

# VIRTUE, NORMS, & OBJECTIVITY

*Issues in Ancient and Modern Ethics*



*edited by*

CHRISTOPHER GILL

OXFORD

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*Issues in Ancient and Modern Ethics*

CHRISTOPHER GILL

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# PREFACE

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This volume of new essays is based on papers given at a conference, 'Ancient and Modern Approaches to Ethical Objectivity', held at the University of Exeter in July 2002. The chapter by Timothy Chappell was written specially for the volume. I am most grateful to all the contributors for their willingness to collaborate in exploring cognate issues in ancient and modern ethical theory. Thanks are due too to all others who participated in the conference, especially Richard Sorabji, and Exeter colleagues who chaired sessions, including John Dupré, Professor of the Philosophy of Science. John Dupré's involvement in the conference indicates the welcome fact that the University of Exeter is the first British university (as far as we are aware), of those which discontinued teaching philosophy in the funding cuts of the 1980s, to restart a philosophy programme, based in the Department of Sociology and Philosophy.

I would like to acknowledge with thanks the contribution to the funding of the conference of the British Academy, the Classical Association of England and Wales, the A. G. Leventis Foundation, the Society for the Promotion of Hellenic Studies, and the University of Exeter; the Leventis Foundation also supported the preparation of the volume for publication. Thanks are due also to Peter Momtchiloff and Rupert Cousins at Oxford University Press, for their valuable support and guidance, and also to anonymous readers for the Press. I would like to give special thanks to Kerensa Pearson for her characteristically excellent work as the editorial assistant for the volume.

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# CONTENTS

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|   |     |
|---|-----|
| NOTE ON CONVENTIONS   | ix  |
| NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS   | x   |
| Introduction  | 1   |
| <i>Christopher Gill</i>   |     |
| <b>Part I: Issues in Ancient and Modern Theory:<br/>The Nature and Grounding of Ethical Norms</b> | 13  |
| 1. In What Sense are Ancient Ethical Norms Universal?   | 15  |
| <i>Christopher Gill</i>   |     |
| 2. On the Idea of the <i>summum bonum</i>   | 41  |
| <i>Sarah Broadie</i>  |     |
| 3. The Look and Feel of Virtue  | 59  |
| <i>Nancy Sherman</i>  |     |
| 4. Virtues, Values, and Moral Objectivity   | 83  |
| <i>Ludwig Siep</i>  |     |
| 5. Virtue, Nature, and Providence   | 99  |
| <i>Sabina Lovibond</i>  |     |
| 6. Hybrid Theories of Normativity   | 113 |
| <i>Wolfgang Detel</i>   |     |
| 7. Commentary on Detel from a Stoic Standpoint  | 145 |
| <i>Christopher Gill</i>   |     |



|   |     |
|---|-----|
| <b>Part II Readings in Ancient Philosophy:<br/>Ethical Virtue and Objective Knowledge</b>   | 155 |
| 8. Socratic Ethics: Ultra-Realism, Determinism,<br>and Ethical Truth<br><i>Terry Penner</i>   | 157 |
| 9. Out of the Labyrinth: Plato's Attack on Consequentialism<br><i>Mary Margaret McCabe</i>  | 189 |
| 10. What Difference do Forms make for Platonic Epistemology?<br><i>Christopher Rowe</i>   | 215 |
| 11. 'The Good Man is the Measure of All Things':<br>Objectivity without World-Centredness in Aristotle's<br>Moral Epistemology<br><i>Timothy Chappell</i> | 233 |
| 12. Aristotelian Virtue and Practical Judgement<br><i>A. W. Price</i>   | 257 |
| 13. An Aristotelian Commentator on the Naturalness of Justice<br><i>R. W. Sharples</i>  | 279 |
| REFERENCES  | 295 |
| INDEX OF ANCIENT PASSAGES   | 315 |
| GENERAL INDEX   | 319 |

## NOTE ON CONVENTIONS

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The abbreviations for ancient authors and works are normally those used by H. G. Liddell, R. Scott, and H. S. Jones, *A Greek–English Lexicon*, 9th edition (Oxford, 1940), and P. Glare, ed., *Oxford Latin Dictionary* (Oxford, 1982). All quotations in Greek, Latin, and other foreign languages are translated. In Latin quotations, *u* is used rather than *v* in all words except personal names, as in the *Oxford Latin Dictionary*.

All secondary works cited by author and date are included in the References at the end of the volume. References to earlier modern philosophers (e.g. Mill, Hegel) are normally to recent editions and pages in those editions. In the case of citations of Kant, references are given either to the volume and page number of the standard Royal Prussian Academy edition (often given at the side of the page of modern editions) or to the pages of modern editions or both. References to p./pp. are to modern editions, e.g. ‘Kant, vol. 4, 437–41 (1948: pp. 98–102)’.

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# Introduction

CHRISTOPHER GILL

## Scholarly Context: Debate about Ancient and Modern Ethics

This volume of new essays discusses issues in ancient and modern philosophy about the nature and grounding of ethical norms and concepts, including virtue, and, in particular, the idea that ethics is objectively grounded. To appreciate the contribution of this collection, it is helpful to locate it, in the first instance, against the larger background of recent debate about the relationship between ancient and modern ethical theory; this debate also bears on the merits and demerits of different types of ethical approach and on the nature and basis of the norms and concepts on which these approaches centre.<sup>1</sup>

During much of the twentieth century, it was common to draw a sharp contrast between the characteristic forms of modern ethical theory, centred on deontological and consequentialist approaches, and those of ancient philosophy, focused on virtue and happiness. Two famous accounts of this contrast, from sharply different standpoints, were H. A. Prichard's 'Does Moral Philosophy Rest on a Mistake?' (1912) and G. E. M. Anscombe's 'Modern Moral Philosophy' (1958). Both accounts accentuated the widespread modern assumption that there are certain distinctively 'moral' motives and actions and that it is the task of moral philosophy to construct theories based on that assumption. By contrast, ancient ethical theory took as fundamental the agent's pursuit of happiness, which might be realized (on some accounts) through virtue, though virtue—even *ethical* virtue—was not to be seen as identical with modern *moral* motivation. Prichard embraced the modern notion of 'the moral'

<sup>1</sup> For a fuller version of the first section of this Introduction, see Gill (2004*d*).

and, following Kant, deplored the attempt by Plato and Aristotle among others—as he understood their aim—to justify morality by showing that it produced happiness. Anscombe, on the other hand, presented the modern approach as based on an unrealistic picture of human psychology, and advocated a return to the ancient, happiness-centred or eudaimonistic, outlook.

Anscombe's response prefigured that of two famous books by modern philosophers in the 1980s, Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue* (1981) and Bernard Williams's *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (1985). Both books offered powerful critiques of the dominant (deontological and consequentialist) strands in modern moral philosophy and presented Greek ethical thought, especially Aristotle's, as providing a more promising model for contemporary theory. Both thinkers argued that modern philosophy neglected the agent's perspective and also understated the role of interpersonal relationships and localized communal values and attachments in shaping this perspective. Modern theories such as Kantianism or Utilitarianism tried, instead, to find an external foundation for ethical life in (allegedly) universal principles such as the Categorical Imperative or the Greatest Happiness Principle. These principles were used, in Williams' phrase, as 'Archimedean' points to lever morality into conceptual frameworks which failed to acknowledge—what he saw as—the real source of ethical motivation, namely, the agent's outlook as shaped by personal commitment and interpersonal engagement.<sup>2</sup> In so far as MacIntyre and Williams saw a credible role in ethics for general or universal notions, such as human nature, they thought this role should be grounded in the individual's pre-established attitudes and dispositions.<sup>3</sup> Williams, like Anscombe, was highly sceptical about what he called 'morality, the peculiar institution', that is, the assumption that there is a distinctive set of exclusively 'moral' motives centred on the desire to do one's duty or benefit others for its own sake (1985, ch. 10).

These two books have been at once very influential and strongly contested as regards their claims about the direction that modern moral theory should take and about the relationship between ancient and modern ethics. In modern philosophy, the shift of focus that MacIntyre and Williams advocated was already under way in the resurgence of what is now known as 'virtue ethics'. Philippa Foot's *Virtues and Vices* (1978) and Peter Geach's *The Virtues* (1977) had already appeared, and other books

<sup>2</sup> Williams (1985), 28–9, MacIntyre (1981), chs. 4–5.

<sup>3</sup> Williams (1985), ch. 8, especially 152–5; also MacIntyre (1981), ch. 15.

on the virtues and ethical character followed in the 1980s.<sup>4</sup> Two programmatic accounts of virtue ethics were offered in the 1990s, by Michael Slote (1992) and Rosalind Hursthouse (1999). Debate about the relative advantages and disadvantages of virtue ethics, as compared with other modern moral approaches, has figured extensively in articles.<sup>5</sup> There is little doubt that virtue ethics has returned as a significant dimension in modern moral philosophy.

How does modern virtue ethics relate to its ancient version? There are, of course, various views on this point; but Hursthouse's *On Virtue Ethics* (1999) provides an illuminating example. One might say that she adopts the form of Aristotelian ethics but not its specific content. Her theory shares with Aristotle's the focus on the agent's standpoint and the assumption that happiness is a valid overall objective and one which can be realized through the exercise of the virtues. But she rejects what she calls Aristotle's 'deplorable views on both slavery and women' (2) and embraces virtues, such as charity or benevolence, not recognized by Aristotle (8). While sharing Aristotle's view that ethical theory consists in debate among committed members of an ethical community, instead of trying to convert the immoralist by argument,<sup>6</sup> she has in mind the modern ethical community (8). Hursthouse also sets out to show that virtue ethics can make a positive contribution to the characteristic concerns of other types of moral theory, such as the motivation of duty and the ethics of abortion (1999: ch. 6, 1991). To this extent, Hursthouse's approach represents a willingness to engage, from the standpoint of virtue ethics, with the characteristic themes of deontology and consequentialism. This represents a sharp contrast with the more polemical stance of Anscombe, MacIntyre, or Williams.

Hursthouse's readiness to explore areas of common concern between theoretical approaches, without giving up her core position, can be paralleled in some other recent work, including writings from a deontological and consequentialist standpoint. Some thinkers in the Kantian tradition, including Christine Korsgaard in *The Sources of Normativity* (1996), have given greater prominence to the role of virtue than has been characteristic of deontology.<sup>7</sup> Nancy Sherman, in *Making a Necessity of Virtue* (1997) shows that the Aristotelian and Kantian theories have more shared insights regarding ethical deliberation, rationality, and interpersonal

<sup>4</sup> Dent (1984), Hudson (1986), and Pincoffs (1986).

<sup>5</sup> See e.g. Trianosky (1990), Statman (1997), 2–41, and Crisp and Slote (1997).

<sup>6</sup> See Arist. *EN* 1.3–4, 10.9. For this approach, see also Allard-Nelson (2004).

<sup>7</sup> See also O'Neill (1984) and Herman (1993).



relationships than one might have expected. A collaborative volume (Engstrom and Whiting 1996) presents scholars associated with Aristotelian or Stoic and Kantian approaches engaging with the other standpoint and finding a surprising degree of common ground. There have also been some attempts to present Utilitarian theory in a form that is more centred on character and way of life and less on the impersonal application of the Greatest Happiness Principle or on general rules promoting beneficial results.<sup>8</sup>

What view has been taken on this question by scholars of ancient ethics and how far have they responded to these issues in modern theory? No single answer is possible, partly because of diversity of opinion<sup>9</sup> and also because some scholars are both specialists of ancient ethics and participants in contemporary debate. But some salient strands can be identified, especially among scholars who have responded directly to currents in modern thinking.

Martha Nussbaum, for instance, has reflected current philosophical debates in her interpretations of ancient philosophy and has also made an independent contribution to ethical theory. *The Fragility of Goodness* (1986) was strongly informed by Williams' critique of Enlightenment, especially Kantian, ideas and by his advocacy of a more agent-centred, and emotionally rich, conception of ethical life.<sup>10</sup> More recently, Nussbaum has suggested that Stoic cosmopolitanism and cognitivism about emotions offer valuable paradigms for modern theory.<sup>11</sup> The combination of her engagement with Stoicism and her own philosophical thinking have led her to take up a distinctive position in current ethical theory. On the one hand, she champions the universalist, trans-cultural values, such as human rights, that Williams and MacIntyre regarded as typical of the generalized ('Archimedean') norms espoused by Enlightenment theory. On the other hand, she gives much more attention to the question how these values can become socially and culturally embedded than has been characteristic of Kantian or Utilitarian theory.<sup>12</sup> She has also explored what it means for an individual agent to embrace

<sup>8</sup> See e.g. Crisp (1992), Singer (1997), Driver (2001), and Hurka (2003).

<sup>9</sup> For instance, Penner (pp. 157–8, n.2 below) signals strong dissent from the rather prevalent scholarly view that ancient, or at least Socratic-Platonic ethics shares the same essential concerns as modern morality (pp. 5–7 below); on this at least he is at one with Prichard (1912), pp. 1–2 above.

<sup>10</sup> See e.g. Nussbaum (1986), 29–30, 427–81.

<sup>11</sup> See Nussbaum (1997 and 2001); also (1994), chs. 9–12.

<sup>12</sup> See Nussbaum (1996). A significant influence on this aspect of her thought is recent work on welfare economics, especially by Amartya Sen.

universalist ideals and to incorporate them within an emotionally engaged life (2001: 359–69). Thus, her thought still highlights aspects of ethical life commended by Williams, together with the generalized norms about which he was highly sceptical.

Julia Annas' study of Aristotelian and Hellenistic ethical theory, *The Morality of Happiness* (1993) offers a synoptic account of the main characteristics of ancient virtue ethics and eudaimonism; in more recent work, she suggests that this forms a possible framework for modern virtue ethics.<sup>13</sup> Annas accentuates the difference in the overall shape or structure of ancient theory from that of modern deontological and consequentialist theories, which are unified architectonically and centred on a single norm (such as the Greatest Happiness Principle, or the Categorical Imperative). Ancient theory is shaped around the agent's perspective; as Annas puts it, 'making sense of my life as a whole' constitutes the 'entry-point of ethical reflection'.<sup>14</sup> However, Annas also emphasizes that ancient theories are concerned with—what we should see as—*morality* (as her book-title highlights), in particular the other-benefiting dimension of morality, whose importance is recognized by modern virtue ethics as well as by other modern approaches. Examination of ancient reflection on the virtues, especially justice, and on friendship, shows that even seemingly egoistic theories, such as Epicureanism, give weight to other-benefiting motivation. Annas also stresses that ethical reflection is conceived, in ancient philosophy, as having the leverage to lead the agent to revise her priorities in life and not simply to give theoretical form to pre-formed attitudes (1993, parts 3–4).

This line of approach can be paralleled in some other recent scholarship. For instance, some studies of ancient theories on interpersonal relationships, including A. W. Price's *Love and Friendship in Plato and Aristotle* (1989), have argued that the presentation of one's own happiness as one's overall goal is fully compatible with (what modern thought would see as) 'altruistic' motives and actions.<sup>15</sup> Two key texts that seem, on the face of it, to raise problems for this type of view are Plato's presentation of the philosopher-rulers in the *Republic* (519–21) as potentially reluctant to go back into the cave of political action and Aristotle's expression of preference for philosophical contemplation over practical action combined with ethical virtue in *Nicomachean Ethics* 10.7–8. These passages

<sup>13</sup> See Annas (1998) and (2003).

<sup>14</sup> See especially her introduction, also chs. 1 and 22.

<sup>15</sup> Price (1989), chs. 2–4, also (on Epicureanism), Mitsis (1988), ch. 3.

seem to run counter to what modern thought would regard as a correct understanding of 'moral' (other-benefiting) priorities. The various scholarly responses to these problematic texts display a spectrum of views on the relationship between ancient ethics and modern conceptions of morality.

Some important studies have suggested that the gap is less wide than it appears. Richard Kraut, in *Aristotle and the Human Good* (1989) stresses that contemplation is not conceived by Aristotle in egoistic terms but as a co-operative activity and as the highest expression of friendship.<sup>16</sup> Sarah Broadie, in *Ethics with Aristotle* (1991), argues that what Aristotle has in mind in *EN* 10.7–8 is not so much abstract contemplation as the reflective aspect of a full human life, and that a crucial function of such reflection is to celebrate the fineness of practical wisdom and ethical virtue.<sup>17</sup> Terence Irwin has attributed to both Plato and Aristotle versions of the idea that rational deliberation about the best life will lead us to recognize that benefiting others will enable us to realize our essential, rational, selves. He sees this as a salient theme in Aristotle's theory of friendship, and also as a line of thought which Plato could coherently have used to resolve the problem that fully educated philosopher-rulers may be reluctant to go back into the cave of political involvement.<sup>18</sup> There are striking parallels between this strand in the interpretation of ancient ethics and the tendency noted earlier to seek for common ground between the moral concerns of virtue ethics and other modern theories (including Kantian and consequentialist ones), in spite of their differing conceptual frameworks.<sup>19</sup>

In *Individual and Conflict in Greek Ethics* (2002, chs. 1–2, 5–6), Nicholas White offers a partial challenge to this approach. White does not dispute the idea that ancient ethical theory centres on what modern thought understands as 'morality'. What he argues is that modern scholars have de-emphasized moral conflicts which occur just as much in ancient as in modern theory, notably those between individual and state and between pursuing your own happiness and doing what is best for others. White takes Plato's presentation of the attitude of the philosopher-rulers to re-entering the cave and Aristotle's debate about the maximally happy life in *EN* 10.7–8 as expressing the recognition of moral conflicts of this type.

<sup>16</sup> Kraut (1989), 59–62, 175–8, 188–9, 341–53.

<sup>17</sup> Broadie (1991), ch. 7, especially 383–6, 412–19. See further Gill (1998c), 3–4.

<sup>18</sup> Irwin (1977), 242–8, (1995), chs. 17–18, especially 288–303, 310–17, (1988), 376–81, 390–7. For the influence of Kantian and post-Kantian models on Irwin's interpretative approach, see Gill (1996b), 260–6, 275–9, 326–31, 338–40; see also Irwin (1984).

<sup>19</sup> See text to nn. 7–8 above.

White claims that the tendency to deny the existence of such conflicts has its roots especially in Hegel's picture of Classical Greek thought as free from the moral conflicts that are accentuated especially by Kant, a picture that was perpetuated by (anti-Kantian) modern thinkers such as MacIntyre and Williams. In *Personality in Greek Epic, Tragedy, and Philosophy* (1996*b*), Christopher Gill also underlines the problematic character of these key passages in Plato and Aristotle. However, they are seen as reflecting a deep-rooted cultural pattern in Greek thought, and also as expressing a specific way of thinking about human personality, characterized as 'objective-participant'. The claim, broadly, is that Plato and Aristotle, like the problematic heroes of Homer and tragedy, were exploring fundamental issues, and reaching ethically uncomfortable conclusions, *for the community* of which they acted as engaged representatives.<sup>20</sup> Gill also argues that modern scholars are too ready to assume that ancient interpersonal ethics are appropriately framed in term of 'altruism', and that they should take more seriously the Greco-Roman stress on different norms including reciprocity and the shared life or solidarity.<sup>21</sup>

What this survey has set out to show is that there has been, in the last twenty years especially, a rich and vigorous debate about the relationship between Greco-Roman and contemporary ethical thought. It has also shown that this debate has helped to shape the direction of modern ethical thought—especially the revival of modern virtue ethics—and to inform scholarship on ancient philosophy. This debate forms a key part of the background against which the present volume has been prepared.

### The Focus of this Volume

What contribution does this volume make to this dialogue between ancient and modern ethical thought? There are two main focuses, which are closely linked. One is on the overall shape and structure of ethical theory, its key concepts or categories and their interrelationship. The other is on the grounding of ethical norms, of virtue and ethical knowledge, and, in particular, what it means to say that ethics is *objectively* grounded.

Which areas of previous scholarly debate are especially relevant for this volume? The background for the first set of questions (about the shape

<sup>20</sup> Gill (1996*b*), especially 11–12, 287–320, 370–83; the nature of the community involved varies in different cases.

<sup>21</sup> Gill (1996*b*), ch. 5, especially 334–46, 348–55, also 303–4, and (1998*a*).

and concepts of ethical theory), is set by the large-scale debate just outlined about the relationship between virtue ethics, in its ancient and modern versions, and other types of moral theory, including deontological and consequentialist ones. As noted, this debate has embraced the question, raised especially by MacIntyre and Williams, whether ethical norms should be conceived as grounded in a way that is internal or external to the agent's perspective.<sup>22</sup> A related debate is under way among Classical scholars about the sense in which, for instance, for Aristotle or the Stoics, 'nature' or 'human nature' functions as a norm.<sup>23</sup> A further, and recent, project that is germane to this volume is that of 'virtue epistemology', exploring the implications of virtue ethics for the theory of knowledge.<sup>24</sup>

The question whether we can identify an objective (by contrast with a subjective or intersubjective) basis for ethics—a key question for the second set of topics in this volume—is, of course, a long-standing one in modern philosophy. Thinkers who have raised this question in connection with ancient as well as modern philosophy include Donald Davidson and Hans-Georg Gadamer.<sup>25</sup> The term 'objectivity' (like its correlative, 'subjectivity') has no obvious equivalent in Greek and Latin.<sup>26</sup> But there are a number of ancient ethical theories, including those of Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics, which argue for, or assume, the idea that certain, independent, or absolute knowledge of ethical truth is in principle possible, by contrast with ancient theories which argue for relativism or scepticism.<sup>27</sup> It is on those (objectivist) theories that the contributions on ancient ethics focus in this collection; these chapters both presuppose earlier scholarship on ancient ethical epistemology<sup>28</sup> and make a substantial contribution to this subject.

The volume thus builds on a number of areas of debate regarding ancient or modern philosophy and their interrelationship. But it also

<sup>22</sup> See text to nn. 2–3 above, also text to nn. 11–12 (on Nussbaum).

<sup>23</sup> See e.g. Annas (1993), chs. 4–5, McDowell (1980), 366–71, (1995), Gill (2004e). See further pp. 22–4, 148–51, and p. 248–54 below.

<sup>24</sup> See e.g. Zagzebski (1996), Fairweather and Zagzebski (2001), DePaul and Zagzebski (2003).

<sup>25</sup> See further discussion by Rowe, pp. 224–30 below.

<sup>26</sup> For divergent views about the relevance of 'subjectivity', at least, to Greek thought, see Burnyeat (1982), Everson (1991), and Fine (2003).

<sup>27</sup> The theories of the latter type include that of Protagoras; also of the Cyrenaics, and Pyrrhonian and Academic Sceptics (on which, see Algra et al. 1999: 241–59, 323–51).

<sup>28</sup> Heinaman (1995) on Aristotle and 'moral realism' is a particularly relevant earlier treatment.

breaks new ground, raising original questions and offering searching and sustained analyses of salient issues in this connection. This volume is subdivided into two parts. In the first part, *Issues in Ancient and Modern Theory: The Nature and Grounding of Ethical Norms*, the chapters examine subjects which figure in both ancient and modern theory or focus directly on the relationship between ancient and modern ideas. In the second part, *Readings in Ancient Philosophy: Ethical Virtue and Objective Knowledge*, the chapters offer new interpretations of specific features of ancient theories, ranging from Socrates to Alexander of Aphrodisias. However, the second part is closely related in approach to the first: the ancient issues are examined in a way which brings out their larger significance for ethical theory in general. Questions relating to the nature of ethical concepts and the grounding of ethical norms are examined in both parts of the volume, while the relationship between virtue or the good and objective knowledge is a subject of special importance in the second part.

### Outline of the Volume

#### *Issues in Ancient and Modern Theory: The Nature and Grounding of Ethical Norms*

There are two main issues in the first part of the volume. One is that of the overall shape of ethical theory and the nature of ethical concepts in ancient and modern philosophy (Chapters 1–3). The other is that of the grounding of ethical norms, including virtue, especially the question whether these can be conceived as based on ‘nature’, in some sense (Chapters 4–7).

The volume begins with three chapters on the character and interrelationship of normative concepts in ancient and modern ethical theory. Christopher Gill asks how far we can find an equivalent in ancient philosophy for the idea, prominent in some versions of modern theory, notably Kantian and Utilitarian, that moral norms are necessarily universal ones and that universality is a guarantee of objectivity. He suggests that the main role for universality in ancient thought lies in the idea that ethical belief and action can be informed by an understanding of ethical concepts and of reality, both conceived in a broad (universal) sense. Objectivity in ancient theory is tied to knowledge of ethical truth rather than to universality. Sarah Broadie distinguishes two ways of understanding the idea that a specific good is ‘the highest’. In one, exemplified by Mill’s Utilitarianism, the highest good (pleasure, for Mill) is thought of as

the standard of right and wrong. According to the other approach, which can be found in various ancient theories, what makes a given good 'highest' is some relation in which it stands to other goods. There are different ways of understanding the relation in question. On the interpretation which Broadie mainly explores, the highest good is what gives value to the other goods. Nancy Sherman's topic is that of the scope of the ethical or moral, in particular, how far morals should include reference to 'the look and feel of virtue', in the sense of behavioural styles and interpersonal emotions. She highlights the fact that even ethical theories which lay stress on the internal motives of ethical action and which de-emphasize the ethical significance of interpersonal emotions, such as Kant's theory and Stoicism, recognize a role for manners as an index of underlying attitude and character, a point illustrated especially in Seneca's *On Doing Kindnesses* (*de Beneficiis*).

The next two chapters explore questions about the grounding of virtue ethics, in both modern and ancient versions. Ludwig Siep asks what kind of objectivity can be attributed to virtue. Against the view that conceptions of virtue are simply culturally relative, he emphasizes both the degree of continuity in conceptions of virtue and the idea that changes in such thinking express shared reflection about what kind of virtue is most in accordance with human nature, rather than mere variation in fashion. Sabina Lovibond starts from a suggestion by Rosalind Hursthouse that the idea that the virtues are grounded in human nature represents a non-religious version of the belief in divine Providence. Examining this proposal, she offers a critical commentary on Hursthouse's attempt to find a credible (quasi-Aristotelian) middle ground between the (Stoic and Kantian) conviction that virtue is sufficient for happiness and Bernard Williams' view that human nature is just 'an ill-sorted *bricolage* of powers and instincts'.

Wolfgang Detel, raising the question of the source of ethical normativity, reviews three modern theories, those of teleosemantics, Donald Davidson, and Robert Brandom, which seek in different ways to explain ethical normativity in semantic terms. Detel argues against this approach, citing as a preferable alternative Plato's view that semantic normativity (as displayed in dialectic) needs to be located in a rich framework of types of normativity grounded in an understanding of reality. He concludes by outlining a 'hybrid' theory of ethical normativity, which integrates three types of normativity, bearing on organic functions, semantics, and conscious evaluations. In a commentary on this essay, Christopher Gill considers how far Detel's 'hybrid' theory can be compared, not just with Plato's view of dialectic, but also with the Stoic idea that a complete

understanding of the good would depend on the integrated understanding of logic (including what is now known as ‘semantics’), ethics, and physics.

*Readings in Ancient Philosophy: Ethical Virtue and Objective Knowledge*

The chapters in this part of the volume offer fresh and challenging interpretations of the ethical theories of Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and the Aristotelian tradition. At the same time, the contributors underline the relevance of their interpretations for the understanding of ethical philosophy more generally. The ancient versions of virtue ethics are also analysed by reference to modern categories, such as consequentialism or intersubjectivism, or are defined by contrast with such modern positions. The dominant question is that of how, and how far, these theories state or imply a form of ethical objectivism; typically, objectivity is conceived in terms of the agent’s correct understanding and application of ethical truth.

Terry Penner presents Socratic ethics as an expression of what he calls ‘ultra-realism’. The hallmark of this position is that agents are understood and assessed by reference to their success in maximizing their real good (happiness), regardless of whether or not this is how they themselves interpret their intentions and actions. They are also understood as aiming at the same real good as everyone else. Penner draws out the radical nature of the contrast between this ‘ultra-realist’ or objectivist approach and that found in Aristotle and much modern theory, which is based on the contrast between inner intention and external facts. Whereas Penner views Socratic ethics as a form of consequentialism, M. M. McCabe finds in Plato’s *Euthydemus* a critique of consequentialism. McCabe’s discussion focuses on one of the central (and much-debated) claims in the argument, that wisdom is the only intrinsic good. Through an interpretation which locates this claim within the larger dialectical drama of the dialogue, McCabe argues that what is implied is that wisdom must be understood as a property of persons as agents and as exercising the human capacity for philosophy. Thus interpreted, the dialogue suggests the (anti-consequentialist) conclusion that goodness is a function of agents, rather than of states of affairs.

Christopher Rowe challenges a reading of Platonic ethical epistemology which goes back to Aristotle, according to which our epistemic goal is absolute knowledge of Forms, such as that of the Good, understood as transcendent, ‘separate’ entities. He argues that this goal is, ultimately, unintelligible, and that a more credible view of the Platonic project is that we should aim to ‘approximate’ to knowledge of the truth. Developing this



view, he considers, but finally rejects, the intersubjectivist analysis of Platonic dialectic (as a means of gaining knowledge) suggested by Davidson and Gadamer. He concludes that Plato's ethical philosophy has to be understood in objectivist terms, but suggests that it is better interpreted as a continuation of (what Penner calls) Socratic 'ultra-realism' than as the evolution of a transcendent metaphysics.

Two chapters explore from different directions the question of the objectivism of Aristotelian ethics. Timothy Chappell begins by contrasting the apparently 'mind-centred' approach of Aristotle's ethical epistemology with his general 'world-guided' epistemology. He argues that Aristotle takes the good person (or *phronimos*) as the measure of all things not because he doubts the objectivity of morals or because he is an ethical particularist but because he thinks that objectivity in ethics can only be defined by reference to the knowledge of an ideal agent. A. W. Price examines in Aristotle the ideal of a type of judgement that is at once veridical (based on a true ethical assessment of the situation) and practical (determining the best course of action in a specific situation). He explores the cognitive content of this ideal: the combination of virtuous motivation, specification of goals or 'quasi-goals', and perception of appropriate actions in particular contexts. He suggests that Aristotle's ethical objectivism is expressed in the formulation of this cognitive ideal, rather than in mounting a defence of objectivism against the kinds of immoralism and relativism that Plato, for instance, confronted directly.

R. W. Sharples concludes the volume by extending the discussion to the later Aristotelian school. He examines a little-known defence of the naturalness of justice ascribed to the second-century AD commentator, Alexander of Aphrodisias. He shows how a text of this type needs to be interpreted by reference to a long history of debate about whether justice is natural or conventional. Although the text consists, essentially, in commentary on that tradition, Sharples argues that it also makes some important independent moves within the debate and in that way enlarges our understanding of ancient arguments for ethical objectivity.

**PART I**

**Issues in Ancient and Modern Theory  
The Nature and Grounding of Ethical Norms**

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## In What Sense are Ancient Ethical Norms Universal?

CHRISTOPHER GILL

There is an important strand in modern thought which links moral rules or norms closely with universality. Moral rules are seen as ones which, necessarily or by definition, apply universally; universality of application is also sometimes linked with impartiality. Moral rules are also sometimes thought to be determined by a process of universalization or to be based on a universal principle. Also, ethical objectivity is often conceived as based on universality. What is the position in ancient thought? If we find that ancient ethical thought does not give the same role to universality, should we therefore suppose that ancient thought embodies, by contrast, a version of moral particularism? I suggest, rather, that ancient thought displays a recurrent pattern in which universality figures at the more reflective or theoretical levels of ethical thought: the analysis of central ethical ideas and the attempt to link these ideas with core features of reality. This is compatible with the thought that much ethical deliberation is particularized in its formulation and is shaped by culture-specific norms. However, it is also maintained by ancient thinkers that the universal ideas based on higher-level reflection can inform and modify practical ethical deliberation in a way that may make a substantive difference to the forms and outcome of that deliberation. I consider how far the role given to universality in ancient thought is comparable to that in modern thought and, in particular, how far objectivity is tied to universality.

This is an extensively revised version of the paper given at the Exeter conference on ethical objectivity. I am most grateful for responses from the participants at the conference, and also for useful comments on earlier written versions by Sarah Broadie and an anonymous reader for Oxford University Press. I would also like to thank very warmly my Exeter theological colleague, Mark Wynn, for exceptionally helpful comments.

## **Universality in Modern Ethical Thought**

I begin by outlining the idea, familiar both in modern ethical practice and at the theoretical level, that ethical or moral rules are by definition universal ones. Universality is also often associated with impartiality and with objectivity. Universality is seen as a guarantee that an ethical norm or principle holds good objectively or absolutely, as distinct from being valid only in certain social or cultural contexts. Universality is also taken as ensuring that the norm functions in an objective way that is not coloured by the particular situation or individual subjectivity of those affected. An index of this set of ideas is the prevalence of debate—in political and social life as well as in theoretical contexts—about what, precisely, ‘universality’ means in this connection. Does universality require that moral rules be applied in a completely uniform way or, rather, in a way that, while not strictly uniform, is at least appropriately or consistently applied. A closely related question is this. What is the scope of the relevant class to whom any given moral rule applies? Does the same rule apply equally to, for instance, humans and non-human animals, men and women, adults and children, natives and aliens, heterosexuals and homosexuals? Or should the moral rule in question apply, rather, in a way that is appropriate to each of the two subgroups (for instance, human and non-human animals), and in a way that consistently reflects differences between these subgroups? Questions of this type are highly prominent in modern ethical debate; and they reflect, I think, the assumptions that moral rules or principles are by definition universal, that universality implies impartiality, and that this is a guarantee of objectivity.

A further index of the prevalence of this set of ideas in modern ethics is the frequency of reference to certain famous formulations of moral principles or rules which are couched in universal form. One is the Ten Commandments in the Bible (Exodus 20). These Commandments include: ‘Thou shalt have no other gods before me’ and ‘Thou shalt not kill’ (20: 3, 13, King James version). Although presented there as rules given by God to Moses for the Jewish people, they have been widely treated, in cultures influenced by the Judaeo-Christian tradition, as religiously based moral rules which hold good universally for all human beings. A secular code of comparable importance in modern life is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations on 10 December 1948. For instance, Article 1 is: ‘All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of

brotherhood.’ Article 12 is: ‘No one shall be subjected to arbitrary interference with his privacy, family, home or correspondence, nor to attacks upon his honour and reputation. Everyone has the right to the protection of the law against such interference or attacks.’ There are, of course, salient differences between these codes: one is religious, and formulated as rules, the other is secular, in some sense political, and stated as a set of rights. But they have in common with each other and with other influential modern documents (including the US Declaration of Independence)<sup>1</sup> the aim of formulating principles which are intended, or are sometimes now taken, to apply universally. The currency of such formulations may be taken as one of the factors which promotes the prevalence of the modern ideas that moral rules or principles are necessarily universal in form and in application, and that this universality safeguards their objectivity.

These ideas have also figured prominently in modern moral theory, notably in two important strands of modern moral theory, the Kantian and the Utilitarian, taken as representing the deontological and consequentialist approaches.<sup>2</sup>

For Kant, it is a fundamental feature of moral rules that they should apply universally, and impartially, equally to others and to oneself. Kant gives this recommendation for ethical action: ‘Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.’ He illustrates this point by presenting imaginary agents considering practical rules for action (‘maxims’) and then rejecting them on the grounds that these rules cannot credibly be willed as universal laws. For Kant, the imperative ‘Act only on that maxim . . .’ is ‘categorical’, that is, one which applies absolutely, and not ‘hypothetically’, in a way that depends on specific circumstances.<sup>3</sup> Kant does not claim that moral laws are, or should be, derived from beliefs or knowledge about reality in a larger (universal) sense, for instance about God, the universe, or human nature. On the contrary, the universalizability of moral rules is seen by him

<sup>1</sup> This Declaration includes this claim: ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.’

<sup>2</sup> The deontological approach centres on the question of what constitutes a right act, whereas consequentialism focuses on the question of the beneficial or non-beneficial outcome of acts and defines their rightness or wrongness accordingly. The contrast between ancient and modern thought comes out most strongly if we concentrate on these strands of contemporary theory; virtue ethics, another major strand in current philosophy, is much closer to ancient thought in this respect; see p. 31 below.

<sup>3</sup> Kant, *Groundwork*, Prussian Academy edition, vol. 4, 421, also, vol. 4, 422–3 (1948: p. 84, quoted, pp. 85–6). For conventions in this volume for references to Kant, see p. ix above.

as a purely formal or procedural principle, which holds good regardless of the beliefs held by a given agent or in a specific social context.<sup>4</sup> However, Kant does couple his procedural analysis of moral rules with one substantive metaphysical claim, namely that human beings, as rational agents, are constitutively capable of the kind of ‘autonomy’ involved in identifying universalizable laws and in obeying them.<sup>5</sup>

Universality is also a crucial feature of Utilitarianism, in that moral principles are seen as universal ones and as applying impartially, to others as to oneself. But this point of similarity is accompanied by an important difference. Whereas the universalizability of moral rules is presented by Kant as purely formal, Utilitarianism presents morality as founded on a universal principle which reflects, in turn, a conception of human nature and of what is ‘natural’. As Mill puts this, at the start of *Utilitarianism*:

The creed which accepts as the foundation of morals, Utility, or the Greatest Happiness Principle, holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. By happiness is intended pleasure, and the absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain and the privation of pleasure.<sup>6</sup>

This principle is taken, in Utilitarianism, to provide the basis for defining the rightness of specific acts or (in another version) of general rules. Hence, when Mill, like Kant, emphasizes that morality applies universally, that is, impartially, he links this point with the foundational principle of maximizing human happiness. As he puts it:

the happiness which forms the utilitarian standard of what is right in conduct, is not the agent’s own happiness, but that of all concerned. As between his own happiness and that of others, utilitarianism requires him to be as strictly impartial as a disinterested and benevolent spectator.

