same holds for S2 and P2: Luca could have decided to make the life of his family comfortable in many different ways. Practical thinking is a search for what will satisfy a desire<sup>17</sup> and there are, potentially, infinitely many ways in which that can be done.<sup>18</sup> In fact, it is even possible to decide to do something in view of one's desire for some end which is in no way conducive to that end but, nevertheless, manages to satisfy the desire. For example, Randy feels like having some salted nuts but he cannot find any at home. Since it is too late (Randy thinks) to go out and buy some, he decides to have some tea instead of the nuts. There is nothing unintelligible about Randy's decision to have tea as a way of satisfying (or perhaps dealing) with his initial desire for salted nuts. Yet it would be, if we were to insist that the action or means chosen or decided upon must be, somehow, connected through necessity to the initial end or object of that desire.

This means that practical thinking need not involve any sort of necessity, whether it be deductive<sup>19</sup> or hypothetical necessity.<sup>20</sup> It also might not involve considerations of efficiency, optimality, or even permissibility of what one (ultimately) decides to do. In thinking practically, one is inquiring into how to satisfy a desire and that might mean, in the simplest case, no more than finding *a* way that satisfies it – as when one decides that a coat *will do* as a covering (passage E) since, perhaps, that's the only thing one could quickly think of. Whether or not one's practical thinking takes a more complex or more reasoned form depends, crucially, both on the kind of person one is and on the kind of situation and state that one is in. It is one's character, among other things, that determines the criteria by which one chooses what counts as a good thing to do and it is one's current state, among other things, that determines what options are possible (*De Motu* 701a24-25). For example, if one is a meticulous sort of person, one might

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<sup>17</sup> Nothing Aristotle says requires that the agent is *conscious* of the desire in his deliberation or practical thinking. All he requires is that the agent sets him- or herself a goal (*NE* 3.3, 1112b15-16) and that he or she desires it (*NE* 3.5, 1113b3-5).

<sup>18</sup> For this point, although arrived at by different route, see J. Allen, 'Practical and theoretical knowledge in Aristotle', 65.

<sup>19</sup> Perhaps the most explicit expression of this idea is in A. Mele, 'How to Represent an Aristotelian Deliberation Syllogistically', *New Scholasticism*, Vol. 59, Issue 4, Autumn 1985, 484-492 who attempts to construct 'a formally valid syllogistic schema for representing *bouleusis*' (486).

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, G. Rodier, *Aristote: Traité de L'Ame, Tome II* (Paris, 1900): 537; M. Nussbaum, *Aristotle's De Motu Animalium* (Princeton, 1986): 172.

not be satisfied with finding a way to do what one desires to do but, rather, inquire into whether there are more ways to do so and which one is the most efficient; if one is a virtuous person, one might inquire into which way is the most *kalon*;<sup>21</sup> but if one is too tired and the desire is rather simple (such as hunger), one might not be even willing to consider any option beyond the first one that will do.<sup>22</sup>

A related, equally important point is that practical thinking cannot *proceed* without desire. Even in passage E1 above, there is nothing necessary about deciding for a coat as the covering that one needs. What makes it the case that one goes from realizing the need for covering to selecting a coat (rather than anything else) is, presumably, that one makes a judgment to the effect that a coat *will do* where this judgment is based not only on the actual suitability or availability of a coat as covering, but also on one's relevant personal preferences, likes, beliefs, and circumstances. But practical reasoning does not depend on one's character (broadly speaking as including one's likes, preferences, desires, and relevant beliefs) only insofar as that determines its particular shape or direction, but also insofar as it frequently requires desire to proceed from one step to another. If one needs a covering and there are two or more options (say, jacket made of leather or cotton), there might not be a reason necessitating any one of them (i.e., any particular conclusion) and one's reasoning needs to be moved into a particular direction by one's desire or

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<sup>21</sup> It is likely that practical reasoning of the practically wise agent has special features – for example, it is aimed at the right aim (i.e., at what is truly good), it knowingly chooses the right means for the right reasons (*NE* 6.9, 1142b29-33), it is well-integrated with the rest of the agent's goals and values. In this sense, the practically wise person is distinguished, among other things, by possessing knowledge or *understanding* of the goodness of his or her aims and actions.

