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# ARISTOTLE'S APPEAL TO NATURE AND THE INTERNAL POINT OF VIEW

by

M. DAN KEMP

Under the Direction of Timothy O'Keefe, PhD

## ABSTRACT

Aristotle believes that certain pursuits are objectively choice worthy regardless of our attitudes towards them. Moreover, in order to have the correct beliefs about which actions are choice worthy, they must have acquired the right dispositions during their upbringing. Bernard Williams argues that Aristotle's theory of moral education undermines belief in objective values. In response to Williams, Julia Annas argues that Aristotle does not ground ethics in the external point of view, but rather in the desires and commitments that people already have. In this thesis, I argue that Aristotle held the view to which Williams objects and that Williams' objection fails. Aristotle's appeals to nature shows that he does not ground values in individual desires and commitments. Moreover, moral education does not alone undermine our confidence in the truth of our commitments.

INDEX WORDS: Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Virtue ethics, Naturalism, Objective value, Internal point of view

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M. DAN KEMP

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## **DEDICATION**

To Carol Anne, who lives what this thesis attempts to explain

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**LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

*APo = Posterior Analytics*

*Cat. = Categories*

*DA = De anima*

*EE = Eudemian Ethics*

*EN = Nicomachean Ethics*

*Metaph. = Metaphysics*

*Phys. = Physics*

*Pol. = Politics*

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Many find Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (*EN*) attractive because it attempts to reconcile objective value to individual interest. The *EN* is typically interpreted to envision the human good as making certain demands on us regardless of our attitude toward them. The human good is thus something objective. Ethics, however, is not a theoretical study of things irrelevant to our lives. Rather, ethics aims to tell us how to become good humans (*EN* 1096b34, 1197b2).<sup>1</sup> The good life for humans is an ideal that unifies and characterizes our relationships, projects, identities, pleasures, and hobbies. It is thus something that can motivate us to aspire to that ideal. The two features that make this view attractive, however, are often thought to be in tension. Bernard Williams, for instance, famously argues that plausible accounts of moral development undermine belief in an objective good. Bernard Williams, for instance, famously argues that plausible accounts of moral development undermine belief in an objective good. In reply, Julia Annas argues that Aristotle's ethical theory does not put forth the sort of objectivity that Williams finds problematic. Instead, Annas claims, the *EN* evaluates individuals based on their individual points of view rather than from an independent standard. Both Williams and Annas reject ethical views that evaluate human behavior based on objective standards without regard to people's interests as they understand them.

In this thesis, I will argue that the human good outlined in the *Nicomachean Ethics* does not depend on individual points of view, and that the first-personal character of our coming to believe in that good does not undermine that belief. In short, Aristotle held the view to which Williams objects, but Williams' objection does not succeed. First, I will rehearse a traditional view of the connection in Aristotle between human goodness and moral formation. Nature helps

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<sup>1</sup> Translations of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* are my own.

us discover the shape one's life should take, but this knowledge must be completed by moral formation. Aristotle holds what I call a "disposition requirement," which says that value commitments result from the disposition to make those commitments. Second, I will relay Williams' argument that the disposition requirement undermines belief in a good independent of the commitments themselves, which motivates Annas' revision. Then I will explain Annas' view of the *EN* and why she thinks it successfully overcomes that objection by an appeal to a distinction between nature and mere nature. Then I will show that, *contra* Annas, the human good put forth in Aristotle's theory does not depend on our individual commitments, although it can be instantiated in various projects. Finally I will show that the disposition requirement does not undermine objective value. Briefly, the disposition requirement undermines belief in an objective good only given a particular view of dispositions that Aristotle has good reason to deny. Therefore, even those who resist the idea of an objective good can agree that Williams and others who argue similarly beg the question against the view they aim to defeat.

## **2 WILLIAMS' OBJECTION: ETHICAL DISPOSITIONS UNDERMINE**

### **OBJECTIVITY**

Aristotle wants to know what it means to live well. To him, something acts well insofar as it functions well (*EN* 1097b25). Things are distinguished by activities characteristic of their kinds. Such things as eyes, kidneys, bakers, and shoemakers have functions that define them. Since things get their identities from their characteristic functions, and since they can perform their functions better or worse, acting well is a matter of performing that function well. The human function, the activity that makes a life a *human* life, is rational activity (*EN* 1098a9). Thus, people live better or worse human lives depending on the state of their reason, and this standard

is not determined by an agent's desires or point of view.<sup>2</sup> Aristotle concludes, "the human good is activity of the soul according to virtue," where "soul" implies a rational principle (*EN* 1098a16).

Aristotle's argument (commonly called the "function argument") appeals to commonsense. After all, I hire a mechanic to work on my car with the expectation that he will do a decent job at the very activities that make him a car mechanic. This expectation would be misguided if excellence had nothing to do with proper functioning.<sup>3</sup> The function argument shows that evaluative judgments of individuals result from comparing species judgments such as "steak knives are sharp" and particular judgments such as "*this* steak knife is dull," which leads to an evaluation such as "*this* steak knife is a bad steak knife."<sup>4</sup> The function argument for steak knives is *complete* insofar as any particular member can be evaluated by comparing it to a steak knife's function. Since being sharp and having a handle are how steak knives cut well, the conditions for a good steak knife fall out of knowledge of its function.

Some function arguments, however, are *incomplete* insofar as they are not sufficient to evaluate individuals. This is because some functions refer to external conditions. Consider the practice of making maps of landscapes. A good map-maker of this sort produces accurate visual representations of a landscape such that a reader can discern the spatial relationships among the elements of the environment. This description is itself enough to make some evaluative judgments. For instance, it shows that maps with indiscernible or incoherently related contents are bad maps. Good maps need more than intelligibility, however. A good map needs a certain relation to hold between its structure and the environment it is supposed to represent. This

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<sup>2</sup> See Shields (2014, 368) and Kraut (1979).

<sup>3</sup> Peter Geach says good is an "attributive" adjective rather than the "predicative" adjective (1956). We can say "X is a good X," but we cannot say that "X is good." I disagree, however, with the suggestion of some that Aristotle endorsed only this sense (Hursthouse 1999, 195; Foot 2001, 2).

<sup>4</sup> The two-judgment model of evaluation is proposed by Foot (2001, 33).

relation is, roughly speaking, conformity to the thing represented. Because a good map must be accurate, it can change from good to bad without altering any of its internal properties when, for instance, it becomes outdated. The point is not that the function of a map is indeterminate or too subjective. Rather, the function of a map involves conditions external to it that objectively determine if it is a good one.

The function argument for humans is also incomplete. The human function is rational activity, which, according to Aristotle, involves acting for the sake of something. This includes valuing things other than merely one's own interests (1169a31).<sup>5</sup> I act rationally, and therefore contribute to my flourishing, when I return money to its owner even if I could have gotten away with keeping it. I do this not *because* it contributes to *my* flourishing, but because it is the decent thing to do. In choosing the “fine” (*kalon*) for its own sake, I act as a good human being. If, on the other hand, I return the money because I want to impress those around me, then I do it for the wrong reasons and act irrationally. Thus, the human good—which is the excellence of the human function—is to act for the right ends and in the right way. However, the *fact* that humans act for ends does not tell us *what* ends humans should act for. For the function argument to have practical results, we need to know what ends we should aim at in our actions. The frequency of disagreement about good and bad actions suggests that no such sense can be taken for granted. Since comparison of the human function and particular members does not tell us if the latter are good members of their kind, the function argument for humans, like that of map-making, is *incomplete*.<sup>6</sup>

Aristotle does not attempt to derive practicable judgments from the function argument.

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<sup>5</sup> See Terrence Irwin (1995, 287-92).

<sup>6</sup> A similar point has been picked up among some neo-Aristotelian naturalists. Thompson (2003, 6) remarks that while practical reason involves having aims, having particular aim *X* is not analytically in this idea of practical reason. Similarly, Brewer (2009, 251) argues that certain uses of practical reason can be both coherent and mistaken. Thompson, but not Brewer, infers from this that the human good is “groundless” (2003, 7).

For instance, Aristotle at one point argues that the best human life is the most proper activity of the rational soul, which is the continuous contemplation of the “highest” things (*EN* 1177a22).<sup>7</sup> Yet looking at theoretical reason does not reveal which things are “highest.” We have to use reason to argue that, for example, god is the highest object of contemplation. Similarly, the function of practical reason involves having the right aims, but the correct aims are not revealed by this fact.

