

# Chapter 10

## Another Dissimilarity between Moral Virtue and Skills: An Interpretation of *Nicomachean Ethics* II 4



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**Abstract** In *Nicomachean Ethics* II 4 Aristotle famously raises a puzzle concerning moral habituation, and he seems to dissolve it by recourse to the analogy between moral virtue and skills. A new interpretation of the chapter is offered on the basis of an important evaluative dissimilarity then noted by Aristotle, one almost universally disregarded by interpreters of the chapter. I elucidate the nature of the dissimilarity in question and argue for its paramount importance for understanding Aristotle's conception of moral agency. I also show that it is the particularly intricate and puzzling character of the chapter that has prevented scholars from noticing such a dissimilarity and from integrating it to the interpretation of the chapter.

### 10.1 Introduction

Since the dawn of moral speculation the analogy between moral virtue and skills (*τέχναι*) has been profusely employed by moral philosophers such as the early Plato and the Stoics, to elucidate and provide support to their respective conceptions of moral virtue – conceptions about its very nature and its causal relationship with human happiness. The analogy is still considered by some contemporary philosophers, such as Julia Annas, as shedding light upon various aspects of moral virtue, such as its development, or the practical reasoning of the virtuous person.<sup>1</sup>

As is well known, in various junctures of his ethical writings Aristotle cautions against taking too far the comparison between moral virtues and skills. He maintains that, whereas systematic knowledge and capacities in general (including skills), can be used for either of two contrary ends – a doctor can, in virtue of the very same knowledge, both cure and kill – virtues of character are dispositions:

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<sup>1</sup>For Annas' skill-based account of virtue, see Annas (2011).

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when we possess them we are said to be practically and affectively disposed *in a particular way*, i.e. well, not badly (*EN* 1129a11–17). And even more significantly, whereas skills are concerned with production – which has an end beyond itself, the finished product – virtues of character are concerned with a different sort of thing altogether: *πρᾶξις*, conduct – which does not have an end beyond itself (*EN* 1140a1-b25).

There is, nonetheless, another aspect of the analogy that Aristotle deemed particularly misleading. As we shall see, the virtue-skill parallel raises the following question: if, as Aristotle undoubtedly recognises, full health or a clean victory can come about *by chance* as well as by the productive agency of the art of medicine or athletic skills, why not say that a fully good outcome, from the moral point of view, can come about by chance as well – i.e. independently of moral agency? But if a fully good outcome from the moral point of view can indeed come about by chance, or by any other means *outside* the agency of moral virtue, then such an outcome cannot possibly derive any portion of its total goodness from its being ‘produced’ by moral agency, when it is in fact so produced. In other words, the moral virtue-skill parallel suggests that the value of acting *from* moral virtue (i.e. moral agency) is in itself null, or at least non-intrinsic and purely derivative. For – if we continue with the parallel – we might think of the goodness of moral virtue as one that merely derives from its capacity – when possessed by an agent as a disposition – to be a *reliable producer* of such a ‘fully good moral outcome’. On this picture that ultimately results from the parallel, voluntariness and the further conditions of acting from virtue (i.e. the conditions of moral agency) that Aristotle recognises (such as acting from rational choice, for the sake of the act itself, and from a firm moral character) derive their significance merely from their being ‘causally linked’ in a peculiarly strong sense to a morally good outcome which – just like a clean victory or full health – has been already established as good quite independently of moral agency. On this parallel between moral virtue and skills, acting from moral virtue ends up having the sort of value that consequentialist accounts attribute to moral virtue.

It is of the utmost importance, accordingly, to see that in *Ethica Nicomachea* II 4, as I will attempt to show, Aristotle firmly opposes this consequentialist conception of the value of acting from moral virtue – and also to see *why* he does so. Aristotle notes in this chapter a crucial dissimilarity between moral virtue and skills – one that allows him to reject a consequentialist account of the value of moral agency. The dissimilarity in question consists in establishing the intrinsic goodness of virtuous character and moral agency, and the purely extrinsic and derivative one pertaining to proficient, skilled agency. Acting *from* moral virtue, in other words, enhances the goodness of the ‘moral outcome’ – or it may well be its only source. Supporting this claim is the primary purpose of this article.

Nonetheless, I also want to show how unveiling this dissimilarity between moral virtue and skills contributes to the solution to the *aporia* about habituation raised in *Nicomachean Ethics* II 4, thus forming an integral part of that solution. For it is my suspicion that scholars’ failure to understand the complex nature of this solution has prevented them from recognising here the aforementioned evaluative dissimilarity

between moral virtue and skills.<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, offering an interpretation of the *aporia* about habituation and Aristotle's strategy for dissolving it – in sum, an interpretation of the bulk of *Nicomachean Ethics* II 4 – will be my secondary aim.

## 10.2 The *Aporia* about Habituation and its Initial Dissolution

In the first three chapters of *Nicomachean Ethics* II, Aristotle has been arguing that the moral virtues result from habituation. Even though we are naturally receptive of them, it is not by nature that we come to acquire them (as in the case of the senses), but rather by frequently behaving in ways characteristic of virtue whenever such behaviour is called for (and preferably, from our earliest youth). Furthermore, Aristotle has made an important claim that seems to be stronger than the habituation claim: virtue “is exercised in the same kinds of actions as those from which it comes about” (1105a15–16, cf. 1104a27–b3). For example, we become courageous by being habituated in enduring fearful things in the right way, and once we have become courageous, it is this same conduct of ‘enduring fearful things in the right way’ that we shall best be able to perform.

