

## Degrees of virtue in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (penultimate draft)

Doug Reed

### *Abstract:*

I argue that Aristotle believes that virtue comes in degrees. After dispatching with initial concerns for the view, I argue that we should accept it because Aristotle conceives of heroic virtue as the highest degree of virtue. I support this interpretation of heroic virtue by considering and rejecting alternative readings, then showing that heroic virtue characterized as the highest degree of virtue is consistent with the doctrine of the mean.

In this paper I investigate two issues regarding Aristotle's ethical landscape in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, both of which have received less scholarly attention than they deserve. The first is whether Aristotle believes that there are degrees of true human virtue, henceforth, 'DOV'.<sup>1</sup> The second is how Aristotle conceives of heroic virtue.<sup>2</sup> I take these two issues to be intimately related—a claim I argue for below—so that any light shed on one of them will likewise illuminate the other. My investigation proceeds as follows. First, I consider the question of whether Aristotle endorses DOV. After raising and replying to some apparent problems with an affirmative answer, I argue that since Aristotle holds that there are people who have heroic virtue, that is, I'll claim, have the highest degree of virtue, he is committed to DOV. Because my argument relies on the claim that heroic virtue is the highest degree of virtue, I turn next to a defense of this interpretation. To this end, I examine alternative interpretations of heroic virtue. After arguing that each alternative interpretation fails, I detail my account of heroic virtue as

---

<sup>1</sup> Although some commentators seem to agree with my claim that Aristotle endorses DOV (e.g., Curzer 1996, 2005, 240, and 2012, Drefcinski 1996, 144, Hardie 1978, 72, and Sherman 1989, 141-142), to my knowledge there has never been a thorough examination of the issue.

<sup>2</sup> Again, commentators sometimes mention heroic or divine virtue, but the topic lacks a proper treatment.

the highest degree of virtue. This is no small task, however, since it requires both considering how heroic virtue fits in with Aristotle's doctrine of the mean, and identifying how good agents can vary with regard to virtue.

### I. Identifying the issue: a characterization of DOV

The fundamental issue in this paper is whether Aristotle allows for degrees of true human virtue. Here it will help us zero in on our target by ruling out what this does *not* mean.

First, this is not about Aristotle's distinction between virtues of character and virtues of intellect. Although the questions of how these states relate to one another, and which, if either, takes precedence, are important, they are not my present concern. Second, I am not inquiring into the difference between natural virtue and true/complete virtue (ἡ φυσικὴ ἀρετὴ πρὸς τὴν κυρίαν, 1144b3). Natural virtues, Aristotle tells us, are temperaments with which people are born; an agent does not possess true virtue until these temperaments are combined with *phronesis*. Thus, someone who only has natural virtue lacks true virtue, and the difference is not a matter of degree but of kind. Again, although this distinction is important, it is not what I am interested in here. Rather, I am investigating whether Aristotle believes that there can be (positive) degrees of true/complete virtue.<sup>3</sup> Another way to put the question at hand is to ask whether or not

---

<sup>3</sup> A parallel example is health. Aristotle claims that health comes in degrees (1173a25), so that two people can be healthy, though one is healthier than the other. The question at hand is whether virtue is similar to health in this regard. For perhaps the earliest discussion and characterization of this question, see Aspasius' commentary (cf. Ierodiakonou 1999). To be clear, DOV is not the view virtue and vice are ends of a single continuum with continence and incontinence as points; these are all distinct conditions. DOV says that virtue itself consists in a spectrum, with, as I shall argue, heroic virtue being highest degree.

Aristotle thinks it is possible that there be two agents with true virtue but that one of them has more virtue than the other.<sup>4</sup> That is, for example: would Aristotle think that it is coherent to claim that Mary and Tom are both truly courageous, but that Mary is more courageous than Tom?

With the issue now clear, some may consider an investigation unnecessary. After all, it may seem that this question can be resolved through a close reading of the text. Indeed, a careful look at the *NE* with an eye toward this question reveals several passages that seem to indicate that Aristotle endorses DOV.<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, for scholars moved by the question at hand, a careful reading of the text offers as many passages that suggest that Aristotle rejects DOV.<sup>6</sup> Thus, the upshot of a careful reading of the *NE* is that, as is so often the case, passages alone cannot do the exegetical work required.<sup>7</sup>

So, Aristotle's text is ambivalent regarding DOV. Perhaps, then, a call to charity is in order. That is, all parties agree that we should interpret Aristotle charitably. And not only do most contemporary ethicists (along, presumably, with most non-philosophers who reflect on ethics) accept DOV, many might think that rejecting it would be absurd.

---

<sup>4</sup> The question of whether virtue comes in degrees is importantly related to, but separable from, the question of how we should conceive of ethical inquiry (cf. Curzer 2005). *Is the goal of ethical inquiry to determine the ideal toward which humans should strive, putting aside the question of whether anyone meets this standard? Or, does ethical inquiry begin with the premise that there are truly good agents and then set as its task to determine what makes them so?* Both conceptions are compatible with DOV or its rejection. However, most versions of the former conception imply the denial of DOV. For, if virtue is an ideal, to be good is to be perfectly good. Hence, there can be no room for degrees.

<sup>5</sup> e.g., 1117b16, 1120b6-10, 1124a2, 1158a33-35, 1172a13, and 1173a22. Cf. *Categories* 10b26.

<sup>6</sup> e.g., 1113a33, 1115b13-20, 1120a24-6, and 1144b12-13. cf. *Physics* 246a13.

<sup>7</sup> Below (note 73) I provide a suggestion to remedy the apparent tension between these passages.

Accordingly, since most people today take DOV as obvious, and since the text is indeterminate, charity requires us to read Aristotle as endorsing DOV.

Employing this proposal becomes difficult, however, when one considers the ancient orthodoxy regarding DOV. That is because even if commonplace today, proponents of DOV appear to have been in the minority in antiquity, at least among philosophers.<sup>8</sup> For instance, Socrates—at least as Plato portrays him in the early dialogues—held that true virtue is (or requires) wisdom of a type that is more than human.<sup>9</sup> For him, then, true virtue seems to be an ideal, dependent on perfect knowledge of virtue terms. Thus, since virtue is an ideal—even if an attainable ideal—all good agents would be perfectly, and so equally, good. Hence, Socrates would reject DOV. Next, take Plato. According to the view we find in the *Republic*, true virtue is possible only in an ideal state or as a gift from the gods.<sup>10</sup> Either way, the possession of virtue requires contact with perfection, which suggests that to be good is to be perfectly so. Even outside of the *Republic* Plato consistently ties the possession of virtue to ideal wisdom.<sup>11</sup> So, for Aristotle’s teacher, it seems that to count as good is to be completely good. And if this is so, then there isn’t room for degrees when it comes to virtue.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> In Greek poetry the strand of thought that true goodness is perfection, and perfection is the sole province of the gods, also supposes a rejection of DOV. For discussions of this strand and its relation to Plato, see Frede 1986, 738 and Parry 1965, 301.

<sup>9</sup> cf. *Apology* 23a3-b2. See also *Protagoras* 342a5-345c4 (cf. Frede 1986).

<sup>10</sup> *Republic* 492e7-8.

<sup>11</sup> cf. *Phaedo* 67a1, 76b1-c2, and 82d5-84b5.

<sup>12</sup> To be clear, though, it is possible to deny DOV while maintaining that virtue is not an ideal.

Admittedly, Plato never explicitly addresses DOV in his dialogues. So, the foregoing is speculative. We don't need to speculate, however, regarding what many of the philosophers after Aristotle thought about DOV, as they directly and unequivocally came out against it. The clearest case is that of the Stoics, who argued that to fall short of perfect virtue, no matter how close one is to it, is to be vicious.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, as we shall see below, later members of Aristotle's own school denied DOV. Much of the work of Peripatetics came in the form of commentaries on Aristotle's works and in these commentaries at least one prominent Aristotelian interpreted his forebear as denying DOV, an interpretation that remains common to this day.<sup>14</sup>

In light of the above, it is clear that in order to settle on an answer to this question, one must go beyond individual passages and our current ethical intuitions, and instead determine Aristotle's deepest ethical convictions and use these as a framework to sort out his stance on DOV. Unfortunately for those who think that Aristotle accepts it, DOV seems to conflict with several fundamental aspects of his ethics. In the following section I'll focus on two of these aspects and show that although they initially seem to conflict with DOV, the problems they pose are merely apparent.

## **II. Apparent problems with attributing DOV to Aristotle**

As I have just argued, in order to determine Aristotle's attitude toward DOV we must consider whether or not it coheres with the most significant aspects of his ethical system.