Aristotle completes the function argument with what I will call the “disposition requirement,” which says that dispositions are necessary to have the right view of the good. Aristotle articulates the requirement when he considers the proper entry point for ethics. At *EN* 1095a32 Aristotle asks, should we start with *explanations* of the good or with the *facts* for which we seek explanation? We must, he says in reply, start with what is “known to us” rather than what is “known absolutely” (*EN* 1095b5). Aristotle here appeals to a distinction he makes in the *Posterior Analytics* (*APo*) 71b33-72a6. Starting points “known to us” are familiar. The best example of a familiar starting point is perception (*APo* 72a2). Starting points that are “known absolutely” are those we would begin with if we had an exhaustive explanation of the phenomenon in question. These are definitions that explain the things that are familiar to us (*APo* 72a4). With respect to ethics, Aristotle states that the “starting point is the *fact*” that this or that activity is good or bad to do (1095b7), since ethical dispositions are about the ethical status of particular things or actions (Burnyeat 1980, 73). Aristotle confirms this point in the final chapter of the *EN*.

Just like the land that will grow the seed, so must the soul of the pupil beforehand be cultivated in his habits to enjoy or despise something well... Indeed, there must be a character to begin with that has some affinity to virtue; one with love for the fine and contempt for the shameful. (1179b24-31)

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<sup>7</sup> See Nagel (1980) for a defense of this interpretation of Aristotle.

These starting points of inquiry, according to Aristotle, are the recognitions of the nobility or the baseness of certain actions. I will use the terms values, ethical judgments, and ethical commitments interchangeably to refer to appearances of “the *facts*” as described here.

Only when we are able to recognize fine and base actions as such can we profitably seek their explanations. How do we get this ability? Aristotle tells us that we are able to know “the *fact*” through the morally formative process of habituation. He says, “to make a good study about the fine and the just... one must have been raised well in his habits” (*EN* 1095b4-6). Later, Aristotle says,

We must not even demand the explanation similarly in all things, but it is enough in some cases for the fact to be well established *that* as in the case of first principles; but the *fact* is first and a starting-point. Some starting-points are observed by induction, some by perception, some others by habituation, and others in other ways. We should pursue each thing according to its nature. (*EN* 1098b1-6)

We can inquire into the good only when we have been habituated to recognize good or bad particular actions (*EN* 1095a2). Knowledge of the good requires the right dispositions. The judgments and values that result from these dispositions make an ethical point of view. Because the starting points of ethics are only accepted from a certain point of view, the study of ethics is useless without the proper upbringing (*EN* 1095a12).

By this last claim, we might mean that some people are unable to grasp the starting points of ethical inquiry, but maintain that this inability somehow constitutes a mistake. In making the mistaken judgments they do, they miss something that would, should their reasoning faculties work properly, lead them to judge otherwise. For instance, Aristotle would admit that he is unlikely to convey the value of friendship to someone who does not already accept it since anything he says would refer to values this person does not share. Aristotle will insist, however, that friendship is in this person’s interests. Williams makes the stronger claim that we cannot

connect the values people allegedly ought to have to their real, as opposed to perceived, interests when the two are not already congruent (1985, 40). Williams sees the friendless person's point of view as undermining friendship's claim to objectivity. He says,

It is not true from the point of view constituted by the ethical dispositions—the internal perspective—that the only things of value are people's dispositions; still less that only the agent's dispositions have value. Other people's welfare, the requirements of justice, and other things, have value. If we take up the other perspective, however, and look at people's dispositions from the outside, we may ask the question “what has to exist in the world for that ethical point of view to exist?” The answer can only be, “people's dispositions.” There is a sense in which they are the ultimate supports of ethical value. That has a practical as well as a metaphysical significance. The preservation of ethical value lies in the reproduction of ethical dispositions. (1986, 51)

People's actual dispositions are ultimately responsible for people's ethical points of view. Put together with Thomas Nagel's note that Williams assumes that “many incompatible perspectives are compatible with human nature” (Nagel 1986, 355). Williams thinks it follows that Aristotle cannot explain why people who lack an appreciation of his description of the good live poorly apart from his own point of view. Put differently, Aristotle cannot explain why the friendless person is mistaken because, says Williams, it follows from the disposition requirement that we cannot judge our ethical outlooks from outside of them.

Thomas Nagel compellingly repeats this concern. He explains that, according to Williams, the “human good is undetermined by human nature.” Nagel continues,

Moreover we have learned to expect that the dispositions that define any more particular form of life will lose rather than gain in conviction when looked at from outside... From outside it is evident that many incompatible perspectives are compatible with human nature; the ultimate support of an ethical point of view can only lie in the agent's actual dispositions, unsanctified by a universal teleology. (1986, 355)

The person who neglects genuine friendships because of his preoccupation with travel and adventure, for instance, allegedly ought to rein back his pursuits and invest in friends. However, the human end is determined by human nature, and human nature is primarily defined by



rationality. Moreover, if an agent's perceived good is not self-refuting—the way, for instance, the pursuit of pleasure at the expense of *any* temperance would be self-refuting because it would result in less pleasure—then an agent does not seem to have a reason to change his activity or pursuits for the sake of acting more like a typical human. To Williams, the internal point of view, shaped by the desires and dispositions that constitute it, creates a gap between the agent and the values we think he should accept.

The objection may be helpfully understood in the context of the human predicament described in Nagel's essay "The Absurd." Nagel remarks that when our reasons to act are questioned, we appeal to further reasons. "I reached for the capsule to get the pill in the capsule. I put the pill in my mouth because I have a headache. I wanted to get rid of the headache because I want to get rid of the pain." At the end of our justificatory chains of reasoning ("I wanted to get rid of the pain") is a basic reason that cannot be justified by another reason. Moreover, others may not accept our basic reasons. They also have their own that we cannot accept from our own point of view. This realization causes us to view ourselves, our chains of reasoning and our accompanying dispositions to act on them, from the outside, that is, *from outside of our acceptance of those foundational reasons*. Similarly, Williams warns that one who steps back from his dispositions in order to evaluate them "should not be surprised if he cannot get an adequate picture of the value of anything, including his own dispositions" (1985, 51). For Williams, when we think about our points of view, we consider ourselves from outside of the perspective that allows us to accept certain reasons.

Williams is able to get his conclusion—that Aristotle's ethical commitments are undermined by his account of moral education—because he accepts a controversial view of dispositions. We see a person's ethical commitments "as coming from deeper in him" while the

person sees them “as coming from outside him” (1973, 227). Williams later says, “A has reason to  $\Phi$  only if there is a *sound deliberative route* from A’s subjective motivational set... to A’s  $\Phi$ -ing” (2001, 91). These passages express two closely related ideas: dispositions are the source of value judgments, and ethical judgments are not affected by potential values outside of the agent’s dispositions.<sup>8</sup> On this view, dispositions are “insulated.” Insulated dispositions do not change according to reasons seen on the inside. Rather, they are responsive only to reasons that already constitute one’s outlook.

Dispositions can change in some ways. Obviously the dispositions operative in a particular situation can change in light of facts about one’s environment. More to the point, insulated dispositions themselves can change in two ways. First, a point of view may develop to acquire values that were the potential output of that point of view from the start. For instance, one’s reflection on her belief in the equal dignity of all humans may cause her to acquire values for some people, say strangers or the homeless, that were not actual or occurrent before. Second, dispositions can be overpowered. A tin cone is disposed to roll in circles if it is pushed. If the cone is melted and reshaped into a sphere, a new disposition to roll in a straight direction is imposed on the material. To Williams, values are incapable of forcing change on points of view that do not already endorse them. People acquire basic values by imposition the same way the tin cone under the blacksmith’s hammer receives a new set of capacities. Changes in basic values are, in short, not the result of an agent rationally reflecting about them. On this view of the processes responsible for ethical commitments, the commitments themselves cannot adjudicate

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<sup>8</sup>This view is not straightforwardly internalism as described by Williams (1981). My main contention is that one can acquire reasons from the outside. If internalism is understood as the thesis that we can only have reasons for things we can care about (Markovits 2011, 263) where “coming to care about” is understood as a procedurally rational process, then my argument is consistent with internalism. On the other hand, my thesis may be incompatible with internalism understood as the claim that “what we have reason to do depends fundamentally on what ends, broadly understood, we already have” (Markovits 2011, 260). For, as I will argue, Aristotle thinks that having the *right* values is an end of practical reason that we already have. However, this paper objects to the view that limits reasons to ends we already have if ends are understood narrowly as the propositional content of intentions.

ethical disputes since it is the commitments that are disputed. If dispositions are insulated, the disposition requirement undermines our belief in objective values.<sup>9</sup>

Some commentators accept that ethical judgments in the *EN* are groundless. Accordingly, they think the *EN* does not address people lacking knowledge of “the *facts*” (i.e. the set of values Aristotle assumes his readers have) because such facts have no basis.<sup>10</sup> Aristotle gives some evidence for this interpretation when he says, “the good and pleasant is according to each disposition” (1113a31). Moreover, the *EN* repeatedly discusses values—such as friendship and good humor—that may appear to us to be a matter of preference, and hence only justified by our actual commitments. Nevertheless, Aristotle’s claim that the virtues are perfections of the soul in regard to particular kinds of actions and passions suggests that these pursuits are, as he sees them, essential components of a good life (*EN* 1107a20-23). In support of this latter interpretation, I now turn to show that Aristotle held precisely the view to which Williams objects.

