

# ScholarWorks@GSU

## Aristotle on Practical Wisdom and the End of Action

Authors	Sapkota, Gagan
Citation	Sapkota, Gagan. "Aristotle on Practical Wisdom and the End of Action." 2016. Thesis, Georgia State University. <a href="https://doi.org/10.57709/8567049">https://doi.org/10.57709/8567049</a>
DOI	<a href="https://doi.org/10.57709/8567049">https://doi.org/10.57709/8567049</a>
Download date	2026-04-13 12:02:25
Link to Item	<a href="https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14694/11983">https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14694/11983</a>

# ARISTOTLE ON PRACTICAL WISDOM AND THE END OF ACTION

by

GAGAN SAPKOTA

Under the Direction of Tim O'Keefe, PhD and Andrew J. Cohen, PhD

## ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I explore Aristotle's conception of the relation between practical wisdom (*phronesis*) and the end of action. Intellectualists claim that *phronesis* determines the end of action, whereas non-intellectualists claim that virtue as a non-rational state determines the end of action. Recently, Jessica Moss has provided a sustained defense of the non-intellectualist interpretation. I offer three arguments against Moss's interpretation: (1) the line at 1144a6-7 that is taken to provide an obvious support for the non-intellectualist interpretation does not provide an *obvious* support. (2) The non-intellectualist interpretation is inconsistent with the conclusion of Aristotle's function argument. (3) The non-intellectualist interpretation fails to distinguish between two distinct senses of 'goal.' After arguing against the non-intellectualist interpretation, I explore the relation between *phronesis* and *eudaimonia*.

INDEX WORDS: Aristotle, End of Action, *Phronesis*, Jessica Moss

ARISTOTLE ON PRACTICAL WISDOM AND THE END OF ACTION

By

GAGAN SAPKOTA

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Masters of Philosophy

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2016

Copyright by  
Gagan Sapkota  
2016

Aristotle on Practical Wisdom and the End of Action

By

GAGAN SAPKOTA

Committee Chair: Tim O'Keefe

Andrew J. Cohen

Committee: Jessica Berry

Electronic Version Approved: 05/03/2016

Office of Graduate Studies

College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

August 2016

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

Firstly, I want to thank my thesis directors, Dr. Tim O’Keefe and Dr. A. J. Cohen, for encouraging me to overcome multiple failures in the course of writing this thesis. Both Dr. O’Keefe and Dr. Cohen provided feedback at each stage of the writing process, which made the completion of this thesis possible. I also want to thank Dr. Jessica Berry who provided me with both extensive feedback on my writing and pointed criticisms on various parts of my argument. Finally, I want to thank Dr. Sandra Dwyer. Not only did she comment on multiple drafts of this thesis, but she also provided support and encouragement at a crucial moment. At a time when I was considering giving up entirely, she gave me very specific instructions that motivated me to continue with the project.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....	IV
1 INTRODUCTION .....	1
1.1 Moss’s argument that virtue makes the goal correct.....	3
2 THREE ARGUMENTS AGAINST THE NON-INTELLECTUALIST INTERPRETATION .....	6
2.1 The Argument from Context.....	6
2.2 The Conflict Between the Non-intellectualist Interpretation and the Function Argument .....	8
2.3 The Non-intellectualist Interpretation and Two Senses of ‘Goal’ .....	12
2.3.1 <i>What is the Goal or End?</i> .....	12
2.3.2 <i>The Non-intellectualist Interpretation and the Incontinent’s Starting-point</i> .....	14
2.3.3 <i>The Non-intellectualist Interpretation, Novel Dilemmas, and Correct Reason</i> .....	18
3 A PUZZLE ABOUT <i>PHRONESIS</i> AND VIRTUOUS ACTION.....	23
3.1 Relation Between <i>Phronesis</i> and <i>Eudaimonia</i> .....	23
3.2 Inadequacy of the Grand End View .....	26
3.3 Virtuous Activity as the Conception of <i>Eudaimonia</i> .....	28
3.3.1 <i>The End of Action and Eudaimonia</i> .....	28
3.3.2 <i>Virtuous Action as Eudaimonia</i> .....	32
3.3.3 <i>Is Eudaimonia Defined only in Terms of the Virtuous Action?</i> .....	35
3.3.4 <i>Phronesis and the Resolution of the Dilemma</i> .....	38
3.4 A Proposal to Understand the <i>For the Sake of Relation</i> .....	40
4 CONCLUSION .....	42
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	43

# 1 INTRODUCTION

“Virtue makes the goal correct, and practical  
wisdom makes what leads to it correct”  
NE VI 1144a6-7<sup>1</sup>

This claim from *Nicomachean Ethics* has created much difficulty in understanding what Aristotle takes to be the relation between *phronesis* (practical wisdom) and the goal of action. Since the claim not only draws a distinction between moral virtue and *phronesis* but also assigns them different roles—moral virtue sets the goal and *phronesis* sets the things toward the goal—the claim, along with other claims, has created controversy about the proper interpretation of the relation between *phronesis* and the end of action.<sup>2</sup> While some scholars argue that this claim is not reflective of Aristotle’s considered position that *phronesis* plays a vital role in determining the ends of action,<sup>3</sup> other scholars argue that there is no decisive reason to deny what Aristotle says explicitly—i.e., *phronesis* determines the things toward the goal, not the goal itself.

Recently, Jessica Moss (2011) has provided a sustained defense of the claim that virtue *qua* excellent non-rational state sets the goal and *phronesis* sets the things towards the goal. In

---

<sup>1</sup> ἡ μὲν γὰρ ἀρετὴ τὸν σκοπὸν ποιεῖ ὀρθόν, ἡ δὲ φρόνησις τὰ πρὸς τοῦτον. [NE VI 1144a6-7] Throughout the thesis, unless stated otherwise, I rely on David Ross’ translation of *The Nicomachean Ethics*.

<sup>2</sup> Here and throughout the thesis, I use the term ‘virtue’ as shorthand for moral virtue (ἠθικὴ ἀρετὴ) and “things toward the end or goal” as a translation for “τὰ πρὸς τὸ τέλος.” Furthermore, though the Greek terms ‘τέλος’ and ‘σκοπός’ are not equivalent, I will use the term ‘end’ and ‘goal’ interchangeably. Neither Moss’ nor my argument hinges on making a distinction between them. For an excellent discussion of the distinction between ‘τέλος’ and

<sup>2</sup> Here and throughout the thesis, I use the term ‘virtue’ as shorthand for moral virtue (ἠθικὴ ἀρετὴ) and “things toward the end or goal” as a translation for “τὰ πρὸς τὸ τέλος.” Furthermore, though the Greek terms ‘τέλος’ and ‘σκοπός’ are not equivalent, I will use the term ‘end’ and ‘goal’ interchangeably. Neither Moss’ nor my argument hinges on making a distinction between them. For an excellent discussion of the distinction between ‘τέλος’ and ‘σκοπός,’ see C.D.C. Reeve (2012, 131-147).

<sup>3</sup> Scholars such as R. A. Gauthier (1967), T.H. Irwin (1980, 1999), Richard Sorabji (1973-74), Troels Engberg-Pedersen (1983), C. D. C. Reeve (2012), and Hendrik Lorenz (2009) support this interpretation, although there are some differences in how they understand the relation between *phronesis* and the end of action. Irwin argues, “As a result of deliberating about what promotes happiness, we discover its constituents, and so we have a more precise conception of happiness” (Irwin 1999, 249). Lorenz argues, “Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics* conceives of the virtues of character as rational states, states partly constituted by a well-informed, thoughtful quickness to grasp suitable reasons for acting in certain ways if and when such reasons arise” (Lorenz 2009, 178).

brief, the rational part of the soul, engaged in the practical domain, primarily designates practical intellect (including reasoning, deliberation, judgment, understanding, etc.), and the non-rational part of the soul designates the appetitive, passionate, and perceptual faculties.<sup>4</sup> Moss argues, “Practical intellect does not tell us what ends to pursue, but only how to pursue them; our ends themselves are set by our ethical characters” (Moss 2011, 205). Moss calls this a non-intellectualist interpretation. A central claim that Moss defends is that virtue is an excellent non-rational state formed by non-rational habituation and it is virtue that sets the end.

In this thesis, I will argue against Moss’ defense of the non-intellectualist interpretation. After briefly explaining Moss’s argument, I will offer three objections. First, I will argue that the context suggests that 1144a6-7 is a conditional claim, and since Aristotle does not uphold the antecedent of the conditional claim, the claim by itself does not warrant the separation between virtue and *phronesis*. This means 1144a6-7 does not provide an *obvious* support for the non-intellectualist interpretation. Second, I will argue that the non-intellectualist interpretation is inconsistent with the conclusion of Aristotle’s function argument. The function argument concludes that the human good is the excellence of the rational part of the soul, and if virtue *qua* non-rational state sets the correct goal or goals, then setting the correct goals seems not to be a part of human excellence. If the non-rational state sets the correct goals, then the excellence of the rational part of the soul is irrelevant in explaining the correctness of the goal. If the excellence of the rational part of the soul can be explained independent of the correctness of the goals, then setting the correct goals seems not to be part of the human good. If correct goals are part of the human good, the function argument requires that there be a connection between the

---

<sup>4</sup> Thanks to Tim O’Keefe for raising the issue that perceptual faculties do not belong in the same category as appetitive and passionate part of the soul. Since the main point here is to distinguish the rational part from the non-rational part of the soul, I will not delve into the issue of distinguishing perceptual faculty from other non-rational part of the soul.

practical intellect and the goals. Third, after briefly discussing different senses of the goal, I will pose a dilemma for the non-intellectualist interpretation. If the non-intellectualist does not differentiate different senses of the goal, then the case of the incontinent person shows that virtue *qua* excellent non-rational state is not necessary for having the correct goal. A promising way to get out of this problem is to draw a distinction between a complete and an incomplete grasp of the correct goal and then to claim that the incontinent person has an incomplete grasp of the goal. However, if the non-intellectualist upholds the different senses of the goal, then the non-intellectualist interpretation loses force for two related reasons: (1) The systematic correlation between habituation and starting-point no longer supports the claim that virtue *qua* excellent non-rational state sets the goal, and (2) non-rational habituation does not suffice for a complete grasp of the correct goal. Then, I will argue that Aristotle takes *phronesis* to be sufficient for setting a complete grasp of the correct goal. I conclude by arguing that virtue, properly understood, includes *phronesis*.

After arguing against the non-intellectualist interpretation, I will explore some implications of the intellectualist interpretation I defend. If *phronesis* defines what counts as the virtuous action in particular circumstances, then how must we understand the relation between *phronesis* and *eudaimonia*? I will consider one question about the relation between *phronesis* and *eudaimonia*: Does the virtuous person have a conception of *eudaimonia* that serves as the standard for the virtuous action? I will argue that it is incorrect to posit some conception of *eudaimonia* as the standard for virtuous action.

