Ethics for Rational Animals
The Moral Psychology at the Basis of Aristotle's Ethics

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Contents

To P, E, and BT.

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Introduction

For Aristotle, the morally good person is a practically wise and virtuous person. Since virtue and practical wisdom are desiderative and cognitive excellences, studying them requires a background in human psychology. In this book, I engage in a comprehensive study of Aristotle's moral psychology in order to give a new account of his views on practical wisdom, virtue and *akrasia*.

Aristotle's moral psychology emerges from my reconstruction as a qualified intellectualism. I characterise this view as intellectualistic because it describes practical wisdom as the sort of knowledge that can govern desire and action, and *akrasia* as involving a form of ignorance. However, Aristotle's intellectualism is qualified because practical wisdom goes beyond grasping the truth about the human good, for it must also be able to convey the truth persuasively to non-rational cognition and desires. Conversely, ethical rational failures are not only failures to grasp the truth, but also failures to be persuaded by it. I thus show that practical wisdom is a persuasive rational excellence, that virtue is a listening excellence, and that the ignorance involved in *akrasia* is in fact a failure of persuasion. Practical wisdom does not merely articulate, silence or manipulate non-rational cognitions and desires. Rather, it persuades them with explanations that are comprehensible and compelling. Virtue, in turn, involves perfecting the ability to listen to reason by learning to recognise fine and shameful things perceptually. *Akrasia* is a form of ignorance because it implies the failure of the agent to produce the persuasive explanations that would remove her vicious desires. Contrary to what is commonly assumed, bad desires are a symptom, not a cause, of the ignorance of the akratic. This ignorance, furthermore, is compatible with the akratic holding the belief that she is doing something wrong while she acts.

Aristotle's qualified intellectualism, as I reconstruct it, preserves our intuition that grasping the truth about the human good is important for

ethical excellences. However, it shows that merely grasping the truth is on its own insufficient. This does not mean that the role of practical reason in Aristotle's ethics is restricted (*contra* Moss 2012, pp. 154–199, Moss 2011). On the contrary, there is much that practical reason can do to control action and desires which go beyond grasping the truth, including regulating attention, generating rational pleasures and constructing persuasive explanations. I argue that if we follow Aristotle in endorsing this richer account of practical rationality, we are able to see the appeal of an intellectualistic view.

There is widespread agreement on the thesis that Aristotle's ethics is based on or at least closely related to his psychology. Part of the aim of this book is to unearth the hidden complexity of this widespread thesis by showing that a study of Aristotle's moral psychology should be methodologically self-aware and comprehensive. The pillar of Aristotle's moral psychology, as I understand it, is that it applies specifically to humans as rational animals. I do not use this label as a scientific definition of humankind.[1] Rather, I use it to capture the fact that Aristotle's moral psychology aims to describe the rational and non-rational aspects of human desires and cognition where they clash and where they cooperate. He sets this agenda at *NE* 1.13, where he argues that the ethicist and political scientist should know about the division between the rational and non-rational parts of the soul. This distinction is important because character virtue is an excellence of the non-rational part, while practical wisdom is an excellence of the rational part. In addition, practical wisdom and virtue involve the cooperation between the parts, while *akrasia* and *enkrateia* signal a failure of cooperation (*NE* 1102a18–1103a10).

The simplicity of the partition of the soul at *NE* 1.13 is deceptive. In the ethical works, we are not given sufficient information either about the cognitive and desiderative make up of the parts, or about the way in which they can be brought to cooperation. For this reason, in order to reconstruct Aristotle's moral psychology, I also rely on the works on psychology, natural science and epistemology. I offer a comprehensive study of rational and non-rational cognitive and desiderative faculties, guided by the assumption that these faculties coexist and influence each other and therefore cannot be studied successfully in isolation. This study sheds light on the perfect cooperation between the parts characteristic of practical wisdom and virtue, and on the failure of cooperation characteristic of *akrasia* and *enkrateia*.