### 3 ANNAS ON ARISTOTLE’S APPEAL TO NATURE

Julia Annas agrees that Aristotle’s view as understood by Williams is problematic since it imposes practical demands from a perspective that is irrelevant to the agent’s genuine concerns. Important ethical questions “are not settled from the agent’s point of view by the imposition of simple solutions from an external point of view” (Annas 1989, 170). But she denies that Aristotle is committed to this picture. Annas reads the *EN* as compatible with the lack of “confidence that there is a true theory of human nature general enough to found ethics, and even if [there were] we would resist the thought that from it we could derive a single ethical way of living” (1989,

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<sup>9</sup> It remains possible, however, that there are “universal” values (Markovits 2014, 25).

<sup>10</sup> See McDowell (1980) and (1995, 128-30) and (2017, 265-69), Annas (1993, 142-49), and Nussbaum (1995). Thompson (2003, 7) says this about Foot (2001). See Irwin (2008, 142-43) for an overview of these interpretations.

154). Rather, “there is a certain individualism in the way ancient ethical reflection gets started. I have to start from asking about my life, since no other starting point will do for me” (Annas 1993, 220). On Annas’ account, Aristotle does not hold the objectionable view Williams imputes to him.<sup>11</sup> Hence, Annas intends for her interpretation to save Aristotle’s ethical theory from Williams’ objection.<sup>12</sup>

Annas’ main concern is to show that Aristotle’s use of nature leads to neither a demand for “unacceptable conformity” to values the individual cares nothing about nor to a “specific direction” of life that leaves no room for personal projects (1989, 160). The results of “conformity” and “specific direction” are usually taken together since a narrow specification of the good life—such as theoretical contemplation—*would* entail a demand for the sort of conformity Annas finds unacceptable. However, I will untangle them for the purposes of this paper, since the demand for conformity does not entail a narrow specification of the good life.<sup>13</sup> For instance, the way carpenters live is considerably different from way philosophers live. Thus, the good life of carpenters and philosophers is distinct in some respects. Nevertheless, we might imagine that happiness is a human good that can be exemplified in various human lives. We might imagine that happiness is a complex of friendship, good humor, and other activities well performed, and still find conformity demanded of the individuals who do not think humor or friends are important. We do not care at the moment about *how many* activities can instantiate or constitute happiness, but whether what makes one happy is up to individual preferences.

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<sup>11</sup> One uncontroversial example of a prescription from the external point of view, without appeal to individual ambitions, is contemplation discussed in *Ethics X*. However, the question at hand concerns whether the structure of Aristotle’s ethical theory commits him to the sort of theory Williams describes.

<sup>12</sup> See Williams (1985, 30-53).

<sup>13</sup> See Brewer (2009, 234-35) for a defense of the claim that the conformity demand does not entail a narrow specification of the good life or necessarily exclude permissible personal plans and projects.

Before explaining Annas' interpretation and consequent defense of Aristotle, let me briefly clarify the picture of Aristotle's ethics that Annas wants to end up with. This view is subtly, though crucially, distinct from two views for which it may be easily mistaken. First, Annas is not merely restating Aristotle's claim that some ethical prescriptions are relative to individuals based on their circumstances (*EN* 1104a5-10). Second, Annas does not claim that happiness and virtue is a free-for-all such that the committed amoralist could be happy. Annas' actual view is stronger than the first and weaker than the second. It says that what *eudaimonia* is depends on individual commitments, desires, and overall attitudes toward life. "*Eudaimonia*," Annas claims, "is an indeterminate end which becomes more determinate as a result of the choices we make" (2017, 268). As you begin to reflect on your life and think about your choices, Annas notes that "your final end is not a fixed point, *since so far you have little or nothing determinate to say about it*" (2017, 267 emphases added). *Eudaimonia*, then, changes from person to person. Annas is forced to admit as the result of her interpretation that, according to Aristotle, one person may value friendship apart from any external goods. Thus, for this person, friendship is intrinsically valuable as constitutive component of a good life, but it is only one such component. It is not sufficient, nor is it good for everyone. Indeed, Annas must mean something like this if her view is to sensibly respond to the Williams/Nagel line without rejecting the Williams/Nagel intuition that "conformity" is "unacceptable." For Annas, *eudaimonia* is person-relative and, since it comprises the process of rationally ordering one's life, the values constitutive of a *eudaimon* life are subjective. How does she get here?

Annas discovers two uses of the term "nature" (*phusis*) in Aristotle's ethical writings. One sense, what Annas calls "mere nature," is captured by the way actions are limited. People's pursuits are constrained by the pursuits themselves or by facts that hold more generally. These

facts are independent of our points of view, such as the boiling point of water, physical impairments, and human mortality. Some of these facts are more tractable than others.<sup>14</sup> They are nonetheless relevant to our deliberations, not by providing a rational motivation but by making some pursuits unrealistic. Nature on the “outside” produces the conditions under which a certain manner of living becomes unreasonable. This view assigns to mere nature a primarily, if not solely, constraining role.

Annas notices that Aristotle has another sense in the *Physics* II, which presents nature as an internal source of change. Something is natural when it moves itself. For instance, a tree has a nature, and its growth is natural because it originates from the tree itself. A wooden bed, on the other hand, is not natural except insofar as it is wood. A bed is a kind of shape or arrangement imposed upon something that is natural (namely, the wood). The distinction between full nature and mere nature is captured in the distinction between the change *of* a tree and the change *on* a tree. The (non-natural) object is a passive recipient of movement when movement results from a source other than the recipient.

To Annas, thinking of reason as an internal source of movement leads to a weak subjectivism about the value of one’s plans and projects. If self-movement is the paradigm of nature, Annas observes, then force or coercion is its antithesis (1993, 145). Self-moving reason is how we would develop “independently of outside interference” (Annas 1989, 166). When we consider the way a rational agent would ideally develop, Annas suggests that natural development must result from reason itself, and that human nature in the “full” sense comes down to “having a rational attitude to natural tendencies, and doing so not automatically but in a way that is up to the individual” (1993, 147). If the chief mark of the natural is self-movement,

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<sup>14</sup> Annas takes the extent to which these facts can change to be the fundamental disagreement between Aristotle and the Stoics. See Annas (2005).

and reason is natural, then reason or rational behavior is the agent's movement. Given Annas' understanding of reason as autonomy, reason may be thought of as control over things. This control occurs when agents "come to understand their own relation to their nature, reflect and modify their given impulses" (Annas 1993, 216). Terence Irwin says of Annas' view that

Aristotle is simply claiming that the activities belonging to virtue are those that we will count—if we are virtuous—as constituting our happiness. We do not need to show that virtue meets some further condition that makes it constitute happiness. The reference to the human function and to activity in accordance with reason simply shows that the virtuous person regards virtue as happiness. (2008, 142)

André Laks, in his commentary on Annas' (1989) paper, draws out the connection between full nature and the internal point of view.

Annas roughly equates human nature in Aristotle with a kind of thin rationality. If for man to be rational is to exert rational reflection, then it may seem that no pattern of life is *a priori* more commendable than another, so that choices are open to us, exactly as, within a single chosen pattern of life, the range of our concrete actions is not settled *a priori*. In other words, the generality of the rationality claim allows for various specifications, and indeed even for conflicting ones. (1989, 181-82)

I do not understand Laks' use of "*a priori*" to mean "known prior to experience." We already knew that Aristotle does not think the human good is settled through knowledge acquired prior to experience, since he tells us that the student of ethics had better be able to recognize the *to hoti* ("the *fact*") of particular actions, and only from these facts are we able to give an account of the human good (*EN* 1095b1-7).<sup>15</sup> Rather, the point is normative instead of epistemological. Annas thinks that Aristotle does not understand facts about humans to *determine from the outset* what the human good is because to do so would neglect individual desires and commitments. The key feature of human nature in the full sense is reason's transformative power over mere nature. Because full nature is development without interference, it is not something "seen from outside

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<sup>15</sup> See Burnyeat (1980) for a defense of the interpretation I assume here.

the agent” (Annas 1989, 165). Full nature is something that can only be seen from the point of view of the individual who possesses it.