<sup>22</sup> Scholars are often attracted to a much more stringent interpretation of Aristotle's conception of practical thinking. One reason (already discussed) is that they treat passages in which Aristotle discusses productive thinking as pertaining to practical thinking. Another reason is Aristotle's tendency to make use of practical syllogisms (or syllogistic vocabulary) in contexts where he discusses practical thinking. This tendency has suggested to at least some scholars that Aristotle requires some sort of logical (perhaps deductive) validity of practical reasoning. I do not have space to do justice to the complexities of interpreting practical syllogism and its relation to deliberation. But it seems to me that where it occurs, it usually connects the result of deliberation with action (as in *NE* 7.3, 1147a25-35) or that it is used to illuminate various features of practical thinking (since, presumably, syllogistic vocabulary is the most exact vocabulary Aristotle has to describe thinking). So, for example, in *NE* 6.9, 1142b22-26, Aristotle talks of 'false inference (*syllogism*)' and 'false middle term' in relation to errors in deliberation. But, despite the vocabulary, the passage does not commit him to a conception of deliberation as *consisting of* (practical) syllogisms. Rather, it illustrates that sometimes, say due to lack of knowledge, we correctly connect two things (desire for an end and action) but in a wrong way. For example, wishing to buy a gift for a friend that she would like, I decide to buy her tickets to the opera thinking that since she loves singing, night at the opera is the right gift. But it turns out that she hates opera-style singing and so my *reason* for choosing opera was bad. Nevertheless, she is pleased with the gift because, even while she does not like the singing style, she really enjoys the beautiful productions and music of operas. For full discussion of the issue, see Price, *Virtue and Reason in Plato and Aristotle*, 236-252; and K. Corcilius, 'Praktische Syllogismen bei Aristoteles', in *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 90 (3):247-297.

preference.<sup>23</sup> The same is not true of reasoning that displays formal validity or involves necessity.

Although there must be something – for example, a wish – to initiate an episode of theoretical thinking,<sup>24</sup> the ensuing process of thinking (i.e., the actualization of the capacity to think) does not require any further desire to keep it going as long as there is no need to decide between two or more options in which one's thinking can go.<sup>25</sup>

Noticing this feature of practical thinking, Aquinas assigns this task to will which is responsible for the movement of practical thought in selecting among the many options available to the one who thinks practically: 'since the will moves itself by means of deliberation and deliberation is a non-demonstrative kind of inquiry that can go in different directions, the will moves itself not necessarily' (QDM 6.1, see also *ST IaIIae*, 6.2).<sup>26</sup> There is perhaps no particular text in Aristotle that suggests this explicitly but consider how in *De Motu* 701a31-33, Aristotle describes the activity of desire as taking place, as it were, of reasoning or questioning – the desire for a drink moves one to act once cognition (whether perception or imagination or thought) recognizes a drink – the idea being that one *could* of course go further (for example, asking, whether it is a good drink, and so on) but desire now 'decides' that *that* drink will do. Similarly, in *NE* 6.2, he tells us that the *archē* of decision is desire (*orexis*) and goal-directed reason (*logos ho heneka tinos*). One might well take it to mean that the role of desire is not just to initiate reasoning but also to guide all the way to the final act of decision.<sup>27</sup>

Now Aristotle distinguishes practical thinking so understood – that is, thinking that leads to decision about how to satisfy a desire – from thinking about *how* to realize the action that one has already decided upon. Although he does not draw the contrast explicitly, he describes a perfected capacity to

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<sup>23</sup> For a similar point, see Price, *Virtue and Reason in Plato and Aristotle*, 249.

<sup>24</sup> For an account of the initiation of episodes of thinking, see K. Corcilius, 'How are Episodes of Thought Initiated, According to Aristotle?' in: *Soul and Mind. Ancient and Medieval Perspectives on the De anima*. Proceedings of the Jubilee of the Wulf De Mansion Centre, Leuven (Leiden, 2010), 1-15.

<sup>25</sup> For example, in *De Motu*, Aristotle tells us that 'whenever one thinks two propositions, one thinks and puts together the conclusion' (*De Motu*, 701a10-11). The presupposition here is, of course, that the two propositions are related in such a way that a conclusion follows of necessity.

<sup>26</sup> Cum ergo voluntas se consilio moveat, consilium autem est inquisitio quaedam non demonstrativa, sed ad opposita viam habens, non ex necessitate voluntas seipsam movet.