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[1]For a critique of the appropriateness of this definition, see J. Müller 2019 and Kietzmann 2019

My methodology is indebted to two groups of interpreters: those who have defended the systematicity of Aristotle's work, and those who have looked at specific aspects of his psychological works to elucidate his ethics.[2] The first camp includes Terry Irwin's wide ranging study of the methodological connections between all areas of Aristotle's thought across the board,[3] as well as the work of many authors who have seen the benefit of combining a study of Aristotle's ethics with his works on psychology and natural science, including most recently Mariska Leunissen.[4] The second camp includes those who have focused on specific aspects of Aristotle's psychology and epistemology to shed light on his ethics, such as for example Jessica Moss, Hendrik Lorenz, Marc Gasser-Wingate, and Giles Pearson.[5] In this crowded literature, the angle of my enquiry is distinctive because I engage with the material in psychology that Aristotle himself identifies as relevant for understanding ethical excellences such as practical wisdom and ethical failures such as *akrasia* at *NE* 1.13.[6] This is why I focus on the cognitive and desiderative make-up of the rational and non-rational parts of the soul. Thus, my study is narrower in scope than those that deal with Aristotle's systematic philosophy as whole, and wider in scope than studies that focus on *phantasia*, non-rational cognition or perception specifically. The greatest intellectual debt of this strategy is owed to two papers by Jennifer Whiting on the mereology of the soul.[7] However, while Whiting also engages with topics that lie outside the scope of an ethical inquiry (such as cosmology and hylomorphism), I restrict my analysis to moral psychology, thus reaching different conclusions about the nature of practical wisdom and character virtue. Since the literature on Aristotle's ethics and

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[2]The latter interpretive strategy has a tradition of supporters (e.g. Ando 1958, pp. 71–75, Burnet 1900, pp. 63–65) and detractors (e.g. Fortenbaugh 1975, Jaeger 1934). I defend it in detail in relation to my discussion of the rational and non-rational part of the soul in the next section.

[3]Irwin 1988a, Irwin 1980.

[4]Leunissen 2017, see further Shields 2015 and Leunissen 2015, which appear in Henry and Nielsen 2015, a collection devoted to the discussion of the benefits of studying Aristotle's ethics in conjunction with his scientific works.

[5]Moss 2012 (focusing on *phantasia*), G. Pearson 2012 (focusing on desire), Rabinoff 2018 (focusing on perception), Achtenberg 2002 (focusing on the emotions), Lorenz 2006 (focusing on non-rational cognition and desire), Gasser-Wingate 2021 (focusing on perception and experience), Gottlieb 2021 (focusing on thinking and feeling).

[6]Other studies also yield important results for Aristotle's ethics, as shown by Leunissen's work on the link between ethics and biology. These studies, however, do not focus on the topics that Aristotle identifies as central in *NE* 1.13.

[7]Whiting 2002b, Whiting 2019.

psychology is vast, for ease of readability, my engagement with these authors and a wide number of others who have worked on related issues occurs for the most part in the footnotes.

0.1 The Rational Part of the Soul and the Non-rational Part of the Soul

The starting point of the book is a passage in which Aristotle gives us guidance about the issues in psychology that are relevant for the study of ethics:

> We have discussed [sc. the soul] sufficiently in our popular works too, and we should use this discussion: for example, we said that one [sc. part] of the soul is non-rational, and the other rational. Whether these are distinguished as the parts of the body (or anything that is divisible in parts), or whether they are two in definition and inseparable in nature like the concave and the convex does not matter for the present purposes.[8]

For the ethicist's purposes, it does not matter whether the parts of the soul can exist separately from each other, or they are merely separable in definition. The distinction between the rational part and the non-rational part, however, is important. But what exactly is this distinction? Aristotle gives us a suggestion about where to look for an answer to this question: he mentions the 'popular works' (*exoterikoi logoi*). Unfortunately, his suggestion is not very helpful for us. There is widespread disagreement among scholars on the nature of the popular works and the only uncontroversial assumption seems to be that they are lost.[9]