Mill also urges ‘devotion to the happiness . . . either of mankind collectively, or of individuals within the limits imposed by the collective interests

<sup>4</sup> For the exclusion of such ‘external’ grounds for morality as beliefs about human nature and happiness or God, see Kant, vol. 4, 425–7, 441–3 (1948: pp. 88–9, 102–4).

<sup>5</sup> Kant, vol. 4, 437–41 (1948: pp. 98–102), supplemented in vol. 4, 446–63 (1948: pp. 107–23) by the claim that rational beings (as participants in the ‘noumenal’ standpoint) are constitutively capable of freedom of the will.

<sup>6</sup> Mill (1993), 7. This difference underlies Mill’s criticism of Kant’s seemingly similar ‘universal first principle [i.e. the Categorical Imperative] as the origin and ground of moral obligation’, namely that Kant’s principle gives no specification as regards the ethical *content* of the rules thus universalized (4, cf. 54–5). For the conception of human nature held to underlie this Principle, see Mill, 8–17.

of mankind', and refers to 'universal happiness' and the 'general good'.<sup>7</sup> A further aspect of the universality of morality is also held to follow from this general principle, namely moral equality. Mill argues that the Greatest Happiness Principle entails that any 'one person's happiness' should be 'supposed equal in degree', that is, 'counted for exactly as much as another's'. He links this idea with 'Bentham's dictum "everyone to count for one, nobody for more than one"' (1993, 64).

### **Universality in Ancient Ethical Thought**

What is the position in ancient ethical thought? I begin by outlining two possible views. According to the first view, there is a deep structural difference between ancient and modern thought in this respect: ancient thought embodies a version of moral particularism and moral principles are not conceived as universal in form or application. According to the second view, there are at least two important roles given to universality in ancient thought and these roles enable us to define three levels of ethical understanding, each of which provides the basis for making correct judgements in specific situations. I suggest that the second of these two views is the more credible. However, it does not follow that universality has the same kind of role in ancient as in modern ethical thought, or that universality is linked in the same way to objectivity.

The first, negative, view could be stated in this form. Both in specific ethical judgements and in the highest type of ethical knowledge (often characterized as 'wisdom'), what is important for ancient theory is not universality but correctness or truth. There are certain recurrent features of ancient thought that might be cited in support of this view. One is the characterization of ethical expertise as the ability to make correct judgements in specific situations. This characterization is not accompanied by the requirement that those judgements involve a process of universalization or depend on a universal principle such as the greatest happiness of the greatest number. The thought is, rather, that the person with ethical expertise is the one who knows that *this* specific act is just or brave in this situation, taking into account the particularities of the context and the relevant ethical considerations. This claim is not so easy to make in

<sup>7</sup> Mill (1993), 17–18. Mill allows that, mostly, people act (rightly) with the motive of helping *particular* people, but denies that this invalidates the Utilitarian principle of maximizing human benefit in general (20–2).



connection with theoretically based ethical knowledge, where the object of knowledge (for instance, the good or human nature) is, unquestionably, conceived in universal terms. But here too, one might argue, the object of knowledge is not, characteristically, *defined* by reference to universality. Ethical knowledge is characterized, instead, by reference to the nature of the epistemic state, on the one hand, and of the reality or truth known, on the other.<sup>8</sup>

This view could be supported by reference to well-known aspects of several ancient theories. Aristotle, for instance, often describes the work of the *phronimos*, who combines practical wisdom with good ethical motivation, in terms of accurate ‘perception’ of the right course of action in specific situations. Aristotle also explicitly rejects the idea that it is possible for anyone, including ethical theorists, to define in general terms what would constitute a correct act in any given specific situation.<sup>9</sup> Features of this kind have sometimes led scholars to describe Aristotle as a moral particularist. Whether or not that description of Aristotle is justified,<sup>10</sup> there is a marked absence of stress on universality in this aspect of Aristotle’s theory. There are analogous features in other ancient theories. In Plato’s *Republic*, the communal work of the fully educated philosopher-ruler is described as that of making correct judgements about what is just, brave, and so on in specific situations, without further explication of the ethical content of these judgements (520c). There are several indications in Stoic thought that it is impossible to state in general terms, from the outside, what a truly wise person would do in a given situation. On the contrary, it is made clear that the wise person’s actions might well run counter to what are generally considered as correct rules of behaviour.<sup>11</sup> These are theories that are normally classed as objectivist in approach; hence the stress on particularity of judgement does not derive from relativism or subjectivism of philosophical outlook.<sup>12</sup> Also, as noted earlier, it is taken to be possible to characterize in general terms the kind of (objective) knowledge involved.<sup>13</sup> But, as regards the ethical judgements made by the person with ethical knowledge, all that can be said is

<sup>8</sup> For general accounts of knowledge (or related cognitive states) and their objects, see e.g. Pl. *Republic* (R.) 476–80, 509d–513e, Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* (EN) 6. Long and Sedley (1987) (= LS), 41.

<sup>9</sup> See further e.g. EN 1.3, 6.7, esp. 1141b14–21, 6.8, esp. 1142a11–20, 6.10, 6.11.

<sup>10</sup> On this question, see Chappell, pp. 245–8, and Price, pp. 272–7, below.

<sup>11</sup> See further Kerferd (1978), Inwood (1985), 213–15, Vander Waerdt (1994a), 4855, (1994b), 287–8, 300–1.

<sup>12</sup> See further on this point p. 28 below.

<sup>13</sup> See n. 8 above.

that they are correct and appropriately correlated with a given situation. We cannot formulate these judgements as general rules; and there is no reason to think that these judgements are reached through a process of universalization or derived from a universal principle such as the maximization of human happiness.

This view is not implausible and includes some points which, I think, are valid regardless of whether or not one accepts the general picture just outlined. But we can offer a more credible account of ancient thought, which recognizes significant roles for universality while also acknowledging differences from the modern ideas noted earlier. We can identify, in a range of ancient theories, two clear types of universality, and these can be correlated with three types or levels of ethical understanding. Both the two types of universality are well-known to scholars, although they are not necessarily characterized in terms of universality. The first is the analysis in abstract terms of key ethical concepts, above all, happiness and virtue. The second is the attempt to link the conception of happiness adopted by the theory with certain universal features of reality, such as human nature or the universe. I outline these two types of universality and then consider how they are correlated with three levels of ethical understanding.

Both types of universality are linked with certain central and well-known features of Greek and Roman ethical theory. From the early (supposedly ‘Socratic’) dialogues of Plato to late antiquity, ancient ethical theory is centred on a recurrent set of general questions. One is that of the nature of virtue or the virtues: this issue, formulated in the ‘What is X?’ question of the early Platonic dialogues, underlies the kind of definition and analysis of the virtues which figures prominently in, for instance, Plato’s *Republic*, Aristotle’s ethical writings, and our sources for Epicurean and Stoic theory.<sup>14</sup> A related question, which has been intensively examined in recent scholarship, is that of the nature of happiness (*eudaimonia*) or, as it is also often expressed, the overall goal (*telos*) or ‘highest good’ (*summum bonum*). A key aspect of the second question is whether happiness is to be defined as identical with, or in relation to, virtue or in some different way.<sup>15</sup>

Why should we describe this type of discussion as centred on universality? It is not (to cite features of modern thinking noted earlier) because practising the virtues is taken to mean following laws or rules which apply

<sup>14</sup> On the ‘What is X?’ question in the early Platonic dialogues, see e.g. Benson (2000); see also, for instance, Plato, *R.* 427d–434d, 441c–444a, Arist. *EN* 2.5–9, 3.6–12, and Books 4–6, Cicero, *On Ends (de Finibus [Fin.])* 1.43–53, *On Duties (de Officiis [Off.])* 1.18–151.

<sup>15</sup> See further Annas (1993), part 4; also Broadie, in this volume.

universally (or impartially) or because the exercise of virtue involves a process of universalization. Rather, it is because, from Plato's Socrates onwards, this form of enquiry consists in abstracting the core, essential—and in this sense, universal—aspects of ethical life from the incidental, context-specific ones. This is especially clear in the case of the question of the nature of happiness or the highest good, a question which is standardly posed and answered in general, abstract terms. But the same point applies to the second dominant topic, the nature of the virtues. The focus is on fundamental general questions, such as whether virtue is identical with, or implies, knowledge, and whether the virtues are essentially unified or interentailing.<sup>16</sup> A related theme is that of the nature of the psychological structure or motivational pattern that underlies the possession and consistent exercise of virtue.<sup>17</sup> These aspects of ancient theory seem reasonably characterized as constituting an enquiry into the 'universal' aspects of ethical life. This type of enquiry is compatible with exploring how the virtue thus characterized in general terms can be expressed in socially differentiated or culture-specific forms of life, a topic explored especially in Aristotle and in some Stoic discussions.<sup>18</sup> It is also compatible with the recognition that the rules or practices through which virtue is expressed may be differently applied in the case of different classes or types of person.<sup>19</sup>

The second type of universality in ancient theory is the linkage of the conception of happiness (or some other salient feature of the theory) with universal, fundamental features of reality. The question of the nature of this connection is conceptually complex and represents a focus of current scholarly debate. Should the linkage be seen as, in some sense, 'grounding' ethical ideas in human or cosmic nature or, rather, as a matter of integrating the understanding of ethics with that of physics (or logic) in a reciprocal way that does not give a foundational or hierarchical role to

<sup>16</sup> See e.g. Stoic treatment of these questions, LS 61; see further on the unity of virtue, Cooper (1998), on the nature of virtue, Annas (1993), ch. 2.

<sup>17</sup> See e.g. R. 434d–444a, Arist. *EN* 1.13, 2.3–6, 6.12–13, Plutarch, *On Ethical Virtue* (*Moralia* 440D–452D).

<sup>18</sup> See e.g. Arist. *EN* 4.1–3 (on generosity, magnificence, and magnanimity); for the linkage of universal and culture-specific in Stoic thought, see e.g. Cic. *Off.* 1. 107–20, and pp. 36–9 below; also Sherman, in this volume.

<sup>19</sup> This partly explains why impartiality is a much less prominent feature of ancient than of modern ethics. The best candidate in ancient thought for systematic impartiality, as an outcome of reflection on ethical universality, is Stoicism, especially in connection with the social outcome of ethical development; see Annas (1993), 262–76. But, on the continuing importance of social differentiation in Stoicism, see also Annas (1993), 302–11, and n. 18 above.

nature?<sup>20</sup> However, at this point, I want simply to highlight certain well-marked features of ancient theory, leaving on one side issues of debate both within ancient thought and among modern interpreters. In the Platonic dialogues, for instance, there are several, rather different, ways in which the understanding of happiness and virtue is presented as dependent on, or integrated with, knowledge of reality in a universal form. In the *Republic*, the stress falls on the idea that practical ethical and political expertise must be grounded in knowledge of a transcendent, universal principle, the Form of the Good.<sup>21</sup> In the *Philebus*, ethical understanding is presented as dependent, ultimately, on knowledge of reality in general; but the emphasis here falls on the idea that the knowledge involved is systematic and complete, rather than that it is knowledge of a transcendent object or objects.<sup>22</sup> In the *Timaeus*, ethical knowledge and knowledge of what is good (understood as being orderly, rational and systematic) in the natural universe are closely linked, with mathematical ideas serving as a way of bridging these two kinds of goodness.<sup>23</sup>

Other theories deploy certain universal features of reality to characterize or explain key ethical claims. Aristotle, for instance, characterizes happiness as the distinctively ‘human function’ (*EN* 1.7) and presents rival candidates for supreme happiness—namely, contemplative and practical wisdom—as the realization of our ‘divine’ or ‘human’ nature, respectively (*EN* 10.7–8). In so doing, he is connecting the enquiry into the nature of happiness with analysis of our nature as human or (partially) divine entities.<sup>24</sup> In Stoicism, ethics is presented as a form of enquiry which can and should, ultimately, be integrated with that of logic and

<sup>20</sup> For a strong challenge to the common view that nature serves as an (external) ‘foundational’ concept in ancient ethical theory, see Annas (1993), part 2, especially chs. 3 and 5; also (1995), and (1999), 108–12. See further Gill (2004*e*); also the discussion of ‘internal foundationalism’, text to n. 50 below.

<sup>21</sup> *R.* 473c–474a, 504d–509c, 517b–c, 534b–c. The usual interpretation (that the knowledge involved is of a transcendent entity or entities) is contested by Rowe in this volume; for a range of current interpretations of Plato’s Good, see Reale and Scolnicov (2002).

<sup>22</sup> See esp. 14c–27c; see further D. Frede (1996), especially 228–33, who locates the account of systematic knowledge in the context of the dialogue as a whole.

<sup>23</sup> See e.g. *Timaeus* 28b–31a, 90a–d, 92c; this dimension of the dialogue anticipates, and seems to have influenced, Stoic thought; see Gill (2000*b*), 70–7. For the idea that the Idea of Good is both mathematical and ethical in *Republic* and *Timaeus*, see Burnyeat (2000); for discussion, see Gill (2004*a* and 2004*b*).

<sup>24</sup> In what follows, I presuppose the view that these two passages function rather differently, 1.7 serving to articulate and conceptualize (but not modify) the world-view of the virtuous agent, and 10.7–8 to revise her ethical world-view; see further Gill (1990), 138–43, (1996*b*), 370–83, 430–43; also nn. 34, 43, 50–1 below.

physics. The most profound insights of the three areas are mutually informing in a way that bears on the understanding of key concepts in any one area.<sup>25</sup> Hence, for instance, the understanding of what ‘good’ means is not, ultimately, just an ethical question but one that draws on the findings of logic and physics, for instance, by showing the relationship between ‘good’ and ideas such as reason, order and structure.<sup>26</sup> In Epicureanism the connection between ethics and physics is not conceived in precisely the same way as in Stoicism. But a correct understanding of the nature of the universe is seen as a prerequisite for forming a correct understanding of human happiness and the virtues, and for expressing these in one’s life.<sup>27</sup>

What kind of universality is involved in this second recurrent feature of ancient thought? As in the first feature noted, there is an attempt to identify core, essential features and to distinguish them from diverse and complex particularities. Also, and more strikingly, the line of thought involves universality in that it centres on aspects of reality that underlie or span different areas of knowledge, such as ethics and physics or logic. The ideas of human nature or the good or god are universal, for these theories, not only in that they form a key part of the ethical understanding of *all* human beings, regardless of other differences, but also that they are central to the knowledge of reality in a universal form, cutting across different areas of knowledge.

I want also to suggest that these two types of universality are linked in ancient thought with three types or levels of ethical understanding, each of which can be expressed in practical action. At each level, the agent may correctly form the thought, ‘this is the brave thing to do under these circumstances’ or, less explicitly, ‘this is the thing to do now’; but a substantially different form of understanding underlies that thought.

(1) At the first level, this thought is based simply on the belief that ‘brave activities are generally of this type’.<sup>28</sup> The belief may be supported by a range of considerations, including socially based and culturally specific views of what activities are generally brave and what constitute normative paradigms or illustrative narratives.

<sup>25</sup> See LS 26 A–E, Algra et al. (1999), xiii–xvi.

<sup>26</sup> See further Algra et al. (1999), 687–90, M. Frede (1999), Gill (2004e).

<sup>27</sup> See LS 25 B, D; see further Sedley (1998b), Algra et al. (1999), 645–7.

<sup>28</sup> I am not suggesting that the agent necessarily articulates this thought at the moment of action; the relevant thought might be only ‘this is the thing to do now’. What I am highlighting is the type of long-term beliefs which underlie the agent’s thought.

(2) At the second level, the agent may also have this type of belief, supported by the same type of considerations. But this belief is also shaped by a reflective understanding of what constitutes a virtue such as bravery, how virtues are linked with each other, what their psychological or motivational basis is, and how they are related to happiness or the overall goal of life. This further dimension may be seen as simply giving a conceptual framework to first-level beliefs which remain unaltered by theory, or it may be seen as substantively modifying beliefs of that type.

(3) A similar process operates at the third level. Here, first-level beliefs are shaped both by a reflective understanding of ethical ideas and by a grasp of the aspects of reality taken to underlie those ideas. Again, the third level of understanding may provide a conceptual framework for beliefs which are otherwise unchanged, or it may bring about significant revision of beliefs. Beliefs at the second and third level involve universality in a way that is not true at the first level. This is not, primarily, because the first-level beliefs are now held in a universalized form ('brave activities are *always* of this type') or because the beliefs so held are seen as applying impartially to all human beings. It is, rather, because the first-level beliefs, or the revised beliefs which replace them, are shaped by a more general and abstract (and in this sense universal) grasp of ethical ideas and, at the third level, by an understanding of reality as a whole (universal reality) in a way that informs the meaning of those ethical ideas.

I do not wish to suggest that these two types of universality and three levels of ethical understanding constitute a schema which figures in a uniform way in all ancient theories. Indeed, there are significant differences of emphasis between ancient theories, which help to demarcate salient positions and issues in ancient philosophy. But I would claim that these are well-marked and important features of ancient theory, as are the debates to which they give rise, and that they can help us to answer the general question raised here, about the role of universality in ancient ethical theory. I now highlight some of the different ways in which these ideas figure in ancient theory, before raising in more general terms issues about the linkage between universality in ancient and modern thought.

For instance, the early dialogues of Plato (often taken as reflecting the practice of the historical Socrates) can be seen as stressing the importance of the second level of ethical understanding. More precisely, the implied claim is that *only* the second level, and not the first, provides a basis for ethical knowledge, a claim illustrated in Socrates' famous assertion that

‘the unexamined life is not worth living’ (Pl. *Ap.* 38a5–6). The urgency of Socrates’ ‘What is *X*?’ question (*X* being one of the virtues) derives from the assumption that only an understanding based on a general, abstract—and in this sense universal—grasp of the nature and interrelationship of ethical concepts provides a secure basis for correct judgement in practical as well as theoretical situations.<sup>29</sup> A similar emphasis underlies the emphatic contrast in Plato’s *Republic* between *epistēmē* (knowledge based on versions of the second and third levels of ethical understanding) and *doxa* (‘belief’ or ‘opinion’) which lacks this theoretical basis and the associated understanding of universality.<sup>30</sup>

The educational programme of Plato’s *Republic*, taken as a whole, and also Aristotle’s ethical theory, can be seen as embodying a theory about ethical development which incorporates reference to all three levels. The underlying thesis is that full ethical development involves, first, the implanting of communally based beliefs of the kind ‘brave activities are generally of this type’, and, then, the theoretical analysis of ethical conceptions and of reality, in a larger (universal) sense, in which those conceptions should be located. This framework is implied, for instance, in Aristotle’s contrast between a preliminary grasp of the ethical ‘facts’ and a theoretically based understanding of ‘the reason why’, and by the well-defined, two-stage educational programme, first for auxiliaries and then for philosopher-rulers, in Plato’s *Republic*.<sup>31</sup> The two theories can also be seen as embodying a—quite complex—set of ideas about the relationship between the three levels. On the one hand, the more theoretical levels are in some sense based on the first level, and also serve to provide an analytic understanding of (and thus a conceptual basis for) the ideas embodied in those pre-theoretical beliefs. On the other hand, there are also indications that full, theoretical understanding can lead to substantive modifications in the ethical beliefs held. In the *Republic*, it is suggested that philosophically grounded courage is qualitatively different from pre-reflective courage because of the way in which knowledge of universal reality (‘all time and all being’) makes human life seem relatively unimportant.<sup>32</sup> More striking still is the suggestion that the outcome of the full programme of

<sup>29</sup> For this assumption, see especially Socrates’ account of his ‘divine mission’ in Pl. *Ap.* 21a–23b, also e.g. *Chrm.* 175a–176a, *La.* 200a–201b; see further Benson (2000) 112–41.

<sup>30</sup> *R.* 476a–480a, 509d–511e, 533b–534c.

<sup>31</sup> See further Arist. *EN* 1.4, 1095b3–8, 1.7, 1098a33–b4, 10.9, 1179b4–1180a14 (taken with Burnyeat (1980): 71–3); also Pl. *R.* 401e–402c, 429c–430c, and refs. in n. 30 above; see further Gill (1996b), 268–75, 279–87, (1998b), 196–202, 205–14, and (2004c).

<sup>32</sup> Pl. *R.* 486a–b, contrast pre-theoretical courage as described in 429c–430c; see further Gill (1996a), 198, 201–4.

ethical education is to make philosophical contemplation seem a fuller realization of human happiness than practical action. This suggestion (as Plato's discussion acknowledges) is potentially problematic for the claim that this education also forms the best preparation for practical action in the political sphere.<sup>33</sup> Analogously, in *Nicomachean Ethics* 10.7–8, Aristotle argues for the same view of the relative merits of contemplation and practical action, considered as candidates for the highest human happiness, a view which is—at least potentially—in tension with the high valuation of ethically guided practical action elsewhere in *EN*.<sup>34</sup>

The latter features of the Platonic and Aristotelian theories, and, indeed, their thinking in general about ethical development, have, of course, been much debated. The sole point I want to make here is that the two types of universality and the three levels of ethical understanding outlined earlier provide a conceptual framework by which to define and interpret the kind of theory being offered. To put the point differently, these theories were among those which helped to make that framework a significant and recognizable one for ancient reflection in ethics (indeed, in another way, to create the conception of 'the ethical' at all in ancient theory).<sup>35</sup> They thus offer clear reference-points for the roles played by universality in ancient ethical theory.

### Universality and Objectivity

On the basis of these two possible views of the role of universality in ancient ethics, especially the second, I want to consider the relationship between ancient and modern thought in this respect. A key issue is that of the relationship between universality and objectivity. The two modern theories discussed earlier (pp. 17–19 above) can be taken as linking universality with objectivity, though in different ways. Kant does so through the formal principle of the universalizability of moral guidelines

<sup>33</sup> Pl. *R.* 519c–521b: see further Gill (1996*b*), 301–20.

<sup>34</sup> See further Gill (1996*b*), 370–83; also Gill (1998*c*), 3–4, reviewing different interpretations of this text. See, most recently, White (2002), 198–214, 244–64, who also sees these texts as acknowledging the possibility of ethical conflict within the theories.

<sup>35</sup> Aristotle was the first ancient theorist to identify a specific body of theory as 'ethical' (more precisely as ethico-political, *EN* 1.2), i.e. as designed to promote living well and as centred on virtue and happiness; but his conception of the ethical is, evidently, influenced by the early Platonic ('Socratic') dialogues as well as by Plato's *Republic* and *Laws*. On the larger, conceptual, question of the relationship between the ancient concept of 'ethics' and modern morality, see Annas (1993), 3–16, 439–55; also Introduction, pp. 1–7 above.



(or 'maxims'), and Mill by the definition of a principle (Utility) that is held to apply universally and to provide the basis for all moral rules as well as for individual decision-making. Both approaches also stress the importance of the idea that these principles should function in a way that is systematic and impartial, regardless of the individual stance or partiality of those involved. Similar claims might be made about at least some other modern moral theories.<sup>36</sup>

How far can we find in the patterns of ancient thought just outlined analogues for this type of modern thinking about universality and its linkage with objectivity? As noted in the Introduction to this volume (p. 8 above), 'objectivity' is not a term for which there is an exact Greek or Latin equivalent. But certain ancient theories assume or maintain that it is in principle possible to achieve knowledge of truth, including ethical truth, which is certain, independent, or absolute (by contrast with theories which argue for relativism or scepticism). Those ancient theories can be treated as maintaining what we would characterize as ethical objectivism. In broad terms, in ancient thought, objectivity, in ethics as in other areas, is defined not by reference to universality but to knowledge of truth. Knowledge of truth may involve reference to universality, of the two types outlined earlier, which correspond to levels two and three of the stages of ethical understanding. But knowledge of truth also involves reference to specificity or particularity in at least two ways. At the first level of ethical understanding, culture-specific ideals and localized paradigms give content to the belief that, for instance, 'brave actions are generally of this kind'. Also, all three levels of ethical understanding are seen as providing the basis for specific, particular decisions; and knowledge of truth is also seen as operative at this level too, in the correct application of the more or less fully universalized considerations that inform each of these levels. Thus, objectivity in ancient ethics is defined in terms of knowledge of the combination of universal and specific 'facts' (we might say) that constitutes truth of a type that bears on the practical living of a human life.<sup>37</sup> Ethical objectivity is not defined by reference to universality as such; nor is it necessarily conceived as embodied in rules or norms that apply universally, understood as meaning 'impartially'.

<sup>36</sup> For instance, in Rawls' famous theory of justice (1971), systematic impartiality, at the theoretical level at least, is secured by the 'Veil of Ignorance' about the agent's specific situation.

<sup>37</sup> For illustrations of this combination of universal and specific 'facts' within an objectivistic framework, see (on Socrates), Penner, pp. 172–8 below, and (on Aristotle), Price, pp. 269–77 below.

This point of distinction between ancient and modern theory can be taken together with another. This distinction centres on the question of explicitness or transparency. Both the types of modern theory considered so far (Kantian and Utilitarian) conceive moral reasoning based on universality as being of a type that can be fully explicated. For Kant, this form of reasoning consists in the procedure of universalization that ensures that the maxim adopted is willed as a universal law. I noted earlier the procedure of universalization which Kant sets out explicitly in the *Groundwork* (pp. 17–18 above). Although, in some aspects of his theory, Kant gives weight to the development of ethical character and virtuous dispositions,<sup>38</sup> he does not stipulate that this type of development is a prerequisite for carrying out the process of universalization.<sup>39</sup> In Mill's case, the explicitness extends not only to the form of moral reasoning, but also to the nature of the 'the foundation of morals', namely 'Utility or the Greatest Happiness Principle' (Mill 1993: 7). This explicitness is crucial in what is called 'act-Utilitarianism' or 'direct Utilitarianism', in which moral reasoning is seen as the direct application of the Utilitarian principle to decisions in specific situations. Explicitness is less obviously relevant to 'indirect Utilitarianism', in which the principle of Utility is conceived as underlying moral rules which may be formulated in different terms.<sup>40</sup> However, even in these other forms of Utilitarianism, both the underlying norm of Utility and the rules or reasoning based on this norm can in principle be rendered explicit to anyone, regardless of their ethical character.<sup>41</sup> These aspects of modern philosophical thinking can also be taken in the context of a culture in which, as highlighted earlier (pp. 16–17 above), key paradigms of explicit universalization, including the Ten Commandments and the Declaration of Human Rights, help to shape expectations about the standard form of moral principles.

<sup>38</sup> See further Sherman (1997), 121–86, also Introduction, above, n. 7.

<sup>39</sup> Indeed, this is ruled out by the claim that human beings as rational beings are constitutively capable of this kind of 'autonomous' (self-legislative) universalization; see text to n. 5 above.

<sup>40</sup> For a lucid overview of different versions of Utilitarianism, see Honderich (1995), 890–2.

<sup>41</sup> A possible exception is what Williams (1985), 108–10, rather sardonically, calls 'Government House Utilitarianism', referring to Sidgwick (1962), 489–90, although even here, I think, the underlying norm of Utility *could* be made explicit to less sophisticated moral agents. There have been recent moves within the consequentialist approach, to take fuller account of agent-centred notions such as character and virtue (Introduction above, n. 8); but these moves have not, as far as I know, involved making stipulations about the character required to understand the Principle of Utility.

There is a sharp contrast in this respect with certain features of ancient ethical thought about the formulation and application of ethical norms, including those involving reference to universality. Some of the relevant points were noted earlier in connection with the view (subsequently qualified) that ancient ethical thought is fundamentally particularized. They can usefully be restated and developed here. Aristotle provides the clearest illustrations, although the tendency is a more general one. As Timothy Chappell brings out in this volume, ideas such as ‘the mean’ (*to meson*) and ‘the person of practical wisdom’ (*phronimos*) function for Aristotle as normative ideals within a framework that assumes that there is objectively correct knowledge of the right thing to do in a given situation. But Aristotle specifically avoids trying to explicate what would constitute the ‘mean’ or right act or to claim that an ethical theorist is in a position to offer this explication.<sup>42</sup> Aristotle, like other ancient thinkers, believes that the forms of universality which I associated with the second and third level of ethical understanding may enhance or transform practical action. But he does not attempt to spell out in any detail just how the ethical decision-making of the person of practical wisdom is informed by the analysis of the virtues or by a theorized understanding of what it means to actualize human or divine nature.<sup>43</sup> Similar points could be made about Platonic or Stoic thinking, despite important differences in other respects. In the *Republic*, we are told that the fully educated philosopher-rulers will make (objectively) correct decisions in specific situations about what is just, brave and so on because of their knowledge of the Forms of these qualities (and of the Good). But there is no attempt to spell out how this universalized knowledge informs those specific decisions, or indeed, to give a full explication of the nature of the Good at all.<sup>44</sup> Analogously, Stoic theorists insist that it is impossible for them to specify exactly what the normative wise person (*sophos*) would do in a given situation or to say how this would be derived from her understanding of the goodness and

<sup>42</sup> See especially Arist. *EN* 1.3, 2.6, also references in n. 9 above, Chappell, pp. 239–41 below; also Price, pp. 260–2 below.

<sup>43</sup> Arist. *EN* 1.7 may be taken as giving a theorized version of the world-view of the ethical agent and *EN* 10.7–8 as modifying this world-view (n. 24 above); but in neither case does Aristotle attempt to spell out precisely how this would affect practical ethical reasoning.

<sup>44</sup> See Pl. *R.* 520c4–6 (imagined address to philosopher-rulers): ‘... because you’ve seen the truth about what is fine, just and good, you’ll know what each [particular] image is and of what [Form] it is an image’. For Socrates’ reticence about defining the nature of the Good, see *R.* 505c–e.

order in ethics (and, in some sense, in the universe).<sup>45</sup> This is so, even though Stoicism deploys as universal norms ideas such as natural law and the brotherhood of humankind, which seem, on the face of it, similar to the principle of Utility and equally open to specification.<sup>46</sup>

This point of contrast between ancient and modern thinking gives rise to a possible criticism of ancient thought. The potential criticism is that this feature of ancient thought is, on the one hand, unhelpful for the practical business of trying to live a better life and, on the other, vague or even vacuous at the theoretical level. What use is it to be told that an ideal figure is the only one who can authoritatively make right decisions in specific situations or who has a correct understanding of universal truths without any clear indication of *what* those correct decisions or truths are? Conceptually, the claims about the uniquely authoritative understanding of the normative wise person may seem ill-defined, arbitrary, or empty. In Kantian or Utilitarian thought, by contrast, we have a transparent picture of the process of moral reasoning (as universalization) or the ultimate norm (the Greatest Happiness Principle). In the case of these modern theories, it may seem, it is clear why we should see the forms of universality as providing an objective ethical basis for ethics, whereas the nature of that basis is more elusive in the ancient use of the wise person as the norm. It may be added that this point applies, on the face of it, just as much to modern virtue ethics (and virtue epistemology) as it does to ancient theories.<sup>47</sup> So if there is a problem, it is not just one of historical interest.

But is there a problem? We can reply that there is only a problem if we approach the epistemology of virtue ethics—whether ancient or modern—assuming the validity of the way that Kantian and Utilitarian theories present universality and tie universality to objectivity. But this assumption may not be justified. As noted in the Introduction to this volume (p. 2 above), Kantian and Utilitarian approaches, alongside most other modern ethical theories, were subjected to radical criticism in two influential books of the 1980s, Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue* (1981) and Bernard Williams' *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (1985). Their critique was especially directed at the way in which such modern theories deployed universal norms. The claim was these ideas were used, illegitimately, as 'Archimedean points' to provide an external

<sup>45</sup> See references in n. 11 above.

<sup>46</sup> See further on this point pp. 35–61 below.

<sup>47</sup> That is, it applies to any theory that is agent-centred in the way virtue ethics is; on modern virtue ethics and virtue epistemology, see Introduction, pp. 2–8 above.

(and allegedly objective) basis for morality. In reality, MacIntyre and Williams maintained (from different standpoints), the only sound basis for ethics lies in the development of virtuous attitudes and dispositions, above all through interpersonal relationships and engagement with the localized values (the 'practices' or 'thick values') of one's community.<sup>48</sup> If there is also a role for universal principles and norms in ethics, it is one that needs to be superimposed on the basis of a pre-existing set of commitments and outlook and to be consistent with that outlook.<sup>49</sup> To put their point in different terms, if there is any credible form of foundationalism in ethics, it is (what one might call) 'internal foundationalism', which is based on the agent's motivational standpoint and world-view.<sup>50</sup> These thinkers see ancient ethics, particularly in its Aristotelian version, as coming closer to a valid form of foundationalism than modern theory, although both Williams and MacIntyre are sceptical that we (moderns) can share Aristotle's world-view in this respect.<sup>51</sup> On this view, it is the conception of universality in Kantian and Utilitarian theory which is problematic, rather than that in ancient ethics.

The critiques of MacIntyre and Williams, in this regard, were and remain, highly controversial. Also, the situation in contemporary philosophy has changed since the 1980s. We have seen the evolution of modern versions of virtue ethics and eudaimonism. There has also been a constructive dialogue between proponents of virtue ethics and Kantianism (and, to some degree, consequentialism), and a willingness to explore areas of common ground between divergent ethical approaches. This dialogue has been paralleled in the attitudes of some scholars of ancient philosophy.<sup>52</sup> To this extent, it may seem pointless to return to the more confrontational stance of MacIntyre and Williams in the 1980s. However, reference to their views brings out the importance of locating universal norms and normative figures in the context of the type of theory in-

<sup>48</sup> On 'Archimedean' points in ethics, see Williams (1985), 22–9, and, for comparable ideas, MacIntyre (1981), chs. 4–5; on 'thick values', see Williams (1985), 143–5, and on virtue as 'the goods internal to practices', MacIntyre (1981), ch. 14.

<sup>49</sup> See MacIntyre (1981), ch. 15, Williams (1985), ch. 8, especially 152–5.

<sup>50</sup> This phrase is my suggestion, though it is designed to be consistent with their views. For readings of *EN* 1.7 which are compatible with the idea of 'internal foundationalism', see McDowell (1980), especially 366–71, (1986), especially 385, (1995), Gill (1990), 138–43, (1996*b*), 430–5, also Chappell, pp. 248–50 below. See also n. 55 below.

<sup>51</sup> See MacIntyre (1981), 148, cf. 158, also (1991); Williams (1985), 52; both have primarily in mind Aristotle's account of the human function in *EN* 1.7. For discussion of, and response to, their views, see Gill (1990), (1996*b*), 430–43.

<sup>52</sup> See further Introduction, pp. 3–7 above.

volved—in the ancient case, that of virtue ethics and eudaimonism—and of not using quite different types of theory as (inappropriate) yardsticks. If we do this, can we make better sense of these aspects of ancient—or modern—virtue ethics?

Some of the key points bearing on this question have already been made here. One is that the objectivism of the relevant ancient theories is centred on an ideal of knowledge of truth, conceived as involving both universal norms and specific, particularized application. Another is that this ideal knowledge is linked with the three-stage programme of ethical understanding and with the two roles for universality, alongside more localized, culture-specific norms, that form part of this programme. These points can be taken together with the idea, underlined in some recent studies, that ancient ethics (together with modern virtue ethics) is agent-centred in at least two ways. One is that the theoretical framework is centred on the ethical agent and on related ideas such as character, virtue, and happiness, rather than on rules, duties and obligations, or on beneficial states of affairs. The other is that ancient ethics is typically framed so as to address the individual person as a self-reflective agent and to enable her (as Julia Annas puts it) to think about how ‘to make sense of my life as a whole’.<sup>53</sup> Typically, though not invariably, ancient ethics also appeals to the agent as one who is committed to the virtuous life and whose understanding of what ‘virtue’ means is shaped by adult engagement in interpersonal and communal relationships.<sup>54</sup> One further feature of ancient ethics is relevant here: the strong focus on ethical education and development, conceived not just as a preparation for adult attitudes, but as a continuing project around which the reflective individual can shape her whole life.

Taking these points together, we can construct a credible general view of the ancient pattern of thinking about objective norms in which the ideal of the wise person fits. The three-stage programme of ethical understanding provides a framework within which the reflective agent can locate his own experience and aspirations. By reference to this framework, he can see himself as building on localized, culture-specific norms and commitments and correlating these with a developing grasp of ethical concepts, analysed

<sup>53</sup> See Annas (1993), ch. 1; also her introduction and ch. 22. See also Hursthouse (1999), whose approach explicitly recreates the general form of ancient, especially Aristotelian, ethics.

<sup>54</sup> A notable exception is the kind of dialogue with the immoralist depicted by Plato in *Gorgias* and *Republic* 1, though the interlocutors of the *Republic* as a whole (Glaucon and Adeimantus) are more ethically well-motivated; see further Gill (1996*b*), 451–4.

as a connected set or system, and with a larger, theorized world-view. Ancient accounts of ethical education, such as the two-stage curriculum in Plato's *Republic* or the Stoic account of ethical development as 'appropriation' (*oikeiôsis*) are not just to be seen as theoretical models but also patterns for aspiration, with which the developing adult agent can correlate his own ethical progress.<sup>55</sup> Such accounts, particularly in Plato, may suggest an (implausibly idealized) linear movement from localized commitment to a theorized grasp of ethical universals and then to their application in concrete situations.<sup>56</sup> But a more plausible model, suggested by Aristotle and the Stoics, is that of a more complex, forward-and-back negotiation between localized and universal norms, and a process of application that draws on both of these types of norm and also helps to advance the development of understanding.<sup>57</sup> In this pattern, the normative wise person or philosopher-ruler represents the horizon and intended outcome of ethical development in understanding. The ideal, though general, is not vacuous, because it derives its content from the analysis of cognitive states and ethical character-development that is so richly explored within the ancient theories. But the depiction of the normative figure stops short of seeking to explicate the content of his ethical understanding (except in broad, suggestive strokes) precisely because he serves as the horizon of aspiration, and not as a fully determinate ideal or as a stage that the thinker himself claims to have reached.<sup>58</sup>

In the ancient works that we tend to regard as most characteristically 'ethical',<sup>59</sup> the objectivism of the theories is more a working assumption than an explicitly argued position. (This is not to deny that Plato or the

<sup>55</sup> On the two-stage curriculum of the *Republic*, see n. 31 above; on Stoic *oikeiôsis*, see LS 57 and 59 D, and, for a reading of the Stoic theory compatible with the idea of 'internal foundationalism' (text to n. 50 above), see Gill (1990), 143–51, and (2004e).