---

<sup>13</sup> See Long and Sedley 1999: 61T and 61I. One could deny DOV without committing to the Stoics's extreme view that someone who lacks virtue is vicious.

<sup>14</sup> For instance, see Irwin 1988, Hutchison 1986, 106, and Annas 1995, 83.

Certainly one of the most recognizable and fundamental features of Aristotle's ethics is his claim that virtue is a mean state. As we shall see later, this commitment presents trouble for attributing DOV to Aristotle. However, since the threat posed by the doctrine of the mean is especially acute regarding heroic virtue—and so, for my thesis that heroic virtue is virtue to the highest degree—I shall postpone my discussion of this worry. Here I consider two other features of Aristotle's theory that seem to preclude DOV: his view that the good person is a standard, and a worry from Aspasius that DOV commits Aristotle to the possibility of too much virtue. In both cases I will explain the concern before showing that properly understood Aristotle's views cohere with DOV.

*The person with virtue as the standard*

One reason to think that Aristotle rejects DOV is his dictum that the good person is a standard. This view does considerable work for Aristotle across the *NE*. For instance, it furnishes him with an answer to the question of which actions are properly pleasurable: “what appear pleasures to him [the person with virtue] will also really be pleasures and what is pleasant is what he enjoys” (1176a18-19).<sup>15</sup> Again, this view helps him to dissolve a puzzle about moral education. On one hand, he maintains that people learn to be temperate, for instance, by performing temperate actions. But on the other hand, it seems that in order to perform temperate actions, one must already be temperate. This puzzle disappears, however, if one distinguishes between a temperate action and a

---

<sup>15</sup> Translations are from Irwin 1999 unless noted. I should point out that I diverge from Irwin's translation with regard to ‘μεσότης’ and ‘μέσον’. Based on Brown 2014 (cf. Brown 1997, 79), I generally translate, and throughout the paper refer to, ‘μεσότης’ as ‘mean state’ and ‘μέσον’ as ‘mean’.

temperate action as performed by a temperate person. The former is defined in terms of how the temperate person would act in a situation. Thus, the distinction allows Aristotle to maintain that an intemperate person could perform a temperate action, but it does so by positing the temperate person as a standard for certain action-types.

Whether in relation to pleasure or fine actions, Aristotle's view that the person with virtue is a standard appears to present the following difficulty for DOV. If DOV were true, then good agents can vary. But, if good agents can vary, there is no single way to be a good agent. Hence, if DOV were true, then there is no standard good agent. Using the example of courageous actions, the problem is that it is not clear whether the actions of the courageous (but not perfectly so) person constitute courageous actions, or whether the actions of the exceedingly courageous person do.<sup>16</sup> Accordingly, if DOV were true, then there is no standard according to which actions are truly courageous. Or, regarding pleasure, if DOV were true, then there is no standard that determines which activities are properly pleasurable. But since Aristotle is committed to, for instance, the courageous person being the standard of courageous actions, and the good person being the standard for pleasurable activities, DOV must be false.

Fortunately for proponents of attributing DOV to Aristotle, these concerns are not insurmountable. Since the two problems have similar solutions, I'll only set out the responses to the second worry, about the person with virtue as the standard for fine

---

<sup>16</sup> To spell out the difficulty: If it is the former, what do we say about actions of agents with more virtue? But, if the actions of agents with the most virtue constitute the standard, can we still count the former as being in accord with virtue? Since neither option seems palatable, it looks like we should reject DOV.

action.<sup>17</sup> One possible response is that in the same circumstances any courageous person, whether barely courageous or exceedingly courageous, would perform the same action.<sup>18</sup> After all, given that there is no difference in the actions themselves of the good person and the continent person, we should perhaps expect that there would be no difference in the actions of agents of different degrees of virtue. Although this response is promising, we might also want to leave open the possibility that differences in degrees of virtue might manifest themselves in action.<sup>19</sup> Accordingly, my second response is to suggest there are degrees of courageous actions.<sup>20</sup> This mirrors the main claim of DOV, namely

---

<sup>17</sup> I will discuss pleasure in greater detail below, but here is my solution to the problem for DOV posed by taking the good person as the standard of proper pleasure. First, Aristotle states that pleasure can vary by degree (1173a21-29). Second, Aristotle leaves open the possibility that two good agents performing the same action can experience different amounts of pleasure (1120a27). Thus, it is plausible that he believes that the good person is the standard for which actions are properly pleasurable while also thinking that good agents can differ from one another in degree of pleasure experienced in a fine action. The view, then, would be that the more virtue the agent has, the more pleasure she experiences from acting well.

<sup>18</sup> Correcting, of course, for the different social/political positions two individuals may inhabit, as these might alter which of the available actions is, for instance, the generous action to perform. In the pleasure case, the response is that all good agents would receive pleasure from the same types of actions.

<sup>19</sup> In all cases any good agent acting finely will perform the same activity described generically. For instance, two generous agents will both give money to another person in need. But for the moment, we should at least allow that there could be differences that do not come at this level of description. Indeed, as we shall see, the agent with more virtue might give more money, or might experience more pleasure. Conversely, the agent with non-heroic virtue might give a little less or not experience as much pleasure in performing the deed.

<sup>20</sup> Regarding pleasure, agents of different degrees of virtue might experience different degrees of proper pleasure in performing fine actions.

that there are degrees of virtue. For instance, on this picture some actions might be courageous, but not exceedingly so. These are the actions that a courageous but not-exceedingly-so agent would perform in a given situation. Some other actions might be exceedingly courageous. These are the actions that an exceedingly courageous agent would perform in a given circumstance. Thus, according to this response, there is not any tension at all between DOV and the distinction between acting well and doing fine actions as the person with virtue does them. Fine actions of given degrees are the actions of agents corresponding to those degrees of virtue. Moreover, far from conflicting with Aristotle's theory of moral education, this picture seems to sit well with it. In order to come to possess a high degree of virtue, one must become habituated to perform fine actions of a high degree, that is, the actions of an exceedingly good agent.

So, to sum up, Aristotle's view that the good person is the standard for proper pleasures, right actions, or anything else is consistent with DOV. At first the view that the good agent is a standard seems to require that such agents are uniform. However, I have shown that this need not be the case. Moreover, I have provided an explanation consistent with Aristotle's view that demonstrates how DOV can cohere with taking good agents as the standard. I'll now turn to another apparent difficulty for DOV, one with history stretching back to antiquity.

### *Aspasius and excessive virtue*

In the earliest extant commentary on the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aspasius, a later Peripatetic, raises a concern for attributing DOV to Aristotle.<sup>21</sup> He argues that Aristotle

---

<sup>21</sup> I am indebted to Ierodiakonou 1999 for appreciating Aspasius' view.

cannot endorse DOV because it issues an absurdity when conjoined with Aristotle's view about the relationship between degrees and excess. In particular, Aspasius believes that for Aristotle whatever admits of degrees must thereby admit of deficiency and excess. Indeed, at 1106a27-28 Aristotle appears to claim as much, writing, "In everything continuous and divisible we can take more, less, and equal, ... and the equal is the mean between excess and deficiency".<sup>22</sup> Thus, it seems that if DOV were true, then Aristotle would be committed to the possibility of possessing an excess of virtue, which, since it is excessive, would be bad.<sup>23</sup> However, it is absurd that possessing any amount of true virtue could be bad. Thus, Aspasius concludes, Aristotle must reject DOV.

Despite this argument, it is undeniable that Aristotle does employ the comparative with regard to virtue terms in some passages (e.g., 1120b6-10), which, all else being equal suggests a commitment to DOV. Accordingly, for his interpretation to be viable, Aspasius is burdened with explaining such passages in a way that is consistent with the denial of DOV. Indeed, there seems to be two alternatives open to Aspasius. The first, which he mentions explicitly, is that in such passages Aristotle thinks that only one of the comparates has genuine virtue.<sup>24</sup> On this view, Aristotle is saying that the person with true generosity is more generous than someone who lacks true generosity. The second alternative is that Aristotle thinks that imperfect virtue, for instance, natural virtue, can come in degrees, and so in these passages Aristotle is discussing imperfect virtue.<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup> Cf, EE 1220b21.

<sup>23</sup> Curzer 1990, 527-528 considers this worry for his understanding of magnanimity.

<sup>24</sup> See Ierodiakonou 1999, 149.

<sup>25</sup> See Curzer 2005, 236 and Ierodiakonou 1999, 161.