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[8]λέγεται δὲ περὶ αὐτῆς καὶ ἐν τοῖς ἐξωτερικοῖς λόγοις ἀρκούντως ἔνια, καὶ χρηστέον αὐτοῖς· οἷον τὸ μὲν ἄλογον αὐτῆς εἶναι, τὸ δὲ λόγον ἔχον. ταῦτα δὲ πότερον διώρισται καθάπερ τὰ τοῦ σώματος μόρια καὶ πᾶν τὸ μεριστόν, ἢ τῷ λόγῳ δύο ἐστὶν ἀχώριστα πεφυκότα καθάπερ ἐν τῇ περιφερείᾳ τὸ κυρτὸν καὶ τὸ κοῖλον, οὐθὲν διαφέρει πρὸς τὸ παρόν. *NE* 1102a26–31. Translations of the *NE* are based, sometimes loosely, on Irwin 1999.

[9]See Susemihl and Hicks 1895, pp. 561–566 for a reconstruction of the different theories concerning the exoteric treatises, and see Hutchinson and Johnson 2015 for the possible exception of the *Protrepticus*. According to some interpreters, these works were not by Aristotle. According to others, they were addressed to a wider audience and they were written in dialogue form. According to others still, they were his lectures. Here, I do not take a position in this debate. All I suggest is that, in absence of better evidence, *De*

We might not have access to the original source Aristotle has in mind, but the ethico-political works give us at least some guidance on the nature of the rational and non-rational parts of the soul. At *NE* 1098a4–5, the strictly speaking rational (*logon echon*) part of the soul is called a thinking or reflecting part (*dianooumenon*). At *NE* 1139a10–12 the rational part is divided further into a scientific part (*epistēmonikon*) and a calculative or deliberative part (*bouleutikon* or *logistikon*). This indicates that the rational part engages in different kinds of reasoning and reflecting. It deliberates about what to do, it contemplates scientific truths and it engages in calculation in order to promote understanding.

The non-rational part, like the rational part, is divided into two sub-parts. The first sub-part is nutritive, 'plantlike' and shared among all living things. Aristotle argues that this part is not relevant for the study of ethics because it is not peculiarly human (*NE* 1102a35–1102b1 and *EE* 1219b36–40). The second sub-part is desiderative (*to orektikon*) at *NE* 1102b29 and passionate (*pathētikon morion*) at *Pol* 1254b8. In the *Eudemian Ethics*, the desiderative and perceptual parts are associated and contrasted with the nutritive part: at *EE* 1219b24–26, the reason why virtuous and vicious people are almost alike when asleep is because then their desiderative and perceptual part is imperfect or inactive.

These remarks sketch a relatively simple picture: the non-rational part reasons and calculates, the non-rational part desires, gets emotional and perceives. This simple picture, however, soon reveals its shortcomings. First, the supposedly non-rational part turns out to partake in *logos* (reason) in a way, in so far as it can listen to it and be persuaded by it (*NE* 1102b26–29 and *EE* 1219b28–31).[10] This feature of the non-rational part is especially

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Anima, the *Parva Naturalia*, the biological works, the *Rhetoric*, the *Metaphysics* and the *Analytics* are good places to look for ideas on how to draw the distinction between the rational part and the non-rational part of the soul. My view is indebted to Moss 2012, ch. 4.2 and Moss 2017. See also Walsh 1960, Ch. III for a similar approach, and for a reconstruction of the different theses concerning the development of Aristotle's scientific and moral psychology. For further defence of the thesis that the study of ethics requires knowledge of some aspects of psychology, see Irwin 1980 and Shields 2015.

[10]Here I take *logos* to stand for speech or reason, and I elucidate the characteristic cognitive abilities enabled by the possession of *logos* in chapter 1.2. My discussion is indebted to Moss 2014. On the basis of the participation of the non-rational part in *logos*, Whiting 2019 argues that we should interpret *NE* 1.13 as suggesting that the human soul is divided into a nutritive, theoretical and practical part. The practical part is unitary in virtuous agents, but subdivided in akratic and enkratic agents. When the practical part is

evident in enkratic and virtuous people:

> However, this [part] as well [as the rational part] appears, as we said, to partake in reason. At any rate, in the enkratic person it obeys reason; and in the temperate and the brave person it presumably listens still better to reason, since there it always speaks with the same voice as reason.[11]

Hence, the non-rational part and the rational part interact and communicate, and their perfect communication forms the basis of virtue and practical wisdom: the former is a virtue of the non-rational part, the latter is a virtue of the rational part (*NE* 1103a3–7).