<sup>56</sup> It is natural to read the two-stage curriculum of the *Republic* in this way; but it does not follow, of course, that this is how we would actually use the ideal of the *Republic* as a model for shaping our lives, as recommended in 592b2–3.

<sup>57</sup> See further Price's analysis (pp. 269–71 below) of Aristotelian ethical reasoning as a process of discrimination that correlates half-explicit goals ('quasi-goals') with the specific particularities of a given situation; also discussion of Cicero's treatment of Stoic material (pp. 36–40 below).

<sup>58</sup> For this type of appraisal of the normative wise person in Aristotle, see also Chappell, p. 255 below, and Price, pp. 276–7 below. Rowe suggests that the philosopher-rulers (and other Platonic figures) symbolize *both* the ideal of achieved knowledge *and* the more attainable level (which falls more within reasonable aspiration) of 'approximating to' this knowledge (pp. 229–30 below). The motif of not claiming to have achieved the highest level of knowledge is especially prominent in Plato, e.g. *R.* 505c–e, *Smp.* 210a.

<sup>59</sup> See n. 35 above.

Stoics, for instance, elsewhere present formal arguments for—what we should regard as—objectivity in, for instance, epistemology.)<sup>60</sup> Hence, we have to construct for ourselves, from the materials offered by the theories, criteria for ethical objectivity or arguments by which to defend the objectivism of the ideals offered, including the role played by normative ideal figures. The final confirmation of the objective validity of the normative ideal remains incomplete in a framework of this kind. It is only the normative wise person who is in a position to understand definitively what would count as absolute truth both as regards the concretely right act or the ethical universal. This point might seem circular: only the normative wise person can confirm that the normative wise person (as conceived in the theory) is indeed an objective norm . . .<sup>61</sup> But the circularity, if that is what it is, forms a consistent part of the ethical framework at the theoretical level and is also compatible with the practical—which also means educational<sup>62</sup>—objectives of ancient ethical writings. The key point, again, is that the objectivism of the theories is not tied to universality in the way that it is in Kantian and Utilitarian accounts. Also, again, the claim is not that the objectivity of the universals involved in the theory provides an external foundation; rather, an understanding of the objectivity of universal norms (and their specific application) forms part of the ideal outcome of ethical development towards which the theory beckons.

### An Example: Stoic Natural Law

I conclude this discussion by offering one further illustration of the ancient pattern outlined here, namely the Stoic idea of natural law. There is widespread agreement that ‘natural law’ is an important—and in some sense universal—normative concept in Stoic ethics, in this respect like the related notions of the brotherhood of humankind and the universe as a single community (*kosmopolis*). However, scholars disagree about the precise significance of this idea. It is sometimes taken to

<sup>60</sup> Pl. *Tht.* (and, by implication at least, the whole trilogy of *Tht.*, *Sph.*, and *Pol.*) represents a critique of the type of relativism associated with Protagoras; Stoic objectivist epistemology was defended and refined in response to criticism from the sceptical Academy; see Algra et al. (1999), ch. 9.

<sup>61</sup> On this apparent circularity (and its not being vicious), see also Chappell, pp. 239–41 below.

<sup>62</sup> See text to nn. 54–5 above.



constitute something similar to modern codes of explicit, universalized rules or principles such as the Ten Commandments or Declaration of Human Rights. But this view encounters certain difficulties, not least that of spelling out the precise content of Stoic natural law. Even advocates of this interpretation have offered only the most generalized formulation of the law's content, namely as the imperative, 'Always act according to virtue',<sup>63</sup> which, of course, presupposes a pre-existing understanding of what 'virtue' entails. A competing, and more plausible, view is that the notions of natural law, the brotherhood of humankind, and the world-community are designed to encapsulate key features of the world-view of the person of complete wisdom, without attempting to articulate the precise content of the wise person's understanding. In particular, these ideas indicate how Stoic conceptions of virtue and happiness are bound up with a certain understanding of universal reality, including human nature and fundamental human motives, notably the motivation towards co-operative association.<sup>64</sup>

To gain a clearer view of the significance of natural law in Stoicism, and also to locate it in the framework of ethical thinking described here, it is useful to consider how Cicero deploys this notion in the version of Stoic ethics he offers in *On Duties* 3.<sup>65</sup> Twice, in 3.21 and 3.52, he makes conspicuous use of the correlated ideas of natural law and the brotherhood of humankind. It is worth noting how Cicero's treatment of these ideas attempts to span, and interconnect, the three levels of ethical understanding outlined earlier. *On Duties* as a whole, especially Book 3, is couched as a non-technical work of practical ethics, which does not presuppose specialized knowledge of philosophical theory. To a large extent, it is directed at people whose practical decision-making is mainly shaped by communal, culture-specific norms, that is, people who operate at what I described as the first level of ethical understanding. But Cicero also aims to inform this level of understanding by drawing on philosophical reflection on key ethical themes and concepts (the main subject of the first two books of *On Duties*) and also, though less explicitly, on ideas which locate those ethical themes within the larger framework of reality,

<sup>63</sup> See e.g. Mitsis (1994), 4848; see also Mitsis (1993) and Striker (1996), though with qualifications in her 219–20 n. 8.

<sup>64</sup> For this view, see e.g. Vander Waerdt (1994a), 4854–5, (1994b), 272–6, Inwood (1999), 105–6.

<sup>65</sup> Though independently formulated, Cicero's approach seems to reflect mainstream Stoic thinking about practical ethics; see further Inwood (1999), 112–13, 120–6.

conceived in universal terms. Thus, although the idea of natural law is one that can only be fully understood by the perfectly wise person, reference to this idea can be used to shape conventional ethical thinking and to promote higher-order, theorized reflection.<sup>66</sup>

Early in Book 3 (3.21), Cicero offers this guideline for discriminating right from advantage in cases when these seem to conflict:

for one human being to take something from another and to increase his own advantage at someone else's disadvantage is more contrary to nature than death, poverty, pain, or anything else that may happen to his body or external possessions. In the first place, it destroys the common life and fellowship of humanity.<sup>67</sup>

Cicero presents this as one way of formulating universal or 'natural' law; he also links it with the related idea that all human beings in the universe make up a single city or community (a *kosmopolis*) or common 'body'. He presents this guideline as comparable to the *formulae* ('rules of procedure') deployed by Roman jurists.<sup>68</sup> This presentation might seem to support the view that Stoic natural law, like modern universalist codes, consists of a series of general rules, intended to regulate moral decision-making. However, this impression is at least partly misleading. For one thing, this 'rule' is at a very high level of generality, even more so than the Ten Commandments or Declaration of Human Rights. Indeed, much of the rest of the discussion can be taken as an attempt to spell out more precisely what this 'rule of procedure' implies. Also, in explicating what is involved, Cicero makes extensive use of distinctively Roman ideas, including the juristic notion of acting 'in good faith' (*bona fide*) and specifically Roman moral exemplars such as the general Regulus, who acted with exceptional bravery and 'good faith' when captured in the First Carthaginian War.<sup>69</sup> Cicero's use of culture-specific and universal ideals alongside each other is striking; it should counteract the impression that Cicero is trying to subordinate culture-specific to universal norms or is seeking (as in a Kantian style of reasoning) to universalize maxims.<sup>70</sup> His project is, rather, that of using *both* well-known conventional ideals and examples

<sup>66</sup> Cic. *Off.* is explicitly addressed to his twenty-year-old son, and designed to encapsulate Cicero's philosophical knowledge and personal/political experience; see especially 1.1–4, 3.5–6 (and on the intended level of the work, 3.13–16).

<sup>67</sup> Trans. Griffin and Atkins (1991), slightly modified.

<sup>68</sup> See Griffin and Atkins (1991), 107, n. 3.

<sup>69</sup> See *Off.* 3.60–1, 64–7, 70, 99–111, esp. 104, 107–8.

<sup>70</sup> Nussbaum (1997) tends to assimilate Cicero's move to the Kantian moral approach, as noted in Gill (1998*b*), 13–15.

and allusions to higher-level, universal norms to promote ethical discrimination. His objective, as suggested earlier, is that of seeking to inform ethical decision-making by those who normally operate at the first level of ethical understanding and to do so in part (though not exclusively) by allusion to universal ideas drawn from the second and third level of ethical understanding, as these are presented in Stoic theory.

The passage can also be seen as alluding to a central claim of Stoic ethical theory, that virtue is the only real good and vice the only real bad and that all other things conventionally seen as bad (such as death, poverty, and pain) are only 'matters of indifference', by comparison with virtue. Also, in presenting this as a 'law of nature', Cicero implies a further core Stoic thesis, that it is 'natural' for human beings as rational animals to develop to the point where the recognition of the supreme value of virtue becomes an integral feature of their character and life.<sup>71</sup> In this respect, like Aristotle in *EN* 1.7, Cicero is presenting a certain ethical claim as grounded in a picture of human nature. (Both Aristotle's presentation and Cicero's can be seen as exemplifying what I called earlier 'internal foundationalism')<sup>72</sup>. Cicero, at this point in the argument, is offering only rather generalized guidance. His advice is also designed (again, like Aristotle's use of the idea of virtue as the human function in *EN* 1.7) to encapsulate a view of human nature that a committed moral agent can be expected to bring to ethical theory. However, in the second passage (3.52), the idea of natural law is used in a way that has a more direct relevance to practical decision-making. It is also used in a way that seems designed to revise conventional ethical thought and not simply to give it a theoretical basis. In that respect, its objective is more like Aristotle's use of the ideas of human and divine nature in *EN* 10.7-8, that of challenging and modifying standard ethical beliefs on the basis of theory.

The relevant comments occur in one of the passages based on Stoic casuistry which explore the ethical issues raised by specific (imaginary but possible) situations. Cicero reports a debate between two Stoic teachers, Diogenes and Antipater, about cases involving business ethics (3.51–5). Diogenes advocates acting rightly but within the normal conventions of business practice; Antipater argues for an approach that goes further than this, for instance in reporting relevant facts which will benefit the other person rather than oneself. In support of his position, Antipater is presented as claiming:

<sup>71</sup> See e.g. Cic. *Fin.* 3.20–1 (= LS 59 D), a key source for this idea.

<sup>72</sup> See text to n. 50 above, also Gill (1990) discussing both theories from this standpoint.

you should be considering the interests of human beings [in general] and working for human society; that was the law you were born under, and those are the principles of nature which you should obey and follow, so that your benefit is the common benefit, and, in turn, the common benefit is yours. (3.52)

It was a standard view in Stoic ethics that the normal way to develop towards wisdom was through full engagement with the institutions of family and communal life.<sup>73</sup> This naturally gave rise to the question how far one should also accept as normal a whole range of other conventional practices and institutions including private property and the legitimacy of profit-making. Antipater, by contrast with Diogenes, argues for a more rigorous approach than that of conventional practice.<sup>74</sup> In supporting this, Antipater, in Cicero's report, alludes to the Stoic ideals of natural law, fellowship of humankind, and the idea that 'benefit' was something to be held in common and not by oneself alone.<sup>75</sup> In Stoic theory, these ideals could only be fully actualized—and fully understood—by perfectly wise people; but they could also be used, as here, to inform discussion and deliberation by ordinary, non-wise people with a view to making a real difference to the way that such people behaved in specific situations, such as the commonplace acts of business treated here.

As noted earlier, the Stoic idea of natural law seems, at first sight, highly comparable to modern universalist ideals such as that of human rights. In another way, it may seem similar to that of the principle of Utility or the Greatest Happiness Principle, which, though impersonal and universal in form, can be used to guide decision-making in specific situations. Closer analysis of this idea, especially as deployed in Cicero's *On Duties*, brings out certain salient and characteristic differences from these modern forms of universalization. In particular, the idea of natural law is much less transparent and less easy to articulate and codify than its modern analogues. Its deployment also presupposes a developed framework of thinking about stages and degrees of ethical understanding. The combination of localized or culture-specific and universal ideas (including natural law) offered in Cicero's discussion needs to be interpreted in the light of this framework. Here, as in other theories examined here, there is an implied ethical objectivism. But the discussion does not assume that objectivity is tied to universality, as Kantian and Utilitarian theories do. Rather, the discussion assumes that the ultimate goal is objective knowledge of ethical

<sup>73</sup> See e.g. Cic. *Fin.* 3.62, 68 (= LS 57 F (1) and (8)), 59 D, G, Q.

<sup>74</sup> See further Annas (1993), 302–11, esp. 308–10, Inwood (1999), 122–4,

<sup>75</sup> On benefit as, in principle, held in common (at least by the wise), see LS 60 P.

truth, expressed both in a complete understanding of universal concepts such as natural law and in correct practical judgements in specific situations. In all these ways, Cicero's use of the idea of natural law can be seen as exemplifying the general features of ancient thinking outlined earlier and thus displaying the sense in which ethical norms and principles are conceived as universal in this type of thinking.

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## On the Idea of the *summum bonum*

SARAH BROADIE

### I

In the minds of most philosophers and historians of philosophy, the idea of the *summum bonum* (highest good) comes embedded in a question: *what* is the highest good? The idea seems entertainable to the extent that the question seems real. For the question to seem real at least two conditions must hold. First, it must seem as if some answers are objectively better than others. Secondly, it must not seem straight off obvious what the right or best answer to the question should be. But there is also, presumably, a third desideratum, namely agreement, implicit or explicit, on the second order question of what is meant by regarding *X* as the highest good, whatever *X* may be. This second order question is my subject here.

Let me approach by observing that the notion of ‘the highest good’ is marginal for modern ethical theories, although arguably it is the determinative concept of every ancient such system. We have all learnt to classify the antique examples in terms of the highest good according to each. Still, no surprise if after two millennia very different themes are now to the fore. But emergence of new claimants for attention does not really explain why the once supremely important notion of the highest good has pretty well dropped out of sight.

I shall begin by identifying an influence which I believe helps explain why the notion has been in eclipse, anyway during the last century and a half of ethical philosophizing. This influence, I shall maintain, incorporates a modern misunderstanding of what, historically, it means to say of something that it is the highest good. I shall next consider a different

broad understanding, which we find in ancient ethics. Under this general heading I shall look at some specific suggestions as to what it means to say that *X* is the highest good, and at some of their implications.

Where will this get us? I am not sure. I do not know whether the concept of the highest good should be re-instated as an important theme of modern ethics. If it should and could be, then no doubt at some point it *would* be, setting us a splendid example of something ancient in ethics poking its head up out of the ground to become an issue again for contemporary-minded contemporary minds. But even if the present discussion fails to yield reason for expecting just such a philosophical revival, one may still indulge two hopes: first, that the great archaic idea of the highest good will have been enjoyed and found interesting even by philosophers who do not see it as directly contributing to their own theorizing; and secondly that the discussion will nevertheless generate *some* distinction or perspective that might be useful on the contemporary scene.

## II

J. S. Mill begins *Utilitarianism* with these strong words:

There are few circumstances among those which make up the present condition of human knowledge, more unlike what might have been expected, or more significant for the backward state in which speculation on the most important subjects still lingers, than the little progress which has been made in the decision of the controversy respecting the criterion of right and wrong. From the dawn of philosophy, the question concerning the *summum bonum*, or, what is the same thing, concerning the foundation of morality, has been accounted the main problem in speculative thought, has occupied the most gifted intellects, and divided them into sects and schools, carrying on a vigorous warfare against one another. And after more than two thousand years the same discussions continue, philosophers are still ranged under the same contending banners, and neither thinkers nor mankind at large seem nearer to being unanimous on the subject, than when the youth Socrates listened to the old Protagoras...<sup>1</sup>

We can extract from this passage two important immediate implications: first, that the question ‘What is the *summum bonum*?’ is the question

<sup>1</sup> Mill, (1968) 1. As well as ‘the criterion of right and wrong’ and ‘the foundation of morality’, Mill also speaks of ‘one first principle, or common ground of obligation’; ‘the fundamental principle of morality, and the source of obligation’ (ibid., 3, 24); ‘the standard of morality’ (11; cf. 6, 16); ‘A test of right and wrong’ (4).

‘What is the foundation of morality?’; second, that the latter was the question debated by the ancient schools when each offered its own answer to ‘What is the highest good?’

Although almost every thought in *Utilitarianism* has been scrutinized, criticized, defended, and criticized again, these implications have passed unchallenged. The reason seems to be that Mill is putting forward a theory of the standard of right and wrong. So when people discuss the ethics of *Utilitarianism*, they discuss the view that rightness is to be determined by conduciveness to the utilitarian goal, however this goal be interpreted. From that point of view, it makes perfect sense to ignore the question whether earlier philosophers who talk about the highest good are talking about the standard of right and wrong. The reasonableness of ignoring it corresponds to the fact that Mill could have announced his topic simply as the question of the standard of right, without ever using the phrase ‘*summum bonum*’ or ‘highest good’. Had he done so, he would have been more accurate. However, he would then have sacrificed the connection that supports his resounding claim that *his* question’s history stretches back to the ancient Greeks.

In fact, Mill does not need that claim in order to motivate interest in *his* problem and in the solution proposed in *Utilitarianism*. These are matters too obviously important in themselves to need the frame of a dubious pedigree to catch our attention. So readers rightly concentrate on what is thus framed and ignore the alleged pedigree, which they then let go unquestioned. The result is that the two implications about the highest good carried by the opening of *Utilitarianism* tend to sink into the souls of students of modern ethics simply on Mill’s authority. What get thus absorbed are firstly the philosophical assumption that being the highest good is the same as, or at the very least is essentially connected with, being the standard of right and wrong; and secondly the historical assumption that our modern focus on this standard is of a piece with the ancient focus on the highest good. Anything questionable about these assumptions then fails to surface in the natural course of modern ethical discussion, because they add nothing of substance to modern debates.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> This is an oversimplified picture. Mill may have been influenced by the fact that Kant interpreted the ancient debate over the *summum bonum* as a debate over the ‘the determining ground of the will in the moral law’ (*Critique of Practical Reason*, Prussian Academy edition, vol. 5, 64 (trans. Gregor 1996)). According to Kant, of course, the ancients in question were utterly misguided in identifying the source of the moral law in that way. We can see Mill’s approach as combining an element from Kant with an element from ‘the ancients’. It is as if Mill accepts (a) Kant’s account of what was at stake in the ancient debate about the *summum bonum*, along with (b) the ‘ancient’ (implicit) assumption that the



This is so, I believe, regardless of the variety of interpretations which the philosophical assumption permits. One obvious variation has to do with the difference between act and rule utilitarianism.<sup>3</sup> Mill's 'standard of right and wrong' or 'foundation of morality' may be understood as a reference point for judging the rightness of particular actions, or for assessing entire action-kinds, practices, character-dispositions, and institutions<sup>4</sup>; but, either way, if the notion of the highest good gets a look in at all, the influence of Mill's presentation will make it appear as connected with, above all, the standard or foundation or principle of morality. The exact nature of this connection can then itself be variously understood. For example, one may assume that being the principle of morality is really all there is to being the highest good, so that to consider whether *X* is, or to identify *X* as, the highest good is already in fact to consider whether *X* is, or to identify it as, that principle. Alternatively, it might seem that one can determine that *X*, say the greatest general happiness, is the highest good, and then, *because of* that insight or conclusion, immediately proceed to assign to *X* the role of principle of morality. Mill's words at the opening of *Utilitarianism* suggest the first of these possibilities, but some later passages<sup>5</sup> may suggest the second. However, his adherence, such as it is, even to the second possibility assumes that the sole reason why ethical thinkers should interest themselves in the identity of the highest good is so as to identify the principle of morality. And very many of Mill's readers have gone along with this, mostly accepting his lead in silence. On one side there are those who acknowledge, with him, a single sovereign consequentialist principle of morality, while entertaining no independent interest in

ancient debate was a proper debate to be holding. It should be added that in the English speaking world Mill's influence has probably been strengthened by that of G. E. Moore. Moore understood the idea of the highest good (or *the* good) to be the idea of a single specific good (such as pleasure) which (i) is supposedly the sole *per se* good, and (ii) because of this supposed uniqueness came to be misidentified (by the 'naturalistic fallacy') with the meaning of the predicate 'good' (1903), ch. 3; on (a) see also (1912), ch. 7, 152–3. Since Moore's attacks on (i) and (ii) are devastating, 'the highest good' is, by his lights, a notion bred of confusion. Anyone reluctant to join Moore in this position (for example, anyone who felt that ancient talk of the 'highest good' is more respectable than Moore can consistently allow) may have automatically opted for Mill's comparatively unmuddled interpretation instead.

<sup>3</sup> I here use 'rule utilitarianism' to do general duty for theories that apply the utilitarian standard to patterns of behaviour rather than particular actions.

<sup>4</sup> Mill understands it the second way, allowing that the conscientious agent normally is, and should be, guided by a plurality of 'secondary principles', i.e. the principles of commonsense morality (1968: 22–4).

<sup>5</sup> See (1968), ch. 4, 32–8, 'Of What Sort of Proof the Principle of Utility is Susceptible'.

what it is for something to be the highest good<sup>6</sup>—not because they deny there is such a good, but because they do not think this status invites any questions not already covered in studying the nature and meaning of the principle of *morality*. And on the other side are those who reject monism about morality but likewise pay no attention to the notion of the highest good, presumably because they do not consider there is anything for the highest good to be or do apart from being, or functioning as, the mythological single determinant of, again, *morality*.

### III

So Mill's legacy is the common assumption that being the highest good is above all something to do with morality: that is, its special status consists in its relation not (i.e. not immediately) to any other *good* or *goods*, but to the *right*. More particularly, utilitarians spell out the special status of the highest good by means of the thought that actions or patterns of action are right or wrong to the extent that they foreseeably promote or undermine the realization of that good. It is, moreover, only too natural in the context of utilitarianism to understand the superlative 'highest' as indicating a maximum of something. It is a maximum of some kind of good which in itself can occur in greater or lesser amounts or be distributed more or less extensively; thus the highest good is, say, the greatest pleasure or the greatest well-being of the greatest number. Clearly, then, the highest good, understood in this way, is not such that it could make sense to speak of maximizing *it*.

By contrast, according to the type of ancient perspective which is the main topic of this paper, the special status of the highest good consists in some relation or other of this good to other *goods*.<sup>7</sup> To take one particularly famous example: in several places in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle exhibits what he calls 'the topmost of all achievable goods' (1095a16)<sup>8</sup> as terminating a hierarchy of *goods*. The thought is that we consider commonly recognized and sought after goods, and ask what that

<sup>6</sup> This does not, of course, mean that they ignore questions about the nature of their candidate for sovereign principle, e.g. about the nature of pleasure, happiness, welfare, etc. and the interpretation of 'for the greatest number'.

<sup>7</sup> The Stoics are excluded from this perspective in so far as they hold that there is just one human good (namely, virtue). In general, the perspective cannot apply to any beings (such as God or the gods in, for instance, an Aristotelian conception) whose good is single and simple.

<sup>8</sup> Translations from *EN* are by Christopher Rowe in Broadie and Rowe (2002).

good is which they are all for the sake of (1094a1–b7). Or in some places the thought is that we consider commonly acclaimed goods, and ask which of them is the one the others are all for the sake of (e.g. 1097a15–1097b21). ('For the sake of' here is quite a rough expression amenable to different interpretations.) Answers to these questions state which good is highest. The business of asking these questions is clearly quite different from that of considering actions or practices normally regarded as justified—or as obligatory—and wondering what the fundamental standard is by which such judgements are correct. Equally, it is quite different from that of assuming a single given standard of rightness and wondering whether such and such an action or practice is right or justifiable by that standard. And, by contrast with the usage natural to utilitarians (and to consequentialists in general), the highest good is not a maximum of some good that can occur in more and less generous amounts and distributions. It is, rather, one kind of good differing from the others in the way pleasure, virtue, and intelligence are different kinds of goods. Like these goods, the highest good is the sort of thing it can make sense to aim to maximize.<sup>9</sup>

For the moment I want to consider one main implication of conceiving of the highest good (whatever substantially it is claimed to be) in the ancient way examined here. It is, quite simply, that the question whether an action or a kind of action is right or justified is in general to be settled independently of the question of its conduciveness to the highest good, whether for oneself or for others. For example, if hedonism is the theory that says that pleasure is the highest good, then a hedonist according to the 'ancient' fashion may coherently and with perfect intellectual clarity decide that something is wrong without ever considering whether doing it will bring anyone less pleasure or more pain.<sup>10</sup> One might ask: but what is it to hold that pleasure is the highest good if not to treat it as the general standard of right and wrong? The answer would go: this kind of hedonist holds (a) that a lot of actions are to be done or refrained from simply because they conform or fail to conform to some familiar principle such as that one has a duty to keep promises or to show gratitude to benefactors, and not because they lead towards or away from a greater good of some kind; and (b) that such principles are self-sustaining, not grounded on anything else; *however*, when it is a question of bringing about some good

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Aristotle, *EN* 1, 1094b7–10.

<sup>10</sup> If W. Frankena is right, this type of hedonism is not exclusively 'ancient': 'A hedonist about the good may be a deontologist about the right', he says, claiming Butler, Kant, and Sidgwick as examples (Frankena 1963: 68).

G, considered as good, this hedonist is bound to consider (c) whether G will add to the pleasantness of the life of whoever it is supposed to benefit, since if it does not, the highest good has been missed, which would mean that pursuing G as a good was not after all worthwhile. Similarly, someone who in this fashion holds that self-improvement is the highest good, should treat conduciveness to self-improvement, whether her own or others', as a constraint on her pursuit of any other *good* for herself or them—but she should not treat it as a constraint on her every action nor as the justification of every practice.<sup>11</sup>

Consequently, there are two forms of hedonism: R-hedonism and G-hedonism, distinguished without reference to egoism, altruism, and universalism. The R-form says that all actions are right or practices justified in so far as they conduce to pleasure (whether one's own or another's), while the G- one says that pleasure is what should be principally kept in view in just the sub-set of actions specifically directed at bringing about good things. And there will be a similar pair of forms of self-improvementism, and so on for every candidate for the title 'highest good'. From now on we shall be considering only the G-version of any such theory.

#### IV

In presenting the ancient idea of the highest good as what stands in some relation or other to the other goods, I took as illustration the thought, famous through Aristotle, that the highest good is what the other goods *are for the sake of*. Although this is rather vague, we can see it as one possible way of identifying what that relation is that makes the highest good highest. I now want to consider two other ancient ways of identifying that relation. But first I want to set aside two possible modern interpretations of the ancient approach. These both involve the idea of 'intrinsic' goodness, as it is often called. I mean the goodness of goods that are good *per se*, i.e. because of what they are in themselves rather than only because of the goodness of something else to which they may lead. According to the first modern interpretation, theories of the highest good treat the highest as uniquely good *per se*, so that all other goods are instrumental.<sup>12</sup> Any theory

<sup>11</sup> This outline leaves open whether the agent has, among her various duties, a duty to pursue goods as good (when doing so does not conflict with other kinds of duty) or whether the normativity of the good is of a different kind.

<sup>12</sup> The first interpretation is visible in Moore (1912). For recent examples, see Montmarquet (1999), entries on 'hedonism' and '*summum bonum*'.

that does this while at the same time identifying the highest good with some one kind of good, say pleasure, is mistaken; for G. E. Moore was surely right to emphasize that different kinds of things are good *per se*.<sup>13</sup> However, it is certainly not true that all the ancient theories make this mistake, and I shall not be focusing on any that do. According to the second of the modern interpretations to be set aside, there is a plurality of goods *per se*, and the highest good is a combination of them all. (This idea inspired an extremely influential but highly disputable twentieth-century view of what Aristotle means by ‘*eudaimonia*’ [his label, so to speak, for the highest good], at any rate in Book I of the *Nicomachean Ethics*.) On such an account, what makes the highest good highest is that it consists of all the *per se* goods (aside from itself). It is not a good that could exist on its own without the other goods. We should also notice that on this sort of account, the highest good depends for its value on the values (presupposed) of its constituents.

I shall now look at two ancient suggestions about the relation of the highest good to other goods. Both envisage a plurality of *per se* goods and a monistic highest good. And on both, the highest good *gives* value to the others. That, in both cases, is the relation that makes it highest.

## V

What I am calling the first suggestion was employed by the mathematician-philosopher Eudoxus of Cnidus (c.408—c.355 BCE) in an argument for hedonism. Eudoxus contended that pleasure is the highest good in part on the ground that pleasure added to any good thing *makes it better*: for example, just conduct and moderate conduct are made better by pleasure (Aristotle, *EN* 10, 1172b23–5). It is clear that what Eudoxus meant was not that a state of affairs in which I perform in either of those ways is better still if at the same time I (for instance) have the pleasure of feeling the spring sunshine on my skin or of hearing birdsong. Eudoxus meant that taking pleasure in performing a just or moderate action makes that action, which is already a good *per se*, into something better—indeed, he may well have meant better of its kind: thus the agent’s pleasure in it makes just or moderate conduct a yet more perfect instance of *just* or *moderate conduct*.<sup>14</sup> Eudoxus’ choice of examples—just conduct and moderate conduct—was surely very deliberate. We can divine this from a comment by

<sup>13</sup> See n. 2 above.

<sup>14</sup> Aristotle’s testimony on this argument is not very clear. He moves from reporting what seems to be the argument I have described, to talking about, as if it were the same, an

his contemporary, Aristotle, who knew him—they were both connected with Plato’s Academy. Aristotle snidely hints that the quality of Eudoxus’ arguments fell below that of his character:

Now Eudoxus used to think that pleasure was *the* good because . . . [there follows one of Eudoxus’ arguments] . . . Eudoxus’ pronouncements carried conviction more because of the excellence of his character than in themselves; for he was thought to be a person of exceptional moderation, and so it was not thought that he made them as a lover of pleasure, but that things were truly as he said. (1172b9–18)<sup>15</sup>

We may surely gather from this that Eudoxus had great respect for just and moderate conduct, since one can hardly possess these virtues oneself without esteeming them and their manifestations in general. So as far as ethical theory goes, Eudoxus was most likely a G-hedonist, at least if his conduct was good by common sense standards and his theory not in conflict with it. For the alternative theory, R-hedonism, like every consequentialist account of right and wrong, conflicts with parts of common-sense morality, in particular some of our intuitions about justice.

Anyway, Eudoxus’ insight was that pleasure has the power to make a very, very good thing significantly better. Whatever can raise the value of *something as good as that* must be, itself, a truly pre-eminent good, a good beyond praise (cf. *EN* 1, 1101b27–31), the supra-perfect source of perfection!

The most obvious objection to this way of promoting pleasure as highest good is that pleasure has just the same power to make a very, very bad thing significantly worse. In fact, it seems that, for every kind *K*, once a *K*-thing possessed by a subject or engaged in by an agent has added to it (in that same subject or agent) pleasure in the *K*-thing, the *K*-thing becomes a more forceful, vital, and emphatic example of *K*.<sup>16</sup> It is not

argument to the effect that a life with wisdom in it is more desirable if it also contains pleasure (*EN* 10, 1172b23–30). Nor is it clear how Eudoxus stood *vis à vis* Aristotle’s distinction between acting from virtue and doing what the virtuous agent does (*EN* 2, 1105a17–b10). Did Eudoxus hold that even virtuous action is improved (made still more virtuous) by the agent’s taking pleasure in it? If so, Aristotle’s position that the (otherwise good) action fails to count as being virtuous at all unless the agent takes pleasure in it (*EN* 1, 1099a8–21) goes one better than Eudoxus, and may have been developed in response to him. In that case, we may also see in this dialectic with Eudoxus the seed of Aristotle’s distinction (never drawn firmly by Plato) between conduct that is virtuous and conduct that is self-controlled (i.e. good, but in a way reluctant; *EN* 7, 1145a15–18; 1151b32–1152a1).

<sup>15</sup> In fact, Aristotle indicates elsewhere that he thinks well of some of Eudoxus’ hedonistic arguments: see 1, 1094a2–3 with 10, 1172b9–15 and 1172b35–1173a1; and 1, 1101b27–31.

<sup>16</sup> This is implied by Aristotle’s account of pleasure in *EN* 10.

surprising if some ancients thought of pleasure as a sort of divine force that makes each thing be more positively what it is;<sup>17</sup> but their culture did not in general take it for granted that what is divine is necessarily *good* from the human ethical point of view. It seems that the conclusion ought to be that pleasure, however much to be reckoned with, cannot be the highest good and perhaps is not any sort of good. For pleasure is bad-making no less than good-making. This suggests that pleasure in itself (whether because it is a sort of elemental principle ‘beyond good and evil’, or because it is an abstraction) is neither good nor bad.

From the ancient point of view there is another objection to Eudoxus’ argument. Even if we grant that pleasure itself is good,<sup>18</sup> its being the sort of good that adds value to other kinds of good is not unique to pleasure. The most obvious other example is intelligence. If something is anyway good, it becomes better when done or handled intelligently. If, as many people do, we assume that intelligence is itself a good, then intelligence is on a par with pleasure.<sup>19</sup> They have equal claim to the title ‘highest good’. But traditionally the title must belong uniquely. The ancient debate (for some reason) takes it for granted that there cannot be ties for this accolade.<sup>20</sup>

## VI

The second suggestion I want to examine is that the highest good is ‘the principle and cause of the goods’. These words are Aristotle’s (*EN* 1, 1102a3–4; cf. *Eudemean Ethics* 1, 1217b5), but the idea can be glimpsed in Plato too.<sup>21</sup> The thought is that the highest good is the source of value to the other goods: in other words makes it true that they are goods at

<sup>17</sup> See *Philebus* 12b–c; 26b–c on pleasure as a divinity (Aphrodite). Empedocles calls one of his cosmic forces by the name of Aphrodite. We may also think of the god-sent gilding of beauty and presence (the *charis*) that descends on a Homeric hero at a particularly significant or regal moment.

<sup>18</sup> Eudoxus had independent arguments for this: see *EN* 10, 1172b9–15; 18–23.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Aristotle, *EN* 10, 1172b28–34.

<sup>20</sup> Stated more fully, my point is that, while the title applies uniquely simply by being a superlative, the ancient choice of just such a formula expresses the substantial assumption that there can only be one pre-eminent ‘good of goods’ even though otherwise appealing criteria may favour more than one candidate. See section VII below.

<sup>21</sup> It is not clear exactly how, in Aristotle, this theme is related to the theme that the highest good is what all other goods are for the sake of. For Plato on wisdom as the good-making good, see *Meno* 87d–88e, *Euthydemus* 279a–281e; see also McCabe pp. 199–202 below. The Sun analogy in *Republic* 6, 506b–509b, may present The Good as good-making. In *Laws* 2, 661b–d, ‘justice and the whole of virtue’ has this role. Cf. Aristotle, *Eudemean Ethics* 8.3, 1248b25–34.

all.<sup>22</sup> It is easy to see how this works if the highest good is the sole *per se* good. For in that case all other goods will be means to the highest good, and it is straightforward that the value of something good only as a means derives from the value of the end. However, that case has been ruled out.<sup>23</sup> The situation is one in which we are trying to see what the relation is in which the highest good stands to the other goods even though some of the latter are goods *per se*, not simply as means. How, on that assumption, does it make sense to interpret the relation as one whereby all the other goods get their value from the highest?

Think of being so committed to some kind of *per se* good *V* that when you are working to obtain or safeguard goods, you unhesitatingly reject or even simply ignore any options that might compromise *V*. These are options for the getting or preserving of goods other than *V*. You operate, in effect, as if these other goods have, as far as you are concerned, no value at all except in the context of your steady hold on *V* (or *V*'s steady hold on you). Letting them go when they threaten *V* is not a loss to you in that situation, because you have let go nothing that is of value in the situation. Similarly you reject or ignore options for avoiding evils—as they would ordinarily be called—if they might compromise *V*. You operate as if, in such a situation, these so-called evils have no disvalue. All this holds whether the so-called goods and evils other than *V* and its absence are what they are as means or *per se*. However, you do not in general operate as if *V* and its absence were the sole good and evil. On the contrary, you are completely willing to pursue and avoid those other goods and evils in the context of a secure hold on *V*. In that context, you treat them as if they have real value, positive or negative, so that you would be genuinely better off with, or without, them, as the case may be. (Hence you would not think it reasonable to secure your loyalty to *V* by training yourself to be uniformly indifferent to those other goods regardless of circumstances; for a variety of circumstances will provide opportunities to become genuinely better off by, and only by, taking a lively interest in goods other than *V*.) In sum, you operate as if, anyway as far as you are concerned, the presence of *V* is not only necessary but also sufficient for its being worth your concerning yourself in a practical way with any other goods and their opposites.

A further point: your commitment to *V* is whole-hearted. It is not simply true that your life would not be worth living to you without *V*,

<sup>22</sup> As Kant says about the good will: see, e.g. the beginning of the *Groundwork* (Kant 1948: pp. 59–60), Prussian Academy edition vol. 4, 393–4.

<sup>23</sup> See section IV above.



for this could be so if you were in some way addicted to *V* with an addiction you find hateful. The commitment I have in mind is one by which you would not want to be alive without caring about *V* as you do.<sup>24</sup> Thus suppose you are so placed that your commitment to *V* precludes you from pursuing something, *S*, which you would normally welcome as a good: you may wish you were not so placed, and you may well regret certain facts about yourself, for instance your poverty or some other pressure but for which you would not be in that situation.<sup>25</sup> But (if *V* to you is the highest good) the one thing you cannot regret about yourself is the force of your commitment to *V*, nor can you feel it a piece of ill luck if the seeds of that were sown in you by others when you were young, even though your commitment to *V* is in a sense as much to blame as anything else for your having to forgo *S*.