<sup>27</sup> I agree with David Charles, 'Aristotle on Practical and Theoretical Knowledge', 73-78 who argues that wish is present throughout the deliberative process, even though not for the reasons he induces, namely not because, as he claims, there is an identity between 'a rational desire to do A and the desiderative thought that A is to be done' (75).

engage in such thinking (i.e., about how to realize an action one has already decided upon), distinguishing it from a perfected capacity for practical thinking (i.e., practical wisdom) as well as virtue:

(F) Virtue, then, makes the decision correct. But whatever should be naturally done for the sake of (*heneka*) [executing] the decision is not the concern of virtue but of another capacity. We must speak more clearly to gain understanding about them. There is indeed a capacity that they call cleverness (*deinotēs*). This is such that it makes one capable of doing and attaining the actions that promote whatever goal is assumed. If, then, the goal is fine (*kalos*) cleverness is praiseworthy, whereas if it is base, it is unscrupulousness (*panourgia*). This is why both practically wise and unscrupulous people are said to be clever. Practical wisdom is not this capacity [i.e., cleverness] although it does not exist without it. (*NE* 6.12, 1144a20-29)

Cleverness, as Aristotle portrays it in the passage, is a kind of expertise but in a very general sense of the word. There is no particular form it needs to take or a particular goal it needs to have since what is required of it depends entirely on the kind of action one has decided upon and the particular circumstances in which one must or wants to carry it out. For example, if one decides to impress one's visitors by a great dinner, one has to know how and what to cook for the occasion, whereas if one decides to ask one's provost for a favor, one has to be able to present one's case in the right sort of words.<sup>28</sup> In

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<sup>28</sup> Some scholars think, mistakenly, that cleverness is practical wisdom without virtue. For example, M. L. Gill, 'Virtue and Reason in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*', in D. Henry and K. M. Nielsen (eds), *Bridging the Gap between Aristotle's Science and Ethics* (Cambridge, 2015): 94-110 at 109 asserts that 'reasoning without virtue is mere cleverness, not practical wisdom at all'. See also, N. Dahl, *Practical Reason, Aristotle, and Weakness of Will* (Minneapolis, 1984), 63; C. D. C. Reeve, *Practices of Reason: Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics* (Oxford, 1992), 85-86. This view is based on the analogy between natural virtue and cleverness that Aristotle draws in *NE* 6.13 and on misunderstanding of what Aristotle means by natural virtue. In particular, natural virtue is taken to be something that transforms into real virtue (once knowledge is added), disappearing in the process. But this is not what Aristotle says or thinks. Rather, natural virtue is an innate proclivity to immediately feel in certain ways or be attracted to doing certain actions without such actions or feelings flowing from any yet consciously adopted values, goals, or attachments. These natural proclivities often remain present even as one acquires full-fledged character qualities or even master virtue. One can, for example, be always prone to anger, to eating sweets, or to being generous. Master virtue is having such (good) characteristics too but *in another way* – it is, among other things, the ability to correct for immediate impulses due to such natural proclivities through reasoning and mature desires habituated to follow reasoning. Hence, even if we have natural virtue, 'we are nevertheless searching for something else to be the master



some cases, the expertise required is of the sort provided by one's knowledge of a craft. So in our example of Joe and Luca, it involves knowledge of house-building since it involves working out a plan (W) about how to construct the additional room (R). In general, cleverness involves technical or productive reasoning that proceeds, at least ideally, through hypothetical necessity and does not depend on the character of the one who reasons. The result of such reasoning is a recipe or a set of instructions about how to produce or accomplish something. In contrast, practical reasoning depends on one's character (broadly speaking) and does not involve reasoning through hypothetical necessity since the connection between S and P (i.e., the desired goal and what promotes it) is contingent.

The answer to the first objection, then, is that sometimes what one decides to do (i.e., to construct a ship in a bottle) is itself an instantiation of the kind of activity that one desires to do (constructing bottled ships). This happens, when one has a very specific desire that already singles out a particular sort of activity. But this is a feature of the example rather than of the general relationship between the object of one's initial desire and the action that one decides on in order to satisfy it. Moreover, even in that case, there are two pieces of reasoning involved. There is practical reasoning that led to the decision to construct a ship in view of one's desire to do so, and there is productive thinking about how to construct the ship initiated by one's decision. If what we said before is true, then the relationship between the initial desire and the decision should be contingent, despite appearances. And this seems to be true. It is conceivable that one could decide to do something else than to construct a bottled ship in view of one's desire or interest in constructing ship. For example, if one did not have the necessary materials for a ship, one could construct a model of a house or decide to paint the bottle from inside (rather than construct

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goodness (*to kuriōs agathon*), that is, to have these [virtues] in another way (*allon tropon*)' (NE 6.13, 1144b6-8). Aristotle probably thinks that without some (or significant) degree of natural virtue one cannot acquire master virtue but that is not the same as thinking that natural virtue is fully transformed into master virtue. He is quite clear that just as cleverness and practical wisdom are two conditions that coexist in the part that has beliefs (*doxastikon*) and, though connected, are distinct capacities, so natural and master virtue are two conditions that coexist in the part that is responsible for one's character (NE 6.5, 1144b14-17). One can usefully think of natural virtue as accounting for, among other things, the variability of character differences between virtuous people. Plutarchos and Andronika are both virtuous individuals, but while Andronika tends to be the friendlier of the two, Plutarchos tends to be the more patient one. The point of the analogy between natural virtue and cleverness (which, unlike natural virtue, is acquired) then is just that both need a master virtue (one virtue of character, the other practical wisdom) in order to be truly beneficial to the agent.

something in it) instead.<sup>29</sup> In which case, one would be thinking (productively) about how to construct a model of a house or paint the bottle even if one's initial desire was for a bottled ship.