### **1.1 Moss's argument that virtue makes the goal correct**

Moss uses the terms 'end' and 'goal' of action to designate, among other things, the object of wish or desire; and she applies the phrase "things toward the end" to refer to things that

lead to the attainment of the end (Moss 2011, 246). According to Moss, while virtue sets the end for us, practical intellect sets the things toward the end, where “things toward the end” should be taken as a category broader than instrumental means. Practical intellect determines not only the means to effectively attain the goal, but also the *mean* in terms of what is just, courageous, generous, etc.. For example, one’s goal of acting virtuously is set by ethical character. Practical intellect determines the *mean* in terms of what is courageous, generous, just, etc. in specific circumstances, along with the *means* to realize the goal of acting virtuously.

Moss marshals passages from Aristotle in support of the non-intellectualist interpretation:<sup>5</sup>

1. Virtue makes the goal right, *phronesis* the things toward the goal. [NE VI 1144a7-9]
2. Decision won’t be right without *phronesis* nor without virtue; for the one makes us do the end and the other the things toward it. [NE VI 1145a5-7]<sup>6</sup>
3. Does virtue make the goal right or the things toward the goal? We suppose the goal, because there is no syllogizing or *logos* about this. Instead, this must be laid down as a starting-point. [EE 1227b23-25]
4. There is no deliberation of ends. [NE 1112b16]<sup>7</sup>

*Prima facie*, these texts support the non-intellectualist’s claim that one does not employ intellect to determine the end. Further corroborating the non-intellectualist interpretation, Moss points to the systematic correlation between theoretical and practical domains in setting the starting-point, in order to support the claim that in the practical domain non-rational habituation sets the starting-point. Moss argues:

---

<sup>5</sup> In what follows, I will focus mainly on what I take to be the centerpiece of Moss’s argument, i.e., that the goal is set by non-rational habituation.

<sup>6</sup> I question the appropriateness of this translation of: ἡ μὲν γὰρ τὸ τέλος ἡ δὲ τὰ πρὸς τὸ τέλος ποιεῖ πράττειν. It is not clear that the line says, “one makes us do the end.” The actual text is ambiguous. Since Greek omits the *be*-verb in some contexts, the line could simply mean that one (virtue) *is* the end, referring back to the conclusion of the function argument that the highest good is virtuous activity. The line could be interpreted to mean: for while one (virtue) is the end, the other makes us do the things toward the end. I do not provide a sustained defense of this claim in this paper; nor does my argument rely on giving an alternative interpretation of this claim.

<sup>7</sup> All four sentences are Moss’ translations (2011, 204, 222).

The role played by *nous* in the theoretical case—laying down the starting-points for reasoning—is played in the practical case by ethical character. And this means that what virtue is doing in ‘making the goal right’ is *supplying* the goal: giving us the true view of the end at which our actions aim. (Moss 2011, 222)

In the theoretical domain, one grasps the starting-point through *nous*. In brief, *nous* grasps the first principles (starting-points), and these first principles are the universals used for explaining the particulars. In the practical domain, it is the ethical character set by non-rational habituation that grasps the starting-point, and this starting-point is the goal that precedes the engagement of intellect (*ibid.*, 246-247). In regard to how the goal is grasped in a non-rational way, Moss gives us an outline: Repeated familiarity with virtuous actions forms a generalized representation of virtuous activity as good, and this generalized representation is conceptualized by the intellect and used for deliberation (*ibid.*, 255, 256).<sup>8</sup> As Moss puts it: “Character supplies the content of the goal; intellect merely renders it the sort of thing one can use in deliberation” (*ibid.*, 257). Thus, character acquired through non-rational habituation sets the goal prior to the engagement of practical intellect. Then the goal supplied by the non-rational cognition is used by the practical intellect to guide deliberation and to work out the things toward the goal. In this manner, Moss explains how virtue makes the goal right.<sup>9</sup> In what follows, I will provide three arguments against the non-intellectualist interpretation.

---

<sup>8</sup> For a detailed account of how the goal is grasped in a non-rational way, see Moss (2012, 200-233).

<sup>9</sup> Moss’ argument is richer and more complex than I present it here. The force of her interpretation relies heavily on the fact that she provides competing non-intellectualist readings for several of Aristotle’s claims that are taken to support the intellectualist reading. I aim to respond only to what I take to be a key claim in Moss’ defense, i.e., that non-rational habituation sets the starting-point and thus furnishes the goal. Yet I have to admit that my understanding of the goal set by habituation aligns quite closely with Moss’ understanding of the indeterminate nature of the goal supplied by the starting-point; where we differ is in our understanding of what we take the end to be. My understanding of end implies a concrete specification of the end, whereas Moss’ understanding of the end is more general.

## 2 THREE ARGUMENTS AGAINST THE NON-INTELLECTUALIST INTERPRETATION

### 2.1 The Argument from Context

In this section, I aim to establish that the line 1144a6-7 that is so central to the non-intellectualist interpretation does not force a non-intellectualist reading. If we look at the broader context where the claim “virtue makes the goal right” appears, we will find that the claim is a conditional claim and does not warrant a neat separation between virtue and *phronesis*.

In 1143b23-28, Aristotle asks if one can doubt the relevance of the intellectual virtues in becoming good:

Practical wisdom is the quality of mind concerned with things just and noble and good for man, but these are the things which it is the mark of a *good* man to do, and we are none the more able to act for *knowing* them if the virtues are states of *character*, just as we are none the better able to act for knowing the things that are healthy and sound, in the sense not of producing but of issuing from the state of health; for we are none the more able to act for having the art of medicine or of gymnastic. (*NE* VI 1143b23-28)

Questioning the relevance of *phronesis*, Aristotle compares *phronesis* with the art of medicine. If *phronesis* is like the art of medicine, then one can be good even without *phronesis* the way one can be healthy without having medical knowledge. And conversely, one can have *phronesis* and not be good, just the way one can have medical knowledge and not be healthy. Aristotle puts the problem in this manner:

[I]f we are to say that a man should have practical wisdom not for the sake of knowing moral truths but for the sake of becoming good, practical wisdom will be of no use to those who *are* good; but again it is of no use to those who have *not* virtue; for it will make no difference whether they have practical wisdom themselves or obey others who have it, and it would be enough for us to do what we do in the case of health; though we wish to become healthy, yet we do not learn the art of medicine. (1143b28-33)

The idea is that if *phronesis* were like the knowledge of medical science, then it would be unnecessary both for the one who is already good and for the one who is not good (since the one

who is not good can get directions from practically wise people). Aristotle then proceeds to investigate whether *phronesis* is like the knowledge of medical science. The subsequent discussions, where the claim “virtue makes the goal right” appears, are meant to show that *phronesis* is not unnecessary, implying that *phronesis* is not strictly analogous to medical wisdom.

In his discussion of the first issue (whether a good person has any use of practical wisdom), Aristotle argues that even for a good person, *phronesis* is not useless; it is choice-worthy simply because it is an excellence of the mind. Furthermore, *phronesis* is necessary *even if we were to assume that a person is already good*. This is the context of the claim, “Virtue makes the goal right; and practical wisdom makes what leads to it correct.” It is important to note that Aristotle assumes a good person and inquires whether *phronesis* would be necessary for that person. Keeping the context in mind, we can read Aristotle as saying: Even if a person is good and has virtue, and thereby the correct goal, the person would still need *phronesis* to make the things towards those goals correct.

The separation of virtue and *phronesis* is meant to highlight the importance of *phronesis* even to someone who is already good. Since the claim—virtue makes the goal correct and *phronesis* makes the things toward it correct—appears under the assumption that a person is already good, we would be justified in maintaining the separation between virtue and *phronesis* based on the claim only if the claim that a person may be good without *phronesis* is true.

Aristotle goes on to deny that one can be fully good without *phronesis*. Aristotle claims, “[I]t is not possible to be good in the strict sense without practical wisdom, or practically wise without moral virtue” (1144b30-31). If one cannot be good without *phronesis*, there is no question about the relevance of *phronesis* for a good man; *phronesis* is necessary to be good. At

this point, although it is unclear how *phronesis* is necessary to be good, it is clear that the claim at 1144a6-7 does not force a non-intellectualist reading. If part of being good is to have the correct goal or goals, and *phronesis* is necessary to be good, then it is *possible* that *phronesis* plays a role in setting the goals.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, the claim—virtue makes the goal correct and *phronesis* makes the things toward the goal correct—by itself does not warrant a neat separation between virtue and *phronesis*.

In the next section, I argue that *phronesis* must play a role in setting the goals, since the claim that practical intellect is *not* involved in setting the goal conflicts with the conclusion of the function argument.

## **2.2 The Conflict Between the Non-intellectualist Interpretation and the Function Argument**

The non-intellectualist thesis that virtue *qua* non-rational excellence sets the goal conflicts with the conclusion of Aristotle's function argument. With the function argument, Aristotle argues that the highest good of a human being is the exercise of the part of the soul that has reason (πρακτική τις τοῦ λόγου ἔχοντος). Since the good of a thing is the excellent functioning of that which makes any thing the thing it is, the human good would be the excellent functioning of the rational part of the soul.

According to the non-intellectualist interpretation, the goal is set by the non-rational part of the soul; if this is so, then the goal is not, strictly speaking, an excellence of the part of the soul that has reason.<sup>11</sup> In so far as the non-intellectualist maintains that the non-rational part of

---

<sup>10</sup> This remark is compatible with the claim that ethical virtue sets the goal and *phronesis* sets the things toward the goal, because *phronesis* and ethical virtue could be taken as independent constituents in being good.

<sup>11</sup> Henrik Lorenz points out that if we take the non-intellectualist interpretation seriously, then all the thinking, reasoning, and deliberating that goes into acting virtuously is not part of the virtue. Lorenz writes, “[O]n such a conception, the generous person's thoughtful and intelligent way of acting generously by implementing a suitable

the soul suffices to set the goal, it is unclear why attaining that goal should count as part of human excellence. Since human excellence lies only in exercise of the part of the soul that has reason, human excellence, if we take the non-intellectualist interpretation seriously, is limited to excellence in determining the things toward the goal, regardless of what goal one has. For example, if Dominique has no qualms about pursuing the wrong goals and she is excellent in pursuing those goals, then it seems Dominique's actions should count as excellent actions. Let me elaborate.

If *phronesis* only determines the things towards the goal, then the excellence of *phronesis* can be explained independent of the excellence of the goals. If human good is the excellent exercise of the part of the soul that has reason and if *phronesis* is the excellent exercise of the part of the soul that has reason, then human good is defined in terms of *phronesis*. If *phronesis* does not determine the goal, then human good can be explained independent of the excellence of the goals. In so far as human excellence can be explained independent of the excellence of the goals, human excellence is compatible with the pursuit of the wrong goals. However, according to Aristotle, an effective pursuit of wrong goals is not excellent. Only actions in pursuit of the correct goals are excellent (*NE VI 1142b18-23*). That means the excellence of the rational part of the soul must be explained in terms of the pursuit of the correct goals.