All this applies whether you are acting so that the other goods are to your own benefit or to that of others whom you care about. In the latter case, *V* must be securely implanted not merely in your life but in theirs in order for it to be maximally true that you, in working to bestow the other goods on these other individuals, and to protect them from the corresponding evils, are working to their real advantage. Naturally, you will do whatever you can, if you have any influence in the matter, and if you care about these individuals, to protect and if necessary develop the existence in their lives of *V*, since from your point of view without *V* nothing genuinely good can happen to or be obtained by these people whom you care about.

We can take this further. You might, in addition, have some corresponding judgemental attitudes towards persons over whom you have no control or who are not your business. For example, someone is deeply and seriously lacking in *V*. His or her ethical heart is wholly elsewhere. As you see it, that person's life lacks, and stands no chance of acquiring, the source of value. When he succeeds in his endeavours, or when he fails, from your point of view he has not made any real gain or suffered any real loss. In fact, from this rather precise point of view of yours, he is a kind of simulacrum of a practical agent, if a practical agent is one susceptible of

<sup>24</sup> Mimnermus fr. 1 ('What is life, what is joyful, without golden Aphrodite? May I die when these things matter no more to me'). Compare Catullus 76, where (about his passion) he begs the gods: *eripite hanc pestem perniciemque mihi* ('This plague, this killer, tear it out of me').

<sup>25</sup> There is no logical conflict in general between regret at being in the situation described (and the desire to avoid it in advance and to escape from it once you are in it), and complete absence of regret for *passing up S in that situation*. The courageous did not welcome the danger in which presently, without regrets, they set aside their own good chance of safety.

faring well or badly. You of course agree that he may fare well-or-badly-from-his-own-point-of-view. But your point of view, including as it does the judgemental element I am sketching, is such that, according to it, faring-well-or-badly-from-his-point-of-view does not entail faring well or badly, any more than being healthy-for-a-malnourished-person entails being healthy.

On one way of looking at the matter, it is as if the various things standardly considered desirable or good are, except for *V*, whatever that may be, only potentially good, with a potential which is actualized only by the concurrent presence of *V*. This is apt enough for goods whose empirical natures in particular cases do not depend on the attitudes and choices of the persons who have them: for example, money, physical health, and many types of opportunity. What these are like in themselves is the same, whoever and whatever sort of person has them. But that does not hold for such important *per se* goods as pleasure and friends. If, for instance, pleasure or having fun is your *V*, the empirical nature of the friends you make and keep will be different from that of the friends of someone whose *V* is something different, say musicality. Let it be that you are a G-hedonist, but like most people you regard friendship as a *per se* good, not an instrumental one. Then your commitment to pleasure entails that, in so far as you value friendship as a kind of *good*, you will value only those friendships where pleasure is the main motif. If, conversely, friendship is your *V*, you will cultivate only friendship-friendly kinds of pleasure, and these will be different in many empirical ways from say music-friendly kinds. Here, commitment above all to *V* does not render good a phenomenon called 'a pleasure', or one called 'a friendship', that comes with its own antecedently determinate properties. The commitment shapes, rather, the very nature of the phenomenon in your case.

Let us suppose for the moment a *V*-ist whose *V* is something other than friendship and pleasure, so that the latter are examples of 'other' goods. Now, exactly how does it come about that, from this *V*-ist's point of view, his hold on *V* makes it the case that such ordinarily acclaimed desirables are *in fact* good, desirable, and worthy of his concrete positive practical interest? Well, we could say that, whereas the bare abstractions *pleasure* and *friendship* elicit in almost everyone schematic and theoretical endorsement of them as objectives,<sup>26</sup> the *V*-ist's commitment to *V* determines specific interpretations such that not until interpreted thus do *pleasure* and *friendship* become (from his point of view) actually worth making

<sup>26</sup> But this is not mandatory: see the penultimate paragraph of section V above.

concrete efforts for—in other words, become from his point of view actually good. According to a slightly different way of looking at the matter, we can greet with merely provisional acceptance the schematic truisms (or would-be truisms) that *pleasure* is good, and that *friendship* is, and then (if we are *V*-ists) we can hail the phenomena picked out by *V*-ist interpretations of *pleasure* and *friendship* as what make those truisms true. (If as a result we treat the truisms as well established—or if we had considered them well-established all along—then as *V*-ists we shall view opposed interpretations of *pleasure* and *friendship* as, in fact, mistaken. We shall say that the experiences, activities, and liaisons which these would-be interpretations pick out are not really pleasures or friendships at all.)

I have been describing aspects of what it would be like to operate as if *V* (whatever this good may in fact be) is source of value for the other goods. I should not be surprised if, on the reflective level, very many moderns would simply dismiss any theory that says that one good is source of value for the other goods, on the ground that talking of value as something that can, as it were, be switched on or off through the presence or absence of some specific good, is confused or even nonsensical. Still, it might be the case that some who are theoretically dismissive nonetheless live, or admire others who live, as if, for some specific interpretation of *V*, *V* is source of value for other goods. And if *V* as specified is the only good that plays this role in someone's life, then that life is being lived as if *V* is *the highest* good. Moreover, if it so happens that you or I consider this life a very good one, and take it to be so precisely because it is thus structured by *V* as specified, then, I think, we ourselves in fact accept that *V* is indeed the highest good.

## VII

Now for some complications of plurality. Several questions arise. Could it not be the case that, for example, two distinct goods are both sources of value in the same life? And could this not be so in either of several ways: either they are joint value-makers for all the other goods, or one has that role for some of the others, and the other for others, or each is sole value-maker for some and part of a joint value-maker for others? It is not clear that the answer has to be 'No' to any of these questions. These pluralizations certainly seem to be logical possibilities, and perhaps for many people they are more realistic than a monistic structure would be.

The Greeks often seem to take the monistic structure for granted,<sup>27</sup> but it is not clear why. Perhaps they got stuck on this model because it is simplest, or perhaps because it appealed to their spirit of competition. However that may be, it seems to me that the idea of a value-making good is more interesting than the question whether it is uniquely or multiply instantiated. And when this type of good is multiply instantiated, it might still be useful to call the instances, each, a 'highest good'. This would mark the controlling status of each.

I have just considered possibilities of multiple instantiation within a given life. However, one might also consider different monistically structured lives, one with *V* as its master-value, another with *W* as *its*, and find oneself thinking that each is very good precisely because (respectively) of its *V*- or *W*- related structure. One would then in effect recognize different highest goods again, only located in different lives. This seems to be the situation Aristotle found himself in towards the end of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, where he distinguishes two kinds of superlative happiness (*eudaimonia*).<sup>28</sup> For earlier he equated *eudaimonia* with the highest good (1095a14–22; 1097a15–21; cf. 1176a31–2). In such a situation one might, like Aristotle, try to rank these kinds, arguing that one sort of highest good is better than the other (although of course it cannot be its good-maker). Or one might argue that they are simply different forms of a single generic highest good. But I do not see that we are bound to make either of these moves.

## VIII

Two areas for probing will probably have come to mind. We ought to get a clearer picture of how, in the sort of framework I have been describing, recognition of goods relates to recognition of right and wrong. And: since so far I have treated the highest good only in formal fashion, considering what it can mean to assign a good the position of 'highest' without regard to substantial candidates, we should ask of a given formal account whether it favours some substantial candidates over others. Here, I shall ask these questions only in connection with the idea of the highest good as source of value.

<sup>27</sup> For example, Aristotle notoriously omits to show that there must be just one highest good. The *Philebus*, too, simply assumes this.

<sup>28</sup> The life that revolves round the kind he considers inferior he still calls 'second happiest' (*EN* 10, 1178a8–9).

Let us take the first question first. I have been assuming that our agent who operates as if *V* is the highest good<sup>29</sup> is, in practice at any rate, a *G*-style *V*-ist. That is to say, his or her adherence to *V* affects only those commitments for which the reason or justification consists in the pursuit of good things as such. Otherwise this agent recognizes all the usual duties and claims, and (I am assuming) gives them the weightings a decent person would give. But can such an agent think coherently about duties involving doing good or refraining from harm? The most obvious examples come under the general heading of what the ancients called justice. It is wrong to assault people or steal their goods or curtail their liberty. Of course, certain conditions have to be met for it to be wrong to attack people physically, or to deprive them of things they own, or to lock them up. But it is not one of these conditions that the persons in question should be dedicated to some particular specification of the highest good. Thus a wronged person could fall into the category of those whom ‘we’ regard as strictly speaking incapable of *really* faring well or badly. For she might either recognize no highest good, or recognize one quite different from ours. Suppose that one of these possibilities holds. Then she is one of those simulacra of practical agency! Still, given certain conditions that have nothing to do with adoption of a highest good, it is as wrong to assault, steal from, or incarcerate her as anyone else.<sup>30</sup> That is, it is *really* wrong. But the notions of harm and loss to the victims seem to stand at the centre of any explanation we can muster for why it is wrong to do these things to people.<sup>31</sup> Yet how can we talk about harm and loss without implying that whoever suffers them fares badly? How can we talk about the *real* wrongfulness of (under certain circumstances) harming people and depriving them of goods without implying that what happens to them when they suffer these wrongs is *really* bad?<sup>32</sup>

One could, I suppose, stick to the original guns, and say: the harming is really wrong (wrong without qualification) even though the victim only fares-ill-from-his-point-of-view. I think many would be quite comfortable

<sup>29</sup> For simplicity I shall now refer to it in the singular.

<sup>30</sup> Thus it is not the case that corrective justice lacks a task when the victim is of inferior character; cf. *EN* 5, 1132a2–6.

<sup>31</sup> However, T. Irwin pointed out that one might conceivably hold that we have certain obligations to people, who have certain rights against us, irrespective of whether they are benefited/harmed by our fulfilling/failing to fulfil the obligations. (Thus one might see oneself as, in a sense, ritually bound to refrain from assault by an obligation that has nothing to do with the way being assaulted affects the victim.)

<sup>32</sup> The paradox that the bad man cannot be unjustly deprived of (non-moral) goods appears at *Magna Moralia* 2.3, 1199b10–18.

with saying this—on one condition. The condition is that everyone in the picture fares well or ill just from their own point of view. There is no set of people whose faring well or ill is simple or absolute in any sense exclusive to them. But to say this is to have abandoned the framework of the highest good. If one keeps that framework with its differentiation between real faring well or badly ('ours') and the qualified form, it is still possible to maintain that, and live as if, doing certain things to other people is really and without qualification wrong even in the case of those others whose welfare is limited to the qualified form. But this comes close to categorizing them as inferior to us by a categorization that we probably find unacceptable. Perhaps we want to be able to say not merely that in certain areas of life each person has a real and unqualified claim to consideration by every other, but that these reciprocal claims are based on our all, at some level, being equal or mattering equally, or mattering in the same way. And this is what the differentiating framework seems to deny.

A better move, if we want to keep the framework of highest good as source of value, might be to restrict it from applying to whatever basics of welfare are presupposed in our ordinary concepts of harm, injury, and infringement of rights. This modification might turn out to mean that the framework only comes into play with respect to *per se* goods.<sup>33</sup> I shall not attempt here to explore the implications of this suggestion.

Let me briefly consider the second question raised above: does the framework favour any particular substantial candidate? It surely does, if we assume an agent seriously conscientious about right conduct. But we should approach this by stages. Take first the simplest case, although it is not clear that this case is in fact logically possible. Here, the person operates just in terms of particular actions, whether deciding for or against them, or judging them in others. Moreover, it matters to her whether she or others act rightly or wrongly at any given time. But she does not think in terms of *dispositions* to behave in the various right and wrong ways. I said that she was seriously conscientious, which is to ascribe a disposition. But *she* does not think of anyone in that way or any other such way. She just takes each piece of behaviour as it comes. She may note that, in a given agent, there are similarities between pieces of behaviour. But she never frames the thought, either to assert or deny it, that the agent is *such as to* behave like that.

<sup>33</sup> But if, as is natural, we count health and seeing as goods *per se*, as well as instrumentally, then basic welfare includes some *per se* goods. Cf. Plato, *Republic* 2, 357c; Aristotle, *EN* 1, 1096b17.

Here, the agent's commitment (as we would call it) to right conduct sets certain constraints on what *V* can be. It cannot be a good such that making it a very important part of life, let alone so important that it dominates pursuit of all other goods, would undermine the agent's right conduct. For example, wild and intoxicating pleasure is presumably a good in the abstract or in occasional carefully hedged doses. But for a person who cares about right conduct, it would probably be a mistake to make that sort of pleasure count as the good to which all other goods give way. Notice that this point is one which an agent who lacked the vocabulary of dispositions would not be able to formulate, since she could not represent to herself the fact that a lot of wild, intoxicating pleasure tends to erode morally good dispositions or prevent them from ever developing. However, as far as I can see, such an agent could be a hedonist (a G-hedonist, of course) in one or another way. Either she could hold that gentle, civilized, pleasure is the highest good, or she could hold that pleasure is the highest good while drawing upon some argument to the effect that wild, intoxicating so-called pleasure, and everything like it, does not really deserve to be called 'pleasure' at all.<sup>34</sup>

Let us now expand the agent's repertoire to include the conceptual vocabulary of moral dispositions. At once her conscientiousness about right conduct is going to lead her to think that dispositions for engaging in and valuing right conduct are good things. It would be incorrect of her to regard them as goods *per se*, because, as Aristotle is never tired of saying, a disposition gets its value from that of the corresponding activity. Logically, the agent ought now to see right conduct not simply as right, but as also good, since otherwise she cannot ground the new point that the disposition for it is a good. What is more, although a disposition is good only because the activity is good, it seems clear that if acting rightly is a good, then the acting rightly that is the activation of a steady disposition to do so is a better good than the acting rightly that happens once in a while or unreliably. And that this is so will be apparent to the agent once she can think in terms of dispositions. It only remains to point out that once the conscientious agent recognizes virtuous dispositions, and the virtuous activities expressive of them, as goods, she will be under powerful pressure from precisely her own conscientiousness to put these latter ahead of all else, thereby identifying the *summum bonum* with virtuous activity.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>34</sup> See section VI above.

<sup>35</sup> This result is close to, but not identical with, Aristotle's, since his *summum bonum* is 'virtuous activity [of reason] in a complete life' (*EN* 1, 1098a18). For discussion of how Aristotle's *summum bonum* is 'value making', see Broadie (1999), 233–51, and Broadie and Rowe (2002), 291–2.

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## The Look and Feel of Virtue

NANCY SHERMAN

We should consider also in how much of our behaviour the benefit or injury resides mainly or entirely in the manifestation of attitude itself. So it is with good manners, and much of what we call kindness, on the one hand; with deliberate rudeness, studied indifference, or insult on the other.

(Strawson 1962: 191)

On a grey Monday morning in early January, 1997, I pulled into the gates at the United States Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland. A marine sentinel, with a 'high and tight' haircut barely visible under his 'cover', saluted me with one hand, and waved me in with another. On that day, I was to begin what would turn into a two-and-a-half-year 'tour of duty' as a visiting Chair in ethics. As I entered the world inside those gates what

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caught my eye, indeed what catches the eye of any outsider, is the attention paid to manners and decorum. ‘Honor, courage, and commitment’ may be written on Academy walls, replacing Harvard’s ‘*Veritas*’. But written on the faces and bodies of the midshipmen is not just a commitment to character, but a commitment to an *aesthetic* of character. Indeed, the world of the military takes seriously not only the inner stuff of character but also its appearance. At the meal-time formation, visitors line up to see a brigade of crisply pressed uniforms and straight bodies. Officers and midshipmen greet civilians with a ‘sir’ or ‘ma’am’, locked eye gaze, and firm hand shake. Hair is in place and uniforms are impeccable; marine shirts have creases that no civilian dress shirt has ever seen. But it is not just a trim and neat uniform that conveys good conduct in the midshipman. It is the overall demeanour and bearing that the visitor notices—a sense of politeness and respect, an air of helpfulness and civility. The term ‘conduct becoming’<sup>1</sup> covers actions, but also a more general sense of appearance, manners, and emotional bearing—the aesthetic of character, as I call it.<sup>2</sup>

I use this snapshot from the military, not to initiate a study of military decorum, but simply to bring into focus an important general question about the aesthetic of character. By the ‘aesthetic of character’ I mean how we appear to others as conveyed through formal manners and decorum, as well as, more significantly for this essay, through manner in the wider sense of personal bearing and interpersonal attitude. The latter can be a matter of looks and gesture, tone of voice and posture, or generally, how we comport ourselves emotionally and physically. The ‘manner’ of our comportment is often an important ingredient in manners, as in expressing politeness by looking a person in the eye when we greet them with a ‘hello’ or showing gratitude through a smile. But equally, manners, and the stuff of manners, are an important constraint on socially sensitive behaviour.<sup>3</sup> Thus, it is not just *what* we do but *how* we do it and how we *appear* to others that often matters ethically.

Philosophers have been quick to dismiss manners and comportment as optional trim on moral character, and in some cases, as mere priggish conventions that have little bearing on genuine virtue. So it is said, formal manners deal with petty morality, the lesser ‘do’s and don’ts’ of social

<sup>1</sup> More typically in the negative, as in ‘conduct unbecoming’.

<sup>2</sup> I adapt a Kantian phrase here; see Kant, vol. 6, 406 (1964: p. 68). (For conventions in this volume for references to Kant see p. ix above.) However, I do not mean to imply, as Kant sometimes does, that the aesthetic of virtue is mere optional trim on virtue.

<sup>3</sup> Thanks to Brad Inwood for helping me formulate the point.

interaction.<sup>4</sup> They are riddled with ritual and convention that limit their moral import. But I want to challenge this view, at least in the limited case of kindness. Taking Seneca's *de Beneficiis* (*On Doing Kindnesses*)<sup>5</sup> as an important yet under-studied text (it is his longest surviving treatise), I suggest, by appeal to this work, that a good deal of what we think of as merely the 'etiquette' of morality figures substantively in the cultivation and expression of a virtue, such as kindness. More specifically, I argue for an aesthetic of character, at least in the case of kindness, that takes seriously the outward face of virtue, as expressed in emotional demeanour.

Still, Stoic writings might seem an odd place to launch such a study. After all, the Stoics famously strip down the ancient notion of virtue to something minimalist and inner (like the Kantian good will that will follow), with an emphasis on what lies exclusively within one's own power and control. The external trappings of virtue (including expression through one's body or other material vehicles), like the external goods in a conception of good living, are part of what we are urged to detach ourselves from in the progress toward true happiness (*eudaimonia*). Emotions, as states that record attachment and loss to unstable external goods, are further threats to stable happiness. However, I want to question this assumption, at least from within the perspective of Seneca's *de Beneficiis*. Here, Seneca insists that what good persons recognize and cultivate as kindness cannot be separated from its expression in emotional demeanour and manner. Thus, one whom we would initially think of as an ardent opponent of emotions will turn out to be an ally of sorts.<sup>6</sup>

Of course, the notion that virtue is exchanged, in part, in the coinage of emotional expression is a familiar Aristotelian position; one must aim to hit the mean in action as well as emotion. But also Seneca's position points forward towards Kant, who in his later moral writings emphasizes the role of manners and demeanour, despite his underlying commitment to a

<sup>4</sup> See Kingwell (1993) for a rehearsal of this characterization.

<sup>5</sup> The standard translation of *de Beneficiis* (hereafter '*Ben*') is 'On Benefits', though strictly, 'benefactions', 'kindly deeds', 'favours', or 'kindnesses' (as I have chosen to translate the term) conveys more accurately Seneca's concern with the activity and not merely the result of *doing kindnesses*. See further Cooper and Procopé (1995), 184, notes to their translation.

<sup>6</sup> The Stoics also provide an interesting lens through which to see the military. The military implicitly and explicitly fashions itself as Stoic. Within the Naval community, sailors and marines identify with the moral idealism and rigour of Stoic ethics, and with the idea that the inner stuff of virtue can be toughened to endure the cruellest blows of fortune. Some, such as Jim Stockdale, are even serious readers of Epictetus, and Stockdale's writing on the subject is assigned reading at some of the military academies. See Stockdale (1995), and Sherman (2002) and (forthcoming).

leaner morality. In a significant way, Kant's view in the *Anthropology* sets the tone for our work ahead:

No matter how insignificant these laws of refined humanity may seem, especially in comparison with pure moral laws, anything that promotes sociability, even if it consists only in pleasing maxims or manners, is a garment that dresses virtue to advantage, a garment to be recommended to virtue in more serious respects too. The *cynic's purism* and the *anchorite's mortifications of the flesh*, without social well-being, are distorted figures of virtue, which do not attract us to it. Forsaken by the graces, they can make no claim to humanity.<sup>7</sup>

It is easy to dismiss this garment as mere decorative flourish. But Kant suggests in several other passages this is not his intent.<sup>8</sup> Full virtue requires fully human ways of being responsive to the dignity of moral persons. Seneca, in whose writing Kant was steeped, seems to pave the way.

In turning to Seneca in order to learn more about the role of attitude in the expression of virtue, I follow an approach parallel to one I employed in *Making a Necessity of Virtue*.<sup>9</sup> There I argued that Kantianism and Stoicism, despite their relatively negative view of emotion as a dimension in ethics, nonetheless give it a role and not a trivial one. I also argued that while Aristotle embraces the emotions more wholeheartedly, we nevertheless gain important insights from Kant in his very struggle to make the point in more limited ways. In this discussion I follow a similar tack, with a focus on manners and attitude. Through their paradoxical interest in the subject, the Stoics help us see how the face of virtue can constitute an index of ethical *depth*. For the face, now to take the term literally, can show us the extent to which character 'goes deep down' (as people say), and unconsciously informs undeliberate ethical expression. But the face can also, in a Kantian, duty-based (and as we shall see, Stoic) fashion, show us the depth of ethical *commitments*, as when we feign emotional expression when we cannot summon corresponding inner states. Thus, the Stoics, and Seneca in particular, help us to recognize the role of demeanour and attitude in a wide range of ethical theories. The fact that the Stoics, whose emphasis is typically on the 'internal' aspect of virtue, nonetheless give an important role to the 'outer' face, is a good indication that this is a significant consideration for *any* credible theory.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Kant, vol. 7, 282, his italics (1974: p. 147).

<sup>8</sup> For a fuller discussion of this theme, see Sherman (1997), ch. 4, especially 141–64.

<sup>9</sup> Sherman (1997).

<sup>10</sup> I owe thanks to Christopher Gill for helping me sharpen this point.

I proceed as follows: in the following section, I take up objections and replies to the idea of including manners and ethical appearances within the moral sphere. In particular, I try to rebut the charges that they are too frivolous, conventional, and insincere to be included within morality. In the section on ‘Seneca on Kindness’, I appeal to Seneca’s *On Doing Kindnesses* to flesh out the claim that ethical appearances can matter morally, especially how we appear as regards our emotional expressions. Seneca argues that the reciprocal exchange of kindness and gratitude has a critical element in emotional demeanour, and that, in returning kindnesses, a material quid pro quo is far less important than goodwill expressed through the emotions one wears. In the section on ‘Emotional Expression’, I examine the coherence of Seneca’s views within his more theoretical, Stoic account of emotions. I argue that in the specific case of kindness, emotions and their expression can find a place in the life of the sage, though at the cost of a redescription of emotions too restrictive to satisfy Seneca’s needs in this project.

### Clearing the Ground

Before we can begin to carve a place for manners and ethical appearances in the moral life, it is important to take up several objections to such a move. I begin with manners. Contemporary philosophers themselves have been loath to include etiquette under ethics, often more so than those uncorrupted by philosophical training.<sup>11</sup>

One objection to including a roster of good manners under a code of good morals is that good manners extend to frivolous and often class-based conventions that seem far from the core of most intuitive notions of morality. What moral difference does it make whether a knife is placed on the left or right of a plate, a dessert fork used on a mutton chop, a tie worn to a dinner party, white shoes worn only between Memorial Day and Labor day, an adult addressed by ‘Mr’ or ‘Mrs’ rather than by first name. True, getting it wrong may offend, embarrass, or even humiliate, but are these really morally significant areas of respect and concern for others? In violating etiquette, are we violating conventions that bear on our moral

<sup>11</sup> For an important recent exception, see Buss (1999). See Ackerman (1988) on politeness, and Kingwell (1993) on politeness as part of the normative demands that conversation itself makes. On gratitude, see Weiss (1985). For other discussions of manners and their relation to morality, see Foot (1972), 81, and Rorty (1991), 285–91. For more general remarks on manners, see Hume (1987) and Emerson (1950).

status? To put it bluntly and pointedly, is etiquette about anything more substantive than using forks?<sup>12</sup>

Thus, there is the issue of the moral relevance of certain areas of etiquette. Manners span a broad continuum. Some aspects of decorum clearly have more to do with avoiding offence against taste than with showing moral responsiveness or concern. Equally, many notions of respect have more to do with deference to class and social status than with a person's fundamental dignity or well-being. By centring the discussion on kindness, a virtue central to most discussions of morality, I try to sidestep some of these issues and pinpoint an area where manners run closer to the aesthetic of *virtue* and thus relate specifically to ethical expression.

Still, there are other worries in treating manners as important to morality. One pervasive objection is that manners stress appearances and the superficial, and as such, have little to do with the notions of character or moral motivation.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, it is easy to think of etiquette as outer ritual that can become hollow and alienated from character. Consider Newland Archer's predicament in *The Age of Innocence*. His upbringing and class have made him a slave to taste and the rituals of dinner parties and opera galas in the elite New York society of the late nineteenth century. (So Edith Wharton begins his story, 'Few things seemed to Newland Archer more awful than an offense against "Taste", that far-off divinity of whom "Form" was the mere visible representative and vice-regent.')<sup>14</sup> But in time, the social proprieties of that New York world come to have little to do with what Newland holds to be valuable in himself or others. His etiquette becomes mere pretence, a false self that he comes to despise.

Yet despite Newland's alienation, it is of course misleading to think of character and its external expression in manners as necessarily in conflict. The New York socialites—the Beauforts, the Mingotts, the Chiverses who people Newland's world—may sincerely live the life, however shallow their ways. But conversely, sincerely practised manners needn't be shallow. Thus, manners can be continuous with a deeper commitment to showing

<sup>12</sup> As Miss Manners parodies the case against etiquette: 'It is artificial! It's old-fashioned! It's arbitrary! It's stuffy! It's prudish! It represses people from expressing their true feelings! It inhibits little children! It's hypocritical! It's dishonest! And—it uses forks!' Martin (1996), 3. For other popular accounts, see Martin (1998) and (1999), Claiborne (1992), Dresser (1996), and Baldrige (1997).

<sup>13</sup> See Buss (1999).

<sup>14</sup> Wharton (1996), 13; see also Keke (1994) for treatment of propriety in Wharton (1996).

gratitude appropriately, being attentive to others, expressing humility or restraint from ridicule. Granted, they are typically behavioural expressions of those commitments that may, on occasion, mask weaker or conflicting ones. A smile of thanks may cover up the thought that the gift of a pea-green sweater really is quite ugly and a gift one could have lived without, an intent gaze may mask a touch of boredom with the conversation, and so on. But even so, the demeanour expresses a certain commitment to the ends of gratitude or beneficence, whatever feelings one may be able to muster at the moment. Thus, from the point of view of manners (though not necessarily character), it is not critical that facial displays of emotions be ‘read outs’ of actual felt emotions rather than merely ‘posed’. For the emphasis is on conveying appearances—emotional expression as a form of social signalling.<sup>15</sup>

Eye gaze, tone of voice, position of brow, head posture, and pose of mouth are among the familiar media for emotional demeanour. So, in many local cultures, to learn not to stare at odd-looking people, to make eye contact in conversation, to smile as a sign of gratitude are all ways of treating others with decency. They involve expressiveness that is often not captured in the leaner language of action. Moreover, if we think of the constraints on virtue in a holistic way, then, criteriologically, it may not count as having a virtue such as generosity or beneficence if one is incapable of showing particular manners and expressions, or is tone deaf to them in others.

The last point underscores the claim that moral practices, including the practice of manners, cannot be fully codified. The point is, by now, a familiar Aristotelian one: there is no giving of necessary and sufficient conditions for the practice of a virtue. So generally speaking, gratitude requires that you send a thank-you note after receiving a birthday gift, but not if you have just had a baby. In this broad sense, general rules governing virtue are defeasible.<sup>16</sup>

But the worry about manners may be less a matter of the exceptions they give rise to than of the conventionalism they embrace. So just as there are local cultures in which eye contact is privileged in the expression of gratitude, there are others in which it is not. So consider the military

<sup>15</sup> For an important discussion of emotions as ‘read outs’ vs. ‘signals’ see Jacobs, Manstead, and Fischer (1999). For a lively and accessible discussion of Paul Ekman and facial expression, see Gladwell (2002).

<sup>16</sup> As Aristotle puts it, regarding ethical conduct, the rules hold *epi to polu*, i.e. ‘usually’. This is not a matter of statistical frequency, but normative privileging. See Irwin (2000) on Aristotelian moral generalities.

community where solemn outward gaze is a typical part of the overall bearing of a subordinate to superior, whether the individual is showing gratitude or accepting an order. Similarly, within a military milieu, the lack of a head nod or warm smile in displays of goodwill typically do not signal impropriety, but a different brand of politeness, respectful of individuals but also mindful of the importance of expressions of personal gravity and composure.<sup>17</sup>

Does this sort of conventionalism argue against the inclusion of manners or demeanour within moral practice? I think not. The fact is that many of our moral obligations are dispensed through roles that are highly conventionalized, be they our roles as parents, teachers, university professors, or doctors. Kant is sensitive to the point in his insistence that the general duty of beneficence must always be tailored to meet the duty requirements of our specific roles.<sup>18</sup> More helpfully, Stuart Hampshire has pointed to a 'face' of morality where the inventions of imagination and artifice hold sway and where it would be simply irrational to demand convergence across different locales. Thus, how we grieve or bury our dead, how we care for our children or show benevolence within love and friendship are typically subject to the habits and customs of the specific groups in which we locate ourselves. Still, to take such practices seriously is not to be deferential to any and every such practice. The practices are constrained by the requirements of a more universal 'face' of morality—such that, in Hampshire's formulation, 'the rules and conventions should not cause evident and avoidable unhappiness or offend accepted principles of fairness'.<sup>19</sup> But Hampshire insists that these shared, general constraints still vastly underdetermine the complex morality of the practices themselves.

These remarks make clear that to embrace conventionalism need not entail moral relativism: conventional rituals are subject to overriding constraints and open to criticism both from within the culture and from without. On this point, Sarah Buss has recently argued that etiquette, viewed as a system of rules for expressing deference or respect, can fail in that objective if it systematically disregards human feelings or condones routine humiliation and offence to others. From the point of view of etiquette itself, it is simply a bad code of etiquette in the same way that a code of ethics that systematically abuses the rights of persons is a bad

<sup>17</sup> I am grateful to Maggie Little for discussion of the points that bear on particularism in this paragraph and the two previous paragraphs.

<sup>18</sup> Kant, vol. 6, 466–8 (1964: pp. 137–9).

<sup>19</sup> Hampshire (1983), 136.

moral code from the point of view of morality itself. In both cases, we preserve the right to judge the local practice, from a point of view internal to the aims of etiquette or morality itself.<sup>20</sup>

A different sort of objection often raised against manners is that they condone, and even encourage, inauthenticity. Favours done gruffly may offend, but a veneer of politeness that masks meanness can be equally offensive in its deceit. Moreover, a false self can alienate others, but also oneself.<sup>21</sup>

We can respond to the charge of inauthenticity in several ways. First, while the demand for baring one's soul may be on some occasions appropriate, to know when it is not is itself a sign of moral sensitivity. To know when to hold back, to know when polite behaviour counts for something and full disclosure for less, seems altogether a morally good thing. Moreover, 'posed' facial expressions<sup>22</sup> may please others and express respect, but also be self-exhortative, a way of coaxing along a corresponding inner change.<sup>23</sup> We nurse a change from the outside in, as it were. Current research on facial feedback mechanisms lends some support to the idea. Experimenters have shown that those who read the 'funnies' with upturned lips find the cartoons funnier than those whose lips are not in the smiling position.<sup>24</sup> Other studies confirm that overt facial expression can affect the intensity of emotional arousal.<sup>25</sup> Anticipating the general point, Kant notes (with a sexism that plagues the *Anthropology*) that when a woman practises smiling, the facial gesture helps to promote an inner spirit of benevolence. The general point is less offensively expressed in the following passage, also from the *Anthropology*:

Men are, one and all, actors—the more so the more civilized they are. They put on a show of affection, respect for others, modesty and disinterest without deceiving anyone, since it is generally understood that they are not sincere about it. And it is a very good thing that this happens in the world. For if men keep on playing these roles, the real virtues whose semblance they have merely been affecting for a long time are gradually aroused and pass into their attitude of will.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Buss (1999).

<sup>21</sup> On developmental and clinical notions of the 'false self', see Winnicott (1965).

<sup>22</sup> On posed and spontaneous facial expressions that correspond to specific emotions and social manners, see Ekman (1982), esp. part 2.

<sup>23</sup> Thus, Pascal's advice to the sceptic: practise as if you believe and you will find yourself believing. On this, see De Sousa's (1988) discussion of examples of bootstrapping that do not shade into deceptions.

<sup>24</sup> Strack et al. (1988).

<sup>25</sup> See Ekman (1982) for a review of the literature.

<sup>26</sup> Kant, vol. 7, 151 (1974: p. 30).



Thus, Kant, dogmatic as he is about truth-telling, is not terribly worried about this sort of semblance as a case of deceit. The game is transparent: it is wink, wink, nod, nod. No one is manipulated. The feigned smile keeps under wraps less generous feelings, which, interestingly, in this account, a duty of beneficence demands be kept just there. The cold-hearted misanthropist, even if he is acting from the motive of duty, should not wear his misanthropy on his sleeve.<sup>27</sup> He is to don an emotional mask that supplements his motive of duty and that can catalyse emotional changes within.<sup>28</sup>

Pretence can serve as practice for oneself, but also helps to create good appearances for others. So Julia Driver has recently argued that for those in leadership roles, appearing to do wrong can be almost as bad as actually doing what is wrong, in that others take their lead from such exemplars, even if they misconstrue them.<sup>29</sup> Military leaders know the point all too well. So, in this post-Tailhook<sup>30</sup> era, senior military men often go out of their way to avoid any chance that their actions toward women in integrated units might be misconstrued as sexual or adulterous. As leaders they must be 'above suspicion', mindful of how actions might be construed *and* misconstrued. The point was not lost on me in a personal way. The captains and colonels who taught with me at the Naval Academy were using my book, *Making a Necessity of Virtue*. The dust cover, I discovered, tended to make some squeamish. It features a photo from the Louvre of Canova's nude statue, 'Psyche brought back to life by Amor's Kiss'. One officer joked that he would have to carry the book to class in a brown wrapper. The joke may have been a tip off to his own prudery or

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Kant, vol. 4, 398 (1948: p. 65).

<sup>28</sup> See Sherman (1997) on the role of emotions in Kantian virtue. Also see Kant (1963: p. 197), on the idea that love born from obligation can itself turn into a more genuine love: with time, as Kant puts it, one acquires 'a taste for' such love.

<sup>29</sup> Driver (1992). Her views draw on Kant's; see his (1963), especially p. 111. Note, as Driver points out, Kant uses other arguments to underscore the moral importance of semblance and *resemblance*. One such argument comes from the treatment of animals: we ought not to practise cruelty against animals not because of animals' inherent dignity, but because the practice of treating them inhumanely can through resemblance reinforce cruelty toward humans. See Kant (1963: p. 239).

<sup>30</sup> 'Tailhook' refers to the way naval aviators must land their planes by hooking the tail of the planes on a taut wire on the flight deck of carriers. Aviators annually meet at a Tailhook convention, widely known for its bawdiness and sexual promiscuity. In 1992, Lieutenant Paula Coughlin, one of the women aviators who was sexually assaulted at the 1991 convention, went public with her complaint. The charge shook the US Navy, leading to a series of resignations from the Secretary of the Navy down. It led to massive policy review within the Navy of the treatment of women.

as Freud would invert, his voyeurism. But I think the real issue for him was how he would be perceived by the impressionable midshipmen. How would *they* take the cover? Was its eroticism pornographic to them? And would he be seen as endorsing pornography? As Driver puts it, ‘being good is sometimes a matter of looking good’. Seneca appeals to the very point, as we shall see shortly. But first some background on Seneca’s treatise.

### Seneca on Kindness: Appearances Matter

Seneca’s treatise, written between 56 and 64 CE, is addressed to one Aebutius Liberalis whom we know little more about than his name and its appropriateness for the occasion.<sup>31</sup> He is addressed in the early books of the essay as a moral novice in the subject, and one for whom exhortation (*praecepta*) and what is later labelled ‘casuistry’ will be critical. By the latter part of the work, he becomes more collaborator and guide with Seneca, making the kind of progress that allows him to examine some of the substantive questions and paradoxes of ethical theory.<sup>32</sup> In this sense the essay both charts and exemplifies a kind of developmental line.

Seneca’s treatment in *de Beneficiis* follows the ancient view in including under a single heading topics we moderns might find disparate—namely, giftgiving, gratitude, and kindness. Seneca’s examples of *beneficia* or favours include ‘large kindnesses’, such as gifts of substantial sums of money, manumission, and saving a life, but also ‘small kindnesses’—gifts of clothing and books, as well as the emotional expression of kindness and gratitude conveyed in looks and gestures. In writing about this wide range of *beneficia*, Seneca insists that he is examining the very glue that binds society: ‘More than anything else, [doing favours] holds human society together’ (*Ben.* 1.4.2). More than—we might fill in with some obvious alternatives—Aristotelian conceptions of friendship or Platonic notions of justice. Kindness holds society together and ingratitude disrupts it: ‘Nothing so dissolves and disrupts the concord of mankind as this

<sup>31</sup> See Griffin (unpublished); also, Cooper and Procopé (1995), 183.