Unfortunately for Aspasius, both of these alternative interpretations face difficulties. Beginning with the first, it seems that none of the ancient grammarians attest to this use of the comparative. According to them the Greek comparative indicates that the comparates share the quality in question but possess it to differing degrees.<sup>26</sup> Thus, Aristotle’s use of the comparative strongly suggests that in such cases he thinks that the people in question both possess the virtue being compared. As for the second alternative, there are passages where Aristotle seems clearly to be discussing people with genuine virtue, not imperfect or natural virtue. For instance, Aristotle’s claim at 1158a33, “though admittedly, as we have said, an excellent person is both pleasant and useful, he does not become friend to a superior, unless that superior is also superior in virtue”, seems to be about two people with genuine virtue.<sup>27</sup>

So, it seems that Aspasius does not have a way to read at least some of the passages in question. Of course, it is possible that Aristotle is employing the comparative in an unusual way that is friendly to Aspasius’ reading. Or, perhaps someone taking Aspasius’ view could find another way to read passages like 1158a33 that poses no trouble for his interpretation. Although none come to my mind, I do not want my imaginative shortcomings to condemn Aspasius’ reading. And recall from above that I have framed this inquiry such that a handful of individual passages cannot make or break an answer to the question of DOV. Accordingly, I need to show that even with these passages set aside there is good reason to reject Aspasius’ concern. To do so, I will argue

---

<sup>26</sup> See Ierodiakonou 1999, 144.

<sup>27</sup> ἡδὺς δὲ καὶ χρήσιμος ἅμα εἴρηται ὅτι ὁ σπουδαῖος· ἀλλ’ ὑπερέχοντι οὐ γίνεται ὁ τοιοῦτος φίλος, ἐὰν μὴ καὶ τῇ ἀρετῇ ὑπερέχηται.

that we can undermine his worry, which, as I understand it, relies on two assumptions. First, he assumes that everything that comes in degrees has a deficiency, mean, and excess. Second, he assumes that every excess is negative. Both assumptions are required for Aspasius' worry to give us reason to reject DOV. And both are contentious.

Beginning with the first assumption. We have already encountered what appears to be solid textual evidence that Aristotle held this view, namely 1106a27-28: "in everything continuous and divisible we can take more, less, and equal... and the equal is the mean between excess and deficiency". In spite of this passage, there is reason to doubt that Aristotle holds that if virtue comes in degrees, it would have deficiency, mean, and excess. First, it seems that for Aristotle degrees and deficiency, mean, and excess do not always coincide. We can find support for this claim in Aristotle's discussion of actions and passions that do not admit of a mean (1107a10).<sup>28</sup> According to Aristotle, some actions and passions do not admit of a mean because they 'automatically include baseness' (1107a12).<sup>29</sup> But it seems that Aristotle should agree that some of the examples of such actions and passions that he offers can come in degrees. For instance, Aristotle claims that 'murder' (ἀνδροφονία) names an action that automatically includes baseness (1107a12). All actions that automatically include baseness do not admit of a mean. But

---

<sup>28</sup> οὐ πᾶσα δ' ἐπιδέχεται πρᾶξις οὐδὲ πᾶν πάθος τὴν μεσότητα. This seems to be an instance where 'μεσότης' is best understood as 'mean', since virtue aims at the mean in passions and actions. I thank Lesley Brown for correspondence regarding this passage.

<sup>29</sup> Aristotle must think that some conditions likewise 'automatically includes goodness'. Cf. 1140b23, where Aristotle claims that unlike craft, which can be employed for good or bad ends, *phronesis* aims only at the good. Thus, he thinks that *phronesis* 'automatically includes' goodness. Here it is worth noting that just as I think Aristotle endorses the view that virtue comes in degrees, I think that he holds the same for *phronesis*.

murder can nonetheless come in degrees. So, murder does not admit of a mean but comes in degrees. Hence, it is not the case that coming in degrees and not admitting of a mean coincide in every case.<sup>30</sup> But Aspasius needs these to coincide for his concern about DOV to go through. Thus, if Aristotle allows some conditions to come in degrees without admitting of a mean, it is possible that virtue is one such condition.<sup>31</sup>

Turning now to the second required but dubious assumption, namely that excess is necessarily negative. This assumption seems to be required in order for the possibility of an excess of virtue to be problematic. The Greek word in question is ‘ὑπερβολή’, which Aristotle uses at 1106a28. But it must be noted that in introducing heroic virtue Aristotle he uses the same word (ἀρετῆς ὑπερβολήν, 1145a24). But heroic virtue is surely good. So, it is not the case that Aristotle believes that any condition that is in some way ὑπερβολή is thereby bad.<sup>32</sup> Thus, we have good reason to deny this second assumption.

---

<sup>30</sup> Admittedly, this seems to contradict 1106a27-28. But if we consider Aristotle’s goal in this passage, the tension can be mitigated. Aristotle’s point in this passage is in service of his distinction between two types of means, the mathematical mean and the mean relative to us. And as Lesley Brown has shown, Aristotle speaks rather broadly in this passage in order to make his point, offering claims that appear to be universal but by his own lights allow for exceptions (1997, 89, cf. Brown 2014, 68). Thus, it is plausible that he does not really think that it is the case that *everything* that is continuous (and so comes in degrees) admits of deficiency, mean, and excess.

<sup>31</sup> Putting this another way, on Aristotle’s view murder automatically includes baseness. So, any murder is base. But there can be degrees of murder; some murders can be worse than others, that is, have more baseness. By the same token, all instances of the possession or exercise of courage automatically include goodness. But some instances of the possession or exercise of courage have more goodness.

<sup>32</sup> We can arrive at the same point if we consider a bullseye. A bullseye is not a single point. Rather, it covers some space. Accordingly, three shots can hit the bullseye but hit it in different positions, with one

This last point takes us to the doorstep of a further, and I believe, definitive reason to reject Aspasius' interpretation that Aristotle denies DOV. As we have just seen Aristotle says that individuals with what he calls 'heroic virtue' possess 'exceedingly great virtue' (ἀρετῆς ὑπερβολήν, 1145a24). The most obvious way to understand this claim is that heroic virtue is normal human virtue to the greatest degree. Thus, it seems here Aristotle is committing himself to DOV. So, Aspasius must be wrong. Now, it is important to realize that in mentioning heroic virtue, Aristotle is not making an insignificant point; this is not a single passage among many others. Rather, in bringing up heroic virtue Aristotle is sketching his whole ethical landscape, which ranges from the lowest form of vice to the highest form of virtue. Thus, if we can show conclusively that Aristotle conceives of heroic virtue as the highest degree of virtue, we will be able to set aside Aspasius' objection, confidently ascribe to Aristotle DOV, and, most importantly, gain important insight into the whole of his ethical system. Accordingly, let's now turn to a full treatment of heroic virtue.

### III. Possible accounts of heroic virtue

Aristotle introduces heroic virtue at the start of Book VII (= *EE* VI). In the course of about fifteen lines, which comprise all of his explicit remarks on this issue, Aristotle tells us that it is the highest of six possible conditions of human character, the opposite of the lowest condition, bestiality. In attempting to find the right way to characterize this state,

---

being furthest from the middle, another being at the middlemost point of the bullseye (so nearer the middle), and the third being somewhere between these two. So, in this example, the middlemost shot is a sort of extreme, but it is still within the bullseye, and indeed, it is most on the bullseye.

he refers to it as ‘heroic’ (ἥρωικός, 1145a20) virtue, my preferred term, ‘divine’ (Θεῖος, 1145a20) virtue, and ‘exceedingly great virtue’ (ἀρετῆς ὑπερβολήν, 1145a24).

Additionally, he tells us that people with this condition are rare (1145a27). Aside from these remarks, Aristotle says little about heroic virtue and in fact never even tells us what constitutes this state. However, as I have already suggested, I believe that for Aristotle heroic virtue is human virtue to the highest degree. I now seek to vindicate this claim, which will require me to address the difficulty tabled above, namely how this conception of heroic virtue coheres with the doctrine of the mean. Before doing so, however, since my reading of heroic virtue runs counter to most interpretations, I will consider alternative accounts of heroic virtue.

Although the topic is almost never given substantial treatment by commentators on Aristotle’s ethics,<sup>33</sup> a few accounts of heroic virtue have emerged in the literature. Here I will attempt to go beyond even the views that have gained traction among scholars and consider all possible alternative accounts of heroic virtue. As I shall demonstrate, each alternative faces serious difficulties. Thus, I will argue, we are compelled to accept my interpretation that heroic virtue is virtue to the highest degree.