## 4 ARISTOTLE ON NATURE REVISITED

### 4.1 Aristotle’s Concept of Life

Annas argues that Aristotle uses teleology in his ethical theory to explain how the character of one’s life results from one’s decisions and actions. When we reflect on our individual choices, we discover that we have both explicit and implicit aims, and in this way our activities can be described teleologically. This teleology does not apply to human nature as describing something external to our desires and commitments. A reading of Aristotle’s ethics that understands teleological analysis as only applicable to deliberate, human actions should give us pause since Aristotle asserts that “it is odd for people to not think a thing happens for the sake of something if they do not see it set in motion by deliberation” (*Phys.* 199b27). Instead, he argues, perhaps implausibly, that “some action is done by agents in the same way it is produced according to nature... And action is for the sake of something; therefore, production of nature is also for the sake of something” (*Phys.* 199a9-12). The studies of nature and teleology, for Aristotle, are inseparable.

Annas denies that Aristotle’s appeal to nature is teleological because she thinks that a thing’s *telos* must be for something other than itself, and in the service of a broader system in which it plays a role. For instance, kidneys and eyes have a particular role that serves the body. Annas says of Aristotle, “there is no well-defined larger system that a human life is a well-adapted part of” (Annas 1989, 156). Thus, “the teleology he has is not a theory about human lives” (Ibid). However, Aristotle does not universally characterize *telos* as an aim at something outside of the organism. For instance, Aristotle famously argues that there are four types of



causes: efficient, material, formal, and final (*telos*). The form of a thing is not something outside of the organism, like a broader system. Form, for Aristotle, is what makes the organism what it is. The final cause is its *telos* or its aim. Sometimes a single thing in the world can play more than one causal role insofar as one and the same thing can be the efficient, formal, and final causes, even though these kinds remain conceptually distinct. This point is important when he concludes that form explains organisms better than matter. One reason he gives for this claim is that the form is the end of things that grow (*Phys.* 193b14-19). A sapling is an immature Oaktree aimed at becoming a mature version of itself. Aristotle does not, then, think of all teleologically oriented objects the way we might think of hammers. Hammers drive nails into solid objects, but they have no value apart from their use. Rather, “what something is and what it is for are often the same” (*Phys.* 198b25). Organisms aim at their own good among other things.<sup>16</sup>

That the end of an organism is its mature self seems like a strange claim. However, there are straightforward reasons to accept it. For instance, we might see ourselves, and our lives comprehensively speaking, as intrinsically good or something to aim for. On the other hand, it seems wrong to say this about a bottle of wine or some other artifact unless the sense of “good” is understood as “good for us” (*EN* 1155b29-31). This difference only makes sense if our lives, as opposed to bottles of wine, have intrinsic value. Object aimed at something other than themselves are instrumentally valuable. If teleological explanations only analyze the relationships between things and their environments, like its subordinate and superordinate systems, then it is not clear how something can be good for itself. Without a teleology of human lives, there is no intrinsically valuable human activity.

We can also establish that the study of nature includes a teleology of the species from Aristotle’s discussion of the soul. Aristotle defines the soul of a living thing as that which

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<sup>16</sup> See Whiting (1988, 35-37) for a defense of the similar claim that the good of an organism is good for it.

explains its being alive (*DA* 415b8-14). However, he has no single, concrete notion of living. “Being alive” for a plant is distinct from “being alive” for a rabbit, since the activities that characterize the life of these organisms differ. Different kinds require different explanations. It may then initially seem that the “soul” of a rabbit and the “soul” of a flower are simply different sorts of things that happen to be referred to by words having the same orthography. The senses of life among different organisms have a non-accidental connection, which turns out to be goal-directed behavior itself. This common feature is explained by each organism having a soul, which is the source and the end of motion (*DA* 415b8-14). Thus living organisms are teleological by nature—because their souls, which are their forms or essences, make them that way—and not by artifice. In other words, the intrinsic *telos* of each living thing explains its being alive.<sup>17</sup>

Moreover, teleological behavior explains a thing’s being alive in the way characteristic of its particular kind. If Aristotle thinks that the soul of every living thing is the source of its inherent goal-directed activity, then he thinks that every living thing has a *telos* by its nature. *Teloi* are not limited to the parts of animals, nor the instrumental roles they play in larger systems, but characterize organisms as members of kinds, and for the sake of the organisms themselves. “Goal-directed activity” is an abstract description of the activities of particular organisms who have their own character. A teleology of the species, then, would be a fruitful science. It would discover and define the activities in virtue of which we say that a thing acts or lives in its own distinct and characteristic ways.

We also see the connection between nature and *telos* in *Physics* II. There, Aristotle develops an account of nature and natural change. The objects that everyone agrees are natural, he argues, each have an internal source of change or movement. However, he also argues that

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<sup>17</sup> See Shields (2014, 324) for a defense of the claim that the Aristotelian notion of life is goal-oriented. See also Leunissen (2010, 53-55) for a similar claim about the “common” definition of the soul.

natural change has some goal that it aims to achieve or service it performs. If something is natural, then it is *for* something (*Phys.* 199a6). “A natural procedure is for something” such that the end of something initiates “motion naturally” (*Phys.* 198b1-5). Moreover, the internal source of motion that informs ethics on Annas’ view is, to Aristotle, the form, which is what things are for (*Phys.* 199a31). The connection between the internal source of motion and teleology is clearly seen in texts like, “Things happen naturally, which come from a certain principle contained in themselves, moving toward some end” (*Phys.* 199b15-17). Finally, Aristotle concludes at the end of a long discussion of luck and necessity, “nature is a cause, and the sort of cause that is for the sake of something” (*Phys.* 199b32). We get the sense from these passages that nature is most properly understood as the internal source of goal-oriented movement.

In sum, Aristotle thinks that organisms have a *telos* at the species level, which is the activity of our souls that corresponds to the species as a natural kind. The occasional identity of the formal and final causes, the unified notion of living as the goal-directed activity, and the picture of nature as goal-directed in *Physics* II show this. If Aristotle’s notion of teleology is so closely tied to his notion of nature, it would be odd if he did not include the former in an appeal to nature to support ethical claims. We have good reason to suspect that Aristotle’s uses of nature in his ethical theory include teleology. Of course, whether nature in the ethics involves teleology depends on the way he actually makes this appeal. Aristotle could have thought of nothing more than “mere nature” when supporting his ethical claims. Or he could have two different notions of nature, one for science and one for ethics.<sup>18</sup> We cannot know without looking at the appeals themselves.

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<sup>18</sup> Although even Annas thinks isolating nature in the ethical works from the scientific ones is mistaken, since she uses nature in *Physics* II to define nature in the ethical works.

## 4.2 Nature in the Nicomachean Ethics

I noted earlier that Aristotle in the *EN* tries to resolve disagreement about what constitutes a good life by appealing to the human function or *ergon*. The *ergon* argument is usually interpreted as an appeal to nature. Annas agrees that it is, but insists that the argument does not rely on anything more than “mere nature.” This means the argument cannot be interpreted as using the ethically relevant sort of nature. Still, it is difficult to see how the argument does not use the full concept of nature as an ethical ideal, since Aristotle thinks it is a “rough outline” to be later “filled-in” with detail (*EN* 1098a22). The *ergon* argument is uncontroversially supposed to demonstrate the sorts of activities we should pursue. I will attempt to show that this demonstration mainly uses facts about ourselves that are not grounded in our particular points of view.

Commentators often interpret the claim that “the good of man lies in his function” is only ethically relevant insofar as it specifies the kind of activity within which the specifically *human* good takes place. The *ergon* argument, on this reading, does not derive normative implications from the human function, but only limits the normative scope to human activity.<sup>19</sup> We cannot know what a good human is by just looking at a human because performing an activity and doing so well are different kinds of activities. Aristotle seems to be tacking on normative content to a factual description. Consider the following analogy. Truck drivers transfer large amounts of products from one location to another. The goal of truck driving is to get the items in the truck to a destination. Businesses often put signs on the backs and sides of these trucks that say, “How’s my driving?” followed by a telephone number and some variation of the statement, “Safety is our goal.” Truck driving companies do not only want their drivers to transfer goods, but to do so safely, presumably for the drivers and those who share the road. But safety is not a part of the

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<sup>19</sup> This interpretation is defended in Gomez-Lobo (1989) and presented in Annas (2005).

notion of transferring goods. A trucker may fatally wipe out every other driver along the way to a loading center, or emit poisonous toxins into the air that kills everyone within a three-mile radius, and still complete his function *qua* truck driver. Commentators often interpret Aristotle as doing something like this; as attaching a sign to the human life that says “How’s my living? Goodness is my goal,” when “goodness” is not part of living *per se*.