<sup>32</sup> See Griffin (unpublished) on the essay as charting the course of Liberalis’ moral progress and the shifts in pedagogical method that match that progress. So, she argues, the early books show a preoccupation with *praecepta* (rules and admonitions), while the latter books, from 4 to 7, examine the *decreta* (tenets) of Stoic theory. Also see Inwood (1995*b*) on two levels of discourse in this essay—that of commonsense morality and that of strict Stoic theory, with its paradoxes and redescrptions.

fault [ingratitude]. Our safety depends on the fact that we have mutual acts of kindness to help us. What alone equips us in life and fortifies us against sudden attack is our exchange of favours' (4.18.1). Moreover, Seneca's discussion makes clear that it is often the small virtuous acts, and not necessarily the grand or heroic ones, that weave the real fabric of community.<sup>33</sup>

Still, as we have said, *On Doing Kindnesses* might seem an odd book for a Stoic to write. For at least orthodox Stoicism urges the self-sufficiency of individuals and detachment from external goods, such as health, good fortune, material wealth, and in general, the kind of conventional goods that are part and parcel of giving and receiving favours. The normative ideal rests in the Stoic sage, who has learned a kind of *apatheia* or freedom from passionate emotions that allows equanimity in the face of loss and happiness grounded in inner virtue alone. Giving and receiving things that satisfy needs for material goods, and moreover, attention to the niceties of such exchanges, seem to fit ill with the concerns of a sage. Of course, orthodox Stoics do not deny entirely the place of externals in a human life. The doctrine stipulates that favourable externals are things to be 'preferred' (*proêgmena*) rather than 'dispreferred' (*aproêgmena*) as selective advantages. But those selective advantages are themselves neither regarded as genuine goods nor constituents of happiness that bear substantively on true flourishing. In this sense, they are 'indifferents', and the project of moral cultivation is one of coming to appreciate, emotionally and intellectually, that what lies beyond one's control are neither genuine goods nor genuine evils. The exchange of material goods, important as they are in the practical world of social interactions, seems to undercut Stoic doctrine about what it is really good to have and to hold.<sup>34</sup>

Yet Seneca himself is not the only Stoic author of a book on kindnesses, although his treatise is the sole survivor. Cleanthes, the second head of the Old Stoa, wrote a book on gratitude, and Seneca cites repeatedly a work by Chrysippus, Cleanthes' successor, on the subject of favours. Hecaton and his teacher Panaetius also have treatises on the subject, and Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius, writing after Seneca, frequently take up the themes of good deeds and gratitude in the political and social order.<sup>35</sup> Thus, treatises on the practical and emotional exchanges of social life find their way into

<sup>33</sup> See my discussion of this as it relates to Aristotelian magnanimity in Sherman (1988).

<sup>34</sup> For further reading, see Long and Sedley (1987), especially sections 58 and 65. Also Inwood (1985), 127–181, and Algra et al. (1999), especially B. Inwood and P. Donini's chapter on 'Stoic Ethics', 675–738.

<sup>35</sup> See Inwood (1995) for a discussion of this background.

Stoic writing from its earliest periods onward. The Stoics follow the rich lead, here, of Aristotle who formally discusses the virtue of kindness (*charis*) in *Rhetoric* 2.7, and then takes up the subject again in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, in connection with the specific virtues of liberality, magnificence, and magnanimity. The topic also emerges in the context of his discussion of friendship.<sup>36</sup> But Aristotle's taking up the subject presents no paradox: external goods are required for the happy life. True, they are subordinate to virtue, but even so, they are of both instrumental and intrinsic value in a flourishing life.<sup>37</sup>

Here, it is important to remember, too, the decidedly practical thrust of much Stoic writing, both ancient Greek and Roman. Seneca's own campaign, through epistle and essay, is to influence the moral novice who takes relatively seriously the project of moral improvement, but who is unlikely to reach the rarefied heights of sagehood. (Certainly Nero, to whom he was tutor in residence and to whom the essay *On Clemency* is addressed, had little chance of approaching that status. But this notorious case aside, it was commonly acknowledged that a true sage would emerge only as frequently as the phoenix.) Still, the sage remains the moral ideal even for those who are trying to make progress. And there is the conviction that sagehood can guide those such as Lucilius, Seneca's addressee in the *Epistles*, and Seneca himself, who have no hope of themselves being sage-like figures, like the great Stoic exemplars, Socrates and Diogenes, the Cynic. (In this regard, even Epictetus, whose counsels can be uncompromisingly severe, cautions his students against thinking that their actions can ever be error-free in a way requisite of a sage: 'So is it possible to be altogether faultless? No, that is impracticable; but it is possible to strive continuously not to commit faults. For we shall have cause to be satisfied if, by never relaxing our attention, we shall escape at least a few faults.')<sup>38</sup>

Similarly, much of the focus in *On Doing Kindnesses* is on imperfect human beings,<sup>39</sup> who rely on each other for goodwill, not in some abstract sense, but concretely, in its material and emotional conveyances. Thus, we might think of *On Doing Kindnesses* as a work sensitive to the nuances of Roman moral decorum (with its stress on gift-giving and

<sup>36</sup> Significantly, in his treatments of kindness Aristotle does not explicitly present the view that emotional gesturing can itself be a gift to others. I take it, however, that Aristotle can easily make the point, given his general views about the role of emotional attitude in the expression of virtue.

<sup>37</sup> *Nicomachean Ethics* 1.10.

<sup>38</sup> Epictetus, *Discourses*, 4.12.19, ed. Gill (1995a), trans. Hard.

<sup>39</sup> See e.g. *Ben.* 2.18.4

gratitude, patronage, and clientship), and focused squarely on revision rather than deprecation of convention, as Cynicism, Stoicism's predecessor, tended to be.<sup>40</sup> In the foreground is the practical reality of individuals who routinely need external goods replenished and restored, who depend upon friends to be sensitive to what is needed and when, and to what is useful or pointless:<sup>41</sup> no one should give 'winter clothes at midsummer' or 'a present of gladiators or animals for the arena when the show has already been put on',<sup>42</sup> 'books to a country bumpkin or hunting nets to a scholar or man of letters'.<sup>43</sup> But also, we should give presents to others that 'bring us to mind whenever he [the recipient] comes into contact with it',<sup>44</sup> that 'endure', that are 'imperishable', that can't be 'used up', 'that stay in existence, cling to my friend, live with him'.<sup>45</sup>

This last remark underscores the palpable tension in this work. Gifts are to encourage precisely the sort of attachment one would expect a Stoic to be admonishing against. Seneca himself tries to mitigate the tension, reminding the reader to distinguish, along technical Stoic lines, the mental act of doing kindness from the material deed 'which is neither good nor bad'.<sup>46</sup> 'What we can hold or look upon, what our covetousness fixes on, can be taken away from us by misfortune or malice. The favour, even when its vehicle is lost, remains. It is a right action (*recte factum*, in Greek, *katorthôma*) and no force can undo it'.<sup>47</sup> Again, 'A favour cannot possibly be touched by the hand; the transaction takes place in the mind'.<sup>48</sup>

Yet as one reads the treatise, these points of Stoic doctrine fade into the background. In the foreground is attention to the details of what is given, and how, and when. The *choice of vehicle* is precisely Seneca's concern here. Granted that, as recipient (and giver too) we may be misled by 'what strikes the eye', by the 'trace and mark of a favour',<sup>49</sup> by holding on to

<sup>40</sup> Indeed, Cynicism challenges conventions of all sorts, including manners and social customs, such as gender-specific dress, the use of coinage, and even the prohibition on cannibalism. See Branham and Goulet-Cazé (1996) and Dudley (1937). The Cynic criticism of convention is an important part of the background to Seneca's work, though Seneca is far too much a subscriber to Roman convention to share the Cynic attitude. On Roman culture, see Rawson (1985) and (1991); on the practice of Hellenistic 'euergetism', see Veyne (1990). For a fascinating study of second-century CE manners of self-presentation and male deportment, see Gleason (1995).

<sup>41</sup> See the classification at *Ben.* 1.11.1 and remarks at 2.1.5.

<sup>42</sup> 1.12.3.      <sup>43</sup> 1.11.6.      <sup>44</sup> 1.11.5.

<sup>45</sup> 1.12.1—*extet, haereat amico meo, conuiuat.*

<sup>46</sup> 1.6.2.      <sup>47</sup> 1.5.3.

<sup>48</sup> 1.5.2. See also 1.5.4; on the Stoic theme of making do in strained circumstances, see 4.21.4.

<sup>49</sup> 1.5.6.

something outward rather than inward. Still, the good person aims to convey her good intentions through a careful choice of the 'outward', be it *via* the material gift, timing, attunement to recipient,<sup>50</sup> emotional gesture, or body language that goes into the giving.<sup>51</sup>

But I don't want entirely to dismiss Seneca's doctrinal appeals to the intention (*animus*) of donor and recipient. There is little doubt that he means to criticize the excessive materialism of Roman rituals of gift-giving and to breathe a new spirituality into the practice. And too, given the realities of patronage and hierarchy in Roman society, he is keen to liberate the recipients of favours, often those considerably less well off than benefactors, from hefty burdens of *quid pro quo*.<sup>52</sup> Inwood, in his important study of *de Beneficiis*, makes this important point.<sup>53</sup> An acceptable form of gratitude that conceptually separates thankfulness and reciprocity from the strains of a matched, material recompense is, thus, important news. But I want to argue that, even if Seneca is at pains to de-emphasize the material aspect of the exchange (especially in showing gratitude), he is not at similar pains to de-emphasize its aesthetic aspects. Indeed, he seizes on demeanour and appearance as crucial to how we project our good intentions, respect, and deference. These are resources we all have, whatever our material status. Thus, the question of *how* we show our concern, interest, appreciation, and thanks does not retreat. We are still to deliver palpable and carefully chosen goods to others. Ghostly, but good intention is of little interest to Seneca. *Pace* Inwood, 'true benefits are' *not* 'purely intelligible intentions',<sup>54</sup> a pure mental exchange, whatever that might be. The intention must be tethered to manifest, expressive attitudes. That is part of the gift.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>50</sup> On this, see the insightful analogy of giftgiving and gratitude to playing a game of catch. In both types of reciprocal exchange, timing and attunement to a recipient are critical (2.17.3–7 and 32).

<sup>51</sup> 1.9.1.

<sup>52</sup> See his important remarks in the preface: 'To plead insolvency here is especially infamous, for the very reason that what is required for discharging the obligation is not money but an attitude of mind: to acknowledge a favour is to repay it' (1.1.3).

<sup>53</sup> (1995*b*), 263.

<sup>54</sup> (1995*b*), 256. In correspondence, Inwood has replied that his interpretive emphasis on the intelligible (on the mind or *animus* as the source of the action of giving a *beneficium*) is a consequence of his conception of Stoic theory of action: that 'action is fundamentally the mental event which causes the physical movement'. This said, he agrees with me that 'the care and thought given to the choice of action and benefit are vital to determining *what* the action is'.

<sup>55</sup> For a similar tension, see Epictetus, *Discourses* 2.5.6, ed. Gill (1995*a*), trans. Hard: 'Externals must be used with care, because their usage is not an indifferent matter, yet at

How to play ‘the role of the good person’ (*partes boni uiri*) thus becomes the key.<sup>56</sup> Creating the right appearances, and creating those appearances through outward emotional expression of attitude, emerge as central themes in Seneca’s essay. ‘What then is a favour? An act of benevolence bestowing joy and deriving joy from bestowing it, with an inclination and spontaneous readiness to do so.’<sup>57</sup> Thus, to bestow joy (*gaudium*) on others and to take joy in doing it become the crucial elements in the exchange. That one has bestowed joy is typically marked by a joyous response, which in turn can enhance the joy of the giver.<sup>58</sup> The back-and-forth loop is often in the language of emotional gestures.

It is time to turn to the text in further detail. First, let us take up the general issue of cultivating ‘appearances’ of kindness and gratitude. Seneca insists that displaying the right looks is important in the mutual exchange, even if there is a touch of hypocrisy in the display. The point can be seen as an application of a more general Stoic thesis: just as the performance of certain actions are duties (*officia*) or appropriate actions (*kathêkonta*) even when they lack proper motivation, so too manifesting certain looks and appearances are duties even when the corresponding inner state is absent. Of course, it is better if the outer expression of kindness matches an inner attitude. But when that can’t be achieved, the appropriate outer expression itself is ethically important. The emphasis on the external aspect of virtue is captured well below:

No gratitude is felt for a favour which has long stuck to the hands of whoever granted it, which he seemed unhappy to let go, giving as though he were robbing himself. Even if some delay should intervene, we should do everything to avoid the *appearance* of having had to think whether to do it (*ne deliberasse uideamur*).<sup>59</sup>

In a similar spirit, we are to contrive to make favours *appear* as if they have been unsolicited, whether or not they have been: ‘to give the impression not of having been asked (*ne rogati uideamur*) [to perform some action] we should make an immediate undertaking and prove by our very haste that we were on the point of action, even before we were approached.’<sup>60</sup>

These last remarks may make some moral rigorists a bit queasy in seeming to endorse lying as requisite for proper attitudinal exchanges.

the same time, with composure and tranquillity, because the material being used is indifferent.’ For much relevant material on practices and attitudes linked with reciprocity in Greek culture, see Gill, Postlethwaite, and Seaford (1998).

<sup>56</sup> *Ben.* 1.2.4, italics added to translation. <sup>57</sup> 1.6.1.

<sup>58</sup> 2.22. <sup>59</sup> 2.1.1, italics added. <sup>60</sup> 2.2.1.

For unlike Kant's recommendation to put on 'a show of affection that deceives no one', this recommendation (to *appear* to initiate a favour before being asked) may seem precisely to depend on deception. Imagine that a friend asks you to help with an extra day of driving in the car pool, as she has just taken on a new extended schedule. You graciously accept, adding the lie that you actually tried to call her yesterday to make the offer, but couldn't reach her. But whether or not we can endorse *this* kind of polite fiction, Seneca's more general point seems unobjectionable and indeed, insightful. Seneca is, in essence, asking us to consider why, on the occasion of doing a favour, we should feel obliged to give a full disclosure of our reluctance, ambivalence, forgetfulness, or lack of motivation? Certainly, if one is confronted and asked to discuss such matters, that might be a different story. And one can imagine spheres of intimacy in which failing to initiate such discussion might itself be the unkind thing. But in the case, say, of an acquaintance whom you invite to dinner out of a sense of duty, why should he know just how hard it was for you to muster enthusiasm for extending the invitation to him?

Playing the role of the good person, thus, has to do with sensitivity as to how much information, candour, nuance, masking, and so forth is requisite for showing respect or due regard. It has to do with socially sensitive behaviour. It also has to do with an important vehicle of that behaviour, emotional demeanour: how we convey to others through the emotional expressions we wear on our faces (or exhibit through our body language and voices) interest, empathy, respect, and thanks. Seneca's remarks, here, are copious. So, he begins in Book 1, we create ingratitude when we do favours with a plaintive attitude and when we are 'oppressive' and nagging in our demands: 'We spoil the effect entirely, not just afterwards, but while we are doing the favour.'<sup>61</sup> Nor do we typically express the right comportment if favours are extorted from us: our reluctance is betrayed in inappropriate 'furrowed brows' and 'grudging words'. Nor should we give a gift in a way that is 'humiliating (*contumeliose*)'. For we are so constituted that insults 'go deeper than any services' and are more 'tenaciously remembered' than kindnesses.<sup>62</sup> 'No one can feel gratitude for a favour haughtily tossed down or angrily thrust on him', or given with groaning or flaunting or with an 'insolent expression' or 'language swollen with pride' or with 'a silence that gives an impression of grim severity' or in a way that is simply 'irritating'. It is like giving bread with stones in it.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>61</sup> 1.1.4.                      <sup>62</sup> 1.1.8.

<sup>63</sup> 1.1.7, 1.7.3, 2.11.6, 2.3.1, 2.6.2, 2.7.1.



Showing arrogance in gift-giving simply undermines the deed itself: ‘There are many who make their kindnesses hateful by rough words and superciliousness. Their language and annoyance are such as to leave you regretting your request was ever granted.’<sup>64</sup> Again, he exhorts, ‘don’t remonstrate when giving an act of kindness; save that for another time. No element of unpleasantness should be mixed with it.’<sup>65</sup> In short, gifts that are true kindnesses are bestowed ‘with a look of human kindness’,<sup>66</sup> be it in the language of words and voice, or facial and bodily expression. The look and feel of virtue matter. They indicate attitude, even if that attitude is, at times, feigned.

Proper emotional bearing is also an important way in which the recipient conveys gratitude. Here, Seneca draws on the theoretical point that material recompense is not the *moral* return for a gift, since material goods are only indifferents. As he puts it, one may give some material recompense, ‘but that is not the missing part of a duty’. On Stoic grounds, the duty is fully performed if one has the right mental attitude; the material recompense is something supplemental.<sup>67</sup> But this said, the *behavioural display* of that attitude is still a critical part of Seneca’s focus; the appropriate *outward* expression of thankfulness matters in the conveyance of attitude. Thus, the Stoic principle that the goodness or virtue is in the mental act needs to be dressed for practical application, at least in the case of those who fall short of sages or gods.

When we have decided to accept, we should do so cheerfully. We should express our delight and make it obvious to our benefactor so that he gets an immediate reward. To see a friend joyful is due cause for joy, still more to have made him joyful. We must show how grateful we are by pouring out our feelings and bearing witness to them not only in his presence but everywhere.<sup>68</sup>

Thus even when words fail, a feeling of indebtedness ought to ‘show on our faces’.<sup>69</sup> Furtive gratitude is no gratitude at all: ‘That is not diffidence. It is just a way of disclaiming the favour.’<sup>70</sup> Moreover, that we may lack wholehearted feelings of indebtedness does not necessarily excuse us from giving the impression that we have them. Again, appearances carry moral weight and are themselves a way of conveying respect.

Seneca offers his remarks about the importance of emotional bearing in moral conduct as moral exhortations without argument. But it is not difficult to fill in some background points. The case can be made clearest

<sup>64</sup> *Ben.* 2.4.1.                      <sup>65</sup> 2.62.                      <sup>66</sup> 2.3.2.

<sup>67</sup> 2.33.1. On this, see Inwood’s helpful discussion in (1995*b*), 259–61.

<sup>68</sup> 2.22.1.                      <sup>69</sup> 2.25.2.                      <sup>70</sup> 2.23.2.

with respect to facial emotional behaviour: beginning with Darwin, and moving through the work of Izard, Tomkins, and Ekman, researchers have noted that we express and ‘pose’ emotions through movements in facial musculature that are readily readable by others and that appear to have some cross-cultural span.<sup>71</sup> It is not my concern here to evaluate this extensive research programme. The modest and uncontroversial point I wish to make is that we are well-tuned readers of faces and routinely rely on such information to gauge each other’s emotional involvement and reactions. Developmentalists present a similar picture. Beginning in the first year of life, infants take their cues from faces as ways of reading their environment. The phenomenon has been dubbed by Robert Emde and others, ‘social referencing.’<sup>72</sup> So a young infant will glance back at a parent’s face to get information about a target object—for example, whether it is really a threat or something novel that is safe to explore. In the absence of such expressiveness, in the case, say, of poker-faced parents, researcher Stanley Greenspan suggests that children show deficits both in sizing up environmental stimuli and in regulating their response to them.<sup>73</sup> More basically, Greenspan argues, children construct a differentiated palette of emotions through expressive interactions with parents, which Greenspan calls ‘gestural communication’, involving facial expressions of affect, motor movements, body postures, vocal patterns, and so on.<sup>74</sup> Social communication through emotional gesturing is a pervasive part of adult social interaction as well. We look to the emotional display in faces, voices, and body language for informational input—about dangers and delights in the world but also about an agent’s own involvement with us. (Interestingly, Seneca himself relies on the fact, instructing *Liberalis* to help guide the discussion by giving facial feedback, for instance, ‘Your face, by which I agreed to be guided, is now puckered and frowning, as if to indicate that I am straying too far afield.’)<sup>75</sup> Where kindnesses are at issue, Seneca insists that outward emotional behaviour is a crucial part of what is conveyed, even if on occasion it involves dissembling. Erving Goffman, in his insightful sociological studies of deference behaviour and demeanour, echoes some of Seneca’s insights:

<sup>71</sup> Darwin (1872), excerpts in Calhoun and Solomon (1984), Izard (1971), Tomkins (1962), Ekman (1982).

<sup>72</sup> Klinnert, Campos, Sorce, Emde, and Svejda (1983).

<sup>73</sup> Greenspan (1989).

<sup>74</sup> (1989), 35. For an overview of emotional expression in infancy, including socialization of emotional facial patterns, see Malatesta (1985).

<sup>75</sup> *Ben.* 6.7.1. I am indebted to Miriam Griffin for drawing attention to the quotation, though she cites it in a quite different context.

It appears that deference behaviour on the whole tends to be honorific and politely toned, conveying appreciation of the recipient that is in many ways more complimentary to the recipient than the actor's true sentiments might warrant. The actor typically gives the recipient the benefit of the doubt, and may even conceal low regard by extra punctiliousness. Thus acts of deference often attest to ideal guide lines to which the actual activity between actor and recipient can now and then be referred.<sup>76</sup>

As Goffman sums up, 'regard is something the individual constantly has for others, and knows enough about to feign on occasion'.<sup>77</sup> This is not to deny that candour might sometimes render the more appropriate and respectful signal, as when concealment of boredom bars a recipient from important feedback. But even here, the poise and timing of one's emotional display may be crucial to the message and a reasonable part of showing due regard.

### Emotional Expression within Seneca's Stoicism

We have been arguing, then, with Seneca, that emotional demeanour is part of the expression of kindness and gratitude. But how can Seneca insist on the point, given his view that a proper moral education (leading to sagehood) is a therapy toward extirpation of the emotions and their expression? Emotions, by Seneca's own lights, are false judgements, that is, voluntary, false assents. They are voluntary assents in that an agent affirms an impression which strikes him. They are false in that the impression registers attachment and loss to external goods, mistakenly viewed as real goods and evils, constitutive of happiness and its opposite. Taken in isolation, the view is harsh, and the ancient Stoics elaborate their position in a critical way. According to this elaboration, *eupatheiai*, or fine and well-reasoned (*eulogon*) emotions come to be cultivated as affective reactions to virtue alone. Thus, the emotional achievement of the sage becomes less that of extirpation than emotional transformation. And with this transformation, the sage's emotional responses are no longer directed to externals and their effect on him (since they are now viewed as indifferents), but to his own virtue, and his emotional attitude toward virtuous striving and veering from evil. Thus, emotional reaction in the sage is essentially recalibrated to mark an axiological

<sup>76</sup> Goffman (1967), 60.

<sup>77</sup> (1967), 58.

shift.<sup>78</sup> The point is presented in these terms by Diogenes Laertius (probably in 225–50 CE):

They [the Stoics] say that there are three emotional states which are good, namely, joy, caution, and wishing. Joy (*chara*), the counterpart of pleasure, is rational elation; caution, the counterpart of fear, rational avoidance; for though the wise man will never feel fear, he will yet use caution. And they make wishing the counterpart of desire (or craving), inasmuch as it is rational appetency. And accordingly, as under the primary passions are classed certain others subordinate to them, so too is it with the primary... good emotional states. Thus under wishing they bring well-wishing or benevolence, friendliness, respect, affection; under caution, reverence and modesty; under joy, delight, sociability, cheerfulness.<sup>79</sup>

With this notion of *eupatheiai* in hand, one way to make sense of the emotional requirements of kindness is by appeal to these kinds of ‘mature’ emotions. There is some evidence that Seneca might be relying on *eupatheiai*, in so far as he standardly calls the pleasure which accompanies kindness *gaudium*, the Latin for the reasonable emotion, *chara*.<sup>80</sup>

The move is restrictive, however, since *eupatheiai* are the privileged achievements of the sage. The strategy, thus, leaves on one side the emotional demands on the moral learner or ‘progressor’ (*proficiens* or *prokoptôn*). And yet, as we have suggested, Seneca means to address his discussion primarily to a progressor, such as Liberalis, who makes progress in the course of the lessons, but who (like Seneca) stands little chance of becoming a sage. To hold that the emotions of kindness are within the reach of the sage, alone, belies the very practical spirit of this treatise.

Consequently, Seneca might opt for a different accommodation which draws on distinctions he elaborates elsewhere. He might argue that the emotional demeanour conveyed in kindness is, ultimately, the expression neither of ordinary emotions nor of cultivated fine emotions (*eupatheiai*), but of pre-emotional arousals or what he suggestively calls in *On Anger*, ‘the preliminaries, the prelude to affections’ (*principia proludentia adfectibus*).<sup>81</sup> Here, Seneca insists that some of the physiological and physionomic expressions associated with emotions are not proper to emotions themselves, but are rather involuntary ‘first mental jolts’ ‘that steal upon us’. ‘If anyone thinks that pallor, falling tears, sexual excitement or deep

<sup>78</sup> For insightful discussion, see Brennan (1998), also, very helpful commentary and notes in Graver (2002).

<sup>79</sup> Diogenes Laertius 7.116, trans. Hicks (1925).

<sup>80</sup> See Inwood (1995b), n. 63.

<sup>81</sup> I am using the translation of *On Anger* 1.2.5 in Cooper and Procopé (1995).

sighing, a sudden glint in the eyes or something similar are an indication of emotion... he is wrong; he fails to see that these are just bodily agitations' (2.3.2). They are *propatheiai*,<sup>82</sup>—'pre-emotions' or 'protopathic' phenomena, as some have referred to them.<sup>83</sup> Even the sage may suffer such feelings in response to appearances:

Thus it is that even the bravest man often turns pale as he puts on his armour, that the knees of even the fiercest soldier tremble a little as the signal is given for battle, that a great general's heart is in his mouth before the lines have charged against one another, that the most eloquent orator goes numb at the fingers as he prepares to speak.<sup>84</sup>

Given his self-awareness and the rigours of his mental cautiousness, the sage can catch himself at the moment of an emotional prelude and hold back from a proper assent. He never experiences the full-blown, subsequent emotion. The novice, in contrast, assents to the impression and surrenders to the full emotion.

If we avail ourselves of this notion, then we might construe some of the outward emotional signs of kindness as pre-emotional phenomena, of the autonomic nervous system responses, not unlike jitters and blushes, erections and tremblings, spontaneous smiles, and tears. Both sage and progressor alike are vulnerable to these behaviours, though in the case of the sage, the full-blown emotion is averted, and what is experienced is primarily a reminder of the past—the 'scars' or 'shadows' of an earlier affective life.<sup>85</sup> They are the residue of the emotional life before sagehood.

The notion of pre-emotional phenomena is empirically rich, and variants of it reappear in contemporary psychology.<sup>86</sup> But Seneca certainly cannot mean to endorse these phenomena as characterizing the emotional demeanour of kindness. For preludes are essentially involuntary.<sup>87</sup> And

<sup>82</sup> For a very helpful discussion of the origins of the notion, see Graver (1999), also, Sorabji (2000), chs. 4–7. The notion is anticipated by Aristotle in discussion of involuntary 'movements of the heart and penis' in *de Motu Animalium* 703b5–7, trans. Nussbaum (1978). For a contemporary look at the phenomenon of blushing, see Gwande (2001).

<sup>83</sup> For an interesting allusion, see Pat Barker's First World War novel about war trauma, and the 'protopathic' responses of the warrior-poet, Siegfried Sassoon: Barker (1991), 74.

<sup>84</sup> *On Anger* 2.3.3.

<sup>85</sup> *On Anger* 1.16.7. Compare Cicero who seems to anticipate the point in talking about 'the bites and little contractions of the mind' (*morsus et contractiunculae animi*) that function as emotional residue in the life of the sage, Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* 3.83.

<sup>86</sup> See discussion in Nussbaum (2001) as well as discussion of J. Le Doux's work in this context in Sorabji (2000), 148–50.

<sup>87</sup> Still, it is important to appreciate how heterogeneous and unsystematic Seneca's emotional preludes are. They include the arousals of an audience at the theatre, in the sense

the very point of Seneca's exhortations about the emotional demeanour of kindness is that we have moderate control here, perhaps even more than we do in the case of corresponding inner states. So he coaches: we are to guard against furrowed brows, or manifest attitudes of insolence and superciliousness in our voices; we are to offer kindly gestures, speak gently, and show cheer on our face when expressing gratitude. The positive expressions and the avoidance of negative ones are presumed within the reach of the will.

But even if emotional preludes cannot themselves play the role of emotional expression in kindness, we may nonetheless hold, in a curious way, that experiencing them can strengthen the emotional agency requisite for manifesting kindness. For in the case of inappropriate emotional behaviour leaking out (say, a furrowed brow when saying 'thank-you' for that pea-green sweater) the sage will be able to catch himself and shortcircuit a more indulged response. And in the case of appropriate emotional expressions, he gives himself explicit consent for their continuance. In either case, emotional agency stays more or less on the tracks. The progressor, we can imagine, might similarly learn how to be responsive to the early warning signals these pre-emotions provide, even if his control is overall, less iron-clad.<sup>88</sup>

Still, this solution leaves unresolved the issue of the progressor's full access to acts of kindness. For if it remains the case that the proper emotional elements of kindness are *eupatheiai*, then the sage, still, is alone capable of them. But perhaps this is not such a surprising result. Though Seneca's essay is meant to have broad popular scope, true kindness, like any virtue in its fullest perfection, is the achievement only of a sage who has recalibrated to the Stoic axiology. To the extent that most of us have not made the recalibration (that is, we do not, at least in an

(which Aristotle would most likely dispute) that such emotional reactions, even if not feigned, are somehow not fully genuine emotions. But they are also likened to habitual, conditioned responses: a military man in civilian dress may prick up his ears at the clarion sound of a trumpet, and perhaps even automatically reach for his weapon. Equally, they extend to contagious mimics of laughing and congruent feelings, such as being sad in a crowd of mourners. Again, they can be instinctual reflexes, such as the involuntary feel of shivering when cold water is splashed on one, or recoiling at the touch of certain things (think of being forced to touch the skin of a slimy snake), or having one's hair stand on end, or blushing upon hearing indecent language, or feeling vertigo when standing on a precipice.

<sup>88</sup> Compare Freud's (1959: 58–61) notion of signal anxiety as a subliminal emotional warning that leads to a defence against experiencing, more consciously, what is traumatic or frightening.

unshakeable way, respond to external goods as indifferents that do not contribute to our happiness),<sup>89</sup> what *we* can hope to achieve as imperfect moral beings is something that necessarily falls short of perfect kindness.

But ought the sage set the normative standard? And exactly how do we apply a norm that is pegged so high above our own levels of achievement? Those questions are too large for me to take on here. What I have been intent to argue is the more modest point—that Seneca presents a viable model in this work of a *good person* who gives and receives gifts, in part, through the expression of fitting emotions, including at times, emotional expressions that do not fully match internal emotional states. Controlling demeanour is itself, we might conclude, a kind of Stoic discipline, whether or not the sage needs to engage in it.

<sup>89</sup> Though we may strive for resilience, and indeed perhaps ought to, given the estimate of a leading epidemiological survey that 50 per cent of Americans will at some point in their lives face traumatic stresses of the sort that could lead to post-traumatic stress disorder. For this, I am indebted to discussions with Matthew Friedman, Executive Director of the National Center for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, and to his website article (2003). For more detailed discussion of the survey, see Kessler et al. (1995).

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## Virtues, Values, and Moral Objectivity

LUDWIG SIEP

### I

There is little doubt that virtues are valuable character traits or dispositions to behave regularly in the right way. If there are any values at all, justice, wisdom, and bravery are among them and just actions are instantiations of the value of justice. Therefore, if virtues can lay claim to some sort of objectivity, we may conclude that there are at least some objective values. But what kind of objectivity can be attributed to virtues?

In recent meta-ethical discussions, several criteria of objectivity for values have been discussed. Peter Railton and Joseph Raz, among others, have offered lists of such criteria, though these do not claim to be complete.<sup>1</sup> In lists of criteria of this type, conditions or—even—degrees of objectivity may be distinguished. Instead of attempting to draw up a list of this type, I will look at traditional concepts of virtue and consider the kind of objectivity which, according to traditional thinking, can be attributed to virtues.

(1) According to both the Socratic and the Aristotelian traditions, virtue is a kind of knowledge. It is objective knowledge in the sense of being appropriate in a given situation with regard to a realm of objects, events, persons, interpersonal relations, and so on. This point holds good for the activities of the virtuous person, but it does not completely depend on his perspective and activity. Virtuous knowledge and activity are themselves recognized and approved by other persons, participants in the situation as

<sup>1</sup> See Nagel (1979) 196–213, Railton (1996), 51–68, Raz (1999), 118–60.



well as observers. However, especially in the Aristotelian conception, the prudential knowledge of the virtuous person is not a detached theoretical understanding, but, rather, a partly emotional and ‘interested’ understanding of situations which demand a reaction involving both emotions and actions.

(2) In the Socratic–Platonic tradition, and also the Aristotelian, virtue is the right order of the functions of the soul. It consists of the rule of reason (*logos*) over the forces of the emotions, drives, and needs. This order corresponds to the rule of *logos* in the external world, the cosmos. Achieving this state of soul and body means becoming part of an objective order so as to ‘fit into the world’. This achievement can be verified by experience. The virtuous person experiences her own virtuous disposition and actions as a lasting state of happiness, as peace of mind and contentment with her way of life. At the same time, the virtuous disposition is confirmed by her ‘social environment’, people being affected by the right and agreeable reactions of a well-balanced character.

(3) According to Aristotle, achieving a virtuous character presupposes education, training, and self-correction. The main sources of this education are parents, teachers, and the law. The basic form of a stable disposition to do the right things consists in loyalty to customs and laws. Hegel, whose thought is firmly established in this tradition of thought about the education of virtue, claimed that only by behaving in accordance with the customs and laws of his community does the individual become ‘real’.<sup>2</sup> Hegel distinguished this reality, which is both social and rationally approved, from the chaotic and unpredictable behaviour of someone acting according to his subjective decisions—even the decisions of conscience, which rank so highly for the modern moral agent.<sup>3</sup> Thus, virtue and the behaviour flowing from a virtuous character constitute a form of public, social reality, independent of private whims and ideas—and are in this sense ‘objective’.

Of course, some of these characteristics of virtue have been questioned by modern ethical philosophy. First, virtues have been separated from public rules and external approval. Especially in the Kantian tradition, behaviour of the latter kind has been called conventional or legalistic, and therefore ‘heteronomous’. True moral behaviour depends on rational intentions,

<sup>2</sup> Hegel (1975) §§ 151, 153.

<sup>3</sup> Hegel (1975) § 136 ff.

and virtues can only defend those intentions against external influences.<sup>4</sup> Second, the cognitive character of the virtues has been called into question. Knowledge depending on, or influenced by, emotions cannot count as objective. Modern philosophy draws a clear dividing line between reason and the emotions, intentions and physical behaviour, rational laws, and social conventions.

Nevertheless, in literature and everyday language, in modern legal thinking ('the honest trader', 'good customs') and professional ethics, the classical concept of the virtues lives on. This is one of the reasons for the renaissance of virtue ethics in modern philosophy.<sup>5</sup> The persistence of this kind of thinking runs counter to the modern demarcations just mentioned. I cannot deal here with the debate about the validity of virtue ethics in general terms. However, I do want to take up one of the issues raised in this connection. It concerns a tension between different kinds of objectivity of the virtues. But, first, I want to relate the above-mentioned traits of the classical concept of virtues to modern criteria of (a) epistemological, (b) ontological, and (c) normative objectivity.<sup>6</sup>

(a) As regards the epistemological criteria of objectivity, virtue in its traditional conception satisfies the criteria of a specific kind of verification and, supported by this type of verification, of intersubjective convergence. Virtue as a disposition and virtuous actions can be experienced by the person himself as 'happiness', a sustainable psycho-physical state of harmony and autarky, and a feeling of living up to one's normative self-expectations. The 'first person criterion' is that of providing lasting inner peace or contentment, whereas the 'third person criterion' is the confirmation of just treatment either by the person affected or by impartial observers.<sup>7</sup> This convergence of types of approval applies not only to virtue as a form of activity, but also to the understanding of what is appropriate in a given situation, an understanding which is, to a large extent, independent of the mind of the virtuous person. The virtuous

<sup>4</sup> Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals: The Doctrine of Virtue*, Prussian Academy edition, vol. 6, 394 (1991: pp. 197–8).

<sup>5</sup> MacIntyre (1985).

<sup>6</sup> I use the term 'objectivity' in this chapter to include epistemological objectivity, ontological reality, and objective validity in the normative sense.

<sup>7</sup> Of course, the distinction between first-personal and third-personal perspectives is a contemporary one. But I think there is something analogous to it even in the classical conception of virtue. The virtuous person has some awareness of her/his emotional balance and rational self-affirmation—and those who observe or are affected by virtuous behaviour approve of or admire its virtuous character.

reactions and dispositions also stand up to ‘the test of time’, the judgement of experts and laymen in future generations, to cite Hume’s criterion for objective aesthetic judgements.

(b) As regards the ontological criteria, virtues are part of a world which is, in many respects, independent of the state of mind of the virtuous person and his observers. Virtuous actions are ‘incorporated’ into the behaviour and physical states of a body. They belong to a social world of public rules and interactions which prescribe or require virtuous behaviour. The reactions of a virtuous person presuppose a trained body and an educated mind. They form a pattern of behaviour and can, to a certain degree, be anticipated and relied on by other people, and are in this way analogous to natural events which follow the laws of nature. The social world is a kind of second nature with its own laws, and one which is in many respects connected with the order of the ‘first’ nature.<sup>8</sup> According to the classical tradition of thinking about virtue, the virtuous person fits into the rational order of society and nature, whereas the vicious person and his behaviour is more of an exception and an irregularity. But the concept of ‘evaluative objectivity’ assumed by this tradition has, of course, been questioned in the modern age.