The lack of scholarly concern for heroic virtue is unsurprising given the interpretation that enjoys the most success among commentators. This is because according to the most common view, Aristotle does not really conceive of any condition that corresponds to heroic virtue. That is, on this view heroic virtue is a mere placeholder in Aristotle’s ethical system. J.O. Urmson sums up this view, claiming that heroic virtue is “merely a part of a Kant-like architectonic, something brought in to be the opposite of

---

<sup>33</sup> For a welcome exception see Curzer 2012, chapters 5 and 6.

brutishness". As a result of this interpretation, Urmson advises that we ignore heroic virtue.<sup>34</sup> John Cooper has recently echoed this sentiment, maintaining that Aristotle brings in heroic virtue only for formalistic reasons, namely being the positive counterpart to the negative bestial vice.<sup>35</sup> Thus, according to the most popular and persistent reading of it, there is no human condition that exemplifies heroic virtue.

It seems to me that there are twin sources of motivation for this reading. The first is Aristotle's dearth of discussion of heroic virtue.<sup>36</sup> The second, and stronger, is that commentators assume that Aristotle rejects DOV, and so conclude that there is no space for heroic virtue.<sup>37</sup> But if my arguments above are successful, then the strongest motivation for this common interpretation is undermined; Aristotle *does* have space for heroic virtue. Additionally, there are two further reasons to reject the common understanding of heroic virtue. One is that although Aristotle is working within an ethical tradition, he is the first thinker to set out explicitly the ethical landscape he gives us in *NE* VII.<sup>38</sup> Thus, he is not constrained by external standards in determining the ethical conditions he takes to be open to humans.<sup>39</sup> That is, his is not a procrustean system

---

<sup>34</sup> Urmson 1980, 158.

<sup>35</sup> Cooper 2009, 18.

<sup>36</sup> I think we needn't be surprised that Aristotle does not focus on heroic virtue, since his aim is to explain virtue in general, not the highest form of it. Still, this does not give us license to disregard heroic virtue.

<sup>37</sup> See Ross 1995, 230: "Aristotle's doctrine, as it is worked out, leaves no room for" heroic virtue.

<sup>38</sup> Thus, we might see a double meaning in his declaration of a new start at the beginning of book VII: a new start for his particular discussion, and a new start for ethical inquiry, highlighted by a complete catalogue of the six conditions of human character.

<sup>39</sup> cf. Natali 2009, 106 who argues that Aristotle introduces the philosophical use of the term 'bestial vice'.

constructed to cohere with a preexisting paradigm. Accordingly, if Aristotle did not believe that heroic virtue were a genuine human condition, he would not have included it on his list. Of course, someone who disagrees could argue that Aristotle was a systematic thinker and would have been disturbed had he not posited a positive corollary to bestial vice. However, to maintain that he would feel compelled to gerrymander his system by introducing a ‘placeholder’, as this interpretation suggests, is to overlook the number of asymmetries he accepts in his system across the *NE*.<sup>40</sup> Second, and more importantly, Aristotle himself makes it clear in his brief discussion that heroic virtue is *not* a mere placeholder. For, as we have already seen Aristotle admits that not only is the state possible, heroic virtue is instantiated. That is, by saying that people with heroic virtue are rare (σπάνιος, 1145a28), Aristotle is acknowledging that such people exist.<sup>41</sup> Thus, the popular view that Aristotle believes that heroic virtue fails to align with an actual human condition must be wrong. He explicitly acknowledges that some people enjoy this condition. Further, since Aristotle thinks that he, along with others, would be able to

---

<sup>40</sup> For instance, Aristotle excuses courage from the otherwise exception-less rule that the exercise of a virtue is (generally) pleasurable (1117b17). So, he does not feel compelled to come up with an explanation of courage that ensures that its exercise is always pleasurable. Again, magnificence and magnanimity stand out as odd, but are nonetheless posited by Aristotle. Finally, Aristotle’s discussion of the unnamed deficient vice related to temperance (1119a9-11) is worth noting. Unlike other vices, Aristotle claims that it is rare and unusual. Yet, Aristotle includes this condition and does not somehow artificially alter his view to homogenize the results. Further, this example is pertinent to the current case because despite Aristotle’s claim that it is somehow not human (1119a10), scholars do not doubt Aristotle believes that it is a genuinely possible state, or think that Aristotle means literally that someone with this vice is not human.

<sup>41</sup> Hence, heroic virtue cannot pertain only to mythical figures. Perhaps some mythical figures are meant to have this condition, but since people who have it exist, even if rarely, it must also belong to people.

recognize such individuals, he must have in mind some genuine condition that ‘heroic virtue’ (and his other phrases) picks out. Accordingly, we must move beyond this reading of heroic virtue and consider other characterizations of this actual human condition.

The second alternative interpretation of heroic virtue is that Aristotle does not really think that heroic virtue is (human) virtue at all. In particular, on this suggestion Aristotle thinks that heroic virtue is not human virtue, but virtue of the gods. In support of such a reading one could cite Aristotle’s claim that just as a beast has neither virtue nor vice, a god does not have (human) virtue, but has something more honorable than it (1145a25-27). Thus, it looks like Aristotle may be here saying that since gods do not really have virtue, heroic, or divine ‘virtue’ is not really (human) virtue but some other state of character. Thus, although this divine state of character is virtue-like, since it is not actually virtue, heroic virtue is not the human virtue to the highest degree.

This interpretation, however, sits uneasily with Aristotle’s four explicit claims in this passage that heroic virtue *is* (human) virtue.<sup>42</sup> Further, even if gods do not have virtue and beasts do not have vice, this does not speak against heroic virtue being (human) virtue nor bestial vice being (human) vice. Rather than thinking that heroic virtue is *virtue-like*, Aristotle is best interpreted as holding that heroic virtue is *god-like* and that bestial vice is *beast-like*.<sup>43</sup> Indeed, in his discussion, Aristotle explicitly refers to

---

<sup>42</sup> Aristotle is clear that his concern lies with human conditions, not those of gods or animals (cf. 1102a15).

<sup>43</sup> I do not accept the suggestion in Natali 2009, 104 that Aristotle thinks that calling someone ‘bestial’ when their vice exceeds human levels (καὶ τοὺς διὰ κακίαν δὲ τῶν ἀνθρώπων ὑπερβάλλοντας οὕτως ἐπιδοσφημοῦμεν, 1145a33) is an ‘improper’ use of the term. Instead, as we have seen, this is how Aristotle describes heroic virtue (ἀρετῆς ὑπερβολήν, 1145a23). Indeed, Aristotle’s claim here—that people use the term ‘bestial’ as a reproach for people with excessive vice—suggests that Aristotle is employing this term,

those who possess such virtue as persons (cf. τὸ θεῖον ἄνδρα εἶναι, 1145a29).<sup>44</sup> Thus, by employing these terms Aristotle is not intending to exclude humans from coming to possess heroic virtue or bestial vice. Instead, by referring to these *human* states in this way he is exploiting a tradition in which people with extraordinary traits were characterized as heroic or divine. Since Aristotle is here discussing people with extraordinary ethical traits, he adopts this usage.<sup>45</sup> This practice continues even today. And I take it that when we talk this way about great human ethical acts, we consider the agents to be god-like but do not consider their actions virtue-like. That is, when we hear about remarkably good human actions (or sadly, heinous human actions), we think about them in the same way Aristotle describes them here—that although they are human actions, they, in a sense, go beyond our human nature.<sup>46</sup>

---

and so also ‘heroic’ and ‘divine’ regarding virtue, in a metaphorical way. Of course, these similarities don’t preclude important differences between heroic virtue and bestial vice. For instance, the latter can arise from madness, disease, being born into an inferior race, and habit. Even if some of these have positive counterparts, surely disease doesn’t. Given this, even if bestial vice (or some of its forms, at any rate) differs in kind from ordinary vice, we need not conclude that this is so with heroic and non-heroic virtue.

<sup>44</sup> Similarly, he discusses *people* with bestial vice at 1145a30: ὁ θηριώδης ἐν τοῖς ἀνθρώποις σπάνιος.

<sup>45</sup> For other examples of this usage, see Dover 1974, 81. Further, although Aristotle uses this language, he need not endorse literally characterizing such people as divine. After all, the picture of the divine Aristotle gives us elsewhere differs from that in the *NE* (see Irwin 1999, 332). Relatedly, Aristotle need not necessarily endorse Hector as an example of true heroic virtue; I suggest that by mentioning Hector, Aristotle is intending to provide an intuitive starting point for his discussion.