The non-intellectualist might claim that there is something excellent about an effective pursuit of the wrong goals, and maintain that there is something more excellent about having the correct goals. The excellence of the correct goals can be explained, the non-intellectualist might say, without claiming that the goals are made correct by the rational part of the soul. However,

---

decision is not strictly speaking an exercise of generosity at all" (2009, 200). Other scholars, such as Frederick Siegler, have also noted this problem. Frederick Siegler notes, "[I]f obeying reason is part of the rational element, and the rational element is peculiar to man, then how could that part of the rational element be common to men and dogs?" (1967, 31)

given that the function argument defines human good in terms of excellent exercise of the rational part of the soul, merely explaining the excellence of correct goals is not sufficient to show that *that* excellence is a part of human good. For an excellence to be a part of the human good, the excellence must involve the exercise of the rational part of the soul. To account for the excellence of *phronesis* in a way that fits with human excellence, Aristotle must maintain that setting correct goals is part of the excellence of the rational part of the soul. If the non-intellectualist assigns the goal strictly to the non-rational part of the soul, then she fails to explain why having correct goals is important for human excellence and her interpretation is unacceptable.

The non-intellectualist might object and point out that Aristotle does not assign human excellence only to the part of the soul that has reason but also to the part that listens to reason. Since the non-rational part of the soul listens to reason, the excellence of the non-rational part of the soul in setting correct goal counts as human excellence. In this way, the non-intellectualist interpretation does not conflict with the conclusion of the function argument.

However, this line of response does not adequately respond to the problem. In so far as the non-rational part of the soul grasps the goal without *listening to reason* or the correctness of the goal is not explained in terms of the involvement of reason, it is not clear that grasping the correct goal matters in terms of human excellence, since the function argument defines human excellence in terms of the exercise of the rational part of the soul. On the other hand, once the non-intellectualists concede that the non-rational part of the soul listens to reason in grasping the goal, engagement of the practical intellect seems pivotal in grasping the correct goal. If grasping the correct goal involves the engagement of the practical intellect, the non-intellectualist interpretation ceases to be non-intellectualist.

The non-intellectualist might insist that correct goals matter for human excellence in another way; perhaps correct goals are important because it is on account of reason that people have come to realize their importance, but that does not mean that each and every individual has to realize the importance of the correct goals through their own reason. Though the correct goals are the product of intellectual engagement, each person does not have to engage intellectually anew to take on those goals; the correct goals can be set by non-rational habituation. Thus, the non-intellectualist interpretation can preserve the conclusion of the function argument.

I think this line of response works well for a person *aspiring* to be virtuous, but it does not suffice for a person who *is* virtuous. In so far as a person is relying on other people's authority about the correctness of the goals, the person does not seem to have acquired an excellence in the fullest sense. Also, in so far as the person does not engage his reason to recognize the goals, those goals are not *his* excellence. After all, the best is not the one who obeys the commands of the wise, but the one who is wise himself. Furthermore, it is reasonable to think an aspirant has *some* correct goals without appropriate intellectual understanding of them. But can a person be fully virtuous without having an intellectual understanding of his goals? It seems a person who lacks an intellectual understanding and has merely been habituated to correct goals can fail to act in accordance with those goals. For example, a person might be habituated to be a vegetarian and be an avid collector of animal skins, because the person fails to recognize that the reason for being a vegetarian also applies to the case of collecting animal skins.

Nevertheless, the non-intellectualist can insist that intellectual engagement has revealed that virtuous activity constitutes one's *eudaimonia*, but a person can be non-rationally habituated to pursue virtuous activity as one's goal. However, this move relies on a misleading conception

of what it means to have a goal. I will explain why a general conception of a goal is misleading in the following sections. In brief, ‘acting virtuously’ or other general specification of the correct goal is not informative in explaining how the goal is correct. For example, if a person aims to act virtuously but thinks that it is just to beat one’s children regularly, it seems that the person gets the particular goal wrong (although the person does have a correct general goal). Now, I will discuss how failing to differentiate between different senses of the goal causes problems for the non-intellectualist interpretation, and then I will argue that a proper understanding of what it means to have a goal requires us to abandon the non-intellectualist interpretation.

## **2.3 The Non-intellectualist Interpretation and Two Senses of ‘Goal’**

### ***2.3.1 What is the Goal or End?***

The non-intellectualist maintains that the non-rational habituation sets the starting-point and this starting-point is the goal (Moss 2011, 223, 247).<sup>12</sup> Although I think it is plausible to claim that the non-rational habituation supplies the starting-point, and that having the starting-point involves recognizing (to some degree) virtuous activity as good, it is not clear to me that to have the starting-point is to have the goal in the proper sense. The person might have some idea that virtuous activity is good, but lack an idea of what virtuous activity really amounts to in specific circumstances. For example, if a person beats his children and then earnestly claims that he is doing the moral thing in “keeping his children in line,” one plausible explanation seems to

---

<sup>12</sup> In understanding the nature of the starting-point, I have benefited from Burnyeat’s discussion of habituation. As Myles Burnyeat writes, “[T]he young who have been well brought up...have acquired a taste for pleasures—namely, the pleasures of noble and just action...he realizes they [wrong actions] are unjust or ignoble” (Burnyeat 1980, 79). Yet there are some perplexities regarding the nature of the starting-point. It is not entirely clear what one really acquires in acquiring the starting-point. It seems one comes to know that virtuous activity is valuable, but it is not clear how this is accomplished.

be that the person has an incorrect conception of acting morally.<sup>13</sup> The notion of having an incorrect conception of a correct goal indicates that there is an ambiguity in the concept of the goal. What does it mean to have the goal?<sup>14</sup> Is having the correct goal same as or different from having a correct conception of the goal?

To resolve the perplexities regarding the concept of the end, it seems there are two ways to construe the end: general and particular.<sup>15</sup> “General goal” refers to a broad characterization of a goal without specifying a concrete content, such as the goal of *eudaimonia*, acting virtuously, or acting well, or acting rightly. “Particular goal” refers to a concrete specification of a goal, such as taking an academic leave to take care of one’s mother. Now we can set up a dilemma for the non-intellectualist. Regardless of how the non-intellectualist construes the goal, she faces a problem. If she fails to distinguish between various senses of the goal, then the case of the incontinent person shows that one does not need an excellent state of the non-rational soul to have the correct goal, because the incontinent person, according to Aristotle, has the starting-point, and if the starting-point is the goal, then the incontinent person has the correct goal without having virtue. But if she acknowledges the different senses of the goal, her interpretation loses its force, because, on the one hand, having the correct goal in a general sense is compatible with being incontinent and, on the other hand, non-rational habituation seems insufficient for

---

<sup>13</sup> By ‘correct conception’ I intend to designate what counts as a correct content. By ‘correct conception of a goal’ I mean getting the content of the goal correct. For example, if my goal is to act courageously but my conception of a courageous action is to act without heeding any danger, then my conception of acting courageously is incorrect (according to Aristotle).

<sup>14</sup> Gaëlle Fiasse in her paper “Aristotle’s φρόνησις: A True Grasp of Ends as Well as Means?” has noted the ambiguity in the concept of the end. Fiasse writes, “[T]here is an ambiguity about the very notion of an end in the *Nicomachean Ethics* which has not been fully recognized and explained. It is clear from the beginning that happiness is the end of ethics; yet it is worthy of note that Aristotle speaks of ends both in the singular and in the plural. If πραξίς is a specific action in specific circumstances, and if, as Aristotle says, it has its end in itself, how are we to understand these ends, or this one end, happiness, as the end of a particular action?” (2001, 324)

<sup>15</sup> There could be other accounts of the concept of the end. Regardless of which we accept, the end must be either general or particular.

getting the particular goals correct. Incontinence, in particular, brings out the difficulty the non-intellectualist faces in failing to make the distinction between different senses of the end.

### 2.3.2 *The Non-intellectualist Interpretation and the Incontinent's Starting-point*

Consider an incontinent person, Victor, who wants to act correctly, but because of unruly passions he fails to do so in various circumstances and then feels ashamed of his failure. Suppose Victor is having an adulterous affair with his neighbor's wife,<sup>16</sup> despite knowing (in some sense) that he is failing to act correctly.<sup>17</sup> Aristotle defines an incontinent person, like Victor, in the following manner:

[T]his is a sort of man who is carried away as a result of passion and contrary to correct reason—a man whom passion masters so that he does not act according to correct reason, but does not master to the extent of making him ready to believe that he should pursue such pleasures without reserve; this is the incontinent man, who is better than the self-indulgent man, and not bad without qualification; for the best thing in him, the first principle, is preserved. (*NE* VII 1151a20-25)

Aristotle maintains that the first principle (starting-point, ἀρχή) is preserved in the incontinent person. The first principle that is preserved in the incontinent person is, as Aristotle says a few lines earlier in the text (1151a15), the final cause. As final cause is the goal, we can infer that the incontinent person has the correct goal.

The case of the incontinent person clearly illustrates that one can have the starting-point while having a disordered state of the passions and appetites. This means one does not need to have an excellent non-rational state to have the correct goal. It follows that virtue *qua* excellent

---

<sup>16</sup> Thanks to Dr. Dwyer for pointing out flaws with this example. Although the example focuses on a specific kind of incontinence, incontinence is not limited to adulterous actions only. For instance, acting intemperately at the cost of another excellence might count as an instance of incontinence, such as engaging in sex at the cost of one's job performance. However, the case of adultery gives us an effective impression of a wrong action.

<sup>17</sup> I write "knowing (in some sense)" to accommodate Aristotle's conclusion that the incontinent person's actions do not result from knowledge proper. The idea is that this person's knowledge is merely apparent and not actual.

non-rational state is not necessary to have the correct goal. If one can have the correct goal without having virtue, then it is not the non-rational excellence that sets the correct goal.

Now the non-intellectualist interpretation faces a problem. The claim that virtue is not necessary for having the correct goal is in tension with Aristotle's claim that virtue makes the goal correct. As the claim that virtue makes the goal correct is a centerpiece for the non-intellectualist interpretation, its proponent cannot accept that one can have the correct goal without having virtue. So the proponent might want to reconcile the two claims in two different ways.

Here is one possible response: the incontinent person has the correct goal but the correct goal fails to function because of the unruly passion. The cognition of the correct goal shows that *some* non-rational part of the incontinent person is excellent, although *other* non-rational parts are not. It is only the excellence of *some* non-rational part that determines the correct goal, and the non-excellence of *other* non-rational part only hinders the functioning of the excellent part. This line of response does not avoid the problem. In so far as virtue constitutes an excellence of the passionate and appetitive part of the soul, the case of the incontinent person shows that virtue is not necessary for having the correct goal. This conflicts with Aristotle's claim that virtue makes the goal correct. Nevertheless, the non-intellectualist might respond in this manner: virtue is constitutive of the excellent appetitive and passionate part of the soul because the excellent appetitive and passionate part *facilitates* the realization of the correct goal grasped by the *other* non-rational part. This is how virtue *qua* excellent non-rational state makes the goal correct. However, this line of response fails to retain the distinctness of the non-intellectualist interpretation. If virtue *qua* non-rational excellence makes the goal correct, and that the excellence of appetitive and passionate part is necessary for the goal to function, then by parity

of the argument virtue includes *phronesis* because *phronesis* is required for (or facilitates) the realization of the goal. Since one can fail to realize the goal in lack of *phronesis*, virtue is constitutive of *phronesis*. In so far as *phronesis* is necessary for the realization of the correct goal, it is unclear how the non-intellectualist can maintain both: (a) virtue *qua* excellent non-rational state makes the goal correct, and (b) one can have the correct goal without having virtue. So, the first possible response does not work.