The answer to the second objection is that although sometimes one has to find out how something can be produced before one can decide to do so, such reasoning (about how to produce it) is not part of one's *practical* reasoning that culminates in one's decision. Consider deliberation about whether to build a dam in order to provide electricity for a large city (say, Las Vegas). The requisite decision presumably will involve considerations of *how* such a dam could be built. But figuring *that* out is not deliberating – it involves, perhaps, drawing plans, considerations of building options, materials and so on. It is an analysis that can be prepared by someone other than the one who makes a decision. So even Luca could have postponed his final decision until he saw Joe's plans, outsourcing productive reasoning to him. But he cannot outsource his practical reasoning – nobody but he can make his decisions.<sup>30</sup>

The foregoing account enables us to shed considerable light not only on the difference between practical and productive reasoning but also on the often discussed distinction between action and production.<sup>31</sup> First, not only productive reasoning but also production can be outsourced to someone else. However, practical reasoning and action are not similarly transferrable to someone else. For example, one can make a decision to build a house but delegate the actual building to someone else. Despite the fact that the person who made the decision is not performing the actual building, the building of the house is still something that the person who made the decision does. This is reflected in linguistic practice – one can say that one is building a house even though one is not the person who is actually putting the bricks together. However, one cannot delegate the decision to build to someone else and still remain a person who is building. This is so even if one should, say, finance the building – an investor is not the same person as the builder (unless, incidentally). Second, many people can participate in one production even

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<sup>29</sup> In a similar way, when one can be hungry and feel like having Italian pasta but, in view of not having any available, decide to have some couscous instead.

<sup>30</sup> It should be obvious by now that it is a mistake to treat practical and productive thinking as if they were somehow identical in nature, differing only in the way in which their objects are specified. Yet, this mistake is common in the literature (see, for example, Milo, *Aristotle on Practical Knowledge and Weakness of Will*, 37; M. Johnson, *Aristotle on Teleology* (Oxford, 2005): 213).

<sup>31</sup> For example: *NE* 6.4, 1140a16-1140b7; or *Pol.* 3.4, 1254a5.

while they are engaged in different actions. Both Luca and Joe can claim that they are building a room. Luca can do so if he is neither the builder nor the architect because he made the decision that it be built. Joe too can say that he is building a room because he is doing the actual building (or planning). However, they are engaged in different actions even if those actions both include the same production, namely building a room – one action aims at (and so is a case of) making the life of Luca’s family better, the other at (and so is a case of) helping Luca.<sup>32</sup>

#### 4. Virtuous Action Done Virtuously

I would like to conclude the paper by an example of how grasping the correct conception of practical thinking in Aristotle can help us illuminate other issues in Aristotle’s ethics. In *NE* 2.4, Aristotle makes a distinction between virtuous actions and virtuous actions done virtuously. The distinction is supposed to address an objection to his account of virtue acquisition through habituation. The account, outlined in *NE* 2.1, is as follows. First, Aristotle claims that virtue is acquired through habituation (1103a25-26). Second, he assumes (implicitly) that habituation is a process in which one develops the ability for *and* enjoyment of a certain activity through a repeated performance of that activity. Third, he observes that this is the way in which we learn a craft: we do so by performing the activities of the craft, for example, we learn to play a lyre by playing one (1103a32-34). He concludes that virtue too, just like any craft, must be acquired by performing the activities of a given virtue: we become courageous by performing courageous actions, just by just actions, and so on (1103a34-b2).