<sup>46</sup> To stress my point, it is that a person is able to go beyond human nature by possessing the highest degree of human virtue, not by possessing some other type of virtue that is different in kind from non-heroic human virtue. That is, although heroic-virtue is god-like, it is so because it is a god-like (on one conception

The third alternative interpretation is that heroic virtue is the supreme virtue of theoretical study, described by Aristotle in Book X, chapters 7 and 8.<sup>47</sup> Initially this reading seems plausible since Aristotle refers to heroic virtue as godlike and also claims that the life of theoretical study is “superior to the human level” and is “divine in comparison with human life” (1177b23-30). Accordingly, it might well be that Aristotle identifies heroic virtue as great intellectual virtue.

While not without a certain allure, this suggestion cannot be correct. The main and, I believe, insuperable, problem is that heroic virtue is identified as a virtue of character (1145a15-18) and is concerned with action, whereas the virtue of theoretical study is neither of these.<sup>48</sup> Since Aristotle clearly distinguishes between qualities of

---

of the gods) amount of (human) virtue, not because it is some different type of virtue available only or primarily to gods. Several pieces of textual evidence from Book VII support this understanding. For instance, consider Aristotle’s use of Hector as a recognizable example of the sort of virtue he has in mind. In order to explain why he had heroic virtue, Aristotle says that Hector was exceedingly good (σφόδρα ἤν ἀγαθός). The wording here indicates that Hector’s goodness is the same in kind as the goodness of other people; it is simply that he has more of it. Again, Aristotle claims that the Spartans ascribe to someone heroic virtue if they admire that person very much (ἀγασθῶσι σφόδρα). Since admiration is the sort of attitude that one has toward someone with human virtue (cf. *Republic* 426d3), Aristotle’s claim here indicates that a person with heroic virtue has the same virtue in kind as other good people, but has more of it, and so, is more admired.

<sup>47</sup> Hardie 1978, 79 attributes this view to Grant, though without reference. I believe what Hardie has in mind is Grant 1877, 102-105.

<sup>48</sup> Moreover, although Aristotle suggests that both types of virtue are divine, he need not take them to be one and the same, as one could be godlike by having an extraordinary character (cf. 1094b9-10) or by having an extraordinary intellect.

character and qualities of intellect (1103a3-17, 1178a9-1179a33) and since he identifies heroic virtue as belonging to the former group (1145a15-30), it cannot also be the latter.

The fourth, and final, alternative interpretation of heroic virtue is that it is the virtue of magnanimity.<sup>49</sup> Again, this suggestion is initially attractive, as Aristotle writes, “greatness in each virtue also seems to belong to the magnanimous person” (1123b30). This certainly sounds like what we expect of someone with heroic virtue, even on my proposed interpretation. And whether or not it is to be conceived of as the highest degree of virtue, given Aristotle’s description of magnanimity, especially his claim that it is the virtue concerned with great things (*μεγάλα*, 1123a35), it seems to be heroic virtue.

Although this interpretation is popular among scholars who attempt to characterize heroic virtue,<sup>50</sup> it cannot be correct. Perhaps the most forceful argument against it comes from silence. That is, Aristotle never says, or even indicates, that magnanimity is heroic virtue. His extended discussion of magnanimity does not include any mention of heroic virtue. And when he turns to heroic virtue itself, he seems to struggle to choose a name for it. But if he understood heroic virtue as magnanimity, a

---

<sup>49</sup> This proposal differs from the foregoing in that it is consistent with understanding heroic virtue as the highest degree of virtue. That is, one way—although not the only way—to understand magnanimity is as the highest degree of human virtue, which is how I characterize heroic virtue. As we shall see, however, characterizing magnanimity as the highest degree of virtue faces serious difficulties.

<sup>50</sup> The most thorough discussion of this view can be found in Curzer 2012, ch. 6, but other scholars also suggest it. For instance, Hardie 1978, 70-73 argues that heroic virtue is at least an aspect of magnanimity. Curzer 1996, 524, 530, agreeing with Hardie, maintains that heroic virtue is magnanimity. Bae 2003, 347 and Gardiner 2001, 279 also suggest the view. Polansky and Stover 2003, 356 do not, explicitly, at least, identify magnanimity with heroic virtue, but seem to maintain that magnanimity requires what I argue is heroic virtue, viz. the highest degree of virtue.

virtue he has already described in detail, he surely would have mentioned it. Since he does not, I think it is safe to assume that he does not believe they are the same.

Another, more philosophically moving reason to resist this interpretation is that it ultimately collapses heroic virtue into non-heroic virtue.<sup>51</sup> To see this, assume that heroic virtue is identical with magnanimity. On the straightforward reading of Aristotle's doctrine of the unity of the virtues, magnanimity entails and is entailed by having all the other non-heroic virtues (1144b30-1145a2). But, if magnanimity is heroic virtue, then heroic virtue likewise stands in this biconditional relationship with the whole of non-heroic virtue. That is, heroic virtue would entail and be entailed by having non-heroic virtue. While it is presumably true that heroic virtue entails non-heroic virtue, if the two are in fact different, as Aristotle makes clear, then non-heroic virtue cannot entail heroic virtue. For, if non-heroic virtue did entail heroic virtue, then anyone who has virtue also has heroic virtue. But since this is not the case, heroic virtue can't be magnanimity.

Certain characterizations of magnanimity would be able to obviate this objection, as some scholars maintain that the unity of the virtues does not apply to it. And if magnanimity is excused from the unity doctrine, then the above worry is avoided because magnanimity/heroic virtue would not be entailed by (non-heroic) virtue.<sup>52</sup> However, such

---

<sup>51</sup> Curzer 1996, 531 makes a similar point, though he takes it to show that there is a problem with Aristotle's conception of magnanimity. We don't need to saddle Aristotle with this mistake if we do not identify magnanimity and heroic virtue.

<sup>52</sup> One piece of evidence in favor of this view comes at 1123b5: "For if someone is worthy of little and thinks so, he is temperate, but not magnanimous". On its surface this passage seems to indicate that one can be temperate without being magnanimous. But as we know from Aristotle's discussion of temperance, the *virtue* concerns pleasures and pains of the body (1118a26). Clearly this is not the sort of condition that he

an interpretation—along with any other view that identifies magnanimity as heroic virtue—still faces difficulties. In particular, this interpretation overlooks the fact that Aristotle sees heroic virtue as the same sort of condition as (non-heroic) virtue, continence, incontinence, and bestial vice; after all, he places heroic virtue in a list with these other general states.<sup>53</sup> Importantly for our investigation, since all of these other categories involve a wide range of objects and emotions, we can conclude that heroic virtue does as well. Magnanimity, however, involves only one type of object, great

---

has in mind when mentioning ‘temperance’ at 1123b5. Rather, here he seems to mean something like modesty, a common meaning of the Greek word ‘σωφροσύνη’ (see *Charmides* 159), but a sense of the word that differs from the sense Aristotle has in mind when discussing the virtue. Accordingly, at least in this passage, Aristotle does not commit himself to the view that these two virtues come apart.

<sup>53</sup> I thank Paula Gottlieb for challenging me to clarify my view here. If I understand his discussion, Aristotle ends up distinguishing between simple and qualified incontinence (for a thorough discussion, see Lorenz 2009). Simple incontinence deals only with pleasure, and so, is related to temperance/intemperance. Thus, it looks like continence/incontinence may not be general conditions, as I maintain. Still, for my purposes what matters is that Aristotle *does* have a general sense of incontinence and continence. It is this general sense of incontinence that allows him to ask coherently “whether anyone is simply incontinent, or all incontinent are incontinent in some particular way” (1147b20). Importantly, this is the sense he employs when he sets out the initial six possible conditions of human character at the start of VII (cf. Cooper 2009, 10). And I believe that he returns to this sense at times during his discussion (cf. Broadie 2009, 159). Whether or not one is convinced by this, it is clear that Aristotle thinks that bestial vice is a general state, as he mentions bestial vice relating to bodily pleasures, but also a bestial form of cowardice (θηριώδη δειλίαν δειλός, 1149a7). Thus, although there may be differences between the two, I submit that if bestial vice is a general state, so too is its positive counterpart, heroic virtue.

honors (1125a35), and only one emotion, pride.<sup>54</sup> Put another way, heroic virtue must consist in a set of character states, while magnanimity is a single virtue and so consists in a single character state. Since these requirements are obviously inconsistent with one another, heroic virtue cannot be magnanimity.<sup>55</sup>

#### IV. The doctrine of the mean and heroic virtue

Since the foregoing exhaust the alternative interpretations of heroic virtue, and each should be rejected, we are left with the view that heroic virtue is the highest degree of human virtue. Thus, we have strong reason to conclude that Aristotle conceives of heroic virtue as the highest degree of human virtue, and so, endorses DOV. But the time has come to pay the piper, so to speak, and consider whether my account coheres with Aristotle's doctrine of the mean. By way of responding to this concern, as well as rounding out my account, I must also advance characterization of what distinguishes agents of different degrees of virtue, in particular, agents with the highest degree of

---

<sup>54</sup> *Pace* Curzer 2012, ch. 6. Bae 2003 correctly stresses the importance of interpreting magnanimity as a particular virtue, but overlooks that heroic virtue is a general state.