Also significant for our present purposes is to note that Aristotle has made use of the analogy with skills to provide support for the habituation claim and the identity claims: The habituation claim is also true of the acquisition of skills, perhaps a more conspicuous process which can serve accordingly to illustrate the more unclear case of moral habituation. Just as we become lyre-players by playing the lyre, or builders by building, so too we become just or moderate by performing just or moderate deeds (cf. 1103a31–b2, 1103b6–17). Further, Aristotle also illustrates the identity claim with the case of strength, which he treats in these contexts as a skill (1104a30–3).

Given that Aristotle has previously argued for the habituation claim and the identity claim – and in both cases partly on the basis of an analogy with skills – it is not surprising to see the philosopher confronted with an *aporia* in the first lines of *Nicomachean Ethics* II 4: ‘What do we mean by saying that in order to become just, men need to do just things (τὰ δίκαια), and in order to become moderate they need to do moderate things (τὰ σώφρονα)?’ (1105a17–19). In other words: How can the habituation claim be true? For it seems that to do just or moderate things implies that the agent carrying out these actions is *already* just or moderate (what I shall call the ‘act-sufficiency claim’). After all, according to the identity claim, both the actions leading to the acquisition of moral virtue and those through which an already

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<sup>2</sup>And perhaps also from simply recognising the dissimilarity itself. A good example is Tom Angier's recent book, where he does not even consider *Nicomachean Ethics* II 4 as containing an argument against the ‘evaluative’ assimilation of moral virtue to skills (see Angier (2010, pp. 41–49)). Some interpreters have even attributed to Aristotle some sort of consequentialist *assimilation* of virtuous agency to skills concerning the way they contribute to the value of their typical products. The most prominent example is Sauvé Meyer (2011, p. 47 and p. 162). Her view serves as an example of the sort of consequentialist view I have mentioned.

acquired virtue is manifested, are *the same*. Aristotle of course has not yet explained what exactly he means by ‘the same’ in the identity claim, but it is reasonable to assume that the identity claim, thus vaguely formulated, motivates the act-sufficiency claim and thus renders problematic the thesis about moral habituation.

Nor is it surprising, in light of what has gone before, to see the philosopher encouraging the *aporia* about habituation by recourse to the analogy with skills (τέχναι). Indeed, the same problem arises for skills. How can one learn to be a grammarian or a musician by doing ‘grammatical things’ (τὰ γραμματικά) or by doing ‘musical things’ (τὰ μουσικά), if doing these ‘things’ implies (because of the parallel identity claim for skills, we might suppose) that the person doing them is already in possession of the skill of grammar or music? (cf. 1105a20–1).

Aristotle develops an intricate argument in order to solve the *aporia* about habituation, which I have divided in three parts. His first maneuver is pretty straightforward. He claims that this supposed act-sufficiency implication of ‘doing *F* things’ fails to apply in the domain of skills:

[T1] It is possible to produce something grammatical (γραμματικόν τι ποιῆσαι) both by chance and at someone else’s prompting. One will only count as literate, then, if one both does something grammatical and does it grammatically (γραμματικῶς); and this is what is done in accordance with one’s own grammatical expertise (τὸ κατὰ τὴν ἐν αὐτῷ γραμματικῇν). *EN* 1105a22–26.<sup>3</sup>

Since Aristotle has used the analogy with skills to motivate the *aporia* about habituation, the most natural interpretation here is that he intends to extend this initial dissolution of the *aporia* by analogy to the case of moral virtues.<sup>4</sup> The resulting analogical argument for the dissolution is then quite straightforward. Since one can do grammatical things both by chance and at someone else’s prompting, this shows that one can do grammatical things without oneself being already in possession of the skill of grammar. By analogy, one can do *just* things by chance and at someone else’s prompting, and so one can do *just* things without being already in possession of the virtue of justice. That respect in which moral virtue and skills are analogous is precisely that both skills and moral virtues are gradually acquired by trial and error (chance) and through the guidance of experts (at someone else’s prompting), by the repeated bringing about of ‘*F* outcomes’ or ‘things’ such as something γραμματικόν, or something σῶφρον.

Because the mere ‘*F*-outcomes’ (γινόμενα) do not imply the *possession* of the corresponding *F*-skill or *F*-virtue, the initial *aporia* about habituation is dissolved. For that *aporia* was based on the act-sufficiency claim (i.e. to do just or moderate ‘things’ implies that the agent carrying out these acts is already just or moderate), which has now been shown to be false in a sense. Surely the act-sufficiency claim is true with regard to a *different* sort of actions, such as doing something *grammatically* (γραμματικῶς), i.e. in accordance with one’s own grammatical skill (κατὰ τὴν

<sup>3</sup>I will be using Bywater 1894 edition of the *Ethica Nicomachea*. All translations are my own, unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>4</sup>This is for instance the interpretation of Grant (1885), Joachim (1951) and Taylor (2006) (see their commentaries *ad loc.*).

ἐν αὐτῷ γραμματικῇν). In general, in order for an action to *imply* the possession of the corresponding *F*-skill, it does not only suffice that one brings about an *F* thing, but it is also required that one does it in an *F*-way (e.g. grammatically), that is, (a) in conformity with the expertise peculiar to that *F*-skill (thus ruling out its being a mere result of chance), and (b) where the *F*-skill in question is possessed by the agent himself (thus ruling out its being done at someone else's prompting). By the former analogy we are naturally encouraged to make the same claims with regard to moral dispositions, *mutatis mutandis*. Thus, Aristotle will talk of doing something *moderately* (σοφρόνως), i.e. in accordance with (one's own) virtue (κατὰ τὴν ἀρετῆν, 1105a29), when the action fulfils both of these conditions.

Does this mean that the identity claim was false? Clearly not. It only means that the identity between deeds involved in habituation and fully virtuous ones cannot consist in their having the same causal conditions. But then notice that Aristotle owes us a positive explanation of what this claim means. I shall return to this point when discussing the third part of the argument.