One could raise a number of objections to this argument. For example, one could wonder whether repeated performance or engagement in a certain activity might not also develop a dislike for it (rather

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<sup>32</sup> All this suggests that when in *NE* 6.5, 1140b3-4 Aristotle says that ‘action and production are of different kinds (ἄλλο τὸ γένος πράξεως καὶ ποιήσεως)’, he is not being confused and that we should not assume as unproblematic Ackrill’s claim that ‘actions often or always *are* productions and productions often or *always* are actions’ (J. L. Ackrill, ‘Aristotle on Action’, *Mind*, vol. 87, no. 348 (1978), 595-601 at 595). However, it is beyond the aim of this paper to pursue an interpretation of Aristotle’s claim that ‘the end of production is different, but the end of action is not since its end is acting well itself (τῆς μὲν ποιήσεως ἕτερον τὸ τέλος, τῆς δὲ πράξεως οὐκ ἄν εἴη: ἔστι γὰρ αὐτὴ ἡ εὐπραξία τέλος)’ (1140b6-7). For a detailed discussion of the claim and the distinction, see T. Angier, *Technē in Aristotle’s Ethics: Crafting the Moral Life* (Continuum, 2010): 36-58.

than make one enjoy it); or one might wonder whether habituation means the same thing in relation to virtue as it does to craft if, as Aristotle insists elsewhere, craft is a certain kind of knowledge (i.e., a state of the rational part of the soul and so it should be learned rather than acquired by habit) but virtue is a state of the non-rational part of the soul. In *NE* 2.4, however, Aristotle raises a different worry. He suggests that although it makes sense to think that one can, for example, play a guitar without being yet a guitar player, it does not seem to make sense to think that one could perform virtuous actions without being virtuous to begin with – how can one perform just, temperate, or brave actions unless one is in fact just, temperate, or brave? After all, although there might be only partially well-executed exercises of a craft (say, a rather badly played piece of music by a beginner), it is odd to think of imperfectly or only partially brave actions. In fact, Aristotle could easily be understood as thinking that there are no such imperfect virtuous action – there is, as he says, only one way to be right (*NE* 2.6, 1106b28-33). Since Aristotle, quite reasonably, excludes from consideration cases in which one does something virtuous by accident (*NE* 2.4, 1105a22-26), the paradox can be stated as follows. If one knows that one is doing a virtuous action, then it looks like one has the appropriate knowledge of virtue and is able to act according to it. But what more can there be to being virtuous than having the appropriate knowledge and exercising it in action? Hence, it appears that one must already be virtuous in order to perform virtuous actions.<sup>33</sup>

Aristotle's response hinges on distinguishing virtuous actions from virtuous actions done virtuously. Virtuous actions are those that have 'the right qualities' (*NE* 2.4, 1105a29), whereas virtuous actions done virtuously involve three further features. The agent who performs them must (1) have knowledge; (2) decide on them and do so for themselves; and (3) do them from a firm and unchanging state (*NE* 2.4, 1105a30-33). I will set condition (3) aside for the present purposes and concentrate on (1) and (2). First, what knowledge does Aristotle have in mind in (1)? He suggests that (1) 'counts for

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<sup>33</sup> Sukaina Hirji reminds me that my reading of the way in which the puzzle is set up in *NE* 2.4 is not entirely uncontroversial. Some scholars maintain that one who is not yet virtuous cannot perform genuinely virtuous actions. For a recent view of this sort see I. Vasilou, 'Virtue and Argument in Aristotle's Ethics', in S. Tenenbaum (ed.) *New Trends in Philosophy: Moral Psychology* (Amsterdam, 2001): 37-78. A recent examination of the issue (defending a reading according to which one can perform genuinely virtuous action while not yet being virtuous of the sort that I am assuming here) can be found in M. Jimenez, 'Aristotle on Becoming Virtuous by Doing Virtuous Actions', *Phronesis* 61(1) (2016), 3-32.

nothing or for only a little' (1105b2-4), yet he still includes it among the conditions. How can the requisite knowledge (whatever it is a knowledge of) be so insignificant for having a virtue and yet be among the conditions for acting virtuously?

Second, what does it mean to say that one has to decide on virtuous actions 'for themselves' and why should deciding on them in *that* way be ethically significant? When one takes one's own life in order to save one's family, one is surely not deciding to take one's own life for its own sake but, rather, for a particular further purpose (namely, preserving the life of one's family). Perhaps one could reply that one decides on the action (of taking one's own life) because it is the virtuous or right or noble thing to do and that that is what Aristotle means by deciding on the action 'for itself'. Although this is not an obvious meaning of the expression 'for its own sake', we can put that aside for the moment. A more pressing problem is that it implies that what made a person act virtuously (rather than merely perform a virtuous action) was her thought that what she was doing was the right thing to do. This seems false – what made her action virtuous was that it was the right thing to do and what made her act virtuously was that she acted on the right reasons and not that she *thought* that her reasons were the right ones.