Aristotle’s view of the relationship between human nature and human goodness is not like the trucker who wants to balance his immediate aim against an external aim like safety. For Aristotle, a thing’s nature gives us a set of standards by which we evaluate its behavior. Aristotle states in the *Eudemian Ethics* (*EE*) that “the end of each thing is its *ergon*” (*EE* 1219a8). Although the *ergon* argument in the *EN* is not explicitly presented as using the kind of nature Annas thinks is an ethical ideal, Aristotle later says that “the virtue of each thing is a relation to its *ergon*” immediately after saying that “we must determine what disposition of each thing is best, for this is the virtue of each thing” (*EN* 1139a15-17). In the *Physics*, Aristotle describes the relationship between virtue and *ergon* as a “completion” of a thing’s nature (*Phys.* 246a10-17), which, again, will differ across distinct natures (*EN* 1175a22-23).<sup>20</sup> The point is that *ergon* supervenes on a thing’s nature such that a difference in kind entails a difference in *ergon*, and therefore a difference in what constitutes virtue. Thus we see Aristotle make the two-fold connection between *ergon* and nature, and *ergon* and a source of ethically relevant information.

Organic *ergon* has an essentially natural role in Aristotle’s biology. *Erga* are the functions that characterize the things that have them. Humans contemplate the cosmos; hearts pump blood. But we cannot understand what *erga* are, or Aristotle’s method of discerning them, simply by observing the organism’s activities. Some unique activities of an organism may be derivative of others or simply too unimportant to say they “characterize” the organism. Humans

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<sup>20</sup> The connection between the *Physics* and *Ethics* texts is made by Achtenberg (1989, 38)

also laugh; the human heart makes a thumping sound in a particular rhythmic way. Clearly, however, these latter examples do not correspond to explanations of the human or the heart. In light of a thing's material structure or the system of which it is a part, certain activities make sense of facts about the organism. The *ergon* of an organism warrants a teleological explanation because it makes sense of the organism's matter and structure.<sup>21</sup> Aristotle argues in the *Physics* that the relationship between the structure and *ergon* of an organism is one of necessity. If we suppose the *ergon* of a saw is a certain sort of cutting, then this goal requires a saw to be made of a hard material with jagged teeth (*Phys.* 200b6). To Martian observers unfamiliar with human culture, these teeth may seem strange until seen in action, upon which their purpose is revealed. In this way, the concept of *ergon* makes sense of the object. It does so by indicating a teleological relationship between the thing's structure and material parts on the one hand, and its activity or product on the other.

This relationship, to Aristotle, is a relationship within nature. In the *De anima*, the soul is the *ergon* of a thing as indicated in texts like, "If the eye were an animal, then sight would be its soul" (*De an.* 412b18). The soul, moreover, is the *telos* of the living body (*De an.* 415b10). According to *Physics* II, the *telos* is the nature of the thing because it explains what the thing is (*Phys.* 193b6-19). Sight is the proper activity of the eye, and it is also the "substance" of the eye because it "corresponds to the definition" of the thing (*De an.* 412b19). In other words, sight is the activity that explains the eye; its structure, its place in its environment, and so on.<sup>22</sup> So then sight—remaining momentarily under the illusion that the eye is an animal—is connected to the

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<sup>21</sup> Clark (1975, 16), describing the conceptual use of *ergon*, says "A part of an animal which seems to us to be superfluous, odd, deformed is suddenly explained when we see how it is generally, normally, characteristically used."

<sup>22</sup> Leunissen says that, in the *De anima*, "the relation between soul and body is a teleological one: living beings have the kind of bodies and bodily parts they have for the sake of performing all their characteristic life functions" (2010, 53).

nature of the eye. This holds for *erga* generally. If Aristotle appeals to a thing's *ergon*, then he is appealing to the function that makes sense of its notable features; he is appealing to its nature. We must understand the human soul to understand the human good (*EN* 1102a19).

If the *ergon* argument is an appeal to nature, then it is a teleological one. In both the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Eudemian Ethics* (*EE*), Aristotle presents the *ergon* argument following his case against a universal good. There is not one good, but “a thing is called good in as many ways as it is said to exist” (*EN* 1096a23). Aristotle famously distinguishes the ten categories of being, one of which is “secondary substance” or species (*Cat.* 1a15). This suggests that insofar as *ergon* is the activity proper to a species, the *ergon* argument is meant to spell out the specifically human kind of good.<sup>23</sup> We have already seen that plants, animals, and humans are said to live in different ways in virtue of their respective souls, which is what makes them what they are. Like the different kind of souls, however, the good of one kind and the good of another are different. Like his theory of the soul, moreover, Aristotle's theory of the good holds that every kind of good is teleologically structured.<sup>24</sup> Aristotle explicitly ties *ergon* to *telos* in the *EE* when he argues that excellence is the best state of something with an *ergon*, and *ergon* is its end (*EE* 1218b37-1219a8). The argument that attempts to discover the human good, by that fact, appeals to something teleological.

This teleological structure is not a description of a mental state or its goals. It is rather an analysis of human functioning (*ergon*), which essentially explains biological and psychological organization. This is supported by the fact that the *ergon* argument's structure is the same as the

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<sup>23</sup> See Johnson (2005, 218).

<sup>24</sup> See Achtenberg (1992, 320-321).

teleological explanations of other organisms.<sup>25</sup> It seems then that the *ergon* argument appeals to natural teleology. This argument appeals to more than people's desires and commitments, because an organism's *ergon* corresponds to structural components. I conclude that the references to *ergon* in the *EN* and elsewhere, the conceptual analysis of *ergon*, and the teleological structure and purpose of the *ergon* argument provide a strong cumulative case that the argument is an appeal to nature in the fullest sense.<sup>26</sup>

Nevertheless, if nature is teleological, but virtue is not achieved by nature, then the relationship between nature and virtue remains to be explained. A thing's *telos* defines its end, but it also gives us a way to evaluate a thing's striving toward that end. Øyvind Rabbas explains that

Each specimen of *S* is so constituted that it will naturally attempt to  $\Phi$ , that is, to display the behavior characteristic of its species *S*: it will *strive* towards  $\Phi$ -ing. As a consequence, if *a* is a member of *S*, then *a* will be a *good S* if, and to the extent that, it regularly and reliably  $\Phi$ 's well, that is, is *good at  $\Phi$ -ing*. (2015, 98)

If organisms *a* and *b* are members of *S*, and *a*  $\Phi$ 's well while *b* does not, because *b* is either vicious or undeveloped, then there must be something about *a* and *b* that explains the difference. The difference is that *a*'s nature, which includes its natural capacities, is complete while *b*'s is incomplete.<sup>27</sup> I noted earlier that Aristotle calls virtue a "completion" of a thing's nature. Completion is the state of lacking nothing (*Phys.* 207a7, *Meta.*1021b12 and 1055a10).<sup>28</sup> A lactose-intolerant person, for instance, lacks the ability to digest dairy products. We do not, however, say this about stones or trees, because the ability to digest dairy products is not

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<sup>25</sup> Johnson claims that the *ergon* argument works like other teleological explanations and is "really an application of the general principle that different kinds of things are completed or perfected by different things... and that teleological explanations are to be made with reference to these specific excellences (2005, 222).

<sup>26</sup> Johnson also says, "the *ergon* argument is shown to be an exemplary teleological argument, not only consistent with his general methodology, but possibly the most important application of it" (220 n.10).

<sup>27</sup> That completion is not a change of nature, but a fulfillment of all the potential features entailed by a thing's nature, is argued by Achtenberg (1989, 38-39).

<sup>28</sup> Aristotle at each of the passages cited above also says that something is complete once it has reached its end.



something they have by nature. If something is completed, it has everything there is to have according to its kind. Each of its parts work the way they should, according to their functions. Thus, we can evaluate how well the organism is living as a whole in terms of its having or lacking things that we understand it to have by nature.

My interpretation so far might be understood as incompatible with Aristotle's claim that "the moral virtues are not placed in us by nature" (*EN* 1103a19). So here is a possible objection. Virtue is not achieved automatically in the sense that one does not achieve it merely by being human. It requires other things such as habituation. Yet if *ergon* is explained teleologically, then, in a sense, we always act for the sake of our *telos*, which seems to contradict Aristotle's claim above.<sup>29</sup> This objection, however, fails to appreciate the distinction between acting for the sake of one's apparent *telos*, acting for the sake of one's real *telos*, and completing one's *telos*. The function of an individual is identical to the function of a good individual of the same kind (*EN* 1098a8-12). If we say that a thing performs its function by nature, we cannot infer that it does so excellently, since excellent and poor performing things can have the same nature. Natural teleology determines what virtue is, but not whether it is acquired. In the case of organisms, to be virtuous is to have everything that one of its kind would need to produce its end successfully and consistently. Teleology can still support certain ethical claims, without violating the Aristotelian *credo* concerning development.

So far, I have tried to show three things. First, Aristotle's view of nature is teleological such that the essential activity of an organism is characterized by its goal. Second, Aristotle's *ergon* argument is an appeal to nature in the teleological sense just described. Third, the *ergon* argument gives us an ethical reason because of the correspondence between our *ergon* and our nature. The argument resolves ethical disputes and tells us that calling the good life *eudaimōn* is

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<sup>29</sup> A similar argument is presented by Achtenberg (1992, 324-28).

not a platitude. In doing so, the *ergon* argument uses nature as much as any argument could. It tells us what we should strive for in light of who we are by nature. I conclude that Aristotle's notion of nature is teleological, and we see this concept employed in an ethical context.