<sup>55</sup> In light of this difficulty, magnanimity also cannot be characterized as the highest degree of virtue (whether or not heroic virtue is the highest degree of virtue). This is again because the former is a particular state, but the latter is general. There is an additional reason to reject the reading of magnanimity as the highest degree of virtue. As we have seen "greatness in each virtue also seems proper to the magnanimous person" (1123b30). But the claim here is not that greatness in each virtue *is* magnanimity, but that the person with greatness in each virtue is the person who has magnanimity. And perhaps Aristotle thinks that she has magnanimity on account of having greatness in each virtue. Thus it is a causal relationship, not an identity relationship. The same point can be seen in Aristotle's claim that "it [magnanimity] makes them [other virtues] greater and does not arise without them" (1124a2).

virtue. These two challenges are related, as the success of any explanation of differences in degree of virtue is predicated on its fit with the doctrine of the mean. Accordingly, I will treat these remaining challenges together, first setting out the difficulty posed by the doctrine of the mean, and then offering an account of heroic virtue that coheres with it.

*The doctrine of the mean*

A thorough discussion of Aristotle's doctrine of the mean is not possible here, so I will limit myself to a sketch.<sup>56</sup> In Book II, chapter 6 Aristotle introduces the view that virtue is a mean state since it aims at the mean both in feelings and in action between deficiency and excess. He tells us that there are a number of different considerations that determine the mean in a particular situation, namely, the time at which one is acting, the things and people involved, the reasons for which one acts, and the ways in which one acts. Given all of these parameters, Aristotle concludes that there are many ways to be wrong but only one way to be right (1106b35).

---

<sup>56</sup> In particular, I can't weigh in on how literally we should take Aristotle's talk of means. Hursthouse 1980-81 rejects Urmson 1980's literal/quantitative reading of the doctrine (cf. Broadie 1991, 100-102) by arguing that most vices do not include excess or deficiency but result from the agent feeling the wrong emotion toward the wrong object. In response, Curzer 1996 argues against Hursthouse's metaphorical reading by arguing that an agent feeling the wrong emotion toward the wrong object can be understood in terms of excess or deficiency across at least one of the virtue parameters. At any rate, if Hursthouse is correct and "vices are not excesses or deficiencies but just ways of going wrong" (71), then the doctrine of the mean doesn't seem to provide any particular trouble for heroic virtue. Accordingly, I will assume a literal understanding of the doctrine.

Even with only an outline, the problem for fitting heroic virtue with the doctrine of the mean is obvious: if virtue must hit the mean between two extremes, then for any given situation, and for any given individual in that situation, there is only one feeling/action pair that is right.<sup>57</sup> However, in order to accommodate the possibility of heroic virtue in addition to non-heroic virtue, it looks like there must be more than a single mean. That is, if the only way to act correctly is to hit the mean, then it looks like there is no room for heroic virtue; either an agent hits the mean, and so acts well, or misses the mean, and so does not.<sup>58</sup> Thus, an agent can only act well or not, and so, there is no room for heroic virtue. As I shall argue, however, there are several possible differences between heroic virtue and non-heroic virtue, and DOV generally, that are consistent with the doctrine of the mean. I turn to them now.

---

<sup>57</sup> Paula Gottlieb pointed out to me in her comments at the APA Central 2014 that the problem is exacerbated if we take Aristotle's claim that the mean is 'relative to us' (πρὸς ἡμᾶς, e.g., 1106b7) to indicate that the mean is relative to the particular agent. If this were so, then even if we suppose that there could be a person with heroic virtue, in any situation she faced, the mean would be relative to her. But in a structurally similar situation, a person with non-heroic virtue would have a different mean, one relative to him. If this second agent attempted to hit the mean of the agent with heroic virtue, he would be overshooting his own mean, and so, acting badly. But—and this is what poses the problem for heroic virtue—since it is relative to her, when the heroically good agent hits the mean, the action is not heroically good, but is (simply) good. Fortunately, Brown 1997 (cf. 2014) has argued convincingly that we should not take Aristotle as saying that the mean is agent-relative. Instead, by 'relative to us' we should understand Aristotle as saying that the mean is relative to humans, that is, the kind of creature we are.

<sup>58</sup> Curzer 1996, 131 suggests that not all ways of going wrong are vicious, as "minor errors do not amount to vice". Unfortunately, this insight can't help here since the concern is with acting well and it still looks like every time we miss the mean, we fail to do so.

*A mean-friendly account of heroic virtue*

In this last section of the paper I offer three possible differences between those with heroic virtue and those with non-heroic virtue.<sup>59</sup> Although my focus is on heroic virtue, my suggestions apply equally to DOV more generally. Importantly, all three of the suggestions are consistent with the claim that virtue is a mean state. If any of the suggestions considered here are successful, then we will have insight into what Aristotle thinks constitutes the highest degree of virtue. Given this, we will have substantiated the most plausible account of heroic virtue. Finally, since this account of heroic virtue relies on DOV, we will be able to conclude that Aristotle countenanced degrees of virtue.

1. Heroic virtue and pleasure

One possible difference between agents with heroic virtue and agents with non-heroic virtue is the amount of pleasure each takes in acting in accordance with virtue. At 1120a27 Aristotle claims that for the person with virtue, fine action is pleasant or at least painless. One reading of this passage is that in any given right action, two good agents might experience different amounts of pleasure, with neither of them experiencing any

---

<sup>59</sup> A fourth suggestion, not included below, is that the mean is wide, and so consists of many points, rather than a single point. If this were the case, then within the mean there would be points that are either closer or further away from the mean-most point. On this view, hitting anywhere within the mean range would be good and hitting the mean-most point would be heroically good (for a similar suggestion, see Kawall 2009, 182). This may be suggested by Aristotle's use of the target metaphor at 1106b33 (see Gottlieb 2009, 21); as discussed above (note 32) there is, after all, more space to a target than dead center.

pain.<sup>60</sup> Moreover, at 1173a21-29 Aristotle argues for the possibility that pleasure admits of degrees. So, since pleasure admits of degrees, and different good agents may experience different levels of pleasure from acting in accordance with virtue, it may well be a distinguishing feature of agents with heroic virtue that they always get pleasure from acting well. Moreover, even allowing this difference, it remains that virtue is a mean state.<sup>61</sup> That is, an agent with heroic virtue and one with non-heroic virtue could hit the mean in a given situation, even if the former enjoys it more than the latter. Further, since they derive pleasure from all of their right actions, agents with heroic virtue might be “unusually eager to do fine things” (1169a8), a characteristic that fits nicely with the two remaining possibilities.<sup>62</sup>

## 2. Virtue and ethical errors

A second possible difference is that agents with heroic virtue never fail to act in accordance with virtue but agents with non-heroic virtue occasionally do. That Aristotle allows an agent with virtue to fail to act in accordance with virtue might strike some

---

<sup>60</sup> At 1117b17 Aristotle acknowledges that the exercise of courage may not be pleasant, but it is not clear if he thinks that it is (in itself) ever painful.

<sup>61</sup> Pleasure supervenes on the activity (1174b33). So, experiencing more pleasure from an action would not be excessive or violate the mean.

<sup>62</sup> This is not to suggest that such people act on account of a desire for pleasure. Instead, they experience more pleasure from acting finely, which may be reflected in their outward attitude when acting.

readers as immediately wrong.<sup>63</sup> But there is textual evidence to support this claim.<sup>64</sup> In addition to such support, it is worth noting that nothing in Aristotle's description of virtue requires that a good agent *always* act well.<sup>65</sup> Furthermore, Aristotle makes it clear that he allows for people to act unjustly while remaining just (1134a16-22), so it is reasonable to think that he allows more generally for good agents to maintain their virtue in spite of acting badly.<sup>66</sup> Thus, we have good reason to think that Aristotle believes that agents with virtue can fail to act in accordance with virtue on occasion. This, however, is perfectly consistent with the claim that virtue itself is a mean state. Thus, it is plausible that Aristotle thinks that a difference between heroically and non-heroically good agents is that the former never fail to act in accordance with virtue.