The second possible response for the non-intellectualist is that the incontinent person has the starting-point, but that does not mean that he has a complete grasp of the correct goal. To have the starting-point is to have only a partial (incomplete) grasp of the correct goal. This partial grasp of the correct goal is the general goal of acting virtuously that fails to materialize as the particular goal of refraining from that affair. In order to have a complete grasp of the correct goal, the person must grasp the particular goals as well.<sup>18</sup> In having unruly passions and appetites, the incontinent person lacks habituated virtue.<sup>19</sup> A person with habituated virtue, who is not derailed by unruly and stubborn passions, chooses the correct goals in particular circumstances. A person with habituated virtue is able to set the correct particular goals, because the person does not have unruly passions that derail him from the correct goal. Since the incontinent person's failure is a result of the unruly passions, when the person acquires an excellent non-rational state, the person comes to have a complete grasp of the goal. This complete grasp of the correct goal does not require intellectual understanding of the goal. Thus, it is virtue *qua* non-rational state that sets the correct goals, both general and particular.

---

<sup>18</sup> This does not mean that the incontinent person has no grasp of the particular goal; it simply means that the incontinent person's grasp of the particular goal is not complete. The explanation of the incomplete grasp could just be that there are other competing goals the incontinent person has and those competing goals override the particular goal of refraining from the wrongdoing.

<sup>19</sup> Although some philosophers have argued that habituation involves an intellectual training as well, here I, following Moss (2010), refer to habituated virtue as a product of purely non-rational habituation.

If the non-intellectualist distinguishes between various senses of the goal, the non-intellectualist runs into other problems. There are two major problems: First, maintaining a distinction between complete and incomplete grasp of the correct goal undermines the plausibility of other of the non-intellectualist's arguments.<sup>20</sup> Aristotle suggests a systematic correlation between habituation and starting-point; since habituation is non-rational and the starting-point is the goal, it is habituated virtue that sets the goal. If the non-intellectualist claims that having a starting-point provides one with an incomplete grasp of the goal, then she can no longer use the correlation between habituation and starting-point to support the claim that virtue *qua* non-rational state sets the (complete) goal. Second, the non-intellectualist must provide an independent reason for maintaining that non-rational habituation could suffice for a complete grasp of the correct goal—that is, that the non-rational habituation could suffice to set the correct particular goals.

It seems possible that a person lacking a proper understanding of his goals, despite having habituated virtue, can fail to determine correct particular goals in some circumstances.<sup>21</sup> Socrates expresses such a concern in *Meno*. Socrates claims, “For true opinions, as long as they remain, are a fine thing and all they do is good, but they are not willing to remain long, and they escape from a man's mind, so that they are not worth much unless one ties them down by (giving) an account of the reason why” (*Meno* 97e4-98a2). We can understand the concern in this way: a person can be familiar with a wide range of correct goals in concrete circumstances,

---

<sup>20</sup> An incomplete grasp of the correct goal designates a grasp of either the general goal or the particular goals in exclusion of the other, whereas a complete grasp of the correct goal entails that one has both.

<sup>21</sup> Although thinking and deliberating about the particular goals might seem to conflict with Aristotle's claim that there is no deliberating about the ends, it is possible to explain away the seeming conflict. Aristotle's claim could simply be that some end precedes deliberation and that something can serve as an end only in so far as it is not open to deliberation. So one can determine some end, but the end functions as an end only after one no longer deliberates about it. For instance, one can deliberate about pursuing x or y, and in so far as one is deliberating about pursuing x or y, neither of them can function as an end. However, when the person settles with x and deliberates about attaining x, x can function as an end.

but mere familiarity might not be adequate in unfamiliar circumstances. In what follows, I argue that mere non-rational habituation will not suffice to get the goals correct in all circumstances. I argue in the next section that novel dilemmas—new situations in which a person has to choose between conflicting goals—highlight the insufficiency of mere habituation in setting particular goals. Then I will argue that Aristotle takes *phronesis* to be sufficient in determining the particular goals in particular circumstances.<sup>22</sup> For the sake of simplicity, in what follows I will use ‘goal’ to refer to particular goals.

### 2.3.3 *The Non-intellectualist Interpretation, Novel Dilemmas, and Correct Reason*<sup>23</sup>

Suppose Mira grew up in relatively peaceful times and became a teacher. During her adulthood the regime of her country took a bad turn, and a dictator came into power. Now Mira faces two options: to participate in a war against the ruthless dictator and risk her own survival or to continue as a teacher and look after her family. The desirability of a just society pulls her toward the first option, whereas immediate concern for her family and her profession pulls her toward the second option.

When values make conflicting demands, it is not clear on what basis a person such as Mira would be able to choose the right action. Although a person with habituated virtue recognizes the right course of action in wide ranges of circumstances, it is reasonable to suppose that some circumstances will be unfamiliar, unexpected, or dilemmatic such that the person is not

---

<sup>22</sup> This claim is consistent with the claim that *phronesis* is not necessary to have correct conception of the correct goal in *some* circumstances, but inconsistent with the claim that *phronesis* is not necessary to have correct conception of the correct goal in *all* circumstances. The role of habituation is to start with *some* correct conceptions of the correct goal, and then the role of *phronesis* is to determine the correct conception of the correct goal in *all* circumstances.

<sup>23</sup> I use the word ‘dilemma’ to refer to the cases where a person is torn between two or more courses of conflicting actions. I am not using the word ‘dilemma’ to refer to the cases of “genuine moral dilemma.” In short, I am concerned with epistemic dilemmas, not metaphysical ones. In other words, I am concerned with the cases of moral uncertainty and a proper resolution of such moral uncertainties.

able to ascertain the right course of action. Resolving dilemmas requires understanding why certain actions are choice-worthy, but in cases of entirely novel dilemmas, when a person asks, “What is the right thing to do?” it may not be clear what answer would suffice.

The non-intellectualist can resist my reasoning and argue that a properly habituated person can perceive the right course of action in a holistic manner. One notices the features of a situation as a whole, and then decides what would be the right action to take in those circumstances. Mira could be applying unconscious analogical reasoning by comparing the novel situations with situations she is already familiar with. Situations instantiate clusters of features, and it is reasonable to assume that through proper habituation Mira is already familiar with most of the features. Experience has seasoned Mira in many ways that enable her to make connections between new and old situations. Hence, Mira can apply inductive reasoning to proceed from the familiar to the unfamiliar, without having to engage intellectually *in order to set the correct goals*. Thus, *phronesis* is unnecessary in resolving novel dilemmas.

Although one comes to be familiar through habituation with large range of virtuous actions, mere familiarity with a large range of virtuous actions will not resolve every dilemma. In fact, relying on old patterns might make it more likely that one’s choice will be influenced by one’s uncritical judgments. In such cases, not having a proper understanding of what matters and why it matters would make it likely that the person would make an uninformed or incorrect decision. Determining the right course of action in novel situations requires more critical judgment and active deliberation than one employs when attempting to fit the novel situation to the old pattern. In such cases, it seems a person needs to think carefully about what matters in order to set the correct particular goal;<sup>24</sup> it is unclear how else a person would make the correct

---

<sup>24</sup> It need not be the case that there is only one correct goal; a person might find after deliberation that several options turn out to be equally plausible goals.

judgment in such cases. If proper resolution of the novel dilemmas requires one to have an appropriate understanding of values, then mere non-rational habituation is not sufficient. Practical intellect seems necessary in setting the goal. In so far as practical intellect is necessary in setting particular goals, *phronesis* plays a pivotal role in setting the correct goals. Although one can set correct goals in *some* circumstances without *phronesis*, one needs *phronesis* to set correct goals in *all* particular circumstances, because *phronesis* is what establishes the criteria of correctness for particulars.

The non-intellectualist might object that I am conflating what counts as the goal with what promotes it. The person facing novel dilemmas is not looking for an intellectual understanding of what counts as the correct goal; the person is merely looking for what promotes the goal of acting virtuously. The non-intellectualist can accept that *phronesis* is required for resolution of dilemmas, and deny that resolving the dilemma is a matter of setting the goal.<sup>25</sup> However, this line of response fails to see the problem with defining the concept of a goal in a generalized way. As I have argued in the discussion of the incontinent person, construing the goal in a general way is problematic for the non-intellectualist interpretation.

The non-intellectualist can still resist my claim that *phronesis* is necessary for setting particular goals. One could claim that I have raised the bar too high for any kind of intellectual engagement to be successful in resolving the novel dilemmas. In cases of novel dilemmas, if habituation is insufficient, there is no good reason to think that intellectual inquiry will be successful. Both the person with habituated virtue and person with *phronesis* would be similarly clueless. They both have equal exposure to the ordinary situations and have developed similar capacities to perceive what would be the right course of action in any given circumstance. Even

---

<sup>25</sup> Thanks to Hal Thorsrud for suggesting this line of objection.

if the dilemma drives one towards intellectual inquiry, it is unclear how the intellectual inquiry helps one in making a choice in a particular situation. So long as the intellectual engagement is unhelpful in resolving the dilemmas, it is doubtful that *phronesis* is necessary for setting particular goals.

This objection questions the relevance of *phronesis* in determining the right course of action in particular circumstance. One obvious way *phronesis* is relevant is in recognizing if the dilemma one is facing is merely apparent or in fact a novel dilemma. In any case of dilemma (merely apparent or genuine), it seems one must deliberate about the course of action, and in so far one deliberates about the course of action, one needs the engagement of the intellect in determining the correct goal.<sup>26</sup> Even if the dilemma is genuine, it seems the only hope of finding a resolution lies in thinking carefully about the dilemma. I will argue that Aristotle takes *phronesis* to be the criterion of the right action. In so far as we consider *phronesis* to be the criterion of the right action and assume that a person facing novel dilemmas is looking for the criterion of the right action, *phronesis* will be sufficient in resolving novel dilemmas. In resolving novel conflicts, *phronesis* sets the correct goals in all particular circumstances.

Aristotle's overall argument in the *Nicomachean Ethics* suggests a similar account of the relation between *phronesis* and the end of action. In Book I, Aristotle claims that the goal is to act well, without providing a concrete specification of what that means. Even the claim that acting generously, courageously, justly, etc., are all ways of acting well is not sufficient to specify what counts as acting well in particular circumstances.<sup>27</sup> If one's conception of what it

---

<sup>26</sup> Thanks to Dr. Dwyer for suggesting this point.