### 10.3 The Dissimilarity between Moral Virtue and Skills

Nonetheless, despite his having apparently solved the initial *aporia* about habituation, Aristotle continues, in what seems to be a *digression*, or so I will argue:

[T2] Further (ἔτι), the case of the skills and that of moral virtues do not even resemble each other: the things that come about through the agency of skills (τὰ ὑπὸ τῶν τεχνῶν γινόμενα) contain in themselves the mark of a good condition (τὸ εὖ ἔχει ἐν αὐτοῖς), so that it is enough (ἀρκεῖ) if they come to be in a certain condition, whereas the things that come about in accordance with the moral virtues (τὰ κατὰ τὰς ἀρετὰς γινόμενα) count as done justly (δικαιῶς) or moderately (σοφρόνως) not merely when they themselves are in certain condition, but also when the agent is in a certain condition in doing them: first, if he does them knowingly, secondly if he decides to do them, and decides to do them for themselves, and thirdly if he does them from a firm and unchanging disposition. *EN* 1105a26-33.

Aristotle is now pointing towards a major dissimilarity between τὰ ὑπὸ τῶν τεχνῶν γινόμενα (“the things that come about through the agency of skill”) and τὰ κατὰ τὰς ἀρετὰς γινόμενα (“the things that come about in accordance with the virtues”). It is natural to think that this dissimilarity somehow affects the initial dissolution of the *aporia* about habituation in T1, since that dissolution was based on the *analogy* with skills. Before determining how this dissimilarity affects the initial dissolution (see next section), however, an interpretation of what Aristotle means by “τὰ ὑπὸ τῶν τεχνῶν γινόμενα” in 1105a27 is absolutely vital.

For reasons of economy, let me provisionally translate the expression ‘τὰ ὑπὸ τῶν τεχνῶν γινόμενα’ in T2 simply as ‘works of skill’. What I call the ‘Aggregative Reading’ takes the contrast in T2 between the goodness (τὸ εὖ) located in works of skill and the goodness located in the things that come about in accordance with the virtues, to depend on the contrast drawn in the lines immediately following T2

between the *kind of conditions* that must be fulfilled by an agent if either of these *F* things is to have some goodness:

[T3] When it is a matter of the possession (τὸ ἔχειν) of skills, these conditions do not count, except for knowledge itself; but when it comes to the possession of the moral virtues, knowledge has a small or no significance, whereas the force of the other conditions is no small thing but counts for everything, and these indeed result from the repeated performance of just and moderate things. *EN* 1105a33-b5.

According to the Aggregative Reading, whereas the things that come about in accordance with the moral virtues must be carried out with knowledge, chosen on their own account, and issue from a firm and unchanging moral disposition, *works of skill* must be carried out *only with knowledge*, that is, the knowledge that defines the corresponding skill. Accordingly, this interpretation takes the contrast in passage T2 to be a contrast drawn *among things done in an F-way*. So for instance, J. A. Stewart comments on Aristotle's conditions for acting from virtue in T2:

'Unless these conditions in the agent be fulfilled, we do not speak of the moral value of actions: but works of art have their artistic merit independently of any such conditions in the artist, *except of course that of his having knowledge*.'<sup>5</sup>

"Works of art" is Stewart's translation of 'τὰ ὑπὸ τῶν τεχνῶν γινόμενα'. Against Stewart, it can be said that when Aristotle says in T2 that knowledge *is* relevant for skills (1105b1–2), he is clearly referring to those productions that reflect the *possession* (τὸ ἔχειν, b1) of a skill (i.e. things done in an *F-way*); but nothing of what Aristotle says in T2 about *the goodness* of works of skill suggests that by "works of skill" (τὰ ὑπὸ τῶν τεχνῶν γινόμενα) he means things done in an *F-way*, and which reflect the possession of *F-skill* accordingly.

Indeed, Aristotle has unequivocally been using the expression 'X κατὰ F' to mark the fact that *X* is something done in a certain way, that is, something that is done *thanks to F* and which reflects the possession of *F* – where *F* (in the accusative) is the corresponding skill or the moral virtues.<sup>6</sup> For current purposes, it will suffice to note that Aristotle here uses the expression 'X κατὰ F' to indicate a sort of *causal* relationship between *X* and *F* – in particular, I should add, one in which some typical result, *X*, is caused by something *F* according to certain rules or standards intrinsic to *F*. By contrast, the use of the preposition 'ὑπό' plus genitive ('through the agency of') in "τὰ ὑπὸ τῶν τεχνῶν γινόμενα" rather suggests that through the latter phrase he intends to express a slightly *different* relationship between skills and γινόμενα.

Some interpreters have indeed suggested that the two prepositions 'ὑπό' and 'κατὰ' express *the same* relationship in our passage, namely a straightforwardly causal or productive relationship, but that Aristotle employs 'ὑπό' to indicate the causal relationship between a finished product and the corresponding *skill*, while he employs 'κατὰ' to indicate the causal relationship between conduct and the

<sup>5</sup> Stewart (1892, p. 182). Italics are mine.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. τὸ κατὰ τὴν ἐν αὐτῷ γραμματικῇν (1105a25), τὰ κατὰ τὰς ἀρετὰς γινόμενα (1105a28–9).

corresponding *moral disposition*.<sup>7</sup> Against this interpretation, it must be noted that at 1105a25 Aristotle uses the preposition ‘κατά’ also in connection with the art of grammar (one of his paradigmatic skills), to indicate that something is done *thanks* to the art of grammar.<sup>8</sup> Why then not use the same preposition κατά, instead of ὑπό in τὰ ὑπὸ τῶν τεχνῶν γινόμενα, if he intended to express the very same causal relationship between some work or product and the corresponding skill? Some other explanation needs to be offered for Aristotle’s shift from the use of ‘κατά’ to the use of ‘ὑπό’ in the phrase in question. I shall suggest one below.