(c) As for standards of normative objectivity, virtues are seen as independent of private wishes as well as of fashions of behaviour or dictates of power. Virtuous actions of a largely invariant kind are required by many longstanding customs and legislative frameworks as well as by religious and philosophical doctrines and literary traditions. In religious and philosophical doctrines, the virtues have been regarded as requirements of nature or rationality. Either they have been regarded as entailed by the fundamental faculties and needs of human beings and human society or they have been justified as ways in which a rational agent with sensual motives can establish in a stable way the superiority of his rationality.<sup>9</sup>

This pattern of thinking seems to justify a rather strong claim to objectivity of an epistemological, ontological, and normative sort. Virtues meet the conditions of independence from private opinion and perspective, of public verifiability, and interpersonal convergence. They belong to the structure of the social and, in some respects, even the natural world, and they are regarded as objectively valid standards of knowledge and

<sup>8</sup> For a modern discussion of virtues as belonging to human second nature, see McDowell (1998c), 167–97.

<sup>9</sup> As in Kant’s moral philosophy (see also n. 4 above).

behaviour. But if we take a closer look, guided by modern doubts about, and criticism of, classical virtue ethics, there is a tension between the kinds of objectivity claimed for the virtues. The argument for the first two kinds can be seen as undermining the third kind, and vice versa.

According to the first two criteria, virtues and virtuous behaviour can be seen as mental, social, and natural facts which occur in many cultures during different periods of time. The mutual expectations and estimations of such a culture, as laid down in its customs, laws, social roles, and institutions, are the source both of the convergence and of the content of the virtues. These factors determine the virtues of social roles, for instance, the justice or courage of a good father, judge, or doctor, and also that of a good citizen and perhaps even the excellence of a human being. But, since they depend on public rules and institutions as well as on specific mental states of knowing and approving, virtues seem limited to temporary cultural phenomena rather than representing objective standards of goodness for human behaviour in general.

From this perspective, the senses of objectivity in the first two criteria and the third seem to be mutually exclusive; or, at least, their respective claims to objectivity weaken each other. Objective facts in the social and natural world are independent of norms, and objective rational norms are independent of social and natural facts.<sup>10</sup> This does not necessarily mean that particular social customs and legal behaviour cannot be in accordance with objectively valid norms. But if there are different, and even opposing, customs at different times, they cannot serve as an index of rational and objectively valid moral behaviour. Cultural change and cultural relativity must be regarded as challenges to normative objectivity. If there is any objectivity in the virtues, it does not consist in their public 'appearance' but in their 'inner' rational norms.

But, as the example of Kantian theory shows, this turns the virtues into a mere instrument for supporting the intention of following the moral law against heteronomous motives and drives. If the emotional, cognitive, physical and public aspects of the virtues are of no 'intrinsic' relevance, they can be replaced by a combination of rational maxims and psychophysical skills. But, before drawing this consequence, we should examine whether the tension within the claims to objectivity in the classical concept of virtue can be resolved. However, should this be possible,

<sup>10</sup> I do not discuss the fact–norm or the fact–value dichotomy here. In many respects, I side with Putnam's (2002) sceptical view of this dichotomy.

normative objectivity cannot be derived exclusively from a priori rationality independent of all cultural particularity and change.

## II

There are different ways of meeting the challenge of cultural relativity regarding the virtues. One is to separate a timeless dimension of the virtues from their expression in particular cultures. This continuity and cultural independence may then be related to traits of human nature or of the fundamental structure of society. Another way of meeting this challenge is to conceive a development in the understanding and manifestations of the virtues, a development which is not a mere change of fashion but which can lay claim to some sort of necessity or progression. I will try to establish the strength of these two sorts of arguments in turn.

As for the first line of argument, we may claim that, for instance, justice as a rule prescribing some way of treating equals equally or giving everybody what he or she deserves is independent of the different meanings given to 'justice' in different cultures. Some have even claimed that this type of justice is much less time-dependent than any law of nature that can be read about in a modern scientific textbook.

But there is, of course, a difference between the cultural particularity of laws of nature and that of norms and values. We often suppose that the laws of nature have been valid all the time prior to their discovery or reformulation in a particular culture, whereas justice, in the ancient, medieval, or modern sense, is valid only for the relevant period of time. This assumption again challenges the normative objectivity of the virtues. To meet this challenge, at least some of the time-independence of the laws of nature seems to be needed for virtues and moral values as well. Otherwise, we would have no independent criterion for judging whether a particular culture or legal system should be called just or unjust in a universal way. If justice or bravery could not serve as a criterion for calling a specific legal system a perversion of justice or for characterizing specific behaviour as the mere appearance of true bravery, concepts of virtues would cease to be critical tools for normative ethics. They would be reduced to the role of descriptors of customary or legally prescribed behaviour.

I suggest, however, that the general meaning of some virtues at least is broad enough to enable us to meet this sort of criticism. Justice, bravery, charity, modesty, prudence, clemency, for instance, can be defined in ways

that enable us to attribute them to rulers, mothers, neighbours, and other role-bearers in very different cultures and times—and to state the borders beyond which such behaviour, even if in accordance with customs or laws, is clearly unjust, reckless, or cruel.

This distinction between the universal and the particular meanings of the virtues makes it possible to restrict objective validity to the general traits of the virtues and to separate this meaning from particular forms of appraised behaviour in any particular culture which may not meet the standards of true virtue. In some instances, however, the public rules and the true sense of the virtues may coincide—and therefore the social reality and the objective validity of virtues do not seem incompatible. At least some virtues in their minimal and universal sense appear to have objective validity without necessarily losing their public, social, and even natural objectivity.

But how are we to explain the time- and culture-independent meaning and validity of these general traits of the virtues? One possibility is to trace them back to permanent features of the human constitution: the need for help and friendship, for upbringing, care and cooperation, for protection against enemies, the distribution of limited goods, the settlement of conflicts, and so on. Making these provisions and meeting these needs regularly in a competent and admirable way is what has always been called virtue.

From this standpoint, virtues are particular forms of natural goodness, to use Philippa Foot's term.<sup>11</sup> As the value of good wolves is expressed within the pack by their being granted a high rank, so the value of good humans is marked among other people by their being called virtuous. And since different human societies develop different social tasks and specialized groups, different virtues are looked for in various systems and none guarantees the highest overall rank.

In addition to this anthropological and functional explanation of the universal traits of virtues, there is another one that concerns the cultural and historical function of the virtues: one reason for the astonishing continuity of the virtues may be the structure of the formation and transmission of cultures. Virtues are an important part of this structure and their considerable stability can be explained by this fact.

Virtues are at the centre of far-reaching literary and religious traditions. The heroic virtues of Homeric epic, the cardinal virtues of Greek philosophy, or the virtues of the Saints reported in the sacred books of world-religions have dominated cultures for centuries, if not millennia. Ideals concerning behaviour are among the fundamental features of cultures and

<sup>11</sup> Foot (2001).

survive the transformation and reinterpretation of these cultures to a considerable degree. Narratives of heroic or pious deeds and the outstanding figures in these narratives exert their own fascination and serve as a means of education for long periods of time.

The physical and the psychological constitution of human nature may support this continuity, but the structure of the formation and tradition of cultures is an independent factor in the explanation of this continuity. The estimation, tradition, and ongoing discussion about the proper forms of right, good, or admirable behaviour is one of the most important sources of the formation of identity in groups and individuals. Both the long-term suppression by other groups—for instance, in the case of Jews—or the longstanding political and cultural dominance over many other groups—as in case of the Romans, Christians, or Moslems—serve to explain the persistence of virtues as components of a normative self-image.

Both ways of explaining the universal and relatively unchangeable part of the virtues are to a certain extent convincing. However, important questions remain open.

Firstly, it is not clear that *all* virtues can be explained by reference to essential social functions. Liberality, wisdom, piety, and some varieties of friendship, for instance, seem to be rather superfluous to those core functions. Secondly, virtues cannot be identified simply by public approval of behaviour. To *look* just may, in a given case, be the opposite of *being* just.<sup>12</sup> And, thirdly, the separation of a universal meaning from culturally specific variations of virtues is insufficient for the tasks of normative ethics. If we are to maintain the difference between objective virtues and their false ‘appearance’ in norms, customs, and behaviour, we cannot simply leave aside the variations between manifestations of justice, beneficence, courage, and so on in particular cultures. Their content and rank in the hierarchy of virtues must be accessible to critical examination.

What we need for normative ethics are concepts of virtues which can, firstly, be specified sufficiently to enable us to understand and criticize particular customs and laws. Secondly, they must allow an evaluation of the historical sequence of variations and revaluations within important cultural traditions. Is justice in the sense of attributing and respecting human rights and solving conflicts in fair trial a more adequate form of justice for our time than a ‘pre-modern’ paternalist or élitist one? Is the courage to stand up against prejudice or the corruption and maltreatment

<sup>12</sup> See Plato *Republic* 2, 361a.

of fellow human beings a more adequate form of bravery in modern societies than that of knights or other pre-modern warriors?

An answer to these questions is provided by the second line of argument mentioned above. If objective validity and cultural change are to be reconciled, there must be some significance or direction in this change. Since the very meaning of virtue, according to the classical concept, requires the adjustment of behaviour to changing situations, some form of historical adjustment of the virtues themselves to changing cultural environments must be compatible with their core meaning and their objective validity. But which form of the cultural history of the virtues is compatible with this type of validity?

### III

Any attempt to explain the history of the virtues has to account for both of their traits, namely the astonishing *continuity* of their general outlines, on the one hand, and the considerable *change* in their specific content, on the other. If this change is not to undermine the objective validity of the virtues, we must look for a basis for the idea that the development of the virtues follows intelligible and justifiable patterns.

Different developmental theories have been suggested to explain change in either the content or the internal hierarchy of virtues and other values. Traditionally, theological theories of God's plan for humanity, or philosophical concepts of the progressive development of human reason and culture have attempted to account for the steps and stages of moral development. The refinement of culture or the teleological unfolding of rationality have served as reasons for the change in the content of justice, courage, temperance, or mutual respect.

Theories of this kind are being challenged today by functional explanations of social differentiation, technical development, or natural and cultural evolution. Developmental theories in cognitive and moral psychology, such as those of Piaget and Kohlberg,<sup>13</sup> account for changes in the status of specific values such as loyalty, autonomy, honour, or impartiality. The forms and content of virtues are related, by these theories, to stages of moral development both in the individual and the human race.

Explanations of this kind, which relate change in the content and ranking of virtues to 'objective' (that is, external) historical, social, and psychological

<sup>13</sup> Piaget (1932) and Kohlberg (1981).



developments still leave us with a problem. They often result in a dogmatism of progress, according to which every new step in social development is necessary or, at least in a crypto-normative sense, 'modern'. Therefore, any attempt at defending or reviving 'old' virtues is seen as reactionary. This again undermines both the normative and the critical potential of virtue ethics. The defence of traditional virtues, the renaissance of forgotten qualities, and even the critical claim that values have been lost must be considered as legitimate moves in normative ethics. Otherwise, philosophical discourse would be cut off from everyday discourse. As in the history of art, conscious 'classicism' may be, and has been, a source of moral renewal.

If one aspect of the objectivity of virtues is their connection with public roles and rules, there can be no doubt that the behaviour in which a virtue is manifested changes in the course of social and cultural development. Likewise, the importance of specific virtues changes along with the importance of functions and professions. Modesty ranks high in a Christian culture but considerably lower in a martial one. Diligence is praiseworthy in an agrarian community and a developing bourgeois context but is valued less in an affluent, or aristocratic, or technological, society. Does that mean that virtues and changes in virtues are nothing but a side-effect of cultural development? Or can virtues also provide an objective measure for the assessment of this development?

What we need is an explanation of the historical development of the virtues which reflects the idea that they can maintain a critical distance from mere positive customs and laws without restricting them to some sort of natural or ideal timelessness. As well as conceiving virtues as expressions of natural goodness related to the human condition and to the epistemological criteria of virtuous behaviour, we need a theory which can explain the adaptation of the virtues to changing cultural environments by types of learning and experience.

The classical doctrine of the virtues provides us with an account of their natural basis and the criteria for recognizing virtuous behaviour. But for theories of cultural change through experience as regards the virtues, we have to turn to the modern age. We can draw on ideas about development through experience of social rules and virtues in Hume,<sup>14</sup> and about changes in norms and institutions, understood as an 'experience of consciousness' (*Erfahrung des Bewußtseins*) in Hegel.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> See e.g. Hume (2000).

<sup>15</sup> See Hegel (1977).

'Experiences' of this sort are not sensory perceptions, collections of data, or empirical judgements of everyday or scientific observers. They are different from scientific experiences in that at least some of them can only be gained in a group. They concern changes in longstanding judgements, expressed in customs, laws, and literary or theoretical writings. They involve, or bring about, a consensus between the people who share a given situation and a set of value-judgements as regards virtues and moral duties. In normal periods, this consensus is nourished by repeated confirmation of the appropriateness of behaviour and of customs and laws prescribing or approving such behaviour. But, as natural and social circumstances change, there can be a crisis in this consensus, giving rise to a widespread feeling and judgement that some values and virtues are outdated and that they do not allow the flourishing of human beings and social relations.

In past centuries, a great deal of behaviour relating to honour, social hierarchy, relations between the sexes and the generations, which had been formerly considered as valid, has gradually lost its value in public estimation. There have, of course, been external factors which have promoted this change, including increasing human domination of nature and the resulting abolition of scarcity. But, in addition, though perhaps triggered by this change in external conditions, there have been shared ethical experiences as regards values, norms, and ideals. Sometimes these are connected with historical catastrophes, as in the experience of colonialism, fascism, and totalitarianism. These experiences leave deep traces in the cultural memory of nations and shape legislation, education, and public debates for a long period of time.

Experiences of this sort seem to be involved in change in virtues and values in general. Virtues are based on a shared valuation of appropriate and admirable behaviour. The basis for this valuation can break down if, repeatedly, 'virtuous' reactions are judged to cause suffering or to be ridiculous rather than admirable.<sup>16</sup> Judgements of this sort may not just express localized reactions but may affect the whole system of values valid until then.

In this process, a whole culture may exhibit tensions and 'value contradictions' (*Wertungswidersprüche*)—such as a Christian slave-holder

<sup>16</sup> Examples of a literary presentation of such a decline in traditional virtues are offered by Cervantes' *Don Quixote* or the many nineteenth-century novels about the loss of female honour (e.g. Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* or Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*).

society or a colonial society supposedly following Enlightenment ideals.<sup>17</sup> In the end, this leads to a fundamental shift of value which does not constitute a change in taste and fashion but a well-founded, objective experience regarding virtues and vices and other values. In the course of such an experience, new virtues or new meanings of the traditional virtues may be discovered—such as the courage of one's convictions in a conformist society or new forms of friendship and loyalty between equal life-partners.

Experiences of this sort are not necessarily restricted to a single culture. Although there are intra-cultural experiences with long-term consequences—often linked to historical events such as a tyranny or a liberation movement—there may be cross-cultural experiences as well. This claim can be supported by three observations. First, cultural isolation is not the normal, but an exceptional, condition of cultural development. As the history of mythologies and religions prove, there are many exchanges, imitations, and transformations between different cultures. They include the transformation of narratives concerning virtues such as friendship, trustworthiness, bravery, charity, and so on.<sup>18</sup>

Second, human physiology and some basic emotional characteristics have not changed during the long period of biological evolution. Therefore, basic needs, the scope of physical and mental performances, and some essential social structures have not changed to such an extent that cross-cultural experiences as regards values and virtues would be impossible or unlikely.<sup>19</sup>

Third, the spread of the world-religions, of the modern sciences, of commerce and technology have led to a process of common historical experiences—triggered off by world wars, global economic crises, environmental processes, and so on—concerning not only policies and institutions, but also systems of laws and patterns of values and virtues. Of course, there is no unanimity regarding the interpretation of these experiences. But some of them have resulted in inter-cultural conventions concerning rights and public goods. And, even if there is controversy about most of the historical events, deeds, and persons, there is also growing agreement on at least some of the virtues embodied by persons like Mahatma Gandhi, Janusz Korczak, Martin Luther King, or Nelson

<sup>17</sup> As, for instance, in George Orwell's *Burmese Days*.

<sup>18</sup> An example is the Christian Hercules in some medieval and renaissance doctrines of the virtues.

<sup>19</sup> I defend a concept of human nature relevant for ethics in Siep (2004a).

Mandela. More important than such heroic virtues for everyday human life may be, however, new versions of 'normal' virtues exhibited in partnerships, professions, and institutions. With the growing adjustment of modern societies to technical, organizational, or educational conditions even these changes can be to a certain extent cross-cultural.

This type of experience with virtues cannot claim to be based on a—spiritual or historical-materialistic—idea of inevitable progress or on cultural or biological laws. Historical events and the findings of the historical sciences have discredited any such model since the Enlightenment. What we need is a theory of intra- and cross-cultural experiences following each other in a non-linear sequence, allowing for setbacks, conscious renewals, and unpredictable discoveries of admirable behaviour which attracts widespread approval and agreement.<sup>20</sup>

A developmental theory of this kind may be able to reconcile the claim to unchanging objective validity of the virtues with their changing cultural manifestations. But, in order to achieve this, we need philosophical concepts which enable us to examine and to justify or criticize the results of the experiences mentioned above. They will have to contain at least some elements of the classical concepts of virtue.

In this respect, the epistemological and ontological criteria can still be seen as supporting the claim to normative objectivity. By applying them to the candidates for new versions of traditional virtues, we are able to satisfy the demand that the meaning of the virtues should be independent of positive law and predominant opinions, even opinions about the historical experience itself. The virtues must still meet the criteria of epistemological and ontological objectivity.

Regarding the first, the virtuous person must still realize and in some sense experience a condition of psycho-physical balance and self-esteem. This harmonious character must be derived from, and manifested by, repeated appropriate reactions to situations and environments. The appropriate understanding and reaction must be confirmed by the members of the social environment. The habits which are generated by such mutual confirmations and imitated virtuous behaviour must be capable of forming a stable pattern of mutually reliable interactions. The social practices forming this pattern must be functionally adequate for the needs of society and its members.

<sup>20</sup> Some elements of such a theory of experiences of values (including virtues) are offered in Siep (2004*b*), ch. 3.

The complete complex of criteria belonging to the classical concept of virtue provides the test which historical experiences and changes in the content of virtues have to pass. Every candidate for a new manifestation of a virtue must fit in with the conditions of human nature and further its fulfilment in a self-rewarding virtuous life. It must equally fit in a pattern of social behaviour that can withstand conflicts and a scheme of public laws and institutions that merits the loyalty of citizens who themselves apply this test. In some respect, this last element represents a 'material' analogue to Kant's formal test of consistency between a maxim, an individual rule of life, and a consistent public legislation for rational beings.<sup>21</sup> If we follow the classical concepts a step further, we even have to ask whether virtuous behaviour fits into an order of the natural world which can, in some sense, be called good, just, and beautiful.

Virtues, or new manifestations of them which pass this test, are not simply a result of evolutionary adaptations to changing circumstances of civilizations. Rather, they represent an enrichment of meaning and a correction of consequences of the more traditional forms of virtue without the very idea of virtue being overturned. The quality and even the lasting success of cultural change rests upon the discovery of virtues of this type and upon their objectivity in all three senses. These factors constitute pre-conditions of the attractiveness of the customs and values of a culture. Without virtues and characters of which people can wholeheartedly approve there is nothing to strive for and not enough for people to care about in their lives.

It is unlikely that consumer wishes and success dreams can replace the virtues—besides, most life-dreams require at least some true virtues. Of course, there are models of behaviour, ways of living, and admired persons who do not pass the test of true, objectively valid, virtue. The stars and personalities of the modern media are not very often truly virtuous. Their characters can be weak, their success achieved by ambiguous means or even dirty tricks.

To justify these moral judgements requires criteria for true or objective virtues such as those mentioned above. The convincing form of virtues for our times may need, however, new interpretations which have to be discovered, invented, or remembered. This is a creative process which largely falls outside philosophical ethics. The latter in its turn has to provide criteria for probing the reasons and sources of public admiration in order to distinguish merely successful from virtuous behaviour.

<sup>21</sup> Kant, *Groundwork*, Prussian Academy edition, vol. 4, 403.

## IV

If the concept of experience and cultural development of the virtues is consistent and plausible, the objective validity of the virtues according to the classical concept is not refuted by their different cultural manifestations in laws, roles, and ideals of character. We are not forced to reduce the core of the virtues either to a timeless minimum or to mere instruments for the execution of pure practical reason.

Instead, it is possible to maintain their status as parts of the social and natural world, of human behaviour, and of ways of knowing, reacting and fitting oneself into a mind-independent situation. This does not render the virtues completely conventional and dependent on ephemeral opinions and fashions. Despite their close connection with customs and laws, virtues are not restricted to the 'value consensus' of particular cultures. This holds not only for their continuity over time and cultural changes (effective validity) but also for the independent standards (normative validity) for judging and possibly criticizing the virtues and behavioural norms of particular cultures and legislations.

Regarding the culture-independent normative standards of value judgements, we can rely on two sources of justification: cultural experiences and philosophical criteria for a meaningful and socially approved life. Shared cultural experiences with virtues and value systems explain their transformation without abolishing their distance from positive law and the spirit of the times. Virtues are not simply formed or overturned by this spirit—the capacity to develop true virtues is itself a criterion for the acceptability and durability of a culture. And the attractiveness of virtues and admirable characters proves that the values they incorporate are not simply fashions or projections of subjective moods.

Although the two sources of justification, public (historical) experience, and philosophical justification, can be distinguished, their criteria are basically the same. They differ only with regard to their application, either in social activity or philosophical reflection. Philosophy is in a position to compare many different cultures and periods, to remember the virtues which have been cultivated in flourishing and creative cultures, to relate them to the development of human faculties and the achievements and experiences of suffering, decline, or the loss of freedom. But how, in any given situation, the identification of tasks and the solution of problems is perceived by the participants remains a question of experience and reflection by the participants directly involved. The virtuous insights and actions thus confirmed must, however, correspond to the philosophical standards of objectivity.

Virtues are only a subset of the values which inform a stable community by providing human ideals which have genuine appeal. Equality, freedom, cultural creativity, or prosperity are social norms and public or communal goods<sup>22</sup> which transcend individual intentions and habits. Virtues are lasting dispositions to act according to such values—to manifest and respect freedom, provide and sustain equality, and so on. But the reverse is also true: the conditions and the manifestations of virtues are themselves public goods. I cannot discuss here the precise relationship between virtues and other values. But if at least a subset of values can claim as much objectivity as the virtues according to my argument, it is not very likely that values in general are merely projections which do not belong to the ‘fabric of the world’.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Waldron (1993).

<sup>23</sup> This ‘projectivist’ view is presented by Mackie (1977).

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## Virtue, Nature, and Providence

SABINA LOVIBOND

### I

I had better begin by declaring that there is one sense of ‘virtue ethics’ in which I am definitely not an advocate of that position: I would not argue that the concept of virtue should be credited with a foundational role in moral thought or theory, or that moral thinking couched in terms of rules, rights, preferences, practices, or any of our other current concepts should be seen as reducible to a single, virtue-centred form. This is by no means to identify myself with some other, putatively competing foundationalist view such as ‘deontology’ or ‘consequentialism’, but simply to locate what I have to say within ‘virtue ethics’ in the minimal sense of *reflection on the virtues* (as distinct from any other bunch of ethical notions). That project implies no hostility either to the ‘deontological’ view that actions prompted by respect for morality are good in themselves, or to the ‘teleological’ view that living well means engaging in an intelligent pursuit of happiness—each of which, after all, represents one part of the moral philosophy of that well-known ‘virtue theorist’, Aristotle. It does, I assume, entail a rejection of any reductive programme that might cause the virtues to be denied their proper place in the study of ethics, but it does not involve any retaliatory attempt to force our other moral concepts into a subordinate role.

If I had to say in a nutshell what I regard as the most valuable result of the late twentieth-century revival of philosophical interest in the virtues,

This chapter is a revised version of a paper delivered at the University of Exeter conference on ‘Ancient and Modern Approaches to Ethical Objectivity’ in July 2002. More remotely, it is also descended from one of my contributions to a graduate class on virtue ethics which Martha Klein and I gave at Oxford in Hilary Term 2001. I am grateful to both the relevant audiences, and especially to the editor of this book, for helpful comments.



I think I would point to what it has indirectly taught us about the nature of rationality in general—I mean about the way in which our capacity to respond to reasons of any kind, not just to specifically ethical reasons, depends on our possession of an appropriate mental disposition or *hexis*, and hence on our having been initiated into some relevant bit of culture, or ‘concrete universal’. The fusion of insights from Aristotle’s doctrine of the acquisition of moral virtues through habituation, and from Wittgenstein’s treatment of normativity and rule-following in his later philosophy, seems to me to have led to real progress here.<sup>1</sup>

My particular concern here, however, will be with a question also treated from different standpoints by other chapters in the first part of this volume—the question of a possible basis for the virtues in human nature. Such a basis might be thought to exist if it could be shown that, given our natural constitution as a species, we (human beings) need *in our own interest* to cultivate certain traditionally ‘moral’ qualities; that without these, we cannot be happy; that, in any event, the virtues ‘benefit their possessor’. One recent advocate of this view, which we inherit from the rationalist ethical thought of the ancient world, is Rosalind Hursthouse in her very illuminating book *On Virtue Ethics* (1999). The book ends with a proposal to revive the idea of ‘God’s providence’ (264–5):

Atheists may find it hard to recognize the point nowadays, but believing that human nature is harmonious is part of the virtue of hope. Something at least very like it used to be called belief in (God’s) Providence; to believe in Providence was part of the virtue of hope; to doubt it is to fall prey to the vice of despair. And that seems to me to be right. To view oneself and one’s fellow human beings as, by nature, battlegrounds between passion and reason, or self-interest and sociality (or an unholy combination of both), so that there is no hope of human beings’ living well, ever, however much theoretical and practical rationality we exercise now and hope to pass on to future generations, is a counsel of despair.

This passage aims to win support for an attempted reconstruction of the hopeful attitude. But the tradition from which, in general terms, that attitude is derived suggests more than one possible account of what it takes to qualify as an optimist concerning the rewards of virtue, and it is worth pausing to consider what is at issue here. On one hand there is the absolutist thesis associated with the Stoics (and with Plato in a certain characteristic vein), according to which virtue on its own is *sufficient for happiness*, or that a virtuous person, as such, *cannot fail* to be happy.

<sup>1</sup> I pursue these themes at greater length in my (2002).

The challenge here is of course to explain how anyone could be happy without enjoying the external or (merely) natural goods of health, intelligence, wealth, social success, and so forth—the things conventionally or commonsensically regarded as desirable, but which the virtuous person may or may not come to possess, since they depend at least to some extent on chance or luck. (This is the question Socrates undertakes to answer in *Republic* 2, beginning with the challenge of the maximally difficult case in which the virtuous person has the reputation of being vicious and is made to suffer the consequences.) On the other hand there is the less revisionary, Aristotelian view, which allows some genuine importance to external goods. For Aristotle, someone who has attained to the condition of ‘happiness’ (*eudaimonia*) as he understands it—that is, to a life of activity in accordance with the virtues—will be *as* independent of chance as a human being can be: he will ‘bear all contingencies gracefully and always act as well as possible in the given circumstances’, and this means that he will never be ‘wretched’ (*athlios*); his life will never be contemptible. ‘But he will not be blessed’ (*makarios*), if he encounters misfortunes like those of Priam—that is, his life under such misfortunes will not be one that a rational person could *envy*, either (Aristotle, *EN* 1100b35–1101a8). So Aristotle proposes to supplement his definition of *eudaimonia* by saying that the life of virtuous activity needs to be ‘adequately endowed with external goods’ (*EN* 1101a15), and this endowment—like the activity it supports—needs to persist not just for a short time but right through a person’s life. And although our own qualities of character, or ‘inner resources’, can save us from a good deal of self-destructive behaviour, self-pitying vexation, and so forth, this acceptance of the indebtedness of our happiness to external factors clearly means that for the Aristotelian virtuous person—in contrast to the unmitigated moralist—there is, so to speak, no guarantee of *salvation*; if things go sufficiently badly, all that is guaranteed is that one’s life will not degenerate into anything one would have reason to be ashamed of.

## II

Julia Annas may well be right to say that each of these rival conceptions of the contribution of virtue to happiness—that is, the rigidly idealistic and the more compromising—answers to something in the outlook of the normally conscientious person (in contrast to that of the moral sceptic or cynic), and hence that the theoretical debate between them is doomed to

remain inconclusive.<sup>2</sup> That debate seems nonetheless to be one in which philosophers still feel some pressure to engage, and Hursthouse is no exception, since she locates herself firmly on the Aristotelian side of the divide just mentioned.<sup>3</sup> This means that there are (at least) two positions in the current literature from which she wants to distance herself. In the first place, by embracing the ‘Aristotelian’ label at all, she rejects what she considers the undue negativity of Bernard Williams (1995: 201), who holds that without Aristotle’s own teleological view of nature there can be no such thing as a systematically ‘Aristotelian’ ethics, but at best a collection of ‘useful thoughts’ in a sub-Aristotelian genre. It is Williams’ views from which Hursthouse is dissenting when she argues, as in the passage already quoted, for belief in a ‘harmonious’ human nature, for Williams leans towards the view that ‘human beings are to some degree a mess’, or that human nature comprises an ‘ill-sorted *bricolage* of powers and instincts.’<sup>4</sup> Hursthouse (1999: 262) reads this as an endorsement of ‘complete moral nihilism’, the belief that there is no such thing as a life-strategy that is *likely*, in general, to succeed in reconciling the (often conflicting) needs and desires of human beings—the need for social acceptance, but also for individual gratification and fulfilment. This belief represents ‘a particularly global form of moral scepticism, one which not only dismisses the whole ethical outlook of the (even minimally) virtuous as mere optimistic fantasy but simultaneously rejects the idea that practical rationality has anything substantial or long-term to do’ (Hursthouse 1999: 262).

As a paradigm for the view that human nature is *not* a ‘mess’, Hursthouse turns to Aristotle’s statement that ‘we have the virtues neither by nature nor contrary to nature, but are fitted by (our) nature to receive them’ (*EN* 1103a23–6)—in other words, that we are fitted by our nature to acquire those moral qualities of which the steady exercise is such as to make us happy. This is the view Hursthouse herself wishes to revive—not on the strength of any theoretical refutation of the ‘ill-sorted *bricolage*’ thesis (since she does not believe we can produce one), but rather on the

<sup>2</sup> Annas (1993), 432–5. As an indication of how high feelings could run on this point, Annas tells us elsewhere (1999, 50–1) that one Platonist writer of the second century AD, Atticus, says of Aristotle’s concessions towards the natural goods that they are ‘petty and grovelling and vulgar’, the kind of thing one would expect from ‘an uneducated person, a child—or a woman’.

<sup>3</sup> We learn in the introduction to Hursthouse (1999), 8, that she sees Aristotle as the primary source for her version of the theory.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Hursthouse (1999), 261, 256.

basis of a transcendental or ‘necessary condition of our practice’ argument (Hursthouse 1999: 265). The argument is that (i) ethical thought, or thinking with a view to ‘living well’ both individually and socially, is a worthwhile—or rather an indispensable—undertaking; (ii) this undertaking is possible only on the assumption that ‘human beings, as a species, are capable of harmony, both within themselves and with each other’ (1999: 265); hence (iii) the assumption of (potential) harmony is itself indispensable to us as practical reasoners. (To echo what Kant says about freedom in the *Groundwork*,<sup>5</sup> we can reason practically only ‘under the idea’ of it.)

So much by way of criticism of Williams. However, in identifying her form of virtue ethics with the Aristotelian *in contrast to* the Stoic tradition, Hursthouse also means to disclaim what may be regarded as a certain lack of humanity in some other contributions to the current revival of virtue ethics. In chapter 8 of her book (1999: especially 179–85), she challenges the view of John McDowell<sup>6</sup> that the virtuous person, as such, has a conception of ‘benefit’ and ‘harm’ so different from that of the non-virtuous that, by their lights, it is necessarily true that the virtues benefit their possessor—necessarily true because, in McDowell’s words, ‘no sacrifice necessitated by the life of excellence . . . can count as a genuine loss’ (quoted in Hursthouse 1999: 182). Emphasizing the gulf that separates this (putative) conception of benefit and harm from the ordinary one, Hursthouse rightly points out that it would commit us to believing that ‘if virtue necessitates your losing all your possessions and becoming destitute, or losing your limbs, or eyes, or freedom, indeed your mental faculties or your life, this is no loss and no disaster to the virtuous’ (1999: 182). She questions the possibility of sincerely entering into this attitude, astutely noting that those commending it seem to have focused too exclusively on the case of losses incurred in a *noble cause*—they betray a ‘masculine yearning for the ideal of the “short life with glory”’, she suggests (1999: 183). But what about those situations (Hursthouse’s ‘tragic [but] resolvable dilemmas’) in which virtue does issue a clear directive, but where it seems unintelligible to say that *no loss* is incurred by following it? (For example, ‘you have fallen into the hands of a mad tyrant and, despite his threats, refused to do something wicked’, or you have had to ‘leave one of your children to die in a fire because, though

<sup>5</sup> *Groundwork*, vol. 4, 448 (1998: p. 53). For conventions for references to Kant, see p. ix above.

<sup>6</sup> Mainly in McDowell (1980).

willing to lose your life to save hers, you are physically capable of saving only the other one', 1999: 183.)

Hursthouse's response to the high-mindedness of the McDowell view reflects, no doubt, an influence from Philippa Foot. The moral virtues, Foot has argued,<sup>7</sup> are excellences in respect of practical reason; as such, they consist in dispositions to *choose well*. But practical reason (and its characteristic excellence, practical wisdom) is manifested not just in the kind of choice that is self-evidently laden with moral significance, but also in a variety of other sorts of choice that need to be made correctly—for example, choices with a bearing on one's own welfare or 'flourishing' (in a sense accessible to anyone—not just to the virtuous, with their distinctive take on these ideas). But then, having said this, where are we to think of the 'morally significant' kind of choice as beginning? No doubt my concern for the welfare of those closest to me is to some extent self-interested, but how cosmopolitan do my views have to be before the element of self-interest can be deemed to have been left behind? (Is it even desirable that when I wish for a solution, say, to problems of poverty and homelessness, I should experience this wish as utterly disconnected from a concern with my own welfare?) Conversely, doesn't it make sense to picture even an obvious instance of self-interested concern, such as the concern to look after one's own health, as filling a certain slot within a larger pattern of *dispositions to choose well* which we can regard as characteristic of the sane, reasonable, or 'practically wise' person? (Compare Aristotle's observation that physical maladies as well as mental failings are sometimes our own fault, and attract criticism, *EN* 1114a21–3.) These points may strike us as obvious corollaries of the idea that ethical upbringing—the process by which our natural inclination towards pleasure is 'moralized', or drawn into the service of what our educators consider to be praiseworthy conduct—could not succeed without a measure of continuity between the pre-ethical and the ethically informed mode of understanding of what counts as harm, welfare, and good or bad outcomes. Accordingly, Hursthouse sums up her disagreement with McDowell by saying: 'I do not think that we have conceptions of *eudaimonia*, benefit, harm, disaster, etc. such that no sacrifice necessitated by virtue counts as a loss, nor do I think that this is because we are imperfect in virtue. I think our conceptions of loss, harm, disaster, the conceptions we began to form in our childhood, though distinctively different from those of the immoralist, *overlap* with his with respect to such things as death, physical injury,

<sup>7</sup> Foot (1995); also her (2001), especially ch. 5.

suffering, and helplessness' (Hursthouse 1999: 185). She adds that our conceptions of pleasure and enjoyment also overlap with his, so that when it is said that the life of virtue can be enjoyable and satisfying, these adjectives are not being used in a special sense that is the exclusive property of the virtuous.

We have before us, then, a form of virtue ethics that is to be distinguished both from the scepticism of Williams (the 'ill-sorted *bricolage*' thesis, 1995: 201), and also from the perhaps unduly moralistic alternative represented by the updated Platonic-Stoic position of McDowell. There is, of course, something odd about this labelling of McDowell's view, given that his own form of ethical cognitivism has drawn more inspiration from Aristotle than from any other ancient source—but on the other hand, his reading of Aristotle has certainly given a prominent place to idealistic or 'Platonizing' themes, for instance in the reconstruction of Aristotle's views on *akrasia* ('weakness of will'). McDowell's Aristotle (especially in his 2000), at any rate, is closer to Plato than the Aristotle of any other revivalist of virtue ethics known to me.

### III

The proposed form of virtue ethics invites two lines of critical comment.