<sup>27</sup> Gavin Lawrence (2001), in his defense of the function argument, suggests a similar picture of Aristotle's argument. Lawrence writes, "[I]n fact 'excellence' here has only a generic reference (as is shown by the subsequent phrase 'excellence or some particular excellence' at 1098b30). And even if it did stand for ethical excellence, no further specification of what these are is offered or required" (Lawrence 2001, 465).

means to act generously, courageously, justly, etc., is incorrect and if one acts on that conception, one fails to act well. According to Aristotle, the correct conception of acting well is the one that is in accordance to correct reason (*NE* II 1103b31). Aristotle defers giving an account of what this correct reason is: “We shall discuss it later, and say what the correct reason is and how it is related to the other virtues” (*NE* II 1103b32-33).

Finally, when Aristotle gives an account of *phronesis*, he claims that *phronesis* is the correct reason and that virtue is not only a state in accordance with correct reason, but a state that implies the presence of correct reason: “For it is not merely the state in accordance with correct reason, but the state that implies the presence of correct reason, that is virtue; and practical wisdom is correct reason about such matters” (*NE* VI 1144b24-25). Since *phronesis* is the correct reason in regard to action, the right action is the one that is determined by *phronesis*.<sup>28</sup> It is with *phronesis* that a person has the correct specification of goals—i.e., particular goals. Thus *phronesis* is required to ascertain correct goals in particular circumstances. Therefore, in order to preserve the coherence of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, we have to explicate the setting of the correct goals in terms of the involvement of *phronesis*. Thus, full virtue includes *phronesis*.<sup>29</sup>

I have argued that the non-intellectualist interpretation is problematic for three reasons: First, the claim—virtue makes the goal correct—turns out to be a conditional claim and, for that reason, does not warrant the separation between virtue and *phronesis*. Second, the non-intellectualist interpretation is incompatible with the function argument. Third, if the concept of a

---

<sup>28</sup> Aristotle here is refraining from giving an account of what makes an action correct or rational. Aristotle seems to leave to the person of practical wisdom (*phronesis*) to determine what is the right action. In doing so, Aristotle avoids having to provide a particular criterion of what makes an action rational or what makes an action correct. *Phronesis* is just a placeholder for the intellectual capacity that determines what is correct. The difficulty with specifying what *phronesis* is is similar to the contemporary problem with specifying the criterion of a rational action.

<sup>29</sup> All of my analysis of the relation between *phronesis* and the end or goal of action is compatible with the claim that *phronesis* determines the things towards the goal. For example, once a person sets which goal to pursue, the person would have to determine the means that are necessary for attaining that goal.

goal is construed in a general sense, presence of the starting-point in an incontinent person undermines the non-intellectualist claim that non-rational habituation sets the goal. But, if the concept of a goal is construed in a concrete sense, then it seems *phronesis* is required for the determination of correct goals. Therefore, in order to preserve the coherence of Aristotle's argument in *Nicomachean Ethics*, we must abandon the non-intellectualist interpretation of the relation between *phronesis* and the end of action.

### 3 A PUZZLE ABOUT *PHRONESIS* AND VIRTUOUS ACTION

#### 3.1 Relation Between *Phronesis* and *Eudaimonia*

So far in the argument we have established that *phronesis* determines the right course of action. However, we have not made clear what it means to have *phronesis*. Following Aristotle's argument, we claim that the goal of action is *eudaimonia*, and *eudaimonia* is virtuous activity, and *phronesis* determines virtuous action; however, we don't seem to have a satisfactory answer for the question: what is *phronesis*? For example, when a virtuous person facing conflict inquires what she should do, what allows her to choose the correct action? Does she have the knowledge of the right criteria for correct action? If she does, why does Aristotle not give us the criteria? If the virtuous person does not have the right criteria, then what allows us to think that the virtuous person would choose the correct action in case of conflict?

One might argue that since *eudaimonia* is the goal, one's *eudaimonia* sets the ultimate standard for what counts as the right action in a given circumstance. If *eudaimonia* is the ultimate criterion, then it seems the virtuous person must have a proper conception of what *eudaimonia* is and then figure out the correct course of action based on that proper conception of *eudaimonia*. Richard Kraut, for example, argues that the standard for making decision "is that such action enable us to cultivate, sustain, and exercise either of the two master virtues, namely,

theoretical and practical wisdom... The proper reason for choosing certain pleasures and rejecting others is that the former facilitate and the latter impede our efforts to lead a life whose ultimate end is excellent reasoning” (Kraut 1989, 335-336). The idea is that since Aristotle argues that *eudaimonia* is excellent exercise of the part of the soul that has reason, it appears that the standard of the right action is the life that allows for the exercise of theoretical and practical wisdom. So, when the virtuous person facing conflict inquires about the correct course of action, she must start with a conception of a life that allows for the exercise of theoretical and practical wisdom and then determine the course of action that fits that conception. Following the literature, I will call this the grand end view.<sup>30</sup>

This way of looking at the relation between *eudaimonia* and virtuous action also allows for the claim that a virtuous person chooses virtuous action for the sake of *eudaimonia*, paving the way for the charge that Aristotelian model of the virtuous person is unattractively egoistic. If a virtuous person chooses an action *because* that action promotes some specific conception of *eudaimonia*, then it is unclear how the virtuous person is acting virtuously for its own sake. If the virtuous person is acting for the sake of *her eudaimonia* and if *eudaimonia* is conceived as being distinct from virtuous action, then it is unclear how the virtuous action is acting virtuously for its own sake. A similar worry with Aristotle’s account is thought to be that there is no genuine acting for the sake of the other, since one’s action is chosen *because* that action promotes one’s *eudaimonia*, and not *because* one’s action is for the sake of the other. If one’s action is not for the sake of the other, then the action does not show sufficient regard for the value of the other.

This construal of the relation between *eudaimonia* and virtuous action is rooted in conceiving virtuous action as being *for the sake of eudaimonia*. The idea is that there is one thing

---

<sup>30</sup> Sarah Broadie (1991) coined this term. For a short defense of this view, see Kraut (1993) and, for a fuller defense, Kraut (1990).

that is *eudaimonia* and virtuous action is a way of getting that thing. When we conceive virtuous action merely as a way of attaining *eudaimonia*, we inevitably separate *eudaimonia* from the virtuous action. If the virtuous person's actions are done *for the sake of* her *eudaimonia*, one can reasonably construe that Aristotle's ethics is problematically egoistic, because the value of all considerations, be it of virtue or other-regard, is reduced to the value of *eudaimonia*. In so far we want to retain the distinctness of the value of acting for the sake of virtue or for the sake of the other, thinking that virtuous person's action are done *for the sake of* her *eudaimonia* and not for the sake of virtue or for the sake of the other appears to be unattractively egoistic. In order to argue that the virtuous person is not an egoist in a problematic way, scholars attempt to reconcile two claims: (a) virtuous person performs the virtuous action for its own sake, and (b) virtuous action is chosen for the sake of *eudaimonia*, by arguing that virtuous action can be chosen both for its own sake and for the sake of *eudaimonia*.<sup>31</sup>

The claim that the virtuous person has some specific conception of *eudaimonia* that serves as the standard of action fails to understand the relation between virtuous activity and *eudaimonia*, or so I will argue. After briefly discussing the inadequacy of the conception of *eudaimonia* as a standard for virtuous action, I will argue that Aristotle is giving the life of virtuous activity as a conception of *eudaimonia*, and to think that some conception of *eudaimonia* serves as the standard of the virtuous action is to misunderstand the order of

---

<sup>31</sup> See Jennifer Whiting, "Eudaimonia, External Results, and Choosing Virtuous Actions for Themselves" for a different interpretation. Based on Aristotle's account of loving a friend, Whiting argues, "choosing a virtuous action for *itself* involves choosing it on account of those features of it that make it the kind of action it is, where these features include its *intended consequences* (such as the benefits it seeks to provide to others)" (2002, 270). For a different line of argument (the one that is closer to my interpretation) that defuses the charge of egoism, see Julia Annas, "Self-love in Aristotle." Reconciling how an agent can both act for other's sake and for the sake of acting virtuously, Annas argues, "the agent's aim is just acting for the sake of others; in doing this he is in fact getting some good for himself, but that is not part of his aim. It is what he is doing in his whole life, which is directed at the performance of virtuous actions, and we could say that it explains his actions, but it is not his aim" (1988, 12).

analysis.<sup>32</sup> Afterwards, I will argue that acting virtuously for its own sake requires acting for the reasons that make an action virtuous. I will then argue that *phronesis* serves as a placeholder for the excellent intellectual ability to discern the correct reason in particular circumstances. I will propose that *for the sake of* relation can be understood as layered description of motivation.

### 3.2 Inadequacy of the Grand End View

Consider Mira, again. Mira is facing a conflict because she is not able to decide whether she should be a teacher or join the revolutionary forces. According to the grand end view, Mira must possess a grand end of her life—a life that is filled with the exercise of theoretical and practical reason—and in resolving the crisis, she must choose the action that fits this grand end.

This way of resolving the conflict—determining the course of action that fits the grand end of life— fails to understand the nature of the conflict. The fact that Mira has a novel dilemma can be understood in two ways: (1) Mira has some standard to determine the right course of action but she is unable to determine which action fits this standard (Interpretive Dilemma), (2) Mira does not have a standard to determine the right course of action (Substantive Dilemma). Although an interpretive dilemma is compatible with having some standard to determine the course of action, a substantive dilemma is not. If one is facing a substantive dilemma, one lacks the standard to resolve the dilemma. Let me elaborate.

First of all, unless we specify in detail the nature of life that allows for the exercise of theoretical and practical wisdom, it is unclear how Mira can use this standard to resolve the conflict. One could say that Mira is facing conflict precisely because the conception of a life that

---

<sup>32</sup> I use the term “virtuous activity” as an excellent exercise of reason to refer to both virtuous action and contemplation. Although some philosophers deny that virtuous action is *eudaimonia* based on some of Aristotle’s claims in Book X, I will not engage with the controversy here. My argument explores the implication of the position that takes virtuous action to be *eudaimonia* (even if it is *eudaimonia* of inferior kind).

allows for the exercise of theoretical and practical wisdom is not concrete enough to resolve the dilemma. Unless we specify what this conception of life is, we only have a rather unhelpful standard. That means the grand end view, as it is stated earlier, is not concrete enough to serve as a standard. However, if we try to provide a concrete specification of the grand end view, we must explain the nature of life that involves the exercise of theoretical and practical wisdom, and the concrete specification seems to give a circular answer. For instance, Mira is not choosing certain action *so that she could live a life of theoretical and practical wisdom*; her choice cannot be separated from living a life of theoretical and practical wisdom. That means Mira must exercise practical wisdom in resolving the conflict. Thus, the course of action that Mira must choose is the course of action that counts as the exercise of practical wisdom. Now we have a full circle: the standard used to resolve the conflict is simply an exercise of *phronesis*. The grand end view, if forced to provide concrete specification, reduces to a circular answer: to have *phronesis* is to have a proper conception of eudaimonia that can serve as a standard, and that standard is the exercise of *phronesis*. For this reason, I think the grand end view provides an inadequate answer about the resolution of the conflict.

One might resist my argument and claim that the proper conception of life is more concrete than the conception I consider. For example, the proper conception of life could just be some reasoned conception of how one wants to live one's life. Since one has evaluated and rationally endorsed some concrete specification of how to live one's life, the virtuous person only has to choose in accordance with that concrete specification of one's life.