A second complication in the partition of the soul is that the rational part is not simply calculative, for it enters into motivational conflict with the non-rational part. At *NE* 1102b16–21, conflicted akratics (and enkratics) are torn between two impulses (*hormai*), one coming from the rational part and the other from the non-rational part. This suggests that the rational part is the seat of rational desires such as wish (*boulēsis*) and decision (*prohairesis*).[12] Aristotle, however, wavers on this point, for he characterises the non-rational part as the seat of all desires at *Pol* 1334b17–25.[13] Nonetheless, even if the

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divided, it has a rational aspect and a non-rational aspect. However, Aristotle's suggestion that the practical rational part should be split is introduced by a conditional remark at *NE* 1103a1, where he argues that if the desiderative non-rational part has reason, then the rational part should be divided into two parts. It is not clear that Aristotle endorses the antecedent of this conditional, for in this passage his only suggests that the desiderative non-rational part can part take (*metechein*) to reason *in a way* (*pōs*) (*NE* 1102b25; *NE* 1102b31). Hence, while it is important to shed light on the way in which the non-rational part partakes in reason, a further division of the rational part may not be necessary.

[11]λόγου δὲ καὶ τοῦτο φαίνεται μετέχειν, ὥσπερ εἴπομεν· πειθαρχεῖ γοῦν τῷ λόγῳ τὸ τοῦ ἐγκρατοῦς – ἔτι δ᾽ ἴσως εὐηκοώτερόν ἐστι τὸ τοῦ σώφρονος καὶ ἀνδρείου· πάντα γὰρ ὁμοφωνεῖ τῷ λόγῳ. *NE* 1102b25–28

[12]*EE* 1225b25–26, *NE* 1111b12–13, *DA* 432b4–7, *Rhet* 1369a3–4.

[13]*NE* 1102b30 is often taken to imply that all desires belong to the non-rational part because they all listen to reason only in a way. The context however suggests that here Aristotle has in mind *epithumia* and *thumos* only, for he has just characterised the conflict typical of *akrasia* as a motivational conflict between the rational part and the non-rational part. On the thesis that Aristotle wavers on the status of rational desire, see Price 1995 pp. 102–111. See Moss 2012, pp. 161–163 and fn. 20 on the thesis that rational desires belong to the non-rational part, yet have some distinctively rational aspect. See Cooper 1989, p. 32 and Broadie 1991, pp. 68–72 on the thesis that the rational part is desiderative.

rational part is not desiderative strictly speaking, there must be something about rational desires that connects them closely to the rational part.

A third issue raised by the partition of the soul concerns the peculiarity of human psychology. The non-rational part is shared between human and non-human animals because both have perception, spirited desire (*thumos*) and appetitive desire (*epithumia*).[14] The rational part, too, is shared between humans and gods, because its contemplative activities are divine (*NE* 1177b17–1178a8). This reflects the fact that humans, for Aristotle, occupy a very special place between beasts and gods in the *scala naturae*. However, it creates a problem in the context of Aristotle's theory, for it implies that the human soul has no distinctive feature, it just results from a combination of godly and beastly elements.[15] This problem is particularly pressing: for Aristotle, human psychology matters for ethics because ethics studies the peculiar excellence of the human soul. This entails that the features of the soul which are not peculiarly human, e.g. its nutritive functions, do not concern the ethicist and the political scientist (*NE* 1102b4–13, *EE* 1219b38–39).[16] However, if the non-rational part of the soul and the rational part of the soul are shared between humans and other beings, a study of human virtue should not take them into account.