### *Deciding on Virtuous Actions for Themselves*

It will be best to tackle the issue by first thinking about how Aristotle can distinguish between actions and the reasons that one has for performing them. Standardly, Aristotle thinks of the reason or reasons one has for performing an action as of the goal or end that one aims at by performing it. He also thinks that one can characterize the action one performs apart from the goal for which one performs it. For example, he says that

(H) ...we judge a person's character from his decision, that is, from that for the sake of which he acts (*to tinos heneka prattei*) and not from the action he does (*ti prattei*). ...we praise and blame everybody with a view to the decision (*prohairesis*) rather than to the deeds (*erga*), even though the exercise [of virtue] is more choiceworthy than virtue itself. The reason is that people can do

bad things (*phaula*) when compelled but no one can be compelled to decide. Further still, it is because it is not easy to discern the character of a decision that we are compelled to judge a person's character from their deeds. (*EE* 2.11, 1228a2-17)

The passage asserts that we often need to judge a person's character from their actions rather than from their decisions since the ends for the sake of which the person acts are not obvious and, as Aristotle tells us elsewhere, people are not typically forthcoming about them either (*Soph. Elench.* 172b36-173a6). So although we know – by observation – what people are doing (i.e., their actions), we do not (and mostly cannot) know the goals at which they aim by those actions simply in virtue of knowing what they are doing. All this might seem intuitive. We usually have little problem identifying what someone is doing even though we cannot tell why she is doing it. This seems to be, in fact, a precondition of our ability to navigate everyday life. For example, we can recognize that someone is donating to charity and yet not know whether she is trying to help people in need or whether she is just attempting to promote her political image. Similarly, we can recognize that someone is cleaning windows of a bank and yet not know whether he does it because he is paid to do by the bank or because he is a thief trying to scope the terrain.

However, one might *also* think that one actually does not know what a person's action is unless one knows her goal or purpose in doing what she is doing. Whether one is trying to help people in need or promote one's political image depends on the goal at which one aims in doing whatever it is that one is doing. In this sense, an action and its goal seem inseparable.<sup>34</sup> In fact, Aristotle himself thinks that what a given change is (and action is a kind of change) is fixed by the goal of that change.<sup>35</sup> So it would appear that we both know and do not know what people's actions are, depending on what we take 'action' to refer to – the easily recognizable acts of donating to charity or of cleaning windows or those acts understood in the light of the goals the agents aim at by performing those actions.

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<sup>34</sup> The point was forcefully made already by J. L. Ackrill, 'Aristotle on Action', *Mind* Vol. 87, No. 348 (1978): 595-601 at 596.

<sup>35</sup> For a discussion of this point, see D. Charles, *Aristotle's Philosophy of Action* (Ithaca, 1984), 19-27.

We can bring clarity to this confusion by employing the results of the discussion of productive and practical reasoning. Let's take the example of giving money to charity. One can have various reasons or goals in doing so – one can do it out of the goodness of one's heart or to promote one's political image. In either case, however, it is a *contingent* matter that giving to charity will do as a way fulfilling one's desire either to do good or to promote one's political image. It is no surprise, then, that it is not possible to *infer* the reason one has for donating (or the goal one pursues by it) from the action of donating to charity itself. We have already discussed the contingent relation that obtains between one's desire and what one determines (by practical reasoning) would satisfy it. But we have also seen that Aristotle thinks that the result of practical thinking is a description of something about which one can reasonably ask 'how does one do it?' and as an answer expect a recipe – specified in universal terms – to tell one how to do so. In our example, giving money to charity (as opposed to promoting one's political image or doing good) is a specific task for which there are specific steps to take in order to execute it. It is something that can be specified in universal terms and done by anyone who has a reason for doing so, whether that person desires to help others or to improve her political image.

We can put the matter more technically. An action considered without the reference to its goal (as given by one's decision) is a description of what one does that specifies it as something which can become a goal for productive reasoning. It is something to be produced or made, a *poiēton*. However, when the action is considered as something to be taken in order to satisfy a desire, as something done for the sake of some goal or end, it is a *prakton* – an achievement. Now, insofar as actions are *poiēta*, they are objects of cleverness (or of productive thinking) and as such the only relevant considerations as to their being well-done are their own qualities (*NE* 2.4, 1105a27-28). This follows from the fact that what makes them what they are can be specified without reference to any desires or beliefs – there are objective steps of how one can donate money to charity and what counts as having done so. But insofar as those actions are *prakta*, they are objects of practical thinking – they have been chosen as ways of satisfying a desire.