### 3. Situations that overstrain human nature

The two foregoing possibilities are promising, though perhaps they fall a bit short of how we might imagine heroic virtue. I suspect that when we hear the term 'heroic virtue' today, we envision actions that go 'beyond the call of duty'. In fact, this intuition seems

---

<sup>63</sup> I don't have the space required to substantiate this fully. So, I direct the reader to Drefcinski 1996 and Curzer 2005. In concert with the present suggestion, Drefcinski 1996, 148 and Curzer 2005, 235 both think that the person with heroic virtue is characterized by infallibility with regard to virtue.

<sup>64</sup> A few such passages are: "If the generous person deviates from what is fine and right, he will feel pain, but moderately and in the right way" (1121a2), "This (that the good person enjoys spending time with himself) is because he practically never regrets [what he has done]" (1166a29), "And they (good men) seem to become still better from their activities and mutual correction." (1172a12). I take that in these passages Aristotle is clearly discussing people who already possess virtue and not still becoming good.

<sup>65</sup> Cf. Curzer 2005, 235 and Drefcinski 1996, 145.

<sup>66</sup> For a full discussion, see Pearson 2006. See also Drefcinski 1996, 144-145 and Curzer 2005, 239.

to fit with Aristotle's own claim that heroic virtue in some sense 'goes beyond' (ὑπερβολή) ordinary virtue. Thus, it seems that like us, Aristotle would not limit heroic virtue to the two above suggestions. Indeed, although he does not connect the two discussions, Aristotle does make space for such actions in his ethics. What I have in mind are the passages in which Aristotle discusses situations that 'overstrain human nature' (ἄτην ἀνθρωπίνην φύσιν ὑπερτείνει).<sup>67</sup> For instance, at 1110a24-26 Aristotle writes, "there is pardon whenever someone does a wrong action because of conditions of the sort that overstrain human nature, and that no one would endure".<sup>68</sup> In light of such passages, I want to offer two characterizations—one weaker, the other stronger—of heroic virtue.

The weaker suggestion is that such passages indicate that Aristotle countenances that the difficulty of situations humans face can vary by degrees. Presumably the range stretches from the trivial to the prohibitively difficult cases that overstrain us. Perhaps at the extremes, ethics does not apply. But what matters for our purposes is that if this is correct, Aristotle has space for very difficult, though not overstraining, situations. Thus, he might think that in such very difficult situations only the best agent—that is, the person with heroic virtue—would be able to act finely. Perhaps, in line with the second possible difference considered above, other good agents would fail to act well, but would

---

<sup>67</sup> Drefcinski 1996, 148 briefly entertains this possibility but then summarily rejects it. Curzer 2005, 238 and 2012, 140-142 endorses this as a characteristic of such agents. Hardie 1978, 72 attributes this characteristic to the magnanimous person, who on Hardie's account has heroic virtue. cf. Broadie 2005, 98.

<sup>68</sup> Compare with 1116b16, where the professional soldiers are limited by and so 'overstrained' because of their lack of true courage. In our present passage, the limiting factor is not the absence of virtue, but instead human nature itself. As I shall propose below, perhaps there are some who Aristotle might think could overcome even *this* limitation.

still possess virtue. Thus, on this suggestion, a characteristic of an agent with heroic virtue is that they act well even in the most difficult (but still ethical) situations.

Now for the stronger suggestion. Here I want to propose that perhaps even in cases that Aristotle says ‘overstrain human nature’, he may think that there is the very rare sort of person who would still act well.<sup>69</sup> To see why this might be so, let’s look again at what Aristotle says. Speaking about such situations, he claims, “there is a pardon whenever someone does a wrong action because of conditions that overstrain human nature”. Notice that in this passage he indicates that even though the situation overstrains human nature, the person still acts wrongly. For, if the person had not acted wrongly, then there would be no reason for her to be pardoned (συγγνώμη, 1110b25). And the fact that she acts wrongly implies that a correct action was available. And since we know that for Aristotle fine actions are actions done in accordance with the mean, it looks like even in such situations there *is* an action that would hit the mean, but that failing to perform it is excusable. Thus, my suggestion is that Aristotle thinks that some people, those few with heroic virtue, could hit the mean even in situations that overstrain human nature.

By way of filling in this strong suggestion a bit, it is worth noting that when he discusses the sorts of situations that overstrain human nature, Aristotle focuses on danger. Accordingly, if my reading is correct, it might appear that heroic virtue is limited to superlative courage. This, of course, would contradict my earlier contention that heroic

---

<sup>69</sup> Or, at least in some such situations. It is worth noting that this discussion is often linked with moral dilemmas. For a thorough consideration, see Gottlieb 2009, 115-134, cf. Hursthouse 1984. By connecting this discussion with heroic virtue, I do not intend to take a stance either way on whether Aristotle countenanced moral dilemmas. But even if Aristotle believed moral dilemmas were possible, in the situations he discusses here, he seems to indicate that there is a correct action to take.

virtue is a general state, consisting in a range of psychological states. However, Aristotle gives us no reason—and we do not have any independent reason—to think that only danger that can overstrain human nature.<sup>70</sup> Indeed, Aristotle himself, albeit outside of the *NE*, offers an example where a good person can be overstrained by the freedom of absolute power (*Politics* 1287a31). In such a case we could imagine that even a good person would be faced with temptations that she could not ultimately resist. However, on the current suggestion, a person with heroic virtue could resist these temptations. Moreover, surely there are cases in which the generous action in a situation might overstrain us, and so failing to do it would be pardoned. Still, in these situations we can imagine a person with such great virtue that she would perform the fine action.

Against this stronger suggestion someone might point out that Aristotle claims that no one would do the right thing in this situation (μηδεις ἄν ὑπομείναι). Here it is worth remembering that Aristotle several times acknowledges that many ethical claims only hold true for the most part (1094b12-27, 1098a25-34, 1104a1-7).<sup>71</sup> Of course, one should be wary of interpreters who cite these passages in an attempt to circumvent a difficulty for their preferred reading. That is, we should not take the view that ethical claims admit of counterexamples as license to ignore relevant passages that conflict with our interpretations. With this point being acknowledged, I believe that Aristotle's qualification about ethical claims legitimately bears on the present discussion. For in raising these sorts of scenarios in which he claims that no one would do the right action, Aristotle is inquiring into atypical situations. Thus, he can sensibly be taken in these

---

<sup>70</sup> The same may be said for my weaker suggestion.

<sup>71</sup> Cf. Curzer 2005, 235 and Drefcinski 1996, 142.

passages as setting out what usually happens in these atypical situations. And it is overwhelmingly the case that no one would perform the right action in these situations.<sup>72</sup> But that is consistent with someone performing the right action in some such situation. Further, he is not raising these cases to elaborate on virtue, let alone on heroic virtue, but to tease out a theory of voluntary, involuntary, and mixed actions. Since Aristotle's focus is on voluntary actions, it is reasonable that he should not account for heroic virtue, as he would be doing so at the expense of perspicuity in his present discussion.<sup>73</sup>

There is a final point I want to make regarding heroic virtue and situations that overstrain human nature. Although I have been employing the term 'heroic virtue', we should recall that Aristotle thinks that this sort of virtue is in some way divine. Thus, we should be sensitive to Aristotle's claim here that *human nature* (τὴν ἀνθρωπίνην φύσιν) is overstrained.<sup>74</sup> Perhaps, then, in order to act well in such a situation, a person would have

---

<sup>72</sup> The claim that there are some scenarios in which no one would perform the right action is absent from Aristotle's discussion of being overstrained in his parallel discussion in the *Eudemian Ethics* (esp. 1225a20-30), which might be taken to support my present contention that Aristotle is speaking generally in the *NE* discussion. I thank an anonymous referee for *Ancient Philosophy* for alerting me to this passage.

<sup>73</sup> The same can be said for passages that seem to imply a rejection of DOV. In many of these passages Aristotle is concerned with some particular virtue. Accordingly, it makes sense that he would speak in generalities, focusing on typical cases without getting bogged down by examples that run contrary to what is usual (cf. Cooper 1999, 320). I thank Tal Brewer for discussion here.