In the ethical works and in the *Politics*, Aristotle does not say enough to untangle these difficulties about the rational part of the soul and the non-rational part of the soul, even if they lie at the basis of his research on practical wisdom, character virtue and *akrasia*. In order to study the division between parts, their clashes, their cooperation, and the peculiarity of human psychology outlined at *NE* 1.13, we must look at Aristotle's work on natural science and epistemology. Moral psychology is by nature interdisciplinary,

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[14]See *inter alia DA* 414a29–b19 for perception and appetitive desire, *NE* 1111b10–13 and *EE* 1225b24–26 for appetitive and spirited desire.

[15]William Fortenbaugh argues that this problem arises from the mistaken identification of the non-rational part with the appetitive and perceptual part in *De Anima* (Fortenbaugh 1969, Fortenbaugh 1975, pp. 26–31 and Fortenbaugh 2006c, p. 122–130). However, the problem arises independently, for Aristotle explicitly says in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that appetitive desires and spirited desires are shared between human and non-human animals and that rational cognition is human and divine.

[16]This claim might sound strange from our perspective, as we might envisage peculiarly human features that do not make the difference for ethics, such as having a sense of humour. Aristotle's view, however, might be that the only features that ought to be considered in this context are those that play a role in defining a life-form, such as nutrition, perception, or thought.

as it seeks to bring together the study of ethics and psychology in a way that enriches both. Taking my cue from the division between parts of the soul at *NE* 1.13, I show how this applies to Aristotle's moral psychology. By looking at the psychological basis of his ethics, we do not only gain a better understanding of his views on practical wisdom, *akrasia* and virtue. We also gain new insights into important features of his psychological theory. In particular, this comprehensive study of the parts of the soul sheds light on Aristotle's notion of attention, his account of how we can perceive value, and his views on the rationality of cognition and desire.

0.2   Book Plan

The book is divided into three parts. In the first part, *the Peculiar Constitution of the Human Soul*, I analyse the cognitive and desiderative make-up of the parts of the soul. I argue that, even though they face some obstacles in communicating, they can influence one another, and this mutual influence explains the peculiarity of human psychology.

In chapter 1, I look at the distinction between the cognitive capacities of the rational part of the soul and the non-rational part of the soul. I show that the non-rational part of the soul is richer, cognitively, than one might initially think. It can grasp means-ends relations as well as some generalisations. Hence, it is able to guide goal-directed behaviour on its own. Conversely, only the rational part can calculate and grasp universal explanatory accounts. This sheds light on the cognitive abilities characteristic of practical wisdom as a strictly rational excellence and on the limits of the communication between parts of the soul.

In chapter 2, I use the reconstruction of the cognitive make-up of the soul to explain the distinction between rational and non-rational desires. Rational desires are suitable to constitute a conception of the good and they are responsive to measurement and calculation. Non-rational desires do not respond to measurement because they are insatiable and too impulsive: insatiable desires defy comparison with competing desires and impulsive desires prompt action without waiting for reasoning. Thus, reason has to limit them and persuade them. This suggests that, for Aristotle, we can manage our desires with our rational faculties, but the strategies we employ with different desires will vary depending on whether the desire is rational or non-rational. In addition, non-rational desires are hard for reason to control.

In chapter 3, I look at how the rational part of the soul and the non-rational part of the soul influence each other by coexisting in the human soul. I argue that their reciprocal influence explains Aristotle's account of the peculiarity of human psychology. Human cognition is related to non-human animal cognition and divine cognition, but differs from both because it requires the cooperation between rational and non-rational cognition and desires. In outlining this cooperation, I discuss unexplored ways in which rational and non-rational cognition and desire influence one another. These include attention, the capacity of the rational part to manipulate the non-rational part, and the capacity to exercise *phantasia* for speculation and creativity. This discussion sketches some of the strategies that practical wisdom may employ to control non-rational cognition and desire.

In the second part of the book, *Cognition of Value, Desires and Action*, I argue that the rational part of the soul needs silencing, manipulation and persuasion in order to interact with the non-rational part because a mere grasp of the truth about the human good is not sufficient for humans to regulate action and desire.