### 4.3 Full Nature and Mere Nature

We are now able to judge how a teleological interpretation of Aristotle's appeal to nature squares with Annas' view that Aristotle distinguishes between full nature and mere nature. Aristotle does see an ethically relevant difference between intractable facts about our circumstance and what is up to us as organisms with the ability to reason. Nature does not make us virtuous, because becoming virtuous requires repeated and deliberate action over time—it requires action that is “up to us” to undertake. Nevertheless, the point concerning how one becomes virtuous is better articulated between nature and something else such as habituation or artifice, not between mere nature and full nature. The latter distinction misses a crucial way in which mere nature and full nature are the same, given what we have said thus far about the role of teleology. There is no indication in Aristotle that our human *telos* is under our control. On the contrary, his view implies the opposite. A thing's *telos* defines the organism that possesses it, which means that it (in the case of organisms) supervenes on the nature of its possessor: no change in *telos* without a change in nature. We may be able to choose this or that action, but a thing's final cause is present from its inception, which cannot then be a result of desires and commitments. Aristotle suggests this in the *Metaphysics* when he says that goodness and completeness are present in the beginning of a thing's nature (*Meta.* 1072b31), and the principles from which things come “are complete; for a man begets a man, but the seed is not first” (*Meta.* 1092a15). A nascent organism has properties that determine the final form it will take if it develops naturally.

There is another textual indication that the distinction between full nature and mere nature is misleading. Annas quotes the first paragraph of *Ethics* II to illustrate mere nature (1993, 143). In that passage, Aristotle famously argues that virtue is not achieved by nature because what is done by nature cannot be unlearned (*EN* 1103a14-27). The upward movement of fire and the downward movement of stone are natural and no amount of repetition will change their direction of motion. Virtue is not like fire or stones, however. We can be habituated in or out of it. Aristotle uses the same analogy in *Physics* II to explain what it means to be natural (as opposed to being a “nature” *per se*). Two things are natural: subjects with natures and “whatever arises from those subjects according to themselves, as springing up belongs to fire” (*Physics* 192b35-7). This passage suggests that something is natural if it either (a) is an object with a nature or (b) belongs to an object with a nature. Aristotle says that the rising of fire “is not a nature, and it does not have a nature, but it is produced according to nature” (*Phys.* 193a1). The phenomenon Annas identified as “mere nature” is natural, but it is not nature itself. More importantly, this passage indicates that what makes a thing’s activity natural is what makes it what it is, which, not incidentally, Aristotle sees as the internal source of movement. The alleged distinction between two kinds of nature is really a distinction between nature and what is *natural*, which is grounded in nature. There are things that happen that we cannot control, like the way fire rises or stone falls. These things happen as the result of something acting on its nature, the end of which is no more under the thing’s control. However, the contrast of “nature” and “natural” was supposed to mirror the kind of nature that we control versus the kind that we do not control. If there is a distinction to be made between constricting nature and full nature, it is not one between the ethically irrelevant and ethically informative kinds.

My interpretation of Aristotle may appear standard or old hat. If it is true, however, then Annas' use of the distinction between full nature and mere nature is mistaken. Aristotle's theory of nature in *Physics* II is teleological, as is the appeal to nature to justify ethical claims. Our *telos*, which is bound up with nature, is something as stubborn as the movement of fire and stone, and yet it is ethically guiding. Aristotle's ethical theory does not rely on the agent's desires and commitments to establish the content of *eudaimonia*. Instead, *eudaimonia* is determined by our nature. Insofar as courage, continence, magnanimity, and the others, are human virtues— completions of human nature—then their goodness does not depend on the internal point of view. One's commitments and desires could be inconsistent with any one of the virtues. Therefore, we should not think that Aristotle's ethical theory accommodates the internal point of view in a way that resists "solutions from the external point of view" (Annas 1989, 170). For Aristotle, our perspectives often miss the mark and need correction.

Human nature is central to Aristotle's ethical theory for the same reason that the distinction between full nature and mere nature fails. The content of *eudaimonia* described in the *EN* does not rely on a teleology of the internal point of view, but on a teleology of natural organisms. The end is set at the beginning by our form or nature. The development of the agent's commitments and desire is the crucial way she achieves those ends. However, the contents of those commitments do not change the final form the human life should take. Thus, if a change in one's perspective would result in action more typical or characteristic of humans, then that person has a reason to make that change. The issue remains whether Williams's objection poses a genuine problem for Aristotle's view. It is to this question that I now turn.

## 5 THE COMPATIBILITY OF MORAL EDUCATION AND OBJECTIVE VALUES

### 5.1 Rational wish (*boulesis*) is truth-apt

Aristotle's claim that knowledge of the ethical "starting-points are grasped by... a kind of habituation" contradicts theories that understand reason as an autonomous provider of moral knowledge. Yet this passage raises a peculiar issue when used to downplay the cognition of value in Aristotle. We typically think of habit or practice as that by which someone does something to her environment, whereas we think of knowledge as something by which someone represents her environment. Why then does Aristotle include habit when he lists the different ways we know or come to know things? How should we interpret the disposition requirement?

If we think of moral knowledge as a mere habit, Williams' objection appears again. What court of appeal, beyond habit, allows us to criticize the ethical views we acquire if habit is fully responsible for those views? Appeal to the well-functioning of the organism only delays the problem. According to what standard can we judge what counts as an example of someone functioning excellently? Moreover, as we have seen, the notion of a well-functioning human is incomplete. If Aristotle thinks that habit has the final say, diversity in this feature would threaten our justification in believing in an objective good.

Alternatively, there is good reason to think that ethical commitments involve cognitive elements such as thoughts or beliefs about the object of value. From our own points of view, our dispositions do not have the final say. For one thing, we often judge our dispositions to be directed at the wrong things or insufficiently appreciative of the things we judge to be worth valuing. For instance, Warren Quinn imagines a person inclined to turn every FM dial to a particular station whenever he comes across a radio, and with no intention to hear music or news (1996, 160). Quinn claims that the disposition alone does not give the person a reason to change

dials on radios around him. To Aristotle, the *akratic* or intemperate person acts in ways that go against his understanding of the good (*EN* 1102b20). These people may be said to desire the things they are disposed to do, but these desires are not accompanied with the judgment that their actions are worth doing.

In addition to our reflective judgments about our dispositions, some of our actions themselves presume that things we value are objectively valuable. We think the things we act for really merit acting that way, and hence the thoughts that form these judgments are truth-apt. Aristotle recognizes the truth-aptness of wish (*boulesis*) when he considers whether we should understand the object of wish as the good or the apparent good. The difficulty is that if we say that its object is the good, then we must admit that those mistaken about the good do not have wishes at all since the true good is not in view. If, however, we say that the object of wish is the *apparent* good, then we claim that no one wants what is really good. Aristotle answers,

Perhaps it should be said simply and truly that desire is for the good, but for each person it is what appears as good. So to the serious person it is according to the truth, but to careless person it is according to chance. (1113a23-26)

Each agent wants the good as it appears to them. They do not want the *apparent* good, but the real thing. Yet they can only understand the genuine good is as it appears to them. Sometimes their appearances are mistaken, in which case they do not get what they want. Aristotle's distinction here is more thoroughly made by Socrates in the *Gorgias* between *wanting* to act well and seeing something as a *fitting way* to act well. There Socrates asks if the powerful but bad person who unjustly kills his enemies does what he wants. Socrates tries to convince Polus that the tyrant does not get what he wants because he wants to act well but fails. Polus agrees with Socrates that "when act for the sake of something, we do not want those things we do for the

sake of other things, but we want that for the sake of which we do things” (468c1-2).<sup>30</sup> Moreover, since “we want good things... but we do not want what is neither good nor bad, and not what is bad” (468c6-8) it follows that the bad person does not do “what he wants if indeed these things are actually bad” (468d7).<sup>31</sup> As Socrates notes, the truth-aptness of wish not only applies to people who pursue things as good that are really bad, but also to people who pursue things as good when no good exists. If I have not acted well because there is no good at all, then I have not done what I wanted.<sup>32</sup>

## 5.2 Rational wish has a mind-to-world direction of fit

Earlier I asked how we should understand Aristotle’s claim that ethical “starting-points are observed by... habit” (*EN* 1098b6). Given what Aristotle says about rational wish, we should understand him to mean that habit and practice have cognitive results (Burnyeat 1980, 73). Even if Aristotle thought of habit as a type of “know-how,” habit is also a way of acquiring cognitive knowledge. We act from a rational wish (*boulesis*) for the things that appear to us to be good. Since these appearances are truth-apt, they are about the things we take to be good. While habit has an epistemic role, it does not itself constitute the sort of knowledge that forms the judgment upon which our actions are based.