In the meantime, it must be noted that Sarah Broadie’s comments have an implication similar to Stewart’s:

*Once chance and direction by another have been eliminated (22-23), X counts as a work of skill or technical expertise if it is seen to have the qualities typical of products of the expertise in question. But for Y to count as a work of justice, etc. (under the same conditions) it is not enough that Y be seen to be the kind of thing the just person would do: certain conditions must also be seen to hold of the agent of Y.*<sup>9</sup>

Broadie’s view is clearly supported by her (and Rowe’s) reading of τὸ εὖ ἔχει ἐν αὐτοῖς (1105a27) as ‘the mark of their being done well’.<sup>10</sup> This adverbial reading misleadingly suggests that, once more, by ‘works of skill’ (i.e. τὰ ὑπὸ τῶν τεχνῶν γινόμενα) Aristotle is referring to things done in an *F*-way (e.g. grammatically or musically). Nonetheless, if we translate the expression τὸ εὖ ἔχει ἐν αὐτοῖς as ‘contain in themselves the mark of a good condition’,<sup>11</sup> then this interpretation is not so obvious. If by ‘a work of skill’ it is meant τὰ ὑπὸ τῶν τεχνῶν γινόμενα at 1105a27, then it is not at all obvious, for all Aristotle says in T2, that in order for *X* to be counted as a work of skill, one needs to *eliminate* chance and direction by another, as Broadie suggests: for all Aristotle has said in T2, *even if X* is an accidental outcome, *X* can still be said to be a *good* ‘work of skill’ (e.g. a well formed sentence, a clean victory, etc.).

Now, that this is indeed the case is confirmed by several texts where Aristotle claims that works of skill, such as a well-formed sentence or a house, can be generated by chance (ἄπὸ τύχης). He claims that products can come about ‘by spontaneity and chance’ (*Metaph.* 1032a29), and he makes the same claim with regard to specific works of skill, such as health (*Metaph.* 1049a18) and the effects of tragedy (*Po.* 1454a11). Actually, it is his considered view in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that ‘in

<sup>7</sup> John Burnet, for instance, suggests that the prepositions ὑπό and κατά ‘correspond to the distinction between ποιεῖν and πράττειν, ἔργον and πράξις’ respectively (Burnet (1900, p. 87)). The same interpretation is advanced by Gauthier and Jolif (1970, p. 130).

<sup>8</sup> The phrase with ὑπό is not necessarily Aristotle’s stock phrase to refer to artifacts. Whereas he sometimes uses this phrase (e.g. *EN* 1175a24), he also uses the phrase with κατά in other places (e.g. *Ph.* 193a32).

<sup>9</sup> Broadie and Rowe (2002, p. 300). Italics are my own. For similar interpretations, see also Tricot (1959, p. 98), Annas (1993, p. 68), and more recently Jimenez (2016, p. 16).

<sup>10</sup> Broadie and Rowe (2002, translation *ad loc.*).

<sup>11</sup> Or ‘have their goodness in themselves’ (Ross) or ‘ont leur valeur en elles-mêmes’ (Tricot). In the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle tends to use τὸ εὖ and τὸ ἀγαθόν interchangeably (e.g. *EN* 1097b27).

a way chance and skill are concerned with the same objects' (*EN* 1140a18), in the sense that both chance and skills can be causally responsible of bringing about the same objects.

As a result, the Aggregative Reading obscures the significance of the contrast between virtues and skills that Aristotle is drawing upon in T2. Perhaps the preposition ὑπό in τὰ ὑπὸ τῶν τεχνῶν γινόμενα misleads us into thinking of things that actually come about through the agency of a skill, but the phrase is to be understood as referring to a class of entities such as 'grammatical things' and 'musical things' (*F*-things) that, as we have seen, can be the result of both (i) expert direction by another and (ii) chance. Accordingly, Aristotle cannot be referring with this phrase to things that *actually* come about as a result of the exercise of a skill.

So, what does the phrase mean? Perhaps our phrase stands for those things that *characteristically* come about through the agency of a skill. Unfortunately, there are certain end-conditions, such as health, of which it would be misleading to say that they come about 'characteristically' as a result of e.g. the exercise of medicine. Health is most characteristically the result of non-artificial factors, such as natural weight loss or natural evacuation (*cf. Metaph.* 1013b1). So perhaps the best alternative is to understand the phrase in this context as 'things that *can* come about through the agency of skill'. I am not saying that this is what the phrase *means*. The point I am making is about how to understand the 'extension' of the phrase, so to say; to wit, the class of entities of which the phrase is truly predicated, which is much larger than the class of entities that are the actual products of the exercise of a skill. For the sake of brevity, I will simply use the term 'artifacts' to refer to this larger class of entities.

Now, if I am right, the contrast in passage T2 between virtues and skills is indeed much sharper than what the Aggregative Reading suggests. If τὰ ὑπὸ τῶν τεχνῶν γινόμενα is effectively being used to refer to artifacts, Aristotle would be saying that, *even when they are the result of chance* artifacts contain in themselves the criterion of their goodness. Now this idea is quite fascinating and probably true. Suppose we discover that, by an extraordinary coincidence, an ape typed an English sentence with no grammatical faults. Aristotle would be saying that such a sentence can still be judged good by grammatical standards, provided that it is spelled according to the rules of English grammar; its 'condition' is then to be judged good independently of the way in which it was produced (i.e. whether or not *according to the art of grammar in the full sense*).