(i) To begin with, we may note the modesty of the conception of Providence—or as Hursthouse candidly puts it, of what *used* to be called (God's) Providence—that it recommends. In contrast to this conception, the philosophical tradition suggests another which (rightly or wrongly) promises much more. Our first witness here is Plato, for whom the conviction that the virtues benefit their possessor is set against the background of his doctrine (presented in the *Phaedo*, *Republic*, and *Phaedrus*) of the immortality of the soul. This doctrine is grounded in a dualism of soul and body, and in an idea of the soul as what the person really or essentially is. Here, there is no risk of a virtuous life failing to find its just reward through natural misadventure ('loss, harm, disaster', and so on), because the real drama of individual destiny is played out in connection with the soul's success or failure, in the course of successive incarnations, in purifying itself and 'becoming like God' (Pl. *Tht.* 176b); for one who does these things, even such 'apparent evils' as hunger and disease will somehow turn out well, 'either in life or after death' (Pl. *R.* 613a). This is, of course, a religious belief—a matter of faith rather than reason—and is

recognized as such by Plato, who abstains from using it to support the views for which he makes Socrates argue in normal dialectical contexts. Still, it does seem to *be* one of his genuine beliefs; for example, he throws in casually at *R.* 498d the suggestion that even if Thrasymachus is not convinced *now* by the arguments of the dialogue, we need not consider them wasted, as their effect may be felt in a future life. And this is surely part of the ideological context of the view he gives to Socrates, that the just are better off than the unjust (indeed, are *happy* without qualification), however badly they fare according to the pre-ethical conception of *eu prattein* ('faring well').

Our second witness to the uncompromising conception of Providence is Kant in the *Critique of Practical Reason* and *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, where we find a transcendental argument that goes way beyond the one proposed by Hursthouse. This is because Kant is much more demanding than Hursthouse with regard to the 'necessary conditions of our practice' of moral reasoning—the necessary conditions, that is, of recognizing the existence of any such thing as a moral imperative. Kant's 'postulates of pure practical reason' include not only *freedom* but *God* and (once again) *immortality*. The last two of these postulates emerge from what we might think of as a grandiose application of Kant's famous 'ought implies can' thesis—I mean, from the idea that *morality* is possible only on the basis of belief in a *moral world-order*.

The existence of God, Kant argues, is something that we have to assume in order to avoid the conclusion that moral effort is pointless. For the highest, or 'perfect', good to be aimed at by (finite) rational beings is the conjunction of happiness with the virtue by which happiness is earned or deserved. But if it were impossible to realize this good, then it would indeed be pointless to try to do so. Hence there must be a God with the power to enforce the moral law, and so to reward the effort of the virtuous: to postulate such a God is a moral necessity, and so a 'need of reason'.<sup>8</sup>

Personal immortality, likewise, has to be postulated in order to reconcile the moral law (demanding, as it does, nothing less than perfect conformity on the part of the human will) with the inability of any *natural* (embodied) creature to achieve such perfection. In this predicament, practical reason maintains its own right to exist in the only way open to it, namely by presupposing the 'infinitely enduring existence and personality' of each individual rational being—and hence endowing each of us

<sup>8</sup> Kant, vol. 5, 110, 125, 140 (1956: pp. 114, 130, 145); (1960: p. 95).

with infinite time in which to progress to the complete moral fitness that is our goal.<sup>9</sup>

Kant's version of the doctrine of immortality, then, differs from Plato's in that it rests on a constructivist basis (for him, it is something in which we *must* believe if we are not to give way to moral scepticism: the moral 'language game' comes first, the metaphysics follows); but he sets his face as firmly as Socrates does in the *Republic* against the possibility of moral waste, or of a morally good life being lived in vain from the point of view of the individual who lives it.

Now, in taking Aristotle rather than Plato (or Kant) as a mentor, Hursthouse is pointing us towards a conception of 'Providence' that is, so to speak, merely statistical.<sup>10</sup> She is challenging the idea that virtue ethics, in order to be tenable, needs to be able to promise so much—to have the means of banishing the spectre of moral waste, as Plato does on the basis of his soul–body dualism, or as Kant does on the basis of the cosmological doctrines just outlined. For her it is enough that we should be able to see the life of virtue as carrying with it (as an internal or 'natural' consequence) a *reasonable expectation* of happiness (still in a sense of this word that would not be the exclusive property of the virtuous)—a reasonable expectation *as opposed to a promise*. If the expectation is indeed a reasonable one, then we can think of the world as, in an important way, benign from the point of view of ethics, as the allusion to 'Providence' suggests. And this vision should enable us to 'keep hope alive' or resist moral nihilism.

I don't wish to attack this programme so much as to reflect a little further on its intellectual background, whose salient feature is perhaps our loss of faith in the idea that nature itself still has a purpose for us—the development which McDowell (1994: 70), following Max Weber, calls the 'disenchantment' of the natural world. Against this background, the plea for hope can be read as a protest against the kind of dogmatically anti-teleological attitude discernible in a wide range of contemporary social theorists influenced by the culture of 'endism' that grew apace in the second half of the twentieth century (when we became inured to talk of the 'end of ideology', the 'end of history', and so on). That is, we can take it as an expression of resistance to the idea that if *nature* has no purpose for

<sup>9</sup> Kant vol. 5, 122 (1956: pp. 126–7, quotation from p. 127).

<sup>10</sup> An Aristotelian way of expressing this thought would be to say that the relevant conception applies, not 'necessarily' (*ex anankês*), but merely *hôs epi to polu* or 'for the most part': see e.g. *EN* 1094b21 and, for general discussion, de Ste Croix (1992).



us, we have no business to entertain any purpose (least of all a large-scale, collective one) for ourselves either—even if the full force of modern ‘disenchantment’ has taken a few centuries to declare itself (especially in the presence of distractions such as the Whig view of history and the Marxist political project).

I think it is plausible to say that for an atheist, or under post-religious conditions, acceptance of the statistical conception of Providence is indeed a hopeful attitude: hopeful, that is, in comparison with the nihilistic view that human nature is merely a ‘mess’, and that cultivation of the virtues is no more reliably conducive to happiness than a policy of predatory self-advancement. It is hopeful in that it provides a rational basis, albeit one set in place by a kind of neo-Kantian faith rather than by scientific demonstration, for trying to amend our way of life and to ‘achieve a harmony that would enable us to live well, individually and socially’ (Hursthouse 1999: 263).

However, this is certainly distinct from the (absolutist) idea that for each of us individually, grounds for hope are always present. And the latter idea does in fact seem impossible to sustain on a secular or naturalist basis, since a life of virtue—however worthy as a strategy in the pursuit of happiness—clearly offers no *guarantee* against loss, harm, disaster, and so forth (still taking these words in a sense such that it is not only the virtuous who can claim to understand them). So the adoption of a statistical conception of Providence—one informed by the recognition that our lives can genuinely be damaged by bad luck—does represent a downgrading of expectations, as compared with the absolutist conception inherited from Plato, the Stoics, and Kant. The switch downgrades our expectations in that it places the relationship between the demands of morality and the prospect of happiness on a par with that between a doctor’s advice to give up smoking, take exercise, and so on, and the prospect of physical health. Here too there is no guarantee that if I follow the advice my health will not fail at an early age; ‘nevertheless, if perfect health is what I want, the only thing to do is to follow [the doctor’s] advice and hope that I shall not be unlucky’ (Hursthouse 1999: 172).

(ii) My second batch of critical remarks has to do with the significance of this downgrading. The point I would like to make is one with which defenders of an updated Aristotelian virtue ethics could easily agree; but which, I think, is apt to be muted by the wish to counter moral scepticism (whether of a ‘postmodernist’ or of a more traditional kind) and to enlist

support for the cultivation of the virtues. This wish defines the dialectical moment represented by Hursthouse, whose thesis—to repeat—is that the effort to live decently, to resist injustice, greed, spite, deceit, and so on, should be regarded as a rational life-strategy for creatures like ourselves, despite the absence of guarantees that it will issue in (what we can describe in a not utterly revisionary sense as) happiness. The recognition that there are no guarantees here amounts, as it were, to an expression of willingness to live in a universe that is not morally ordered *in absolutist terms*; that is, one in which there can be moral waste and failure. Well, a naturalist or atheist reader will feel, so much the better; assent to the absence of moral order in that sense represents an emancipation from a certain kind of fantasy or superstition. *Of course*, there are unredeemed moral losses, the kind of losses embodied in the lives of people who take risks or make sacrifices in the cause of virtue and for whom, personally, these risks or sacrifices do not pay off. To accept this is to open one's mind to the tragic aspect of life, thus rejecting the dogmatism of the kind of rationalist philosophy which maintains that tragedy exists 'only at the level of appearances'. (We may think here of Nietzsche (2000: 78, emphasis added). 'Let us consider the consequences of the Socratic principles: "Knowledge is virtue; sin is the result of ignorance; the virtuous man is the happy man": in these three basic forms of optimism lies the *death* of tragedy.')

But now we seem to be moving towards a version of that crude ethical 'naturalism' or 'realism' which says, 'Life is unfair: get used to it'—an attitude which has something ugly about it in philosophy, just as it does outside the study. Is this suspicion well-founded?

Another way of putting the question would be to ask whether virtue ethics, as formulated here, has the resources to express a certain kind of negativity about morality which was well captured by ethical non-cognitivism, with its characteristic attention to the emotional investment we need to make in moral values and demands: the kind of negativity that centres on an experience of the demands of morality as alien, or as issuing from some social or ideological formation to which one is not oneself party. (I mean, of course: has virtue ethics the resources to give a voice to this negative impulse, and to acknowledge whatever may be right about it, without collapsing entirely under its impact?) To show what I have in mind I will quote a passage from Philippa Foot—actually an addendum to her paper 'Moral Beliefs' (1958–9), but written in the spirit of her more neo-Humean 'Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives' (1972).

Foot argues here that ‘the rational co-operation of others in moral practices is not to be taken for granted’, and that we would do well to recognize that ‘the reasons men have for acting justly and charitably depend on contingent human attitudes, and the identification of one man with another in society. For then we would see that it is up to us to cherish these things, and (above all) that it is no good treating people despitefully and divisively and then demanding morality of them with an alien “ought”’ (1978: 130–1).

There is a political subtext to this passage that is worth noticing. At first glance, we might think that the idea of an *alien* ‘ought’ could effectively be dismissed by means of *ad personam* arguments against the moral sceptic. (Can you sincerely claim that, in their own long-term interest, you would *not* wish any children of your own to acquire the virtues? Are you not giving too much weight to the absence of guarantees?)<sup>11</sup> We might assume that, if virtue could be shown to be a life-strategy with as much to recommend it as our standard strategies for the maintenance of good health, this would demonstrate that the ‘ought’ of morality is not alien, but instead is held in place by the facts of human nature. But that would be to overlook Foot’s words: ‘despitefully *and* divisively’. As far as health is concerned, although ‘divisive’ social conditions do notoriously make a big difference—for better or worse—to the life expectancy of different groups of people, I presume it is not controversial that, even in the absence of any major social inequality, there would still (pending some revolution in medical knowledge) be a ‘genetic lottery’ distributing disease in the familiar, arbitrary manner reflected in nostrums about life being unfair. The fact that A dies of cancer at the age of twenty-five while B makes it to 100, then, is ‘unfair’ only in an attenuated, pathetic-fallacy sort of sense, and in so far as it is due to genetic rather than to environmental disadvantage, cannot sensibly be called ‘divisive’, since exposure to genuinely natural evils is a factor that unites human beings more than it divides them. But what about the distribution of *moral* waste and failure? What sort of factors determine whether, having made a resolute attempt to be honest, brave, charitable, not lazy, and so on, I will nevertheless be cheated of the rewards which a virtuous person could hope for at the hands of a statistically benign Providence? Are these factors as randomly distributed in human life as the genetic predisposition to this or that ailment?

<sup>11</sup> This is the line of argument proposed by Hursthouse (1999), 174–7.

## IV

I want to end by suggesting the following answers to these questions.

(i) Still bearing in mind the admitted continuity between our pre-ethical and our ethically informed conceptions of happiness, reward, harm, loss, and so on, I think we are all at least implicitly aware of the ways in which one's social position or role affects one's prospects of being 'rewarded' for a conscientious life. Not all, but certainly some, of those who have acted bravely in war can be said to have been used as cannon-fodder. Not all, but certainly some, of the people whom Iris Murdoch praises for simple, unassuming goodness—those 'inarticulate, unselfish mothers of large families' commended in *The Sovereignty of Good*<sup>12</sup>—are chronically unappreciated and exploited, as are a variety of occupational categories (for instance, nursing, teaching) in which ideals of public service are not only *presumed to exist* but constantly *presumed upon*. (Conversely, we may recall the case of the not very socially challenged young Charles Augustus Fortescue in Hilaire Belloc's *Cautionary Tales* (1973), who ends up as proprietor of 'The Cedars, Muswell Hill'—'Where he resides in Affluence still, / To show what Everybody might / Become by SIMPLY DOING RIGHT'.) And, of course, these examples do not even touch on the relationship between rich and poor at the international level.

(ii) Occupancy of one of the thankless, or sacrificial, social roles just mentioned, while 'unlucky' relative to a given socio-economic order, cannot be equated with the pure bad luck represented by congenital susceptibility to a certain disease—that is, with misfortune at the hands of nature. This equation is unsatisfactory just in so far as we recognize the socio-economic circumstances of human life as subject to purposive intervention and control. For what we regard as changeable cannot be put down to luck in an absolute sense, or to what used to be called 'acts of God'.

(iii) Consequently, virtue ethics needs to acknowledge that there is indeed such an attitude as the one Foot means by 'demanding morality of people with an alien "ought"'. The trick is to hold on—optimistically, as it were—to the anti-sceptical thought that human nature is not a mere 'mess' or 'ill-sorted *bricolage*' (or rather that it is a necessary condition

<sup>12</sup> Murdoch (1970), 53. I comment on this passage in §44 of my (1983).

of engagement in moral reasoning that we do not believe it to be so), while at the same time paying our dues to pessimism by acknowledging the objectively alien character of the demands of virtue from the point of view of many of the people to whom they are addressed: acknowledging, that is, the structural reasons why a respect for moral demands *predictably* serves some people less well than others. The importance of giving an airing to this (admittedly not particularly philosophical) insight seems to me to lie in the fact that, unless we do so, any virtues recommended by the philosopher are liable to incur the odium that threatens to engulf morality wherever people are treated ‘despitefully and divisively’; and any attempt to describe a naturalized successor to divine Providence is liable to get a hostile reception from those to whom the message is ‘jolly bad luck’—when, in fact, their bad luck consists in having been taken to the cleaners.

I accept that, in strictly philosophical terms, there is nothing in these considerations to show that our incentives to virtue cannot be located in the promise held out by a merely statistical Providence. But if our aim is to rebut moral scepticism or nihilism by appealing to the idea, not of a *perfect* moral world-order, but of an imperfect one in which it is open to an atheist to believe, I think it would be wise to be a little more forthcoming about the contrast between divine Providence—as administered, so to speak, by a genuine divinity—and, on the other hand, the secular counterpart of this idea, where the administrator is an unfeeling and often stepmotherly nature. (And if we bring human social and political institutions, in an Aristotelian spirit, within the ambit of ‘*second nature*’, we can note that this is no less apt to be stepmotherly than the first.) No doubt it is often true both in ethics and in medicine that ‘the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong’ (Ecclesiastes 9.11), but the reasons are not entirely analogous in the two cases. When it comes to ensuring that virtue receives its just rewards, my (perhaps truistic) conclusion, therefore, is that Providence needs all the human help it can get.

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## Hybrid Theories of Normativity

WOLFGANG DETEL

### I

What is the source of ethical normativity? It is often thought that the ancient world-view provides an easier answer to this question than the modern scientific picture of the world. The traditional diagnosis is that the ancients conceived of the universe as being a teleological structure. The real is supposed to be in some sense normative and human life has a purpose which depends on the teleology exhibited by the universe as a whole. This is supposed to be sufficient to establish that ethics really is normative and that its demands on us are justified. At the same time, the ancient view seems to ground ethical normativity firmly in nature. According to the traditional diagnosis, the modern scientific world-view has deprived us of the idea that the world has a purpose or *telos*. In the modern view, nature is taken to be the realm of laws that are in no way teleological or normative. From this point of view, normativity in general seems to be a mystery, and the question of the source of normativity becomes a serious and difficult problem. Indeed, modern moral philosophy can be read as a search for the source of normativity, indicating that modern moral philosophers have endorsed the traditional diagnosis just sketched. In response, they have come up with a number of answers to the question of the source of normativity, answers that have been taken to be mutually exclusive. Modern ethics looks for the source of moral

I have benefited greatly from critical discussion of an earlier version of this chapter presented at the conference on 'Ancient and Modern Approaches to Ethical Objectivity', held at Exeter, UK, on 1–4 July 2002. I would also like to thank Christopher Gill very much for organizing this stimulating conference and for his suggestions about making my English more idiomatic and improving the clarity of this paper.

normativity within the framework of the modern scientific world-view and offers a set of alternative theories on this basis.<sup>1</sup>

One of the most influential of these theories is voluntarism. According to this view, moral obligation derives from the command of someone who has legitimate authority over the moral agent and so can make laws for her. You must do the right thing because a political leader commands it or because a political sovereign whom you have agreed to obey makes it law. Normativity springs from a legislative will. Another theory is ethical realism or objectivism. The basic idea is that normative claims can be true and are true if there are intrinsically normative entities or facts which they correctly describe. Realists try to establish moral normativity by arguing that values or obligations or reasons really exist; and they argue against the various forms of scepticism about intrinsically normative entities. Ancient ethics can, of course, be seen as one brand of realism. A third influential kind of modern ethics works with an appeal to autonomy. The idea here is that the laws of morality are those of the agent's own free will and that its claims are ones she is prepared to make on herself. The capacity for self-conscious reflection about our own actions confers on us a kind of authority over ourselves, and it is this authority which gives normativity to moral claims. One of the most debated ethical theories in recent decades works with the idea of rationality. The basic assumptions are that humans behave sometimes in a social way that is at the same time rational and that the presuppositions of rational behaviour are the decisive source of ethical normativity. One kind of rationalistic ethics sees semantic normativity as a basic form of normativity. Moving in the logical space of reasons, or participating in the game of giving and asking for reasons, is taken to be an important part of leading a good life. Initiation into conceptual capacities as a basic condition for moving in the logical space of reasons is, according to this view, an indispensable part of ethical upbringing. In addition to modern realism, this kind of rationalistic ethics is a second form of modern ethics that can be linked with ancient ethics.

One of the claims I want to make in this chapter is that the traditional diagnosis of ancient ethics is wrong or at least grossly oversimplified. Rather, we should see ancient ethics as trying to distinguish between different levels of normativity and to locate ethical normativity within different kinds of normativity. In short, ancient ethics aims to develop hybrid theories of normativity. Another claim is that the endorsement of

<sup>1</sup> See Korsgaard (1996).

the traditional diagnosis, the focus on moral normativity, and the foundationalist move of picking out just one form of normativity as the only and exclusive source of normativity are theoretical mistakes that generate a lot of problems. The most important of these problems is that the gap between the normative and the natural seems to be either too big (for instance, in the case of Kantian or rationalistic ethics) so that we can no longer see how the normative can be related to nature; or this gap seems to be too small (in the case of reductive versions of normative realism that suggest we can bake a normative cake exclusively from non-normative ingredients) so that we are in danger of falling prey to naturalistic fallacies. Another problem is that these modern approaches cannot adequately locate the source of genuine normativity. I call the state of a creature *genuinely normative* only if this state has an intrinsic value independently of whether other creatures confer a value on this state or not. An intrinsic value must somehow *matter* to the creature which possesses this intrinsic value.<sup>2</sup> More precisely, if a state or activity is to be genuinely normative for a creature, this creature must have the *authority to evaluate* the state or activity, and at least part of this evaluation must be *mentally accessible* to the creature in question. This requires that this creature must have a *self-relation*, namely, a *reflexive relation* to itself.

These claims are obviously far-reaching. Given limited space, the most I can do here is to support my claims by certain specific lines of enquiry. One possible approach is to examine semantic normativity in ancient and modern theories, since this kind of normativity seems to be intermediate between natural and ethical normativity. Reflecting on the relationship between ancient and modern thought about semantic normativity can therefore contribute to clarifying the possible structures of a hybrid theory of normativity.

First, I consider how Plato conceived the normativity of truth and of good arguments. Plato did not, of course, have a clear notion of semantic facts or relations in the modern sense; in particular, he did not have a clear idea of formal logic or logical validity. But Plato certainly recommended that we should care about the truth and use specific patterns of argument. That is why Plato is often seen as the first thinker to have discovered the realm nowadays called 'the logical space of reasons' and to have entertained the idea of normative semantic facts. What interests me both from a historical and a philosophical point of view is that Plato seems to base recommendations about truth and inference ultimately on the idea of a

<sup>2</sup> See e.g. Papineau (1993).



good life.<sup>3</sup> While he takes the production of good arguments to be an example of good human functioning, he also believes that the normativity of truth and of good arguments has a source that is distinct from truth-conditions and patterns of argument. Hence, the normativity of truth and of good arguments seems to be, in part, a derived one (though it can form part of a larger system that gives rise to genuine normativity). Plato points to three different kinds of normativity: first, the well-functioning of large parts of the universe in general, second the specific well-functioning of human activities including the production of good arguments, and thirdly the criteria of a good life. Of course, there are important relations between these three kinds of normativity, but the kinds of normativity are definitely distinct.

In the following sections, I examine three varieties of modern semantics that involve claims, though different in scope and content, about the normativity of semantic norms: first teleosemantics (in my view, the most advanced naturalized semantics currently available), then a Davidson-style semantics (in my view, the most influential modern semantics and, in many respects, a breakthrough for serious semantic theory), and finally Brandom's inferential semantics (in my view, the most sophisticated type of thoroughly normative semantics). I try to show that neither of these theories explains the sources of the normativity of semantic relations in a wholly adequate way, though they highlight types of normativity that may serve as ingredients of a hybrid theory of normativity of a kind that I outline in the last section of this chapter. It seems to me, however, that we must take *feelings* to be another important source of the normativity of semantic relations—a source that has been widely neglected in semantic theory. If all this is basically correct, then we can not only recover Plato's insight that the normativity of good judgements is a derived one and has an external source;<sup>4</sup> we can also see that modern ethics can learn from ancient ethics that hybrid theories of normativity still represent an attractive strategic option.

## II

According to the traditional reading of Plato's theory, our human conceptions of a good life rest on Platonic Forms as entities that are

<sup>3</sup> Of modern thinkers, McDowell comes closest to this view; see e.g. McDowell (1994), 125.

<sup>4</sup> Among modern semantic theorists, David Papineau (e.g. 1990, 1993) comes closest to this position.

intrinsically and objectively valuable, especially the Form of the Good. For instance, Mackie says, in his criticism of moral realism, that ‘Plato’s Forms give a dramatic picture of what objective values would have to be . . . An objective good would be sought by anyone who was acquainted with it, because . . . it has to-be-pursuedness somehow built into it.’ Similarly, Christine Korsgaard, in outlining Plato’s so-called moral realism, points as evidence to the well-known passage of the *Phaedo* that suggests that two perceivable sticks, while not being exactly identical, seem somehow to aim at identity (*Phd.* 74a–75b). Therefore, Korsgaard thinks, Form in Plato’s view represents value. Since Form is, at the same time, the true and perfect nature of all things partaking in it, being guided by value is being guided by the way things ultimately are. In ethics, this comes down to being guided by what *we* really are: ‘So the endeavour to realize ethical perfection is just the endeavour to be what you are—to be good at being what you are.’<sup>5</sup>

If we look more closely at the *Phaedo* passage and at similar passages, however, it becomes clear that, for Plato, a perceivable entity E partaking in a form F is deficient, compared to F itself, simply in the sense that E is sometimes not-F (while F is, in a sense, always F). This is an extremely general and thin kind of structural normativity. There is, however, no straightforward path, in Plato’s theory, from this thin ideal normativity to ethical normativity. Thin ideal normativity by no means *implies* concepts of ethical normativity that tell us how to live best. Although the Form of humanity *is* certainly a specific Form exhibiting thin ideal normativity, it is an oversimplification to say that Plato thinks that we humans aim at realizing our true nature in exactly the same sense in which, for instance, identical or coloured things in our world aim at becoming perfectly identical or coloured. The source of genuine ethical normativity must be something that explains why some things and states matter to us. This is surely not just thin ideal normativity; rather, it is the specific determination of what we, as human beings, are supposed to aspire to that really matters to us and is the crucial source of ethical normativity. Thus, according to Plato, part of our human nature is the essential source of genuine normativity, and it is from this source that the conceptions of a good life ultimately emerge.

There are a number of passages in Plato’s dialogues in which certain patterns of argumentation are shown to be invalid. In a short passage of the *Euthydemus*, for example, Dionysodorus, having forced Socrates to

<sup>5</sup> See Mackie (1977), 40, Korsgaard (1996), 2–3.

answer him, tries to show that Socrates contradicts himself. One out of a number of similar arguments is that, since Chaeredemus, as Socrates agrees, was the father of Patrocles, but not the father of Socrates himself, Chaeredemus was father and not father. Socrates admits that it seems that Chaeredemus is not a father, but brings out very clearly that Chaeredemus, while the father of Patrocles, is not the father of Socrates. He makes the same point in answering similar questions proposed by Dionysodorus (*Euthd.* 297c–298a). Therefore, it is pretty obvious that Plato wants his readers to understand that to say that a person P instantiates a relation R and does not instantiate R is only a shortened way of making the fully consistent claim that there are two different persons Q and Q\* such that P stands in relation R to Q but not to Q\*. Hence, Socrates highlights two things: first, that Dionysodorus uses a certain *general* pattern of argument, and second, this pattern of argument is invalid. In the same dialogue, Euthydemus also asks the boy Clinias whether he thinks the wise or the ignorants are learners. Clinias, answering that the ignorant are learners, is led by Euthydemus to admit that the wise are learners, and, having admitted that, is then forced to agree that it is the ignorant that are learners (*Euthd.* 275d–277c, cf. *Tht.* 165a–e). Helping Clinias out, Socrates shows him that Euthydemus played with two different senses of the notion of learning, and that a failure to recognize the proper function of homonymous words in all these cases leads one to be caught in contradiction (*Euthd.* 277b–287b). This is one of the rather rare places in which Socrates explicitly proves that, and why, a pattern of argument is invalid.<sup>6</sup>

But it is not only the Sophists whom Plato shows relying on certain patterns of argument, albeit invalid ones; Socrates himself also uses certain general *patterns* of argument to examine, and refute, claims made by his companions. In some of the earlier dialogues, for example, he regularly uses this pattern of argument. If the definition ‘A is B’ is at stake, he shows, first, that A’s are good things, and second, that there are at least some B’s that are not good. It follows that A cannot be the same as B, in the sense that something is A if and only if it is B.<sup>7</sup> Another pattern of argument Socrates sometimes relies on is designed to examine definitions of the form ‘A is knowledge of B’; in this case, Socrates shows, first, that every object of knowledge has a certain property C, and second, that B does not have this property. It follows that A cannot be the knowledge of B (for instance, *La.* 194e–197e). What is more, these patterns of argument turn

<sup>6</sup> See also the remark about the trick argument in *Meno* 80e.

<sup>7</sup> See e.g. *La.* 197e–199e, *Euthphr.* 6e–8a, 9e–11b, *Chrm.* 160e–161a.

out, from a formal point of view, to be logically valid (at least the first one is a valid syllogism, in Aristotelian terms).

Sometimes we even find general advice about constructing arguments. For instance, in a good argument, we should not confuse talk about principles with talk about consequences as destructive critics do (*Phd.* 101e); and there is a distinction between the right and the wrong method of conversation (for instance, if you care about virtue, you should not be unfair in the way that you argue with people, *Tht.* 176e). In general, Socratic elenchus relies, obviously, on the logical principle of non-contradiction. We must assume that Plato took these and similar patterns of argument to be valid or at least reliable, although he did not yet, of course, have a clear idea about logically valid deductions (the patterns just outlined are indeed logically valid, according to syllogistic and modern logical standards, but Plato did not realize this).<sup>8</sup> It seems, then, that Plato wanted to distinguish between good and bad general patterns of argument. It is not surprising that Plato later calls the method of refutation that is designed to purify the soul from false beliefs, prejudices, and stupidity (stupidity being the ignorance that one is ignorant) an *art*, more specifically a certain *art of education*, namely ‘sophistry of noble lineage’ (*Sph.* 229a–231b).

In the later dialogues, it is, of course, the method of *dialectic* that is recommended, by Plato, as a general pattern for philosophical conversation and exploration. Dialectic involves attempts to establish adequate divisions and collections of conceptual structures sometimes called *Forms*. More exactly, it can be defined as the *art* of defining and dividing kinds (*Sph* 253c–d). Therefore, discussion is the most difficult part of philosophy (*Rep.* 6, 498a). In dialectical reasoning, everything depends on recognizing the *intermediates*—this makes all the difference between a philosophical and a contentious discussion.<sup>9</sup>

According to Plato, some people pretend to apply the proper divisions and distinctions to the subject under consideration, while in reality pursuing purely verbal oppositions, and thus practising eristic, not dialectic (*Rep.* 454a). However, there seems to be no way in which ‘men who could not render and exact an account of opinions in discussion would ever know anything of the things we say must be known’ (*Rep.* 531e). Dialectic as a *way* and *process* of inquiry is a *method* of tracking difficult

<sup>8</sup> See Detel (1973), (1974).

<sup>9</sup> *Phlb.* 17a. For more specific advice on how to construct good divisions see e.g. *Phdr.* 265d–e.

and obscure things, such as the Sophist (*Sph.* 218d), a pattern of how to reach an understanding of things (*Sph.* 221c). So dialectic as the method of definition and division must be *recommended* as the best way of reaching the truth of things (*Phdr.* 227b). Again, dialectic is an *art* that can be applied to different things, so it is truly a sort of general pattern; it should be practised on lesser things, but is indispensable for getting insight into the highest and most valuable things (*Plt.* 286a). It also looks at the consequences of one's assumptions to examine these assumptions:

Whenever you suppose that anything whatsoever exists or does not exist or has any other character, you ought to consider the consequences with reference to itself and to any other things that you may select, or several of them, or all of them altogether, and again you must study these others with reference both to one another and to any one thing you may select, whether you have assumed the thing to exist or not to exist, if you are really going to make out the truth after a complete course of discipline. (*Prm.* 136 b–c)<sup>10</sup>

So the method is an abstract one; it can and should be repeated, with different entities taken as subjects.

### III

If we ask why Plato recommends the benevolent Socratic technique of refutation and the art of dialectic, why we should, from Plato's point of view, adopt these general patterns of philosophical argument, and in which sense these patterns can be seen as norms that we are somehow supposed to follow, then the answer seems to be straightforward: following these patterns or norms improves our epistemic state, either by moving us from ignorance of ignorance to the knowledge of ignorance, or by moving us from the knowledge of ignorance towards substantive knowledge. Improving our epistemic state is surely valuable, or so it seems. Commenting on the refutation of the slave boy during the geometry lesson in the *Meno*, Socrates says:

Observe, Meno, the stage he has reached on the path of recollection. At the beginning he did not know the side of the square of eight feet. Nor indeed does he know it now, but then he thought he knew it... Now however he feels

<sup>10</sup> English translations of quotations from Plato's dialogues are from Hamilton and Cairns (1989).

perplexed. Not only does he not know the answer, he does not even think he knows. (*Meno* 84a)

And Socrates makes it plain that the boy is now ‘in a better position and that the numbing process was good for him’. Moreover, the boy will now be ‘quite glad to look for the right answer’ (84b–c). He feels challenged, and he now wants to know the right answer. This attitude, however, is not only a sort of good behaviour; it is, as Socrates emphasizes, a kind of virtue:

we shall be better, braver, and more active people if we believe it right to look for what we don’t know than if we believe there is no point in looking because what we don’t know we can never discover. (*Meno* 86b–c).

Similarly, dialectic must be recommended as the best way of getting to the truth of things (*Phdr.* 277b), and is in particular able to provide an insight into the Form of the Good.<sup>11</sup>

All this makes sense, of course, if truth is an intrinsic value and the achievement of truth something which is to be recommended. But what about the notion of truth in Plato? This is, of course, a big topic in itself, so I must confine myself to a few remarks. I take it that Plato talks about truth in at least two different ways. Sometimes truth is seen as a property of things or reality in so far as they are proper objects of genuine knowledge; and sometimes Plato talks about the truth of judgements.<sup>12</sup> There is a close relationship between these two notions of truth, but the ontological truth talk seems to be more restricted than the propositional truth talk. Ontologically, it is the *essential* aspects of reality that are called truths, whereas the truth of judgements is not conceptually restricted to the relationship between judgements and *certain* aspects of reality. Only the truth of judgements can be counted as a semantic fact in the modern sense, and I restrict my remarks to Plato’s propositional truth talk.

Plato’s famous analysis of true and false statements in the *Sophist* (262d–263d) has been for a long time a subject of intense debate. Here, I want only to note that, however this analysis is to be understood in detail, it is, certainly, formulated in a non-normative language. Plato arrives at his definition of truth and falsehood at the end of an extremely long and complicated argument that covers two of his most profound dialogues, the *Theatetus* and the *Sophist*. So we are definitely entitled to read his final analysis of truth and falsehood as offering a philosophically

<sup>11</sup> *R.* 532a ff.; also 511c.

<sup>12</sup> See Detel (1972), Szaif (1996).

adequate account. Plato basically claims that true statements state things about an X that are identical with some things that are the case with respect to X, while false statements state things about an X that are different from all things that are the case with respect to X. In the same way thoughts, understood as inward statements formed by the mind without spoken sound, are true or false, respectively. This is, as Plato's Stranger explicitly notes, the *nature* of true and false statements and thoughts.<sup>13</sup> So, to *describe* adequately the truth and falsehood of statements, we do not need to refer to any normative notion. In particular, we can understand fully what propositional truth and falsehood are without assuming that truth is, in general, something *good*, and that falsehood is, in general, something *bad*.

However, grasping the truth, like using valid patterns of argument, is necessary for achieving *knowledge*. Just as good and valid arguments are valuable because they improve our epistemic state, so truth is valuable because knowledge requires grasping the truth. Indeed, if knowledge is, as Plato points out in the *Meno* and in the *Theatetus*, true and justified belief, it is precisely the combination of truth *and* good arguments that is required for knowledge. It follows that *good arguments and truth are genuinely valuable if and only if knowledge is intrinsically valuable*.

But why should knowledge *in general* be something that is intrinsically valuable? It is the same knowledge or art that is directed to the contraries, that is, to that which is good within its domain *and* to that which is bad within its domain.<sup>14</sup> So science and art can be abused—they *can* be used to harm people (*Grg.* 456d–e). They do not, therefore, in general benefit us—except in cases where they are guided by the science or knowledge of the good and evil.<sup>15</sup> Rather, it is primarily some *specific* kinds of knowledge that are, according to Plato, valuable in themselves—namely those that are virtues (in particular, the knowledge of the good or of good and bad things). We can only do what we really want if we frame true thoughts about our purposes and the right means for achieving what we want (*Grg.* 466d–468e). Every kind of knowledge that contributes in some way to the knowledge of the good is then also, in a derived way, valuable.

It is in this sense that Plato believes that having a mental state or property of the soul called *truth* is the beginning, or presupposition, of

<sup>13</sup> *Sph.* 264b–d. See Detel (1972).

<sup>14</sup> *Ion* 532a; see also the entire *Lesser Hippias*.

<sup>15</sup> *Chrm.* 174c. There is even a sort of knowledge that can be harmful for those who possess it (*Prt.* 313a–314b).

the truly good life,<sup>16</sup> and that the intellectual life that consists, among other things, of pursuing as many truths as possible is the best form of life.<sup>17</sup> Likewise, the use of *good* arguments is to be recommended in so far as it contributes to a good life. The elenchus in the earlier Platonic dialogues is not only an examination of a certain claim, but also an examination of a person, her character, and her way of life.<sup>18</sup> Learning not only sciences such as geometry, but also improving our skills in *dialectical reasoning* has, according to Plato's later dialogues (in particular, of course, the *Republic*), a definite function within the framework of a philosophical education: it helps us to grasp the Forms and especially the Form of the Good, thereby becoming good persons that know how to lead a good life. Virtue is, after all, a sort of knowledge of the good.

The overall picture that emerges from this analysis is that Plato conceived of at least three different levels of normativity. There is, first, the thin functional normativity that most of the things in the universe exhibit in so far as they partake in Forms. There is, second, an important case of this kind of normativity: rational and semantic normativity that is specific to humans and that allows us to distinguish between truth and falsehood, as well as between good and bad arguments or between knowledge and ignorance, without being forced, however, to describe these distinctions in terms of genuine normativity. Finally, there is ethical normativity connected to the normativity of the human mind that can generate adequate notions of a truly good life. Functional normativity pervades the other kinds of normativity too, but it is only by seeing that semantic normativity contributes to a good life that we can attribute a derived genuine normativity to truth and good arguments. In my view, the conclusion of all this is that we can see Plato as the first thinker to have developed a kind of *hybrid* theory of normativity.

#### IV

I now consider some versions of modern normative semantics to see whether, and if so where, these theories locate the origin of the normativity of semantic norms. *Semantic norms* are norms that, if they exist, govern

<sup>16</sup> See e.g. *R.* 490a–b. See further Szaif (1996), 65 ff.

<sup>17</sup> See Szaif (1996), part 2, §§11–12.

<sup>18</sup> *La.* 187e ff., *Ap.* 38a. For a clear account of this aspect of the Socratic elenchus, see e.g. Brickhouse and Smith (2000), 135–40.