What distinguishes the non-dispositional part of ethical knowledge from the dispositional part? To answer this question, we can appeal to Elizabeth Anscombe’s attempt to distinguish beliefs and intentions. Anscombe considers what happens when a shopping list does not match the items the shopper bought (1963, 56). Clearly a mistake has occurred, but where? This

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<sup>30</sup> Translation Plato’s *Gorgias* is mine.

<sup>31</sup>Socrates’ point reveals the complication of framing this debate in terms of internalism and externalism about reasons. Socrates, for instance, is not an internalist as described by Markovits (2011, 260) since he denies that what reasons he has fundamentally depends on whether they emerge from the motivational set he already possesses. On the other hand, he is not an externalist as understood by Parfit (2011, 276) since in the passage above he accepts that one should do what best fulfills one’s wishes, which is to act well.

<sup>32</sup> See Vogler (2002, 51) for further defense of my claim here.

depends on whether, for instance, it was made by the shopper or by someone recording everything the shopper bought. If the shopper made the list, then the mistake is in the shopper's actions, since the list conveys an intention. If, on the other hand, the list is a record, then the mistake is in the list. The two lists, in other words, have opposite relations of conformity to the action of purchasing items at the store. One list conforms to the world while the other conforms the world to it. Relations of conformity have been described as "directions of fit" (Searle 1985, 3).<sup>33</sup>

Records, like maps of landscapes, can be mistaken in virtue of no internal feature because of its direction of fit. Rational wish, for Aristotle, involves, among other things, the same relationship of conformity as records and maps. Its direction of fit conforms the mind to the world. We seek to better understand values as they are, which as I already argued, we see as objective. Why believe this? If we can find a case structurally identical to the case in which the discrepancy between the purchased items and the record was due to a "mistake" in the list, then we have some evidence that our view of the good has a mind-to-world direction of fit. We have, in other words, evidence to think that our ethical commitments are supposed to conform to the world the way a record is *supposed* to record accurately.

Our ethical commitments have the same feature of the list that makes *it* mistaken when it does not match up to what the shopper bought. There is one crucial way they are distinct, however. When ordinary lists and maps are inaccurate, that is the end of the story unless someone fixes them. They have no internal principle of movement that aims at accuracy. To Aristotle, reason is the principle by which we move and develop as humans. Thus, insofar as

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<sup>33</sup> John Searle credits Anscombe with producing the "best illustration" of directions of fit. However, the distinction goes back at least as far as Aquinas, who claimed that the mind, when it causes something, is the measure of that which it causes; and likewise, when the knowledge is caused in the mind, the thing that knowledge is about is the measure of what is in the mind" (*Summa theologica*, I, q. 21, a. 2).



reason has the mind-to-world structure, its principle of movement pushes it toward apparent conformity to the world.

That reason is a principle of motion has everyday significance. Humans are capable of changing their conceptions of the good upon reflection. When something tells us that our notion is inadequate, we update it for a more accurate version. For instance, people often put a high value on having money, or at least act as if they do. Upon reflection, however, they often find that their appraisal of money's value does not accurately represent the actual value of possessing it. In asking herself, "what am I doing?" the agent steps back from the trudge and distractions of daily tasks and contemplates the activity as a whole. This reflection may then lead the agent to question the intrinsic merit of certain actions or objects by asking things like "is this really what I want to do?" or "is this everything I thought it would be?" In asking questions of this sort, the deliberator either pays attention to her present tasks or imagines what it is like to have or do things about which she is questioning the merit. By reflecting on the value of money, according to the picture I am describing, she puts herself in a context aimed at perceiving the value of possessing it. This deliberation prompts her to simulate experiences so that she can *attend to* them to probe their value. This attention brings the apparent value into focus to get a better sense of its real character. The resulting commitments are truth-apt, and since what they are about are mind-independent, their truth conditions are mind-independent.

Typically, belief is thought to have a mind-to-world direction of fit while intention is thought to have a world-to-mind direction of fit. Aristotle can agree but maintain that many actions involve an aspect aimed at conformity to the world. Consider again the powerful and bad person described by Socrates in the *Gorgias*. This person sees as fitting the good—that is, killing his enemies—what in fact is not. Now let us change Socrates' example so that this person ends

up inadvertently acquitting the man he intended to kill. There has clearly been a mistake, and the mistake is in the *world*. The man, by the tyrant's intentions, was supposed to suffer but the facts do not reflect his intention. The presence of this mistake proves that a world-to-mind direction of fit is involved in action. On the other hand, what would have otherwise been a mistake (if the world had matched the tyrant's intentions) was avoided, because there is agreement between what the tyrant brings about and what is good. Because he does not want just the apparent good, the tyrant is able to do what he wanted. Aristotle, who roughly adopts Plato's notion of acting for the good, can agree with the fact that action involves a world-to-mind direction of fit but insist that actions are based in ethical commitments that have mind-to-world directions of fit. While action involves bringing the world to conform to one's mind, this is done according to a process that involves bringing one's mind to conform to objective values.

The *active* nature of practical reason's fitness is seen in Aristotle's distinction between the properly rational part and the part that obeys reason that he makes in order to account for the continent and incontinent person. Both people make a judgment about what they should do (*EN* 1102b16), but the continent person acts according to this judgment while the incontinent person acts out of desire against his judgment. The difference cannot be desire since both continent and incontinent people desire to act against their judgment, while the continent person is able to subdue her desires. Aristotle compares the incontinent person to a person who chooses to move his arm one way but is unable due to paralysis (*EN* 1102b19). One part is responsible for our judgements while the other is responsible for putting our judgments into practice. The difference between the continent and incontinent person is that the non-rational soul in the continent person listens to reason "in the way that we depend on the word of both one's father and of friends, not

as one has an account of mathematical truths” (*EN* 1102b31-33). Habits and dispositions are formed and changed by reason, but they are not themselves rational.

Issues of incontinence notwithstanding, the active conformity of the properly rational part of the soul is also important as it is responsible for the distinct relationship humans have to their good compared to other animals. We can see a significant difference between the characteristic behavior of rational animals, and the corresponding system of evaluation, and all other living things. In the system of evaluation set out in the function argument, organisms are evaluated by their characteristic activities. But the value of the activity itself is not taken into account in this form of evaluation. Function arguments tell us if this tree is a good one, or if this clam is a good clam, but not whether being a clam is better than being a tree.

John McDowell imagines an instance of a wolf becoming rational while its pack remains non-rational (1995, 130). When this happens, McDowell claims, the wolf ceases to have reason or motivation to act the way it did before. Alternatively, we might think that the wolf, in virtue of its ability to act for ends that it sees fitting, gains new reasons to act that it did not have before. Rational animals are able to choose things they take to be good, and are moved by the appearance of the good. As Philippa Foot puts it, “while [non-rational] animals go for the good (thing) *that they see*, human beings go for *what they see as good*” (2001, 56 emphasizes original). Humans are superior to animals, says Alexander of Aphrodisias, since “the better thing that man has the capacity for is better than the valuable things that the other living creatures possess” (*EP* 119.33).<sup>34</sup> If non-rational animals could “go for what they see as good,” they would and should pursue things other than what they do in a non-rational state, assuming that there is an objective good.

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<sup>34</sup> Translation of Alexander’s *Ethical Problems* from R. W. Sharples (Trans.) New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic.

### 5.3 Practical reason is responsive to reasons on the outside

The view I am defending understands that certain things like friendship, humor, and contemplation have intrinsic value while other things like toothpicks, eye glasses, and dollar bills do not. When value is apparent to us, moreover, it makes things like friendship, humor, and contemplation choice worthy for their own sakes. How is the appearance of choice-worthiness acquired? How could the representational elements of Aristotle's moral psychology adequately fit with the dispositional requirement to explain how knowledge of the good is acquired?

There are many possible accounts of the relationship between habit, cognition of the good, and moral knowledge that are compatible with both the objectivity of value and the disposition requirement. For example, Linda Zagzebski argues that moral knowledge is gained through admiration of virtuous exemplars (2017, 14-20). Alasdair MacIntyre claims that moral knowledge emerges through the ordinary means of seeking the advice and reflection of *others* on one's commitments (2016, 220-30). In this last section, I will gesture toward a more general account of the discovery of values in order to show that ethical outlooks are not insulated given Aristotle's view of dispositions.<sup>35</sup> Contrary to Williams, the direction of fit of our values makes them liable to change from outside our current dispositions. Because dispositions are not insulated, the disposition requirement does not exclude the possibility that points of view are caused by the values that they are about. The result is that, for Aristotle, there are authorities outside of our own commitments, which are the values themselves.