<sup>74</sup> Cf. *EE* 1225a20-30. We find a similar point in Plato's *Laws*. At 875a1-d2 the Athenian initially claims that human nature will always drive a person to look to his own advantage. But he then allows that it is possible that some person with a special nature from the gods could overcome these human pitfalls, and so would not need to be constrained by laws (cf. 691c5-d1, 713c6). Thus, as in my reading of Aristotle's discussion, the Athenian's point is about the limitations of human nature. And both discussions, I suggest,

to surpass her human nature in some sense.<sup>75</sup> And if a person did act finely in such a situation, we might feel compelled to say that in some sense she overcame her human nature to perform the best possible action. Indeed, as we have seen there is good reason to think that this is just how Aristotle describes the person with heroic virtue.<sup>76</sup>

## Conclusion

We have covered much ground in order to arrive at this conclusion. So, it will be worthwhile to retrace our steps. I began with the question of whether or not Aristotle believes that true virtue can come in degrees. I argued we cannot adjudicate this question on the basis of passages alone, and so I considered whether some of Aristotle's fundamental ethical tenets rule out DOV. I argued that they do not. From here I proposed that one aspect of Aristotle's ethics commits him to DOV, namely heroic virtue. In order to substantiate this proposal I offered evidence that Aristotle advances heroic virtue in earnest. Further, I detailed possible alternative characterizations of heroic virtue and gave

---

allow for the possibility that someone special could overcome the limitations imposed by human nature.

My claim here is that Aristotle believes that the way one could do this is through possessing the highest degree of virtue. I thank Dan Devereux for directing me to this passage from the *Laws*.

<sup>75</sup> Aristotle does claim that we all have a divine element in us (1177b28). He brings this up in the context of the life of theoretical contemplation, but does not indicate that living in accord with our divine element is limited to this life. On the contrary, at 1168b24-33 Aristotle suggests that the person who lives most in accord with the controlling part of her soul, that is, her reason, would be "eager above all to do just or temperate actions, or any other actions in accord with virtue".

<sup>76</sup> In so acting, the agent is still a person, not a god. Hence, heroic virtue, even on this stronger suggestion, remains human virtue. I thank Julie Ward for discussion on this aspect of my account.

reason to reject each one. Finally, I set out an account of heroic virtue that is consistent with Aristotle's doctrine of the mean.

As we have just seen, my account consists in three possible distinguishing characteristics of an Aristotelian heroically good agent. Although I have not argued for it, I suspect that someone with heroic virtue would possess all three characteristics. Such a person would be as rare as she would be recognizable. And just as Aristotle does at the start of *NE VII*, today we might attempt to describe her using metaphorical language, like calling her a 'saint'. In spite of my arguments, though, many other students of the *Nicomachean Ethics* might think that my characterization of heroic virtue is simply virtue for Aristotle. That is, many commentators take Aristotle to hold that all good agents are perfect, ideal, and so, possess equal amounts of virtue. I hope that in this paper I have given good reason to see that this is not so. Rather, it looks like on Aristotle's account there are degrees of true human virtue and that although he does not expect a good agent to be perfect, he does describe a superlative type of virtue, heroic virtue.<sup>77</sup>

---

<sup>77</sup> I would like to thank Ron Polanksy and an anonymous referee for *Ancient Philosophy* for comments that improved this paper. I also thank Paula Gottlieb for her comments at the APA Central 2014, as well as Julie Ward and everyone in attendance for a helpful discussion. The same goes for Tal Brewer and attendees at the UVa Blandy Conference 2011 and the Virginia Philosophical Association Conference 2013. I also appreciate Jenny Reed for discussing these issues and for her willingness to read drafts. Finally, I'd like to express my gratitude to Dan Devereux for his insights along the way and his heroic generosity in commenting on and discussing many drafts of this paper.

## Works cited

Annas, J. 1995. *The Morality of Happiness*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bae, E. 2003. 'An Ornament of the Virtues' *Ancient Philosophy* 23: 337-349.

Broadie, S. 1991. *Ethics with Aristotle*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Broadie, S. 2005. 'Virtue and beyond in Plato and Aristotle' *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 43: 97-114.

Broadie, S. 2009. 'Nicomachean Ethics VII. 8-9 (1151b22): *Akrasia, enkrateia*, and Look-Alikes' 157-172 in C. Natali ed. *Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics Book VII*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Brown, L. 1997. 'What is "the mean relative to us" in Aristotle's "Ethics?"' *Phronesis* 42: 77-93.

Brown, L. 2014. 'Why is Aristotle's Virtue of Character a Mean?' 64-80 in R. Polansky ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Cooper, J. 1999. *Reason and Emotion: Essays on Ancient Moral Psychology and Ethical Theory*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Cooper, J. 2009. 'Nicomachean Ethics VII. 1-2: Introduction, Method, Puzzles' 9-40 in  
C. Natali ed. *Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics Book VII*. Oxford: Oxford  
University Press.

Curzer, H. 1990. 'A Great Philosopher's Not so Great Account of Great Virtue:  
Aristotle's Treatment of 'Greatness of Soul'' *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 20:  
517-537.

Curzer, H. 1996. 'A Defense of Aristotle's Doctrine that Virtue is a Mean' *Ancient  
Philosophy* 16: 129-138.

Curzer, H. 2005 'How Good People Do Bad Things: Aristotle on the Misdeeds of  
the Virtuous' *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 28: 233-256.

Curzer, H. 2012. *Aristotle and the Virtues*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Dover, K. 1974. *Greek Popular Morality in the Time of Plato and Aristotle*.  
Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Drefcinski, S. 1996. 'Aristotle's Fallible *Phronimos*' *Ancient Philosophy* 16: 139-  
153.

Drefcinski, S. 2006. 'A Different Solution to an Alleged Contradiction in Aristotle's

- Nicomachean Ethics*' *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 30: 201-210.
- Frede, D. 1986. 'The Impossibility of Perfection: Socrates' Criticism of Simonides' Poem in the Protagoras' *The Review of Metaphysics* 93: 729-753.
- Gardiner, S. 2001. 'Aristotle's Basic and Non-Basic Virtues' *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 20: 261-296.
- Gottlieb, P. 2009. *The Virtue of Aristotle's Ethics*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Grant, A. 1877. *Aristotle*. Philadelphia: W. Blackwood and Sons
- Hardie, W. F. R. 1978 'Magnanimity in Aristotle's "Ethics"' *Phronesis* 23: 63-79.
- Hursthouse, R. 1980-81. 'A False Doctrine of the Mean' *Proceeding of the Aristotelian Society* 81: 57-72.
- Hursthouse, R. 1984. 'Acting and Feeling in Character: "Nicomachean Ethics" 3.i' *Phronesis* 29: 252-266.
- Hutchinson, D. S. 1986. *The Virtues of Aristotle*. Routledge.

- Ierodiakonou, K. 1999. 'Aspasius on Perfect and Imperfect Virtues' 142-161 in A. Alberti and R. Sharples edd. *Aspasius: The Earliest Extent Commentary of Aristotle's Ethics*. New York: Walter de Gruyter.
- Irwin, T. 1988. 'Disunity in the Aristotelian Virtues' *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 61-78.
- Irwin, T. 1999. *Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Translation and Notes. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing.
- Kawall, J. 2009. 'Virtue Theory, Ideal Observers, and the Supererogatory' *Philosophical Studies* 146: 176-196.
- Long, A.A. and Sedley, D.N. 1999. *The Hellenistic Philosophers volume 1: Translations of the primary sources with philosophical commentary*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lorenz, H. 2009. 'Nicomachean Ethics VII.4: Plain and Qualified *akrasia*' 72-102 in C. Natali ed. *Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics Book VII*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Natali, C. 2009 'Nicomachean Ethics VII.5-6: Beastliness, Irascibility, and *akrasia*' 103-129 in C. Natali ed. *Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics Book VII*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Parry, H. 1965. 'An Interpretation of Simonides 4 (Diehl)' *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Society* 96: 297-320.
- Pearson, G. 2006. 'Aristotle on Acting Unjustly without Being Unjust' *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 30: 211- 233.
- Polansky, R. and Stover, J. 2003. 'Moral Virtue and *Megalopsychia*' *Ancient Philosophy* 23: 351-359.
- Ross, W. 1995. *Aristotle*, 6<sup>th</sup> edition. London and New York
- Sherman, N. 1989. *The Fabric of Character: Aristotle's Theory of Virtue*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Urmson, J. 1980. 'Aristotle's Doctrine of the Mean' 157-170 in A. Rorty ed. *Essays in Aristotle's Ethics*. Berkeley: University of California Press.