There is a well-known and crucial objection to this account. Is not 'donating money to charity' already specifying something (say, transferring money) by its purpose? In fact, would not *any* description

of action ultimately involve further goals of those actions? If so, the distinction between actions considered as *poiēta* and *prakta* would surely collapse. The objection is in a way correct and it helps us to both clarify and further the argument. It is a feature of most publicly sanctioned activities, which include crafts and their objects, that they have a built-in purpose. This purpose is not somehow a necessary consequence of engaging in them but, rather, a way of putting such activities or crafts to use in ways that the society came to recognize as useful for satisfying its needs and so decided to promote or enable them for that purpose. Thus the production of bread feeds the hungry, surgery saves lives, and book-printing distributes knowledge. This is a lesson learnt in *Met.* 9.2, discussed above in section 2: every craft has its proper purpose with which it is properly concerned. In fact, this purpose constitutes the goal for the sake of which a given craft *exists* – medicine for health, shoemaking for shoes, and so on.

It is crucial to recognize that each craft has a goal for the sake of which it exists and that crafts and their activities are matters of public knowledge and interest. In *NE* 1.1, Aristotle famously presents an image of a hierarchy of crafts – for example, there is bridle-making which serves horsemanship, which, in turn, serves generalship, and so on (1094a7-14). As Aristotle portrays it, all or most human activities are potentially exercises of various *technai* or (more generally) kinds of knowledge that fall under the general umbrella of cleverness. What people do in their daily lives is intelligible to us precisely because we recognize what they are doing as falling under such general, publicly recognized descriptions which we understand as tied to certain (good) purposes. We know that the baker is making food (and that food is for relieving hunger) and that the doctor is performing surgery (and that that is done to make people healthy). Of course, we need to learn to recognize people's activities in this way – we do so, for example, by becoming competent speakers of language or by becoming socialized and encultured through both private and public education and upbringing. For our purposes, the important point is that we learn to see human activities as purposeful and, in fact, as tied to particular purposes that we are, generally, able to recognize.

Interestingly, however, when we ordinarily see people engaging in such activities, we do not suppose that they engage in them *because* (or for the sake) of those societally built-in (good) purposes that benefit predominantly others rather than the people who do them: the baker does not bake bread to



feed people – he wants to sell the bread to make a living; the doctor does not simply heal people – rather, he does it for a fee.<sup>36</sup> In other words, we suppose that people engage in the various activities they do because they want to further their own good, that is, they put the exercise the crafts for ulterior purposes. In fact, we find this view so appealing that we tend to forget about the true purposes of those activities. And so the only contrast that comes to mind, when we think of why people engage in them, is that of engaging in them *for their own sake* (i.e., abstracting from any further purpose) and *for ulterior purposes* (i.e., especially for sake of one's own good). That particular contrast, rather obviously, weighs things towards the latter case: simply making bread or repairing cars *for its own sake* does not appear either sensible or desirable (setting aside cases in which these are one's hobbies).

But notice what would happen if one were in fact to do such craft-activities for those built-in purposes. For example, the baker would bake bread in order to feed the hungry, the car mechanic repair cars in order to help distressed motorists, and the doctor perform surgery in order to heal the patients. Suddenly, their activities – the exercises of their respective crafts – get a very different flavor – they appear to have what we might call moral or intrinsic value. Interestingly, they appear to do so because they are done for the very reasons (or very purpose or utility) for which they in fact came to be and exist. This is neither a case of doing the activities (say, baking bread) for their own sake (in the sense just described, that is, for example, so as to make bread) nor doing them for ulterior (selfish) purposes. Rather, it is engaging in them in a way that is proper to those crafts of which they are exercises. This is, I take it, Aristotle's point. Deciding on an action 'for itself' does not mean deciding on it independently of the goal that the action aims at. Rather, he means that one has to decide on it for the very reason for which such sort of actions or activities and the crafts associated with them exist and are publicly recognized as good and useful. To decide to make bread for itself is not to decide to make bread for the sake of making bread (the insensible option mentioned above) but, rather, for the sake of feeding those who are hungry. This is what bread-baking *is*.

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<sup>36</sup> This is an old point made by Thrasymachus (*Rep.* 343b-344c).