This is an important feature of artifacts (in the broad sense previously specified), and one that contrasts neatly with actions. Buildings fit for habitation, military victories, well-constructed sentences or symphonies, can all be unconditionally good in the sense that they can be regarded as being what they ought to be or as functioning in the way they ought to function regardless of whether they are the actual products of the proficient exercise of a τέχνη. The consequence is that *from* a well-formed sentence I can infer that someone was in possession of grammatical knowledge, provided that I make sure that (i) *he* was in fact the one who wrote the sentence and that (ii) he wrote the sentence in accordance with his own grammatical knowledge. That is, contrary to what the Aggregative Reading suggests, I do not



have to *first* establish (i) and (ii) in order to know that such a sentence is well-formed.

I have suggested that this contrast between skills and excellent ethical dispositions is spelled out in terms of their corresponding ‘works’ or ‘operations’ (ἔργα): what can be the final *product* of an activity of technical production (the house, the victory, etc.), or an ethically significant piece of conduct (πρᾶξις) in the case of moral dispositions (cf. *EE* 1219a14–18). Skills, however, have yet another ‘operation’, namely, the *activity of production itself*, the ποιήσις. Now, it is possible that by τὰ ὑπὸ τῶν τεχνῶν γινόμενα Aristotle also refers to the process of production, and not only the final product. After all, the activity of production *is* something that occurs in virtue of the agency of a skill. If you saw an ape typing at random you wouldn’t say that it was *writing* something. Nevertheless, wouldn’t this present a problem for my non-aggregative interpretation of T2, given that – one may think – the process of production itself *cannot* come about by chance?

The answer is ‘No’. When Aristotle explicitly refers to the activity of production, by saying that ‘it is possible *to produce* (ποιῆσαι) something grammatical both *by chance* and at someone else’s prompting’ (1105a22–23), it is evident that he does not take ‘to produce’ to mean the actual exercise of τέχνη. As a matter of fact, if what I have argued is correct, it is perfectly reasonable for processes of production to be interpreted as ‘artifacts’, at least whenever the question concerning their goodness is at stake. If a given artifact can be deemed good independently of its being the product of the exercise of a skill, then *any process* whatsoever – whether identical to such exercise or not – can be deemed good in so far as it brings about such an artifact. According to this view that I am now attributing (somehow tentatively) to Aristotle, the only consideration relevant to the increasing or decreasing goodness of a given process of production is its being more or less *reliable* in bringing about the artifact, which has already been established as ‘good’, indeed as good as it can be (see below), on independent grounds. If a skill happens in turn to be good at all, we might now suppose, this is only due to its being the source of a reliable processes of production of a good artifact.

To be more faithful to Aristotle’s own way of expressing this contrast in T2, we could say that, according to him, whenever we judge an artefact to be good in this extrinsic fashion, this is *enough* (ἄρκει, a28), that is, we have ‘all that we want’ in terms of ‘technical goodness’, so to speak. But this is not the case with moral agency, for whereas judging the condition of an artifact as technically good in this extrinsic fashion is enough, the condition of a piece of morally significant conduct or ‘outcome’ judged in this extrinsic fashion is not enough, that is, it does not give us all that we want in terms of *moral* goodness. We only have all that we want in this latter sphere when the action is done in a certain way, that is to say, when the moral agent as such is fully responsible for it. This is then the dissimilarity between moral dispositions and skills that Aristotle has in mind in T2.

In sum, the contrast in T2 between the goodness of artifacts and morally significant behavior is not based, as the Aggregative Reading suggests, on the difference between the sort of conditions internal to the producer in the one case, and the ones internal to the moral agent in the other – conditions that artifacts and morally

significant actions have to meet in order to count as fully good. Rather, the difference in question is grounded on the fact that, whereas such inward conditions are irrelevant to the true goodness of an artifact, they are of the utmost importance to the true or full goodness of a morally significant deed.

I am conscious that a result of my interpretation is that Aristotle is left with the uncomfortable notion of a virtuous ‘outcome’ or ‘deed’ (‘the moral outcome’) that can be identified as such, that is as *just*, *moderate*, etc., quite independently of its being the result of virtuous agency at all (in particular, even in cases where knowledge of the action as just, moderate, etc. is not available to its agent). For instance, if I gave the money back to the person I owed it to thinking that the envelope contains a love-letter, Aristotle would have to say that such a deed was a *just* thing. *This* would be the equivalent of the ape typing a well-formed English sentence. I will address this problem below, but for the moment let it suffice to point out that this agency-independent notion is certainly present in Aristotle’s *Ethics*.

## 10.4 The Second Dissolution of the *Aporia*

How is the second section of Aristotle’s argument, T2, logically connected with the previous *aporia* about habituation and its initial dissolution in T1? More precisely, the difficulty consists in understanding how the evaluative dissimilarity between skills and moral virtue noted in T2 bears upon the *aporia* about habituation and its initial dissolution in T1 based on the analogical argument.

Firstly, as we have seen, Aristotle states the initial *aporia* about habituation. He says this *aporia* doesn’t hold for skills because the act-sufficiency claim is here false; and because in one respect skills and moral virtue are analogous, the analogy helps him make the case for claiming that the act-sufficiency claim doesn’t hold for moral virtue either. Nonetheless, now in T2 Aristotle is not satisfied with that solution. He now concedes that there is a difference between the domain of skills and the domain of virtue, the difference being that something inward is necessary for our being completely satisfied with the goodness of virtuous action, namely, some internal conditions of the moral agent. None of the parallel conditions linking the producer with the artifact – not even knowledge – is required for our being completely satisfied with the goodness of artifacts.