Ethical commitments are acquired. Acquired knowledge needs certain contexts in order to be learned. To use a sensory analogy, visual perception requires several environmental

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<sup>35</sup> In what follows, I am indebted to Talbot Brewer's account of desire in the *Retrieval of Ethics* (2009, chs. 1 & 2). There, Brewer argues that desire is an intimation of the good, which changes and evolves as one engages with the thing taken to be good. We can modify this account for our purposes, and understand dispositions as requiring a perception of the good that has a mind-to-world direction of fit.

conditions to be satisfied in order for it to furnish the mind. To have the idea of a tree of the sort that only perception can provide, as opposed to the idea I might have if a friend tells me about one, I need to have at some point been near one in the right lighting and when my perceptual faculties were working, and so on. Moreover, we acquire new knowledge by manipulating our environment or changing our context. For instance, someone may believe he sees a rattlesnake in the distance but walk closer to find that what he thought was a rattlesnake is actually a coiled rope.

Likewise, in order to learn about value, we need to be in the right sort of context in order to “see” the good of a certain activity. When our experience is mistaken, which reason aims to correct in virtue of its direction of fit, changes in the context can bring about an improvement in knowledge. What kind of context is required for the sort of knowledge that provides the basis of our ethical commitments? The conditions of a context for knowledge must be sufficiently relevant to the subject matter. For instance, the conditions necessary for visual experiences must include light and spatial proximity. Aristotle thinks that things worth acting for are activities (1095b31, 1098a6). Let us grant for the sake of argument that he is right about this claim. On this assumption, the conditions necessary to experience value are practical. In order to adequately relate to the value, we have to participate in the activity. Since participation in an activity is only achieved by practice, it follows that action is required for knowledge of the good. If, for instance, friendship is an intrinsic good and also an active relationship, then the good of friendship can only be known through practical engagement with that activity. We can call the need for practice in order to perceive value the “practical requirement.” I can have some moral knowledge without satisfying the practical requirement, such as if I learn about good or bad behavior from a trustworthy source. This kind of knowledge, however, is more akin to hearing about trees rather

than seeing them for oneself since the relevant context is missing. The satisfaction of the practical requirement, if veridical, yields special access to the good.

Moreover, to have a grasp of the good we need to be at least minimally attentive to the value of the object in question. To show this, we can look at MacIntyre's distinction between internal and external goods. MacIntyre considers the difference between a child who desires to play chess for its own sake and a child who desires to play chess because his teacher has offered him five dollars' worth of candy for playing and five more dollars' worth for winning (1981, 175). In these two examples, the two children are not disposed to act the same way. The child playing for candy has no reason not to cheat provided he can do so without getting caught. A child who plays chess for its own sake, however, has reason not to cheat.

The child externally motivated does not value the goods uniquely offered by games like chess. However, as he is instructed to attend to the processes and requirements of chess, he may become aware of the internal goods uniquely offered by the game. He sees that it requires a certain degree of focus and strategy, that it facilitates comradery, that the dynamic of an individual game can radically change depending on which pieces are most often used, and so on. MacIntyre says,

There will come a time when the child will find in those goods specific to chess, in the achievement of a certain highly particular kind of analytical skill, strategic imagination and competitive intensity, a new set of reasons, reasons now not just for winning on a particular occasion, but for trying to excel in whatever way the game of chess demands. Now if the child cheats, he or she will be defeating not me, but himself or herself. (1981, 170-71)

As the child participates in the activity that he does not yet see as good, and as his attention is drawn, albeit by external incentives, to its internal goods, he begins to see their value. The goods internal to an activity or goal that cannot be understood but by participating in the activities that carry them. This process likely takes repetition, which results in a disposition on the part of the

child, to see the value of the game. Thus, the disposition requirement does not prevent ethical knowledge from being acquired, as the chess example above shows how practical reason can lead one to accept ethical claims “from the outside.”

Williams might reply that the practical requirement is not enough to reconcile the disposition requirement to objective values since practice is not the same as habit or disposition. One can act without having a disposition to act or value the activity. The disposition requirement suggests that practice alone is not enough to make one see the value of something. Against my argument so far, Williams might argue that dispositions are impervious to goods internal to the activities one engages in but does not find intrinsically good.

In reply, the practical requirement does not suggest that the good of an activity is immediately available to the individual. Repeated practice and the explicit encouragement or shaming by a teacher in order to draw one’s attention to the normative considerations might also be conditions to acquire a disposition. However, the practical requirement as envisioned in the story above connects the cognitive and dispositional aspects of ethical development. The question is whether we can plausibly account for a moral psychology that does not entirely rely on dispositions. By showing how practice is a necessary condition for knowledge of the good, we have a groundwork for a story relating the dispositional requirement and cognition of value.

Moreover, habit makes a difference to the story about the practical requirement above. We should expect to find differences in the cognition of value between one who is disposed to certain acts and one who is not as familiar with the activity. In a different context, John Locke recognizes the various factors that make knowledge of the good difficult. While value and goodness are accessible to all “rational Creatures,” they are “biased by their Interest, as well as ignorant for want of studying it, [and] not apt to allow of it as a Law binding to them in

application of it to their particular Cases” (2003, 327). Different considerations compete for authority over our practical reason. We might not intentionally ignore the demands of value, but other factors might cause the value present in our activities to elude us. Our prior ethical outlooks may keep us from attending to the value of an action we perform. If the child plays chess only to get candy, then he does not need to maintain an awareness of the good of the game since he already has a sufficiently action-guiding principle. The good of the game of chess does not force itself on him out of necessity.

The fact that we can often get by without recognizing or sufficiently appreciating the good of something makes awareness of the good of something through practical reason and awareness of one’s environment through sensory perception significantly disanalogous. Agents have an immediate interest in constraining their action in light of the facts about their environment known by visual perception. If I proceed to a walk on a bridge without regard to rotten planks ahead, I might die or injure myself. Whatever my interests are, if they include not dying or getting injured, they are put at risk or undermined by my disregard for my surroundings. As Locke appears to suggest, values that we do not already recognize do not usually have the immediately consequential and high stakes relevance to our current ethical outlooks that objects of sense perception do. The habitual and attentive interaction with the good seems to be the best way to develop an orientation toward the good when the agent was previously unable to perceive the value of the activity or previously lacked the incentive to give the requisite attention. Habitual practice updates the agent’s perspective on the value of her activities.

Williams’ objection to Aristotle raises the difficult problem that ethical commitments are a result of our dispositions to make them. However, we should not conclude from this that commitments come “from deeper in” us as opposed to “outside.” We have seen the possibility of



a reflective procedure that results in the change in one's ethical outlook. Aristotle cannot fully accept Williams's central premise, that "people's dispositions" are all "that has to exist in the world for [an] ethical point of view to exist." Our dispositions to make moral commitments are based in commitments about the world outside of our own points of view. Even if we experience something that only appears good, the object of our experience is not an *apparent good*. Our judgments, given their direction of fit, are open to revision similar to the way visual perception is open to revision when the viewer walks closer to what he thought was a rattle-snake but finds is actually a coiled rope. Dispositions to act for the sake of the good thus presuppose the possibility of revision in light of new experiences of value. These experiences can be veridical, if the realist about objective values is right, or entirely illusory, or a mix of both. In any case, the possibility remains that an ethical perspective may undergo a change in values, their relations, or weights as a result of reflection and experience. This procedure crucially involves the experience of what reason takes to be the intrinsic value of things.

Aristotle agrees that, for instance, my dispositions, acquired through my rearing, are responsible for my judging that my friend who is lying to me is doing something bad to me. Nevertheless, it does not follow that my friend's doing something bad to me through lying to me is *not* responsible for my judgment to the same effect. To conclude that moral commitments are groundless, Williams relies on the premise that dispositions alone determine ethical outlooks. However, this premise assumes that objective value (if it exists) cannot adequately relate to an individual's point of view unless that individual already values it. The objection only works if it downplays the cognitive role in ethical development of seeing something as good. Williams, moreover, has not ruled out the possibility that the experience of value through active engagement with the world allows us to update our commitments to better conform to the truth.

When these changes occur, we see them as motivated by something worth changing for. To Aristotle, we love our friends, virtue, and the contemplation of god for themselves.

## 6 CONCLUSION

Aristotle believed that the human good was not dependent on our prior commitments and desires. This entails the possibility that people should not have some values they do, and have others they do not. This view, however, is troubled by the fact that we can only know the good through our commitments and desires. From an objective point of view, it seems that we cannot say why it is in someone's interests to act from a different set of dispositions than the ones they actually have. Contrary to some attempts to save the *EN* from this objection, Williams is right to interpret Aristotle that the human good is not always compatible with our subjective outlooks and that points of view are necessary for knowledge of the human good. However, and contrary to Williams, nowhere in the *EN* does Aristotle admit that values *originate* in one's point of view. I hope to have shown in this thesis why Aristotle can proceed without such an admission.

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