In chapter 4, I start with an analysis of value cognition. The cognitive richness of the non-rational part allows Aristotle to argue that we can come in contact with evaluative features such as goodness, advantageousness and fineness by means of faculties such as perception and *phantasia*. The fact that the non-rational part can cognise these values matters for Aristotle's account of character virtue as a non-rational listening excellence. This is because it shows that non-rational cognition can be persuaded to pursue the fine.

In chapter 5 I analyse the links between cognition of value and desires. I argue that the evaluative cognitive states that can give rise to desires and actions in beings like us include perception, *phantasia* and thought. As a result of this richness, it is difficult for humans to control and manage their desires by thinking and reasoning. In particular, Aristotle thinks that we cannot regulate our desires merely by discriminating between true and false appearances of goodness, fineness and pleasantness.

In chapter 6, I argue that grasping the truth about appearances of goodness, fineness and pleasantness is also insufficient to regulate action. This explains why, for Aristotle, we are often conflicted and that we can be clear-eyed when we act against our best judgements.

In the third part, *Ethics for Rational Animals*, I rely on my account of the cognitive and desiderative make up of the parts of the soul to look at their practical excellences and practical failures: *phronēsis*, character virtue and

akrasia. I show that *phronēsis* can convey persuasively the truth about the human good to a virtous non-rational part. *Akrasia* and *enkrateia*, conversely, involve failures in this persuasive communication.

In chapter 7, I argue that *phronēsis* is a peculiar practical excellence in that it must be authoritative and persuasive, as well as controlling both desires and actions. In order to be persuasive, *phronēsis* needs to go beyond merely grasping the truth about the human good. It must be effective in directing attention and it must produce explanations suitable for the persuasion of the non-rational part of the soul. Furthermore, the persuasive function of *phronēsis* is hindered if the non-rational part is not virtuous, i.e. if it is not an excellent listener. This explains why, for Aristotle, *phronēsis* and character virtue are distinct but interdependent.

This analysis of *phronēsis* and virtue informs the following discussion of *akrasia* in chapter 8. I argue that the ignorance of the akratic is in fact a lack of *phronēsis*, and therefore a failure of persuasion. The akratic, like the enkratic, does not fully grasp the reasons or the values that ground her decision to act well and therefore fails to bring in line her non-rational desires. Hence, the ignorance of the akratic is compatible with at least some form of clear-eyed *akrasia*.

If my account is right, Aristotle constructs a very rich account of practical rationality, which enables him to explain how reason can control desire and action despite the fact that non-rational capacities are well suited to guide behaviour independently. He thus defends an appealing sort of intellectualism, according to which correct attention, pleasure, and the ability to construct persuasive explanations are rational excellences on a par with grasping the truth about the human good. These excellences are able to govern human desires and behaviour, if they engage with cooperative non-rational excellences.

Beyond the specific conclusions that it draws, I hope that this book will demonstrate that Aristotle's ethics and his psychology are best studied in conjunction, as the picture that emerges from their integration is philosophically fertile. When we look at our moral psychology from the perspective of what it takes to be virtuous and practically wise, we focus on faculties and abilities that might be disregarded otherwise. Thus, we discover Aristotle's views on the insatiability of desire, on deliberative *phantasia*, on attention, and on the cognition of value and action regulation. These views are sophisticated and often surprisingly modern: much like Duncan 2006 and similarly to Mole 2011, Aristotle sees attention as the outcome of the competition between cognitive stimuli; his theory of the link between cognition of value and desire

is able to account for the complexity of human desire, including akratic and enkratic desire; his views on the rationality of desire and action explain that not all actions against one's best judgement are irrational (see Arpaly 2000). Conversely, when we study ethical excellence with an eye to the constitution of human cognition and desire, we gain a fuller picture of the way in which it is gained and sustained. For Aristotle, moral excellence has a rational and a non-rational side. Since the two are integrated, however, they display peculiar characteristics, for their task is to communicate and agree with one-another. Thus, moral excellence is not a mere conjunction of a correct grasp of the human good with well-habituated non-rational desires. Rather, it presupposes the possession of excellences which are rational, yet able to engage with non-rational faculties, and other excellences which are non-rational, yet able to pay heed and respond to reason's guidance.