But although this account might be true of crafts and their activities, can it be applied to virtuous actions? Virtuous actions (as opposed to exercises of crafts) are a special subclass of human activities – they promote particular, especially exalted or useful goals: for example, just actions are those that contribute to equitable distribution, generous ones those that benefit other people, brave those that, among other things, contribute to the preservation of the *polis*, and so on. These actions are recognized as especially worthwhile or noble (*kala*) since they are difficult and their goals or results are especially beneficial to the agent, fellow citizens or the society (this is very explicit in *Rhet.* 1.9, 1366a33-1366b22). Moreover, unlike in the case of craft-like productions, which too can be done out of *kala* or noble motives (that is, they can be done for themselves in the way I just explained), there is usually no particular way in which the virtuous goals can be promoted – for feeding the hungry or healing the sick we have farming and medicine, but there is no particular craft for benefitting those in need or preserving the *polis*. Sometimes we benefit those in need by donating money but at other times by baking bread. Similarly, sometimes it is fighting that preserves the *polis* but at other times it is doing good journalism. In other words, in order to be a good, praiseworthy craftsman, one only needs to exercise one's craft for the purpose for which it exists. This, though, admirable, is not especially difficult. In order to be a virtuous person, however, one not only has to act for the right, *kala* purposes (equitable distribution, benefit those in need, preserving of the *polis*) but also be able to determine which activities would do that – and that is a difficult task since there are no particular activities of bravery or generosity, as there are of medicine or bread-making.

Nevertheless, the idea remains the same – to decide on virtuous actions for themselves just is to decide on them for those features that make them virtuous, that is for those features that contribute to the virtuous, noble goals. Aristotle tells us what those goals are in each case (for temperance it is health, for generosity benefitting those in need, for bravery preserving the *polis*, and so on). The generous person, then, is one who, say, donates money to charity or spends a year teaching mathematics precisely so as to benefit those who need it – she decides to donate or to teach *because* it is beneficial to the right people not

because she wants to donate for the sake of donating or teach for the sake of teaching.<sup>37</sup> Notice that this does not mean that one has to decide to say, stand firm in battle, because one *believes* or *thinks* that virtue (courage) demands it. Rather, it means that one does so for those reasons (like saving the polis or preserving an equitable distribution of wealth) that make such actions just or courageous. Of course, the virtuous agent might well care about her temperance or courage or virtue in general and cultivate it. This is important especially in teaching others (say, children) about virtue. But this does not exclude that she is genuinely motivated by the virtuous goals themselves (rather than by her awareness of them being virtuous or by preserving her own virtue).

### *The agent must have knowledge*

When Aristotle says that one who performs virtuous actions virtuously must have knowledge, what knowledge does he have in mind? And why does he think that it counts for (almost) nothing in the case of virtue? If the foregoing account is correct, then it cannot be knowledge of what makes one's actions virtuous since such knowledge is needed (and so crucial) in order to decide on one's actions for themselves – what makes one's actions virtuous must constitute one's reasons for doing them. It also cannot be the knowledge one needs to translate one's overall goal (helping Luca) into a decision to do something specific (e.g., to build a house as a way of helping Luca) since such knowledge is required if one is to make a decision at all. Finally, it cannot be knowledge that what one does is virtuous (i.e., knowing that it is, say, courageous) since such knowledge is not needed for doing virtuous actions virtuously (at least not on the account I have just defended).

It remains that the relevant knowledge is knowledge of how to do what one aims or thinks that one should do, that is, knowledge of how to implement one's decision (in our example, knowledge of how to build a house, *not* knowledge of how to help Luca). This would fit the analogy with craft as

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<sup>37</sup> On my interpretation, there is thus no special problem about virtuous actions having what some have called 'external goals' (e.g., *NE* 10.7, 1177b16-20) while being ends in themselves (e.g., *NE* 10.6, 1176a35-1177b9) since it is those goals that make the actions what they are. For a discussion of the problem, see J. Whiting, 'Eudaimonia, external results, and choosing virtuous actions for themselves' in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 65 (2002):270-290.

Aristotle uses it in the chapter (*NE* 2.4). For example, if the virtuous thing is donating money or teaching mathematics, then it is knowledge of how to donate money or how to teach mathematics. In other words, the requisite knowledge would belong to craft or, in general, cleverness. If so, we can explain why it is both among the conditions of doing a virtuous action virtuously but also why it matters only very little in virtue, as opposed to craft. It matters in craft because craft just *is* that kind of knowledge and to act with craft is to act out of such knowledge. It is among the conditions for acting virtuously since if one did *not* know (at all) how to do what one decided to do, then the only way in which one could have performed the virtuous action would be by chance or by following someone else's instructions. It is thus a necessary feature of *acting* virtuously. Yet it matters little because it has to do with the ability to do what one decided to do rather than with one's motivation to do it. In fact, the requisite knowledge can be quite minimal. For example, although one may not know how to carry out what one decided to do (say, build a house or teach mathematics) as long as one knows how to elicit the help of others who do (i.e., how to hire a house-builder or elicit help of friends who know mathematics), one knows all one needs to know. One can, as Luca did in our example with Joe, outsource the thing to be done and yet remain the one who acted in a virtuous way.

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