Now, had we likened moral virtue to skills, as the initial analogical argument did, but *disregarded* the disanalogy just indicated, we would have been led to believe the wrong thing. We would have been led to believe that just like a well-formed sentence is in as good a condition as it can get, so too when I give the money back to the person I owed it to thinking that the envelope contains a love-letter, this *just outcome* (that the creditor got his money back, justice was served) is as good as it can get – and perhaps the only value and significance of moral virtue would now lie in its being a reliable producer of good outcomes. That is, we would have ended attributing to Aristotle a form of consequentialism. If, on the other hand, we do not disregard the evaluative disanalogy, there is a clear respect in which the analogy

with skills is misleading, because it suggests that just as in artifacts we get all we want when the artifact is in a certain condition extrinsically, so with ‘just things’ or ‘moderate things’ we get all we want (from human agents *qua* human) when the same holds. Doing these deeds justly or moderately would not add any value to the action: it would merely allow us to *infer* from it the possession of moral character by the agent, as in the case of doing something skillfully. And the analogy on its own misleadingly suggests this picture of moral agency, I believe, because: (i) it forces us to make sense of a *just* or *moderate* outcome that is independent of the inward conditions of moral agency and yet *identical* to the action issuing from such conditions; and (ii) the obvious and natural way of making sense of this sort of outcomes is to think that there is some extrinsic criterion of goodness, independent of the inward conditions of moral agency, that applies to them.<sup>12</sup>

And now my interpretation, which involves two claims. **(I)** First, as a result of this evaluative disanalogy, the initial analogy between virtue and skills that served Aristotle well in the initial response to the *aporia* is misleading, as we have seen. So clearly, when Aristotle says ‘Further (ἔτι), the case of the skills and that of moral virtues do not even resemble each other’ (1105a25–6), at the beginning of T2, this emphatically does not contribute to the initial dissolution of the *aporia* based on the skill-analogy. Logically at the very least the point introduced here seems to be a *digression* to the previous argument.

I am conscious that perhaps the trouble with taking it like this is grammatical: it is now not clear how to make sense of the adverb ἔτι (1105a25), which clearly isn’t in the right position to mean anything other than: ‘Another point’ – as opposed to discharging a digressive function. Perhaps because the adverb ἔτι is most naturally taken, grammatically speaking, as adding to the immediately previous dissolution of the *aporia*, most commentators have tried to interpret T2 precisely as an addition to or a way of strengthening the initial analogical dissolution. It is not at all clear, however, how the evaluative *disanalogy* between virtue and skills here introduced could be an addition to the initial *analogical* dissolution.<sup>13</sup> Surely, because of this

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<sup>12</sup>In fact, there are reasons to think with Arthur Adkins that the traditional conception of ἀρετή reinforced this natural suggestion. Adkins argues that such a conception, ‘from Homer onwards, always commended the correct reaction, or the production of the correct result, in a given situation, regardless of the manner in which the result was produced or the intentions of the agent’, adding that ‘the explicit linking of εὐδαιμονία and ἀρετή merely emphasised this’ (1963, p. 332). Adkins himself suggests that the first in the history of philosophy to remove this ‘chief impediment’ was in fact Aristotle (p. 334), by insisting that any action performed from ἀρετή must satisfy certain conditions internal to the agent. I think Adkins was right.

<sup>13</sup>The clearest interpretation along these lines is Alexander Grant’s (1885, commentary *ad loc.*). His view is that T2 helps to solve the *aporia* about habituation by somehow *reinforcing* the analogical argument initially offered by Aristotle to dissolve it. For the point of this analogical argument was to show that if we have reason to suppose that mere getting *F*-things done is not proof of the possession of skill, then we have reason to suppose that it is no proof of the possession of moral virtue either. If Aristotle’s second argument now in T2 consists in arguing that, whereas an artifact can be judged as being good by its intrinsic properties, mere doing of ‘just things’ or ‘moderate things’ cannot be so judged, it follows that *it is even more evident* that in the case of moral virtues the mere doings of these things do not imply the possession of a just or moderate character by the

difficulty, most interpreters, wanting to follow the natural reading of ἔτι, simply choose to disregard the evaluative disanalogy, as I have interpreted it in the previous section. The usual reading is once more based on the Aggregative Reading.<sup>14</sup>

(II) What I want to suggest is that there is a second alternative: the ἔτι sentence does indeed introduce a further reason, but not for strengthening or adding to the analogical argument – rather, a reason for directly dissolving the *aporia*, a reason that is directly based on the evaluative disanalogy. The crucial point, I think, is to realise what is involved in Aristotle's concession that it is not the case (as the initial analogy might have suggested) that just as in artifacts we get all we want when the artifact is in a certain extrinsic condition, so with the possible outcomes of agency we get all we want when they can be extrinsically labeled as 'just' or 'moderate'. The crucial point is that this concession only makes sense if there is *already in play* an underlying distinction between merely doing e.g. just deeds, on the one hand, and just deeds done justly (i.e. from a just character). We attribute all the goodness we want only to the latter, whereas the former (the mere outcomes) fail to give us all we want. Accordingly, by making this important concession, Aristotle can also derive the gist of his solution to the *aporia*, according to which there can be just deeds without yet being an agent in full possession of justice. This conceded disanalogy too helps Aristotle make the main case, and thus the initial *aporia* can once more be dismissed.

Accordingly, it seems to me that Aristotle's argument thus far has something of the form of '*p* implies *q*, not-*p* implies *q*: therefore *q*'. That is to say: 'the analogy gives me the desired point, the disanalogy gives me the desired point: therefore, I am entitled to the desired point.' This may give the false impression that Aristotle is

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agent: for how could they have such implication if, strictly speaking, these 'things' are not even *moderate* or *just*? I find Grant's interpretation unconvincing. Aristotle evidently thinks that merely getting just things done is no proof of the possession of justice, not because it cannot be characterised as 'moderate', 'just', etc., but rather because, although it can be so characterised, there are (as he claims in T3) further conditions internal to the agent performing these actions that need to be fulfilled in order for the agent to count as just or moderate.