This attempt to salvage the grand end view also fails, because it is reasonable to think that the virtuous person is conflicted because she is uncertain whether her antecedent plan of her life is *really* a correct plan of her life. It is reasonable to think that in facing novel conflicts, the

virtuous person either seeks an assurance that her antecedent plan of her life is correct or seeks to reevaluate and revise her plan of life. What is required is an assurance that the antecedent plan of life is correct; to simply posit it to be correct is to beg the question. In order to explain the proper resolution of the conflict, one must provide some other ways of resolving the conflict.

Novel conflicts reveal a lack of a proper standard for determining the correct course of action. Since it is difficult to both specify what could serve as the standard and explain how the virtuous person actually resolves the conflict, it is alluring to appeal to some conception of *eudaimonia* to get out of the difficulty. As I have indicated, the excellence of *phronesis* cannot be explained simply by appealing to some conception of *eudaimonia*. This is because the proper conception of *eudaimonia* is (involves) an exercise of *phronesis*.

The reason why the grand end view fails to provide a proper answer is that it misunderstands the order of analysis of *eudaimonia*. While Aristotle gives the analysis of *eudaimonia* in terms of virtuous activity, it is mistakenly thought that the goal of virtuous action is *eudaimonia* as if *eudaimonia* is something that can be defined independently of virtuous activity. Now I will explain the order of analysis to show that virtuous action—one kind of virtuous activity—is a conception of *eudaimonia*, not that virtuous action aims at *some* conception of *eudaimonia*.

### **3.3 Virtuous Activity as the Conception of *Eudaimonia***

#### ***3.3.1 The End of Action and Eudaimonia***

Aristotle begins his inquiry with the conception of the best good as the end of action. The best good, if it exists, is pursued for its own sake, and there is no other end for which the best

good is pursued. This is just a conceptual analysis of the best good. This is what I take to be the gist of Aristotle's controversial remark in section 2 of Book 1 and other relevant passages:

If, then, there is some end of the things we do, which we desire for its own sake (everything else being desired for the sake of this), and if we do not choose everything for the sake of something else (for at that rate the process would go on to infinity, so that our desire would be empty and vain), clearly this must be the good and the best good.  
[NE I 1094a18-24]<sup>33</sup>

Aristotle claims that if there is some end to all our activities such that the end is chosen for its own sake and everything is chosen for the sake of this end, this end is the good and the best good.<sup>34</sup> Aristotle is not claiming that every person's desires (from the agent's perspective) are organized based on some final end or even that every person chooses everything else for this final end. Aristotle is not merely describing an agent's psychology;<sup>35</sup> Aristotle is claiming that if there is an end that can serve as the final end and save our desires from being empty and vain, then that end would be the best good. Conversely, if our desires were not to have some final end (or, if there were not to be some stopping point for our desires), then our desire would be empty and vain, in the sense that our desire would never be complete. Aristotle posits the best good as the goal (final end), and if our desires were to be directed to this goal, then our desire would not be empty and vain.

We can look at this in another way. People have varieties of desires: some are proximate and some are distal; some are superficial and some are deep; some are directed to a proper goal

---

<sup>33</sup> With some modifications {chief good-best good}

<sup>34</sup> For a detailed explication of this passage, see Bernard Williams, "Aristotle on the Good: A Formal Sketch"; Peter B. M. Vranas, "Aristotle on the Best Good: Is *Nicomachean Ethics* 1094a18-22 Fallacious?"

<sup>35</sup> Thanks to Dr. Berry for pointing out that Aristotle's claim about the structure of desire and the final end is not *merely* about an agent's psychology. Previously, I had thought that Aristotle's claim is not about an agent's psychology at all, but now I recognize that it is misleading to claim that Aristotle's claim about the structure of desire and the final end is *definitely* not about an agent's psychology.

and some are without a proper goal. Although varieties of proximate desires are more familiar to us, in explaining the multiplicity of our desires and actions we posit more basic desires. For example, if I desire x for the sake of y, then my desire for x implies, or is explained by, my desire for y. In this sense my desire for y is more basic than my desire for x. Now we can ask: is there some desire that is the most basic and that can explain all of our desires? The most basic desire would be the final end of all our desires. If there is some end that satisfies our most basic desire and we attempt to satisfy our desires for the sake of satisfying our most basic desire, then the end of this most basic desire must be the best good. This does not mean that an agent must be aware of her most basic desire. Positing the most basic desire is a way of explaining how the multiplicities of desires are somehow united. We can look at the multiplicity of desires from the agent's perspective and then wonder if there is some final resolution of all the desires. Or, we can look at the possibility of the unity of all desires and wonder how the multiplicity of desires is connected to one single thing. It seems to me that Aristotle is claiming that desire presupposes an end, and if desires were not to be vain and empty, there must be one final end.<sup>36</sup>

Perhaps one can argue that we need posit neither one final end for the resolution of our desires nor one most basic desire to explain the varieties of desires. We can have multiple final ends that can unite our desires and also provide the possibility of resolution. In so far as Aristotle does not consider the possibility of multiple final ends it seems necessary to explain why

---

<sup>36</sup> One could deny Aristotle's claim and maintain that desire does not require one final end for proper resolution. For example, Cyrenaics denied the teleological structure of the end of human beings. O'Keefe writes, "Cyrenaics start from Aristotle's observation that the *telos* of something is what it aims at. However they *deny* that there is a *telos* to our lives as a whole, instead, each of our actions aims at some particular pleasure. And since our actions are based upon our desires, the Cyrenacis would say that, just as our actions each aim at some particular pleasure, so too do our desires aim at particular pleasures....And there is no further overall end to unify these particular ends" (O'Keefe 2002, 408). Nevertheless, it seems that Aristotle's teleology requires him to posit one most final end of action. Williams' exposition *might* fail if it is possible to make Aristotle's teleological framework compatible with multiple final ends and an absence of the most final end. Here, all that matters is that Aristotle assumes that there must be one most final end.

Aristotle assumed that there must be one final end. Explaining why Aristotle would assume this, Bernard Williams writes:

If we were merely left with the set of TL things [final ends] as each providing reasons, there could be ultimately reasonless choices *between* pursuits, since no reason could be given for choosing what conduced to one TL thing [final end] rather than what conduced to another. If this is to be avoided, there must be some TL thing [final end] that stands in a special relation to the others, as something for which they can be pursued, but not it for them, and this will be the TLT thing [the most final end].  
[Williams 1962, 294-295]

In order to preclude the possibility of reasonless choice, Aristotle must assume that there is one most final end that we as human beings seek through our desires. Since choice implies desire and desire implies an end, Aristotle is committed to positing one most final end. If there is one most final end, then that would be the best good achievable by action.

And virtually everyone agrees that the best good achievable by action is *eudaimonia*.

Aristotle writes:

Verbally there is very general agreement; for both the general run of men and people of superior refinement say that it [the best good] is happiness, and identify living well and faring well with being happy. [NE I 1905116-20]

Thus, Aristotle claims that the best good we seek is generally agreed to be *eudaimonia*. So far in the argument, Aristotle has not argued that the best good actually exists. If there is the best good for action, it is *eudaimonia*. If there is the most final end of our desires, it is *eudaimonia*. It is misleading to think that *eudaimonia* is the best good *because* everyone desires *eudaimonia*; to reason that way is to assume that everyone already knows what they desire as their final end. We need philosophical analysis to tell us about our final end precisely because we don't know about

our final end prior to philosophical analysis. In this way, *eudaimonia* is the best thing a person can achieve through action.

So far in the inquiry, the best good (i.e., *eudaimonia*) is the unknown variable. Our inquiry about *eudaimonia* is an illustration of our interest in finding the best good achievable by action. The inquiry presupposes that we do not actually know what *eudaimonia* really is, and the disagreement among people only highlights the lack of an obvious answer. Aristotle claims that people differ in their conceptions of *eudaimonia*: some people take *eudaimonia* to be a life of pleasure; some take *eudaimonia* to be a life of honor; some take *eudaimonia* to be virtue, and so on. If there is some best good achievable by action, then that good would satisfy the criteria of *eudaimonia*. That would be the end of our most basic desire. That good would be the conception of *eudaimonia* that a person can have as a target in organizing their lives and attaining the best good. At this point, Aristotle uses the function argument to claim that exercise of one's own function is the highest good for a human being.

### **3.3.2 *Virtuous Action as Eudaimonia***

With the function argument, Aristotle argues that our *eudaimonia* or the best good lies in the fulfillment of whatever is our function. The function of the human being is the exercise of the part of the soul that has reason. In order to establish this claim, Aristotle argues that the function of human beings is just the activity that is a human being's own.<sup>37</sup> That which is a human being's own is the exercise of the rational parts of the soul; so the function of a human being is the

---

<sup>37</sup> ἴδιον is translated as either 'peculiar,' or 'characteristic.' Kraut (1979) translates ἴδιον as 'peculiar.' Crisp (2004) translates ἴδιον as 'characteristic.' I think 'one's own' is a better translation of ἴδιον than 'peculiar' or 'characteristic'. ἴδιον literally means one's own, and 'peculiar' does not fully capture the meaning of ἴδιον. While some feature *f* can be peculiar to *X* (in the sense of being characteristic or distinctive or exclusive), *X* may not consider *f* to be one's own. For instance, I may have a stutter that is peculiar to me among my friends—i.e., having a stutter is my characteristic feature or a distinctive feature or even an exclusive feature among my friends—but I may not consider having the stutter as something that is my own. Instead, I may consider having the stutter as something alien to me. The word 'peculiar' allows for distinguishing a thing from relevant others based on non-central features, whereas 'one's own' purport to capture the central feature of a thing.

exercise of the rational parts of the soul. Since the good of a thing is the excellent functioning of that thing, the good of a human being would be the excellent functioning of the rational part of the soul.<sup>38</sup> If the best good for a human being is *eudaimonia* and the excellent exercise of the human function is the good of a human being, then *eudaimonia* is the excellent exercise of the part of the soul that has reason. This argument purports to show that the excellent activity of the rational part of the soul is the best good of a human being.<sup>39</sup> The inquiry that began with our quest for the best good comes to a conclusion that the best good is virtuous activity involving reason.<sup>40</sup> Corresponding with each of the two parts of the soul that involve reason—i.e., the part that listens to reason and the part that has reason—Aristotle provides two conceptions of *eudaimonia*: virtuous action and contemplation.

The import of the argument is that if we are looking for *eudaimonia*, we must look for virtuous action.<sup>41</sup> In this way, Aristotle argues that our desire for *eudaimonia* is a desire that can be fulfilled by excellent exercise of reason. This way of defining *eudaimonia* in terms of exercise of reason also harmonizes with Aristotle's claim at 1166a23-24: "the element that thinks seem to be the individual man, or to be so more than any other element in him." Since we are the intellect more than anything else, our best good is to exercise the intellect excellently. Julia Annas

---

<sup>38</sup> Here, I think Aristotle is relying on some kind of principle that can be articulated in this way: the excellent functioning of a thing counts as the best good for that given thing. There is no superior good that a thing *qua* that thing can achieve other than its excellent functioning.