<sup>14</sup> See for instance Hutchinson (1986, pp. 90–91); Irwin (1999, p. 195); Taylor (2006, p. 83). These scholars suppose that in order for something to count as having 'artistic merit' you needed the knowledge condition. Hence, on this interpretation, you need the knowledge condition in order for something to count as a *just* or *moderate* deed too. It is now supposed that Aristotle's point in T2 is merely to point out that in order for these deeds to count as done *justly* or *moderately* and thus to imply the possession of character you need *further inward conditions* besides the knowledge condition. This contributes to the initial analogical argument simply because the distinction between the knowledge condition and such further inward conditions (acting from rational choice and full possession of character) is perfectly adequate to account for the distinction between 'the just, etc. deed' and 'the just, etc. deed done justly'. The just deed is done with the relevant knowledge, and is the one involved in habituation; the just deed done justly requires further inward conditions and it is the one arising from virtuous character. It should be clear by now that I reject this reading. The knowledge condition is not needed in order for something to count as a *just* or *moderate* deed or outcome. Moreover, this reading flagrantly ignores the significance of the evaluative disanalogy, and also misinterprets the initial distinction between (i) artifacts and (ii) bringing them about in a skillful way that is the basis of the analogy – what can now be the basis of *this* distinction, if the knowledge condition applies *equally to both*?

merely interested in the result ( $q$ ), but I also think he wants to maintain both  $p$  and not- $p$ , that is, both the initial analogy and the disanalogy. There is in fact the obvious parallel between artifacts and moral 'F-outcomes' on the one hand: because they do not imply the possession of the F-skill or F-moral character, they can be involved in the relevant processes of learning and habituation. Nonetheless, by contrast with artifacts, mere outcomes or deeds fail to give us all we want in the moral domain, and we only get this when such deeds are the exercise of moral agency. As I have tried to argue, this new disanalogy is important in its own right, but it also helps to dissolve the *aporia* – without contradicting the first analogy, strictly speaking.

Now, because Aristotle takes our fundamental disanalogy seriously, and because conceding this disanalogy presupposes a distinction between merely doing e.g. just deeds and just deeds done justly, I think that Aristotle's three inward conditions for acting virtuously (in T2) should now be regarded in a light different to the usual 'aggregative' one. Suppose the action I did yesterday at the party can be appropriately described as 'refusing to eat an enormous chocolate cake'. Firstly, for the action to be done temperately, it must be carried out by myself in full knowledge that what I am refusing is merely to eat an enormous cake, and not for example, a poisoned cake; for otherwise my action would not be a recognisably temperate action (this is the knowledge condition). Secondly, my action must be the result of *προαίρεσις*, a considered judgement to the effect that refusing to eat an enormous cake is, overall, good conduct, and moreover, good conduct *qua* refusing to eat it, as opposed, for example, to *qua* pleasing my girlfriend by so acting. It is easy to see that my action would not be a recognisably temperate action if this condition were not fulfilled (this is the *προαίρεσις* condition). And thirdly, Aristotle also believes that, for the action to be fully good, it must be carried out from a firm and unchanging temperate disposition, that is to say, a firm and unchanging disposition to act in this way whenever it is required (call this the 'stability condition').

Once we have noticed the evaluative disanalogy and decided to integrate it to the whole argument, these inward conditions of acting from virtue acquire a whole new significance: they become conditions for the goodness of a given deed, not (merely), as in the parallel case inspired by skillful activity, for inferring the presence of moral character in the agent. I suspect that the implicit message that Aristotle now wants to convey is that the deed is *better* the more it is the result of moral agency according to the stipulated inward conditions.

Somehow incidentally, let me notice that it is not difficult to see why someone *could* think, on the basis of these inward conditions, that moral virtues are good merely due to their being reliably or 'non-accidentally' productive of 'moral outcomes'. Someone who fulfils these conditions is much more likely to act e.g. temperately when the occasion arises, than someone who does not fulfil them. Take for instance the voluntariness condition. If you were *forced* to refrain from eating the cake, even if such refusal happens to be the right thing to do in the circumstances, there is no guarantee that you would have willingly refused to eat in the absence of any constraining factors (in fact, quite the opposite). Again, take the *προαίρεσις* condition. Aristotle himself recognises that if you pursue or choose A for the sake of Z, then, strictly speaking, you pursue or choose Z, not A: you pursue or choose A

only *accidentally* (EN 1151a35-b2). So even if A (e.g. refusing to eat the cake) happens to be the right action, there is no guarantee that you would still have done A if A *had not* been instrumentally connected with Z (e.g. pleasing your girlfriend). This does not occur to someone who chooses A for its own sake. Finally, take the stability condition. Even if you chose to refrain from eating the cake in full knowledge of the relevant facts and for its own sake, you are clearly not a reliably producer of ‘temperate outcomes’ if such choice is not deeply ingrained in your character: it may well be the case that this is the only right choice you have made and will ever make in your life. Accordingly, there is some attractiveness to the skill-based or consequentialist interpretation of the nobility we attribute to acting from virtue.

Now clearly, if you have the Aggregative Reading, you might fail to see that Aristotle is emphatically rejecting this picture of moral agency in our chapter. If we are to take seriously the evaluative disanalogy introduced by T2, Aristotle is clearly implying that these inward conditions of moral agency *give us all that we want in terms of the action’s goodness*. This in turn implies that the conditions in question are what *constitutes* this goodness, at least partially: if the action extrinsically described had not issued in accordance with these conditions, it would have been less good, or perhaps not good at all. Therefore, the goodness of moral virtue must be partly *intrinsic* and cannot fully derive from its reliability to produce ‘moral outcomes’ independently established as fully good, for no ‘moral outcome’ can be established as fully good in the first place. This is an important result in its own right.

## 10.5 Such as the Just or Moderate Person would Do Them

The final, logically independent claim, developed in T3, is that these further internal conditions for acting from moral virtue come about (at least partly) *through* the repeated performance of the relevant deeds. Let me now quote the full passage:

[T3] And when it is a matter of the possession (τὸ ἔχειν) of skills, these conditions do not count, except for knowledge itself; but when it comes to the possession of the moral virtues, knowledge has a small or no significance, whereas the force of the other conditions is no small thing but counts for everything, and these indeed result from the repeated performance of just and moderate things. So things done are called just and moderate (πράγματα δίκαια καὶ σώφρονα λέγεται) whenever they are such that the just person or the moderate person would do them; whereas a person is not just and moderate because he does these things, but also because he does them in the way in which just and moderate people do them [i.e. according to the conditions just described]. Therefore, it is right to say that one comes to be a just person from doing just things and moderate from doing moderate things. EN 1105a33-b10.

The claim that full possession of moral virtue comes about through the repeated performance of the relevant deeds is not new, of course: it is the habituation claim. What the previous arguments have shown is that it is now possible to make such a claim without any trace of paradox, because we have now been forced (because of

the evaluative disanalogy) to identify a class of deeds that are ‘morally significant’ but do not already imply the possession of character. According to my interpretation, Aristotle’s argument has subtly shown that this class of deeds can fulfill increasingly demanding and robust conditions leading to full possession of character but not yet entailing it: there is a sense in which they can be the outcome of chance, or they can be brought about with the relevant knowledge but someone else’s knowledge (as in instruction), or they can be brought about with the agent’s own knowledge, and perhaps they can even be prompted by the deliberated choice of the *instructor*. At least in principle all these deeds can now serve to habituate the agent by means of their repeated performance.

But now notice that Aristotle needs to make sense of our ability to *identify* these deeds as ‘just things’ or ‘moderate things’ in the first place (recall the awkwardness noted before). Furthermore, he has also incurred a related explanatory debt: how to make sense of the identity claim, given that deeds involved in moral habituation do not have the same causal conditions as the ones manifested by full possession of character, nor the same value. Aristotle’s final position is spelt out at 1105b5–9, and it is partly meant, I think, to dispel these doubts. Deeds are *called* (λέγεται) just, etc. when they are deeds *such as* just people do; whereas the just person *is* (ἔστιν) not merely one who does just deeds but one who does them on the basis of the stated inward conditions. If I gave the money back to the person I owed it to thinking that the envelope contains a love-letter, Aristotle can now say that such a deed can at least be *called* ‘just’, presumably because it can be recognised by a virtuous agent as the sort of thing that *he* would perform voluntarily and from character if he was in my shoes. The recognition of a deed by the virtuous agent as the sort of thing he would do from character provides us with the relevant identification, and also provides the identity claim with the right content: all F-deeds, whether involved in the process of habituation or fully manifesting virtue, have this recognition as a common denominator.

Somehow incidentally, notice that perhaps the contrast between *calling* deeds ‘just’ or ‘moderate’ and agents *being* just or moderate, is meant to convey the idea that the former are not in reality *good*. If this is the case, the evaluative dissimilarity between virtue and skills is even more profound than I have suggested, for it would entail that any deed or outcome that is independent of the conditions of moral agency, instead of merely failing to give us all we want in terms of moral worth, gives us *nothing* in these terms. Furthermore, if this were the case, the conditions of moral agency would not only ‘contribute’ to the moral goodness of a given deed or outcome: they would fully determine such goodness. It seems to me that Aristotle’s contrast between *calling* deeds ‘just’, ‘moderate’, etc., and the agent’s *being* just, moderate, etc., might well suggest this more profound dissimilarity.

Another relevant point is that Aristotle’s argument must be supplemented as follows. According to my interpretation of *Nicomachean Ethics* II 4, deeds or outcomes that are the mere result of *chance* and those that are the result of instruction fall under the same category: mere *F* outcomes. Aristotle’s point here in this chapter is certainly that deeds performed as a result of instruction do not reflect the possession of skill or character by the tutee, but rather the one by the tutor. Still, these

actions are typically *voluntary*, whereas practical outcomes or artifacts that result *from chance* are not voluntary. *Nicomachean Ethics* II 4, however, must implicitly distinguish between the voluntary, morally significant actions performed under the direction of a tutor, and those states of affairs that are the outcome of chance, because part of the *Nicomachean Ethics* II 4 argument is that the most important of the conditions for acting from virtue (i.e. being able to act from rational choice and a stable character) *come about* through the frequent doing of ‘just things’ or ‘moderate things’, and these frequent doings clearly do not include outcomes that are the result of chance.

There is nonetheless a solution to this problem. The *Nicomachean Ethics* II 4 implicit distinction between voluntary actions and involuntary deeds, is explicitly drawn by *Nicomachean Ethics* V (1135a19–23),<sup>15</sup> where Aristotle distinguishes between doing an *unjust act* (ἄδικημα) which is voluntary by definition, and doing *something unjust* (τι ἄδικον), which is not voluntary. In order to solve the *aporia* about becoming a virtuous agent, it was enough for Aristotle to show that one could do ‘just things’ or ‘moderate things’ without being in possession of just or moderate character. But the implicit distinction between doing an *unjust act* and doing *something unjust* is important because, in the process of acquiring an unjust character through habituation, the would-be moral agent is required to perform unjust acts voluntarily<sup>16</sup> in such a way that this performance is neither governed by chance (as in the doing of something unjust) nor implies that he is already in possession of an unjust character (as in doing something unjust in a certain way).

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<sup>15</sup> See also *Rh.* 1374a9–17 and *EN* 1136a1–4.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. *EN* 1113b26–7, 1114a12–16.



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