<sup>39</sup> What about the self-sufficiency and finality criteria of the highest good? Shouldn't those criteria be applied to the virtuous action? In an excellent discussion of the function argument, Gavin Lawerence has pointed out that although the function argument seems to have a limited scope, it can eliminate a lot of potential candidates, such as the human good being some sort of state of the soul.

<sup>40</sup> I will use the term 'virtuous activity' as a translation of ἀρετή ἐνέργεια, enveloping both virtuous action and contemplation.

<sup>41</sup> Although the relation of *eudaimonia* with virtuous action is a matter of debate given Aristotle's surprising claims in Book 10, I will ignore the complications in this section. I will take it for granted that Aristotle considers virtuous action as a conception of *eudaimonia* and that virtuous action involves excellent exercise of reason. I have already argued that *phronesis* is the ultimate virtue that determines what counts as virtuous action in particular circumstances, and I think this is how virtuous action counts as an excellent exercise of reason.

elucidates the identification of an individual with the intellect in this way: “For what is it to identify with your practical reasoning? It is simply to make decisions and commitments based on what developed practical reasoning has worked out, and to regard these as *your* decisions and commitment” (Annas 1988, p. 4). However, we don’t find ourselves always identifying with the intellect; rather we identify with various desires and impulses that are not based on our practical reasoning, and that is what makes it possible for us to miss our final goal.<sup>42</sup>

Overall the inquiry about the best good—i.e., *eudaimonia*—has led to the conclusion that our *eudaimonia* consists in or is virtuous action. The unknown variable of *eudaimonia* is made more accessible, such that we can have a goal to aim at in life.

Aristotle has given a concrete specification of *eudaimonia* as virtuous action. So, the person aiming for the best good must inquire about virtuous action. In living a life that aims for the best good, the proper question to ask is: what counts as virtuous action? If Aristotle were to claim that virtuous action requires one to have a conception of *eudaimonia* and act in accordance to that conception, then it would make sense to claim acting virtuously requires one to have a conception of *eudaimonia*. But that is not what Aristotle says. Aristotle gives various conditions for determining whether one is acting virtuously or not:

...virtuous acts are not done in a just or temperate way merely because *they* have a certain quality, but only if the agent also acts in a certain state, that is, (1) if he knows what he is doing, (2) if he chooses it, and chooses it for its own sake, and (3) if he does it from a fixed and permanent disposition. [NE II 1105a28-33]

Thus, Aristotle offers an account of what it takes to achieve the best good. Although there is a debate about how to understand ‘acting for its own sake,’ there is a general agreement that acting

---

<sup>42</sup> Here I am relying on a distinction between what we actually are and what we find ourselves identifying with. The idea is that what we actually are (our essence) is not something that is immediately available to us. In so far we are unaware of what we are, it is possible for us to miss our final goal.

for its own sake requires acting for right kinds of reasons. For instance, if Joan offers some money to a needy stranger in order to impress her friend, then she is acting on the wrong kind of reasons. If Joan were to offer some money to a needy stranger because offering money is going to help the stranger, then that counts as acting for the right reasons.

Provided that (a) Aristotle defines *eudaimonia* in terms of virtuous action and, (b) he does not specify possessing a conception of *eudaimonia* as a condition of virtuous action, it is a mistake to think that the virtuous person determines the virtuous action based on some conception of *eudaimonia*.

One might contest both (a) and (b). One might argue that Aristotle does not define *eudaimonia* in terms of virtuous action, but in terms of the conjunction between certain desirable state of affairs and virtuous action. Or, one might argue that although Aristotle does not specify possession of a conception of *eudaimonia* as a condition of virtuous action, a conception of *eudaimonia* is necessary for setting the standard of virtuous action or for resolving dilemmas.

### **3.3.3            *Is Eudaimonia Defined only in Terms of the Virtuous Action?***

In order to contest (a), one might appeal to some passages from Aristotle to advance the claim that virtuous action is supposed to be only a constituent of *eudaimonia*, and in so far *eudaimonia* is the goal, virtuous action must aim for a correct conception of *eudaimonia* that balances all the constituents of *eudaimonia*. There are two main passages that are usually interpreted to mean that *eudaimonia* includes more than virtuous action:

A self-sufficient thing, then, we take to be one which by itself makes life desirable and in no way deficient; and we believe that happiness is such a thing. What is more, we regard it as the most desirable of all things, not reckoned as one item among many; if it were so reckoned, happiness would obviously be more desirable by the addition of even the least good, because the addition makes the sum of goods greater, and the greater of

two goods is always more desirable. Happiness, then, is found to be something perfect and self-sufficient, being the end to which our actions are directed. [NE I 1097b15-21]

We are now in a position to define the happy man as ‘one who is active in accordance with complete virtue, and who is adequately furnished with external goods, and that not for some unspecified period but throughout complete life.’ And probably we should add ‘destined both to live in this way and to die accordingly.’ [NE I 1101a14-19]

However, these passages do not undermine the claim that *eudaimonia* is virtuous action in a complete life. The second passage, in Greek, can be read as follows: We can conclude that the happy man realizes complete virtue in action, and with adequate supply of external goods (the happy man) lives not only for unspecified time but throughout a complete life. I supply this reading because the phrase ‘external goods’ in Greek is in dative, and it is proper to read “external goods” as means to secure virtuous activity. The idea is that the happy (*eudaimôn*) man is the one who realizes complete virtue, and with an adequate supply of goods the person is able to realize complete virtue throughout life. Read this way, we can maintain that *eudaimonia* is virtuous action and claim that external goods are only necessary to ensure that one manages to live a complete life engaged in virtuous action.<sup>43</sup>

Secondly, the self-sufficiency condition only specifies that the highest good cannot be made better by addition of other goods, and this claim is compatible with *eudaimonia* being virtuous action, because for a virtuous person there is nothing one can add to the virtuous action to make the composite more desirable. One might resist my construal and insist that virtuous action can be made more desirable in certain circumstances, for example, by addition of external

---

<sup>43</sup> As Robert Heinaman (2007, 228) has pointed out, there is another problem with defining *eudaimonia* as a composite of activity and state of affairs: since *eudaimonia* is a good of the soul, it is unclear how a composite of good of the soul (virtuous action) and goods of the body (health or beauty) or external goods can add up to the good of the soul. So, according to Heinaman’s argument, either *eudaimonia* is virtuous action or *eudaimonia* is not an activity, but a composite.

goods. However, there are two possible responses: if one finds virtuous action to be more desirable by addition of some other good, then either (a) one who is making the judgment is not virtuous (and it is only the virtuous person who serves as the standard), or (b) what is thought to be the virtuous action is simply not virtuous. Our judgment that some virtuous actions can be made more desirable by addition of other good might be a result of the discrepancy between our standard of virtuous action and Aristotle's standard of virtuous action. After all, Aristotle posits a pretty high standard for an action to be virtuous action. Aristotle writes:

...it seems clear that happiness needs the addition of external goods, as we have said; for it is difficult if not impossible to do fine deeds without any resources. Many can only be done as it were by instruments—by the help of friends, or wealth, or political influence. There are also certain advantages such as good ancestry or good children or personal beauty, the lack of which mars our felicity; for a man is scarcely happy if he is very ugly to look at, or of low birth, or solitary and childless; and presumably even less so if he has children or friends who are quite worthless, or if he had good ones who are now dead. [NE I 1099a32-1099b6]

It is not the case that in lack of friends, wealth, or political influence, one's *eudaimonia* is compromised despite acting virtuously.<sup>44</sup> Aristotle is claiming that it is difficult to perform fine deeds without these resources. The fact that Aristotle thinks friends, wealth, political influence, and other resources are required for one to do fine deeds indicate that his standard of virtuous action is somewhat different than our contemporary notion of virtuous action. So, if we understand Aristotle's concept of virtuous action as requiring external goods, instead of thinking

---

<sup>44</sup> Eric Brown (2006) provides a defense of the claim that external goods (including both health and wealth) are necessary for happiness only because external goods are necessary for virtuous rational activity, and he provides a novel argument to in support of his claim: lack of external goods causes psychological pain and on account of the pain one is not able to act virtuously in the best possible way. Thus, external goods are important because their absence mars the luster of *eudaimonia*.

of *eudaimonia* as being composite of virtuous action *and* external goods, then we can avoid the claim that a proper conception of *eudaimonia* involves virtuous action and other goods.

Another way to resist my argument is to claim that our interest in *eudaimonia* stretches over certain conditions that are desirable independent of their contribution to the virtuous action. For instance, in addition to acting virtuously it is desirable to be financially secure. Although financial security may allow for different sets of virtuous action, financial security does not add to the virtuousness of the action. However, this line of argument does not affect my argument, because if a good (for instance, wealth or healthy body) is desirable independent of its contribution to the virtuous action, that good cannot figure in the deliberation about the virtuous action. If one claims that it is necessary for that good to figure in one's deliberation about the virtuous action, it is unclear how that good is desirable independent of its contribution to the virtuous action.

### ***3.3.4 Phronesis and the Resolution of the Dilemma***

One might contest (b)—Aristotle does not specify the possession of a conception of *eudaimonia* as a condition for virtuous action—and argue that even if Aristotle does not explicitly mention the need for a conception of *eudaimonia*, it is clear that something like a conception of *eudaimonia* is required to set the standard of virtuous action. To sustain the claim that the virtuous person has a certain conception of *eudaimonia* that serves as a standard for determining the virtuous action, one might claim that in absence of some specific conception of *eudaimonia*, the virtuous person facing a novel conflict is left without a resolution.<sup>45</sup> If a person facing a conflict is taken to be ignorant about what constitutes the virtuous action in that

---

<sup>45</sup> Or, one could claim that Aristotle has provided a circular analysis of the good. If (a) the best good is defined in terms of virtuous action, (b) virtuous action is determined only by a person with *phronesis*, and c) *phronesis* is just the excellent intellectual ability to determine the virtuous action, then we have a circular analysis of the good.

particular circumstance, then there is nothing the virtuous person can appeal to in order to determine the virtuous action. If it is not clear how the virtuous person would manage to act virtuously in facing a novel dilemma, then either *phronesis* seems to be insufficient for acting virtuously or we have erred in explicating the notion of *phronesis*.

I don't think that the virtuous person facing novel conflict is left without a resolution. The fact that the virtuous person does not have some specific criteria does not entail that the virtuous person is at a complete loss. Nor do we need to claim that *phronesis* is an unhelpful concept for thinking about the virtuous action. Properly understood, *phronesis* is not only a helpful way for thinking about the virtuous action but also a fitting way of capturing the fragility of our ethical decisions. What Aristotle is offering is a conception of intellectual excellence using *phronesis* as a placeholder. This analysis of *phronesis* does not imply that *phronesis* gives one access to the criterion of right action. Neither does *phronesis* entail having all the right answer for all possible ethical problems. Aristotle is avoiding the claim that one can provide a yardstick to determine the virtuous action in all cases. Determining what counts as the correct reason is an open-ended endeavor that requires commitment to thinking and sensitivity to the limits of our ways of thinking. To recognize the openness of ethical inquiry is to recognize that at any given time our ethical inquiry might be incomplete. Due to the limitation of information or ways of thinking, we might err on the side of defining what counts as the correct reason too narrowly. In light of new information or novel ways of thinking, our conception of what counts as the correct reason might change. Acknowledging that our best reasons for action might fall short or rupture, it behooves us to make the best judgments based on the information we have and our ways of thinking, while being sensitive to better ways of thinking about reasons. And what counts as best reasons is something that requires enduring intellectual engagement. The intellectual skill acquired though

enduring intellectual engagement is *phronesis*. Although we have certain ethical guarantees through our intellectual engagement, we are always testing and expanding our ethical limits. *Phronesis* determines the virtuous action in particular circumstances and the virtuous person is committed to acting in accordance to *phronesis*. It is through the rational consideration and assessment of the relevant practical demands or concerns that the virtuous person is able to resolve the dilemma.<sup>46</sup>

Therefore, the attempt to explicate *phronesis* in terms of some plan of life or conception of *eudaimonia* misses Aristotle's order of analysis of *eudaimonia* in terms of virtuous activity, nor is such explication necessary for understanding how the virtuous person determines the virtuous action.

Now I will consider the *for the sake of* relation between virtuous action and *eudaimonia*.

### **3.4 A Proposal to Understand the *For the Sake of* Relation**

Once we understand the relation between *eudaimonia* and virtuous action, we can shed light on another related issue about the actual goal the virtuous person has in mind. Although one might have virtuous action as a goal in life, in particular circumstances one must have some particular goal or the other.<sup>47</sup> However, having the *de re* goal of acting virtuously seems unattractive in certain circumstances. For instance, Gael is a generous person and Sunny, Gael's friend, is in desperate need of money. Gael helps Sunny by offering a large sum of money. One can ask: Does Gael help Sunny because Gael aims to act virtuously or does Gael help Sunny because Sunny needs help? Although the virtuous person has the goal of acting virtuously, it

---

<sup>46</sup> In thinking about *phronesis*, I am influenced by Daniel Russell's (2012) conception of *phronesis*. While Russell characterizes *phronesis* in terms of virtuous reasons, my inquiry is more focused on determining what counts as virtuous reason.

<sup>47</sup> I assume that I have provided sufficient reason to think that the virtuous person does not have a conception of *eudaimonia* as a goal that serves as the standard for virtuous action.

seems unattractive for the virtuous person to be motivated by the goal of being virtuous when it comes to acting virtuously, because it seems better for Gael to be moved by Sunny's plight than the goal of acting virtuously. Gael helping Sunny because she has the goal of acting virtuously does not appear to be an attractive model of the virtuous person.<sup>48</sup>

I think one way to answer is that Gael offers a large sum of money because Gael aims to help Sunny, and that fact makes the action virtuous. The action being excellent is a second-order description of the action, not the thought that motivates the virtuous person to act in the particular circumstance. Gael's desire to help Sunny implies Gael's desire to act virtuously, but we can maintain both: (a) maintain that Gael's primary motivation is to help Sunny, and (b) Gael is motivated to act virtuously. We can think of motivation as being layered: for Gael, the most immediate motivation (primary) is to help Sunny; nevertheless the less immediate motivation (that forms the character) is to act virtuously. When we say that Gael has the goal of acting virtuously, we are describing Gael's character, and when we say that Gael has the goal of helping Sunny, we are describing Gael's immediate motivation. That does not mean Gael is acting on two goals; it only means that we can *describe* Gael's action by appealing to two goals (*de re* goal of helping Sunny and *de dicto* goal of acting virtuously). Once we describe the structure of motivation as being layered rather than a string of goals connected in a *for the sake of* relation, we can understand how the virtuous person can be motivated by the immediate concern and yet have the goal of virtuous action.

---

<sup>48</sup> This concern is related to the self-effacing objection to virtue theory (Keller 2007). As Keller writes, "An ethical theory is self-effacing, in the relevant sense, if the considerations that it posits in telling that story sometimes should not serve as motives for action, according to the theory itself" (Keller 2007, 221). Virtue ethics presents virtuous agents as models to be emulated, implying that "it is never undesirable for an agent to be moved to action by the thought that...she is acting as the fully virtuous person would" (224-225). However, sometimes it is undesirable for an agent to be motivated by the idea of emulating virtuous agents. Therefore, virtue-ethics is self-effacing.

Or, perhaps the attempt to find the precise thought that motivates the action of the virtuous person is somewhat misguided. As John Tutuska writes, “When Aristotle says that the courageous (and generally the virtuous) act for the sake of the noble and (for the most part) leaves the matter at that, we must take seriously the possibility that the lack of clarity of this statement is due neither to obtuseness on Aristotle’s part nor to our historical difficulties in reconstructing Aristotle’s notion of the *καλόν* but is more significantly a deliberate reflection of the lack of clarity found in much of our motivation” [Tutuska 2013, 174]. Perhaps we cannot parse our motivations with as much precision as we can parse the descriptions of our motivations. If we take this idea seriously, then the unattractive picture of the virtuous person is a result of our attempt to draw finer distinction in things that are not amenable to finer distinctions.

#### 4 CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I argued against the non-intellectualist interpretation of Aristotle’s claims about the relation between *phronesis* and the end of action. I argued that Moss’ interpretation relies on an incorrect understanding of the concept of goal. As I argued, the concept of goal can be understood in two ways: (a) General goal, and (b) Particular goal, and that *phronesis* is necessary for setting particular goals.

However, it is unclear how *phronesis* sets particular goals in cases of novel dilemmas. While I argued that *phronesis* sets the standard of virtuous action, I argued against the attempt to define the standard of virtuous action in terms of some plan of life. I proposed that it is fitting to understand *phronesis* as a placeholder for intellectual excellence produced through enduring intellectual engagement, but it is not entirely clear to me how the intellectual excellence is supposed to yield the judgment about virtuous action. That leaves the inquiry about *phronesis* unresolved.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Annas, Julia, 1989. "Self-love in Aristotle," in *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 27, pp. 1-18.
- Annas, Julia, 1995. *The Morality of Happiness*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Broadie, Sarah, 1991. *Ethics with Aristotle*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Brown, Eric, 2006. "Wishing for Fortune, Choosing Activity: Aristotle on External Goods and Happiness," in *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy* 22, pp. 221-254.
- Burnyeat, M. F., 1980. "Aristotle on Learning to Be Good," in *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*, ed. Amelie Oksenberg Rorty. California: University of California Press, pp. 69-90.
- Grube, G.M.A, tr. 1997, *Meno in Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper. Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company.
- Crisp, Roger, tr. 2004. *Aristotle: Nicomachean Ethics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Fiasse, Gaëlle, 2001. "Aristotle's  $\varphi\rho\acute{o}\nu\eta\sigma\iota\varsigma$ : A True Grasp of Ends as Well as Means?" in *The Review of Metaphysics* 55 (December), pp.323-337.
- Gauthier, R.A, 1967. "On the Nature of Aristotle's Ethics," in *Aristotle's Ethics: Issues and Interpretations*, ed. James. J. Walsh and Henry L. Shapiro. California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, pp. 10-29.
- Glassen, P., 1957. "A Fallacy in Aristotle's Argument About the Good," in *The Philosophical Quarterly* Vol. 7. No. 29, pp. 319-222.
- Heinaman, Robert, 1988. "Eudaimonia and Self-sufficiency in the Nicomachean Ethics," *Phronesis* Vol. 33 No. 1, pp. 31-53.
- Heinaman, Robert, 2007. "Eudaimonia as an Activity," in *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* Vol. 33, pp. 247-279.
- Hursthouse, Rosalind, 1999. *On Virtue Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hursthouse, Rosalind, 2006. "Practical Wisdom: A Mundane Account," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society New Series*, Vol. 106, pp. 285-309.
- Irwin, Terence H., 1980. "The Metaphysical and Psychological Basis of Aristotle's Ethics" in *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*, ed. Amelie Oksenberg Rorty. California: University of California Press, pp. 35-53.
- Irwin, Terence H., tr. 1999. *Aristotle: Nicomachean Ethics*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company.
- Joachim, H.H., tr. 1951. *Aristotle: The Nicomachean Ethics. A commentary*, ed. D.A. Rees. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Keller, Simon, 2007. "Virtue Ethics is Self-Effacing," in *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* Vol. 85 No. 2, pp. 221-231.
- Kraut, Richard, 1979. "The Peculiar Function of Human Beings," in *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* Vol. 9 No. 3, pp. 467-478.

- Kraut, Richard, 1990. *Aristotle on the Human Good*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Kraut, Richard, 1993. "In Defense of the Grand End," in *Ethics* Vol. 103 No. 2 (1993), pp. 361-374.
- Lawrence, Gavin, 2001. "The Function of the Function Argument," in *Ancient Philosophy* 21, pp. 445-475.
- Lorenz, Hendrik, 2009. "Virtue of Character in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*," in *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, Vol. 37, pp. 177-212.
- Moss, Jessica, 2011. "'Virtue Makes the Goal Right': Virtue and *Phronesis* in Aristotle's Ethics," in *Phronesis*, Vol. 56 (2011), pp. 204-261.
- Moss, Jessica, 2012. *Aristotle on the Apparent Good*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- O'Keefe, Tim, 2002. "The Cyrenaics on Pleasure, Happiness, and Future-Concern," in *Phronesis* Vol. 47, No. 4, pp 395-416.
- Reeve, C. D. C., 2012. *Action, Contemplation, and Happiness: An Essay on Aristotle*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Rorty, Amelie Oksenberg, 1978. "The Place of Contemplation in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*," in *Mind* New Series, Vol. 87, No. 347 (Jul.), pp. 343-358.
- Russell, Daniel, 2012. *Practical Intelligence and the Virtues*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Siegler, Frederick, 1967. "Reason, Happiness, and Goodness," in *Aristotle's Ethics: Issues and Interpretations*, ed. James. J. Walsh and Henry L. Shapiro. California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, pp. 30-55.
- Sorabji, Richard, 1973. "Aristotle on the Role of Intellect in Virtue," in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* New Series, Vol. 74 (1973-1974), pp. 107-129.
- Tutuska, John, 2013. "Aristotle on the Noble and the Good: Philosophic Imprecision in the *Nicomachean Ethics*," in *Ancient Philosophy* Vol. 33, pp. 159-179.
- Vranas, Peter. B. M, 2005. "Aristotle on the Best Good: Is *Nicomachean Ethics* 1094a18-22 fallacious?" in *Phronesis*, Vol. 50 No. 2, pp. 116-128.
- Whiting, Jennifer, 2002. "Eudaimonia, External Results, and Choosing Virtuous Actions for Themselves," in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. LXV No. 2, pp. 270-290.
- Wedin, Michael. V., 1981. "Aristotle on the Good for Man," in *Mind* Vol. 90. No. 358, pp. 243-242.
- Williams, Bernard, 1962. "Aristotle on the Good: A Formal Sketch," in *The Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 12 No. 49, pp. 289-296.