*semantic facts* such as representing something or being true, and also *semantic transitions* such as inferential relations between contentful sentences or thoughts. Such norms seem to *recommend* that thoughts and sentences be true instead of false, and they seem to *recommend* that inferences be valid instead of invalid. ‘In logic we do not want to know how the mind actually operates and has proceeded so far in thinking about things; rather, we want to know how the mind *should* think.’ This remark in Kant’s so-called *Jäsche Logik*<sup>19</sup> belongs to the foundations of a long-standing tradition that attributes a normative dimension to our ways of thinking and speaking. A century later, formal logic supported this tradition by presenting itself as a *normative* theory designed to prove which inferences are *valid*, and by grounding these proofs on the *meaning* of logical terms. With the publication of works such as Sellars (1956) or Kripke’s (1982) account of Wittgenstein’s discussion of what it is to follow a rule, the claim about the normativity of semantics was extended again from logical inferences to thinking and speaking in general, pretty much in the Kantian sense. ‘Meaning is normative’ was the new slogan in the philosophy of language. If we mean something by an expression, then we *should* use it in a certain way, and if we do not use it in the required way, we make a *mistake* and use it *incorrectly*. One of Kripke’s most important points is that he takes the claim about the normativity of meanings, not as part of a theory of meaning, but rather as a pre-theoretical condition that any adequate semantics must meet. It needs to be emphasized that modern normative semantics tends to see normativity as being *internally* related to content and meaning: the normative force is supposed to flow directly from semantic facts.<sup>20</sup> For example—just to mention one possible line of thought—suppose that ‘rot’ means *red*; then the expression ‘rot’ seems to apply *correctly* to all and only the red things. This normativity seems to follow directly from the truth-conditions of the sentence form ‘rot (x)’.<sup>21</sup>

In recent discussions on semantics, some philosophers have strongly rejected, and others have strongly supported, the claim that semantic facts or semantic relations are normative. In semantics, causal-informational

<sup>19</sup> Kant, *Logic*, Prussian Academy edition, vol. 1, 6. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant says that in nature normativity of the sort that connects reasons does not occur, Prussian Academy edition, vol. 1, 547.

<sup>20</sup> See e.g. Glüer (1999), Wikforss (2001). According to Dummett (1991: 85), this is also the Wittgensteinian view.

<sup>21</sup> See the discussion of Kripke’s normativity condition in Boghossian (1989), especially 513.

theories (for instance, Fodor 1990*b* and Dretske 1988) or conceptual role theories (such as Peacocke 1992) typically reject this claim, while, for example, Davidson<sup>22</sup> and the modern Sellarsians (McDowell 1994, Brandom 1994) stick to it. In this chapter, I proceed from the assumption that there is a good sense in which we can say that thoughts or statements *should* be true and that, *if* we take some of them to be true we *should* also take some other thoughts or claims to be true; and I take it that some of these transitions can be justified by looking at the contents of the thoughts or statements in question (logically valid transitions are, of course, only one example, albeit an important one). But, at the same time, I take the claim seriously that semantics can be treated, to a considerable extent, in non-normative vocabulary. One of the aims here is to show how these two intuitions can be seen as consistent.

Interestingly, *teleosemantics*, in my view the currently most advanced version of a *naturalized* semantics, claims to offer an account of the semantically most basic ‘*normative*’ distinction, namely, the distinction between successful representation and misrepresentation.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, if we want to introduce the notion of semantic content by relying on a notion of representation, one of the most basic criteria of adequacy is that the account should provide the conceptual resources for talking about misrepresentation. This can be done by defining a notion of non-mathematical function that allows us to determine malfunctions as well.<sup>24</sup> The teleosemantic notion of a proper function relies on the concept of a reproductive family as a set of things that reproduce each other, that is, that produces copies of existing members of the family. Now let R be a reproductive family and m a member of R, then it is the *proper function* of m to do F iff, first, m exists now, second, C is a property that gets copied among the members of R, third, the positive statistical relation between C and F becomes greater during the history of members of R, and finally, these points contribute to explaining why m exists now. It is obvious that

<sup>22</sup> Some readers of Davidson’s works doubt that he takes normativity to be essential for the mental realm of contentful thoughts and sentences, and there are, indeed, not many passages that are unambiguous on this issue. For a recent, unambiguous statement, see Davidson (1998), 101–2. Cf. also e.g. Dummett (1991), 85, 91, McDowell (1998*b*).

<sup>23</sup> See Millikan (1984), Dretske (1988) for influential books on teleosemantics. An overview of the main varieties of teleosemantics and the main problems of this theory is provided by Detel (2001*a*) and (2001*b*).

<sup>24</sup> Note that traditional definitions of non-mathematical functions do not provide the theoretical resources to do this. For instance, if we say that A has the function F iff F is a causal effect of A, or if we say that A has the function F iff the very fact that F is the causal effect of A results causally in A’s coming about. For an extended critical discussion of notions of non-mathematical functions, see Samson and Detel (2002).

these points introduce evolutionary history into the picture. For they indicate that former members of R have been selected because their having the property C resulted in their doing F, and that former members of R were successful under selective pressure because they contributed, by doing F, to the fitness of members of R.<sup>25</sup>

It follows from this idea of a proper function that organisms have proper functions, not due to their actual dispositions or their actual performance, but due to their evolutionary history of reproduction. Therefore an organism can have a certain proper function without satisfying this function adequately. Having a proper function F is fully consistent with malfunctioning with respect to F. Obviously, it is the historical dimension of the notion of a proper function that provides the possibility of talking about malfunctioning organisms that still possess the corresponding proper function, since conditions (i)–(iv) remain satisfied even in case of malfunctions.

Mental states and signs produced by organisms can have proper functions, too. Thus, imperative signs have the proper function of bringing about appropriate actions of interpreters; and indicative signs may have the proper function of bringing about larger and more complex signs. However, these proper functions *do not* explain sufficiently that they are *representational* states (these proper functions may even have *nothing* to do with their being representations).<sup>26</sup> Rather, if we want to explain representations of signs, we have to look for proper functions of the *producer* of representational mental states or signs, as well as for the proper functions of the *consumer* or *interpreter* of mental states or intentional signs, respectively. Thus, it is the proper function of the *brain* to produce *brain-states* that map on to the world *and* produce *actions* that guide the system adequately in its behaviour. Likewise, it is the proper function of a sign-producer to produce *signs* that map on to the world and

<sup>25</sup> A more formal definition is this: Let R be a reproductive family and m a member of R, then it is the *proper function* of m to do F iff (i) m exists now, (ii) C is a property that gets copied among the members of R, (iii) the positive statistical relation between C and F (i.e.  $p(F/C) > p(F)$ ) becomes greater during the history of members of R, and (iv) points (i)–(iii) contribute to explaining why m exists now (i.e. why (i) holds). Here it is again obvious that conditions (iii) and (iv) introduce evolutionary history into the picture. For (iii) says that former members of R have been selected because their having the property C resulted in their doing F, and (iv) says that former members of R were successful under selective pressure because they contributed to the fitness of members of R.

<sup>26</sup> In particular, it is wrong to say (as e.g. Dretske 1988 does) that mental states or signs have the proper function of indicating states of affairs in the world, for functions are always some kind of effects, and mental states or signs do not have the effect of indicating something.

guide an interpreter adequately in her actions. Mapping here means that there is an isomorphism between the qualified states of a type of event and the qualified states of a type of mental state or sign. It is on the basis of this idea that we can introduce a basic notion of teleo-content.

It is important to see that, for any given production of a mental state or sign (or of a sequence of these states and signs) having the content A, the production is *not* dependent on a specific cause of the production; in particular, it is not dependent causally on a qualified state of A. Otherwise, we could not have misrepresentation.<sup>27</sup> But there is a normal explanation that tells us that, in the history of the organism and its brain that produces the mental state or the sign, the predecessors of this organism did produce mental states and signs that mapped on to A, and this turned out to be advantageous for these organisms. So they were selected for producing mental states and signs mapping on to A; and thus they adopted the proper function of doing this. The *distinction between successful representation and misrepresentation* is a *normative* one—or so many advocates of teleosemantics claim (for instance, Neander 1995). This is exactly what we want and need for any theory of content, since we must be able to say that a mental state or sign has the content A *whether or not* A is the case or is causally responsible for this mental state or sign. It is on the basis of this account that Millikan 1993 claims to have offered a *biological solution* of the problem of normativity. More importantly, this kind of normativity is explained, in the teleosemantic approach, in purely naturalistic terms, and seems therefore to be founded in nature. The source of this normativity, as for instance Millikan holds, is the natural Darwinian purposes that generate those standards relative to which we can talk about mistakes, falsehood or, at the most basic level, malfunctions and misrepresentation. For Darwinian purposes imply criteria of adaptivity from which these standards follow, as Karen Neander tells us.

However, it seems pretty clear that to talk in this evolutionary way about normativity is *not* to talk about *genuine* normativity. If an organism has a representational mental state or produces a representational sign,

<sup>27</sup> My impression is that many neurobiologists talk about representations in a much weaker sense. If an external entity E or a set S of stimuli causes regularly a brain to produce a cluster C of firing neurons, then C is a representation of E or S, respectively. It is obvious that this way of talking about representations is not able to say what would constitute misrepresentations. Representations are nothing more in kind than the normal effects of given causes. In my view, this is not to talk about the mind at all: there is nothing, in this way of looking at the brain, that is characteristic of the mind. These people are simply doing physics or biology, without taking mental phenomena into account at all.

then, according to teleosemantics, the natural or biological normativity of this state or sign is supposed to rest on the fact that there is an *objective* difference between functions and malfunctions, or between successful representations and misrepresentations. It is obvious, however, that the crucial criterion for this difference is the *contribution to the probability of survival and reproduction* of the organism in question. But this probability does not have, *in general*, an intrinsic value. At least in the case of rather simple and primitive organisms such as bacteria, it in no way matters to these creatures whether they survive or reproduce themselves with a high or low degree of probability. They do not have in general authority in evaluating this probability. To be sure, simple and primitive as these creatures may be, the fact that they are members of reproductive families, have genuine proper functions, and may even be representational systems is remarkable, and marks them off sharply from things such as stones. They are organized in such a way that their states *can* adopt intrinsic values if some more conditions are satisfied, and this is by no means trivial. So we could consider talking, in such cases, about *physical normativity*; but we must be clear that physical normativity, while certainly an important necessary condition of genuine normativity, is not identical with, and is not even the crucial source of, genuine normativity.

In sum, teleosemantics have done much to clarify, and to describe in great detail, the key necessary preconditions for genuine normativity; but it has not provided a biological and thus, naturalist solution of the problem of genuine normativity.

## V

Donald Davidson entertains what might be labelled an *interpretivist* conception of psychology. This conception involves the idea that our *understanding* of people (*understanding* not in the sense of scientifically explaining, but rather in the sense of the German *Verstehen*) is in some way *normative*. Davidson stresses that we need to make sense of the *whole* of the set of attitudes and the *whole* of the set of contentful utterances we ascribe to a person in order to render them intelligible to us.<sup>28</sup> Interpret-

<sup>28</sup> In a well-known passage, he writes that to ascribe attitudes or to interpret someone we must work out a theory of what the person means, thus simultaneously giving content to his attitudes and to his words. In our need to make sense, we will try for a theory that finds the person consistent, a believer of truths, and a lover of the good. See Davidson (1980), 253, and in general Davidson (1990).

ing people's utterances, mental states, and actions successfully implies being able to reconstruct the whole set of these utterances, states, and actions as being governed by a number of *principles of rationality* such as consistency and truth, or having good reasons for one's beliefs and claims, or believing and stating the obvious. There cannot be any doubt that these principles are meant to be *normative* in character and that the notion of rationality is meant to be a *normative* one.<sup>29</sup> In short, *understanding* a person's mental states, words or actions is to be able to *rationalize* them, that is, to see them as *rational* ones given other mental states, statements or actions of this person. It is important to keep in mind that, for Davidson, being interpretable in this *rational, logical, and normative* way is *constitutive* of speaking a natural language, having contentful mental states, and performing actions that are describable under some contentful intention. This kind of deep normativity is *non-optional*: it does not make sense to think about the possibility of violating these norms, but it is still the deepest sort of normativity characteristic of creatures mastering natural languages and having a mental life. This is the crucial reason for the *universality*, and in this sense, the *objectivity* of this sort of non-optional normativity. It is a logical consequence of a semantic theory in a broadly Davidsonian style that the general standards of rationality of all interpreters *and* interpretands must be the same. That is why the interpreter, in trying to understand a creature, must apply the principle of charity, and must seek to maximize the agreement between the interpretand and herself concerning consistency, truth, and justification of their beliefs, claims, and intentions.

This theory still has great appeal. Nevertheless, as far as the claims about normativity are concerned, it is problematic. The easiest way to see this is to look at some details of the construction of Davidson's theory of interpretation, in particular, in two respects. A theory of interpretation is supposed to be an *empirical* theory based on the so-called T-theorems used as empirical evidence; furthermore, this theory is supposed to be constructed, in a situation of radical interpretation, by interpreters who have already mastered a natural language and have contentful thoughts. Interpreters begin to construct a theory of meaning for a given object language by establishing, in an empirical

<sup>29</sup> Daniel Dennett, for instance, who entertains a type of interpretivism himself, has pointed out that: 'A system's beliefs are those it ought to have, given its perceptual capacities, epistemic needs and biography...Deciding that something is an intentional system permits predictions having a normative or logical basis rather than an empirical one', Dennett (1978), 13, 48–9.

manner, a lot of T-theorems of the form *s is true if and only if p* (where 's' is a meta-linguistic name for a statement in the object language). The notion of truth enters this construction in two different ways. First, it is obviously *used* to formulate the T-theorems. On this level, the notion of truth, while, of course, belonging to the meta-language spoken by the interpreter, does not mean more than 'stating something assertively' *in the object language*. This notion of truth is absolutely basic for the theory of interpretation, and it is *strictly non-normative*. Secondly, the interpreter must take the T-theorems themselves to be true. *This* notion of truth is, therefore, *applied* to statements *in the meta-language*, for instance to T-theorems. Does Davidson think that *this* notion of truth is already a normative one? Does it make sense to say that T-theorems *should* be true? To my knowledge, Davidson never discusses this question, but I think the answer must be positive. In constructing an empirical theory of interpretation, we already rely on the usual methodology well-known from the philosophy of science that is supposed, among other things, to *recommend* how to proceed if we want to establish a good empirical theory. Part of this recommendation is, of course, that the test-basis for our theory should consist of true empirical statements or sentences.

T-theorems containing a non-normative notion of truth do not necessarily give us the *meanings* of the statements of the object language that they mention. Rather, as already indicated, they have only to be true as material equivalences in the logical sense. This implies, obviously, that the notion of truth as applied to the object language must be taken to be non-normative and that the relation between different T-theorems is not yet a logical or normative one. But how do T-theorems become interpretative? By being incorporated, according to Davidson, into a satisfying axiomatic theory of interpretation that reveals how all the statements of the object language are related to each other. Put in an over-simplified way, it is the *holism* of this theory that turns T-theorems into sentences that give us the *meanings* of statements in the object language—if this theory remains empirically successful, and thus enables us to deduce all true T-theorems for the object language. However, in order to construct a satisfying theory of interpretation, the *interpreter* has to make use of the principle of charity and apply all those principles of rationality that are constitutive of speaking natural languages and having contentful beliefs. It is by maximizing agreement between interpreter and interpretand concerning these principles that T-theorems turn out to be interpretative, that their relations turn out to be governed by normative logical rules, and that the notion of truth applied to statements of the object language is equipped with a

*normative* dimension that enables the interpreter to say, for instance, that the interpretand *should* take certain statements to be true *given that* she takes certain other statements to be true.

All this shows that Davidson's theory of meaning and content may reveal some normative conditions that are characteristic for speaking a natural language and having contentful thoughts. But Davidson is not able to illuminate the *source* of this semantic normativity. This is obvious because, in his theory, semantic and methodological normativity must theoretically be *presupposed* as governing the meta-language spoken, and the interpretation theory constructed, by the interpreter. One could even say that Davidson's whole theoretical approach *precludes* any attempt to say something about the source of semantic normativity, because the approach proceeds from analysing situations of radical interpretation that must already presuppose that semantic normativity is *given* with respect to the meta-language. Theoretically, the introduction of rationality and normativity must be taken, in a Davidsonian type of semantics, as *completely ad hoc*. According to Davidson, the ultimate source of semantic normativity is the constitutive ideal of rationality that the principle of charity refers to. But this ideal of rationality is simply *declared* to be normative.

Another way to see this is to reflect briefly on Davidson's 'causal theory' of reference as part of his broadly externalist semantics. His basic idea here is that in the most fundamental cases our thinking or stating that *p* is caused by *p*. But, at the same time, Davidson thinks he can avoid any more detailed analysis of this causation; in particular, he thinks that a theory of perception is not necessary for semantics. In this way, he tries also to avoid the introduction of the notion of representation into semantic theories. These moves are not at all convincing, however; Davidson's so-called theory of reference is much too simple and really nothing more than a vague sketch. Filling out this sketch and developing it into a full-scale theory must imply an analysis of representational perception, much as outlined in teleosemantics. Thus, we can see that there is no problem in talking about successful representation or misrepresentation in a completely non-normative way. The same holds for the distinction between truth and falsehood of statements and beliefs. Like successful representations, true beliefs and statements provide an adequate mapping of external states of affairs (to put it very simply), but there is nothing genuinely normative in this, except that true beliefs and linguistic signs help to increase the probability of survival and reproduction in some sense. This is, of course, not to say that successful representation or truth must be



*defined* in terms of reproductive success or utility. Rather, success and utility are an explicable *effect* of successful representation and truth. So we need more theoretical ingredients to *show*, instead of simply proceeding from intuition, that semantic relations are, and how they become, genuinely normative. Davidson's theory of interpretation and meaning does not give us these additional theoretical ingredients.

## VI

Let me now look briefly at Robert Brandom's big book *Making It Explicit* (1994, henceforth *MIE*). There are actually two major projects in *MIE*. One is to analyse, and demarcate, genuinely conceptual practices. The basic idea here is that what is special about human beings is being bound by reason and rationality, which amounts to recognizing, and being subjected to, inferential norms that govern the propositional contents of mental episodes, signs, and acts that we humans can rationally understand. But to understand fully what is special about linguistic practices we need, as Brandom sees it, to understand also the relationship between genuinely conceptual practices and pre-conceptual practices. The challenge is to tell a story about how linguistic practices arise out of non-linguistic practices. This is what Brandom offers in the first four chapters of *MIE*. The second project is to outline a social and inferential route to representation. More generally, the task is to introduce, and explain, the traditional semantic vocabulary on the basis of the account of inferential norms presented in the first part of *MIE*. In particular, the challenge is to reconstruct the ways of representing things by looking at the ways of inferentially articulating and recognizing things (and not vice versa, as in most semantic approaches).

While I think that *MIE* is in many respects an impressive book (particularly, chapters 5 to 7, which are usually discussed less intensively, if at all), it seems to me that both big projects in *MIE* are questionable. Here, it is the first of these projects that concerns me most. How is it that, for Brandom, semantic normativity arises, and where must we locate the source of this normativity? The overall picture presented in *MIE* is this. Brandom proceeds from the assumption that neither regulism nor regularism is acceptable. *Regulism* is the view that norms are explicit rules. *Regularism* is the view that norms are regularities. Regulism is false because it implies a regress, since it can always be asked whether the rule is applied *correctly*. Regularism fails due to the gerrymandering argument.

This is that, for anything one might go on to do, there is some regularity such that one might count the act as going on the same way; hence, to distinguish between regular and irregular, and thus, between correct and incorrect, patterns of behaviour, there must be a way of picking out some of all the regularities exhibited by the behaviour as somehow *privileged*. However, there is, simply, no such way. Consequently, Brandom wants to start from *norms* given *implicitly in practices*. Such practices have to be described both as not involving explicit rules and as distinct from regularities. He rejects the approach endorsed by theorists such as Haugeland that norms implicit in practices can be introduced by pointing to *sanctions* conceived in terms of conditioning and reinforcement. Brandom's main point is that sanctions of this kind are *non-normative* states or regularities, and so the gerrymandering argument can be generated again at the level of *physical* sanctions.

Brandom's suggestion is, therefore, that we should think of norms implicit in practices as *instituted* by practical attitudes of assessment and acknowledgement. Performances are correct or incorrect by being taken, or assessed, by actors as being correct or incorrect. Practical assessment can be understood as sanctioning, but these sanctions must themselves have *normative* significance, that is, there must be changes in the *normative* status of the people that are being sanctioned, for instance by their being granted privileges or being released from duties. In this way, *norms are operative all the way down*. As it does not make sense to explain modal vocabulary by reducing it to non-modal terms, so it does not make sense to explain normative vocabulary by reducing it to non-normative vocabulary. There can only be *internal* explanations of modal or normative terms. This goes especially also for *conceptual* norms, and thus, for *semantic* normativity.

While it is certainly correct to think, as Brandom does and Kant and others did before him, that norms come into existence, in a sense, by people's assessing and evaluating things or performances, Brandom's line of argument does not, in my view, give us a secure theoretical basis for his conclusions. As in Davidson's case, normativity, specifically, for Brandom, the normativity in our practices of assessment, does not get theoretically introduced or explained in any illuminating way. One reason for this may be that the distinction between physical and normative sanctions that Brandom adopts is too sharp. But the main reason is, I think, that it is hard to understand what it means for norms to be given *implicitly* in practices; likewise, it is hard to understand what it means to follow a rule *implicitly*—an idea on which Wittgensteinians rely in seeing language as a

set of linguistic *conventions*. There are actually two problems here: one is that we are supposed to understand that an agent's behaviour is guided by rules or norms that are not cognitively realized in the agent's mind because they have not been verbally introduced to him. The other problem is that Davidsonians, Wittgensteinians, and Brandomians presuppose, in their philosophy of language, a *social background* ('practices') without in any way explaining what it is for a form of behaviour to be a practice or to be social in a *normative* sense. I doubt that we can *explain* what it is to follow a rule or what it is for behaviour to constitute a social practice without already invoking talk of content-rich thoughts and contentful utterances.

Thus, the review of the three semantic theories sketched here suggests that, technically speaking, the semantic theorist can and should proceed without relying on normative vocabulary. Once the difference between truth and falsity is modelled on the teleosemantic distinction between successful representation and misrepresentation, we can introduce notions such as *consistency* and *valid inference* in a non-normative way too. For instance, valid inferences preserve truth, sentences are incompatible if the negation of one of them follows from the other on the basis of valid inferences, and a set of sentences is consistent if it does not contain incompatible sentences.

Nonetheless, human beings who have mastered a natural language are clearly capable of producing second-order thoughts and of using them to examine critically whether they should accept, or reject, some of the accessible contents of first-order sentences and thoughts. This capacity seems to indicate that we are right in assuming that, even if we can understand at the theoretical level what content and meaning are and how they function without referring to anything more than physical normativity, there is a sort of genuine normativity that, while not being constitutive for content and meaning, is nonetheless bound up with the use of natural languages by human beings. But, if this is right, we must ask how genuine normativity enters the semantic picture. In the final sections of this chapter, I want to outline an answer to this question, though only in the most general way.

## VII

The first move is to look at neurobiology and cognitive psychology, as is commonly done in this context. Details and niceties aside, neurobiologists inform us that a main function of the brain, in particular of the limbic

system, at least of mammals, is to *evaluate* unconsciously and non-linguistically external states for, and internal states of, the organisms it belongs to. These evaluations can be described in a purely physicalist vocabulary. For an organism X to *evaluate* a state of type Y in environment E consists, basically, of reacting causally to Y-states in E in such a way that X develops dispositions for behaving in future cases of Y-states in E in such a way that this behaviour increases the probability of the survival and reproduction of X.<sup>30</sup> It seems, interestingly, that most, if not all, organisms *capable of evaluating* things in this sense are, at the same time, *representational* systems in the teleosemantic sense, but that unconscious evaluations are *independent* of representational capacities in the sense that representation does not *imply* evaluation, although it might be the case that evaluation *presupposes* representation. Not every representation constitutes an evaluation;<sup>31</sup> but creatures that are in principle incapable of representing things cannot evaluate them. All mammals including human beings display a lot of unconscious mechanisms of evaluation that have specific biological functions. In animals that have memory and are capable of associative learning, the evaluative mechanisms can take on the form of conditioning by reinforcement, although this is by no means the only way of learning at an unconscious and non-linguistic level. Clearly, evaluative mechanisms are, in addition to non-linguistic representations and misrepresentations, the second important case of mechanisms displaying *physical* normativity. As such, they belong to the *physical* world. In a sense, organisms equipped with a limbic system have a sort of authority in evaluating things. The limbic system that is doing the job of evaluation belongs, after all, to individual organisms. But the evaluations provided by the limbic system are clearly not accessible to the organisms themselves: they do not establish the kind of self-relation that is required for genuine normativity.

However, in mammals it is precisely the limbic system that is closely correlated with the occurrence of *feelings*, that is, drives and emotions.<sup>32</sup> Psychological theories of feelings assume that there are a number of

<sup>30</sup> See, for instance, Panksepp (1998), Roth (2001).

<sup>31</sup> However, in the case of mammals many representations are evaluative. At the most fundamental level, for instance, the 'pure' perception of red things that philosophers like to talk about as a prime example is a fiction. In most cases, redness indicates something dangerous, in other cases readiness for sexual intercourse and so on. Perception of coloured things is in most cases evaluatively laden.

<sup>32</sup> The psychology of emotions standardly distinguishes rather sharply between 'drives' and 'emotions', see Izard (1999).

elementary drives (such as hunger, thirst, sexual drive) and emotions (such as anger, fear, pleasure, curiosity)<sup>33</sup> common to most mammals. Among biologists and psychologists, there is fundamental agreement about the biological functions of states of drives and emotional states. For every organism there are, as a matter of fact, certain classes of dangerous and valuable events in the internal or external environment; hence, drives are reactions to *internal* evaluative events, while emotions are reactions to *external* evaluative events (Damasio 1999: 54). In any case, both drives and emotions can be positive or negative attitudes and are correlated not only with complex patterns in the body's chemical profile, as regards the states of the viscera and the degree of contraction of muscles (for instance, of the face, throat, trunk, and limbs), but also with structures of neural circuits in the brain, most prominently in the limbic system—structures that cause all the physiological states just mentioned. That is why there is sometimes an ambiguity in the way neurobiologists and psychologists talk about drives and emotions: sometimes drives and emotions are simply identified with specific neural and physiological states, sometimes they are taken to be conscious feelings that are themselves correlated with specific neural and physiological states.

This ambiguity is, of course, not really a problem, but we must be aware of it. Actually, it is based on the grand tradition of the three main theories of emotions (and drives). The *Cartesian tradition* identifies emotions with feelings. The key idea is to treat emotions and drives as purely mental phenomena and to separate them from all bodily aspects, primarily from both perceptions preceding them and from physiological changes that follow them. In this view, drives and emotions are a sort of reflexive awareness of things going on in one's own body.<sup>34</sup> The *behaviourist tradition* identifies emotions and drives with physiological and neural states including motor reactions to these states.<sup>35</sup> The *Aristotelian tradition* offers a cognitive theory of emotions and drives. According to this theory, emotions and drives have contents and amount to evaluative

<sup>33</sup> There are various assumptions about the set of primary emotions, e.g. Damasio (1999: 50) mentions six: happiness, sadness, fear, anger, surprise, disgust.

<sup>34</sup> See Descartes (1995 [1649], parts 1–2), and his correspondence with Princess Elisabeth. Hume entertained another version of this theory, the main difference being that he tried to explain the impact of emotions on behaviour. The most influential modern advocate of the theory of feelings is William James (1890) vol. 2, ch. 25, who hoped to develop a scientific theory of emotions by examining the behaviour and physiological changes that are correlated with emotional states.

<sup>35</sup> J. B. Watson (1919: 192 ff.), the founder of Behaviorism, suggested such a theory. Cf. also Skinner (1974) and, above all, Skinner and Holland (1961), 210–12.

judgements.<sup>36</sup> I agree emphatically with those theorists who see each of these three theories as picking out just one of the important aspects of emotions and drives, in this way narrowing down a rich and full-scale theory of emotions and drives. Such a rich theory would rather have to appreciate *all three* aspects emphasized in each of the mentioned traditions. Even at a sub-linguistic level, drives and emotions are, according to this comprehensive view, (a) neural and internal physiological patterns, that are (b) often correlated with a sort of conscious awareness, have (c) a teleo-content and result often (d) in typical muscular structures (for instance, of the face) that can be taken to be intentional signs (in the teleosemantic sense) for (a) and (b).<sup>37</sup> I suggest that, in talking about issues of normativity, we work with this rich account of emotions and drives, located systematically at a sub-linguistic level. On this view, drives and emotions are part of an area called *phenomenal consciousness* in the contemporary philosophy of mind; but they are not just pro- or con-attitudes, that is pleasant or painful conscious awareness of some physiological states caused by some brain states. They also have, in addition, teleo-content based on their biological functions, and are related to external muscular expressions that are intentional signs which can be, and are very often, interpreted in the sub-linguistic teleosemantic sense. (It is, by the way, interesting to see that an increasing number of psychologists and neurobiologists are convinced that conscious mental episodes exist in many mammals, that they can be distinguished sharply from unconscious states, that they can be correlated with specific brain-states in the so-called associative cortex, that they have specific biological functions, and that they are characterized by a specific subjective quality of experience.<sup>38</sup> In addition, there is now a lot of research going on to explore the *neural mechanisms* that realize conscious states physically.)

I claim that drives and emotions, in this rich sense, are one of the most important sources of genuine normativity. It seems to me obvious that

<sup>36</sup> Aristotle thinks that emotions, since they have cognitive content, can and do influence the judgements of human beings profoundly in speeches of various kinds; that is why he treats the cognitive theory of emotions primarily in the *Rhetoric*, see *Rh.* 2.2–11. In early modern Europe, Spinoza advocated the cognitive theory of emotions. In modern philosophy it was most of all Magda Arnold (1960) who rehabilitated this theory. See also Solomon (1976) and Lyons (1980), as the most influential advocates of the cognitive theory of emotions.

<sup>37</sup> See further Ekman (1980). One of the most forceful and convincing defenders of such a rich theory of emotions is R. De Sousa (1987). The much-debated new book of Antonio Damasio (1999) talks primarily about how emotions, defined in a purely neural and physiological sense, are accompanied by feelings in a broader sense.

<sup>38</sup> See again Roth (2001); also Revonsuo (1999), Durstewitz and Windmann (1999).

drives and emotions of this kind represent the most fundamental level on which all mammals, including human beings, are capable of exercising an evaluative authority that is related to the accessibility of the evaluations in question. This accessibility is due to some sort of awareness and self-relationship that comes with all degrees of phenomenal consciousness.

### VIII

From a philosophical point of view, this move provokes a number of questions. Thus, there is a considerable debate going on about the question of whether states of consciousness are always or regularly tied to some sort of awareness. Obviously, an answer to this question depends in part on the specific notion of consciousness that is invoked in this debate. A number of influential writers, for example, take the occurrence of full attention or second-order thoughts to be necessary conditions for phenomenal consciousness to occur.<sup>39</sup> Others distinguish between two kinds of consciousness. Thus, Ned Block urges us to draw a distinction between access consciousness and phenomenal consciousness,<sup>40</sup> and Michael Tye insists that there is a kind of consciousness that is not related to attention and is not introspectively accessible either. (We can, for instance, be conscious of the logical implications of beliefs we have entertained without paying any particular attention to them, or we can feel how it is to be exposed for a short time to a very loud noise even while being completely inattentive during this time interval.) Consciousness tied to attention is, according to Tye, simply a higher-level kind of consciousness.<sup>41</sup> In any case, in order to be able to identify drives and emotions, considered as part of phenomenal consciousness, as important sources of genuine normativity at a non-linguistic level, I must point to those kinds of consciousness that are at least in some minimal way correlated with a sort of awareness, accessibility and thus, self-relationship. I must assume that this kind of consciousness supervenes on brain states that produce representational inner episodes and intentional signs having teleo-content that can be sub-linguistically interpreted by members of the same species.

One of the most intensive debates in this context concerns the question of whether all these conditions can ever be sufficient to explain the sort of

<sup>39</sup> Dennett (1991), Dretske (1999), Becker (2000).

<sup>40</sup> Block (1995). For a critical review of this position, see Burge (2001).

<sup>41</sup> Tye (1999). Similarly, Searle (1992), 160–5, talks about a ‘center’ and a ‘periphery’ of consciousness connected with different levels of attention.

*reflexive* relation of a creature to itself that seems to be connected with its conscious states. There is a long and strong tradition from Herder and Humboldt up to Wittgenstein, Davidson, and Dennett that claims that consciousness, and thus, genuine normativity, in this respect like the possession of significant thoughts, *presupposes* the mastering of a natural language (let me call this the *Herder-tradition*). The Herder-tradition insists that the content of conscious states can only be determined—and thus, that conscious states themselves can only be individuated—by applying and using natural languages. At the same time, the Herder-tradition is extremely critical about carelessly ascribing consciousness to non-linguistic creatures.<sup>42</sup> The claim is that we should be at least agnostic about what conscious states of non-linguistic creatures might be like and whether they possess consciousness at all. Obviously, this position excludes any attempt to explain semantic normativity by appealing to physical normativity *and* consciousness.

I am not at all sure, however, that the Herder-tradition is correct. There are good reasons to believe that the overall picture offered by the Herder-tradition is too simple. Admittedly, some forms of human consciousness may indeed depend on linguistic capabilities. But, first of all, in the ontogenesis of human beings, there does not seem to be a neural structural reorganization of those parts of the brain that are connected with conscious states around the time period at which humans learn to master a natural language (Roth 2000). Also, psychologists tell us that there are many indications that consciousness comes in degrees. Recent studies on people with damaged brains have shown that there are all sorts of *low, diminished or (more or less) suppressed states of consciousness and awareness*.<sup>43</sup> One well-known case is what is sometimes called *dissociation*. Patients who have suffered from extreme continuous pain and have undergone a certain routine surgery of the brain say afterwards that they still feel pain (and pleasure) but do not suffer from (do not enjoy) it anymore, that is, they are dissociated from suffering and joy (Dennett thinks that non-linguistic mammals feel drives and emotions in this dissociated way). Also, patients with significant language impairments

<sup>42</sup> This is, of course, the line of thought proposed by Davidson and Dennett. For a new review, extension, and defence of this argument, see Becker (2000). Interestingly, there are also some neurobiologists who have recently supported this philosophical position, e.g. MacPhail (1998).

<sup>43</sup> See e.g. Damasio (1999), Roth (2000). Recent critics of the claim of the dependence of consciousness on the capacity to speak a natural language include Flanagan (1992) and Block (1993).



(up to global aphasia) seem to remain awake and attentive. More importantly, they are often capable of indicating that they are experiencing the value of specific objects or the tragedy of a situation (Damasio 1999: 108–12). Finally, recent research on primates and human babies seems to indicate that primates solve problems that human beings cannot solve without conscious attention and that non-linguistic babies have conscious experiences and even intentional consciousness (Roth 2001, ch. 11, Tomasello 1999). So there are surely impressive data that suggest that some non-speaking creatures do have at least lower states of phenomenal consciousness, especially of drives and emotions, that can be taken to be individuated *for* their bearers and therefore to be examples of *accessible* states of evaluation.

There is another kind of recent research that is extremely interesting in this context and needs to be appreciated. This research is designed to compare the cognitive capacities of adult chimpanzees and young non-speaking human babies. Two of the most important results of these studies are that, firstly, young human babies are—while even adult chimps are not—capable of understanding other human beings as intentional beings like themselves, and secondly, that from around nine months of age onwards they begin to show behaviour that involves a triadic coordination of their interactions both with other people and objects. Triadic coordination of one's own interactions both with other people and objects includes at least seven different ways of bringing about joint attention, none of which occurs in the interaction of chimps. These are joint engagement, point following, imitation of instrumental acts, imitation of arbitrary acts, reaction to social obstacles, use of imperative gestures, and use of declarative gestures.<sup>44</sup> Remarkably, these measures of joint attention are regularly connected to positive or negative feelings: young non-speaking human babies seem to be regularly pleased if adult people share the attention that the babies want to share with them, and they seem to be clearly disappointed if they fail to get other people to 'tune in' to their attention. Understanding other human beings as intentional agents at a non-linguistic level presupposes, of course, that the thoughts and signs produced by these agents be representations; it is obviously at this point that we can bring in teleosemantics to account for the significance of thoughts and signs independently of natural languages. Of course, compared with creatures that master natural languages, we are talking about a

<sup>44</sup> Tomasello (1999); see further Carpenter, Nagell, and Tomasello (1998); Carpenter, Tomasello, and Savage-Rumbaugh (1995).

weaker form of intentional understanding which consists mainly in grasping that other human beings have goals and that these goals are related to their behaviour. For instance, young human babies react differently to what human adults would call random behaviour, on the one hand, and intentional behaviour, on the other hand.

All this is, clearly, a scientific expansion and corroboration of what Davidson once called *triangulation*. The capacity that enables human babies to get involved in a situation of triangulation is in turn, as Davidson argued, one of the conditions of forming a conception of the objective external world. The development of this conception goes along with the emergence of subjectivity and consciousness in its highest human forms for instance, as the occurrence of second-order thoughts and meta-representations, and perhaps also as suffering or pleasurable states of drives or emotions (Perner 1991).

A more sophisticated picture, then, would be that there are a number of important conditions at a non-linguistic level for the formation of high levels of consciousness (and, at the same time, for a conception of the objective external world). These conditions include (i) representations in the teleosemantic sense, (ii) unconscious evaluation systems (primarily in the limbic system), (iii) interpretations of intentional signs having teleo-contents, (iv) lower forms of consciousness connected with lower forms of feelings and a lower kind of genuine normativity, and (v) a specifically human capacity for pre-linguistic intentional understanding and sharing attention with other humans. It is on the basis of these five conditions that human babies can master natural languages, which in turn results in, or goes along with, the development of higher forms of consciousness, and thus, of accessible feelings and the human kind of genuine normativity.

So even if, in the Herder-tradition, Humboldt is right about the pre-conditions of, at least, certain kinds of consciousness, it remains true, in my view, that we must look at conditions (i)–(iv) to account for genuine normativity in general. I insist that the Herder-tradition is wrong in assuming that we are entitled to use normative vocabulary to do semantics without relating semantic normativity ultimately to physical normativity and various forms of consciousness. *If we take our human way of speaking, understanding, and reasoning to be genuinely normative, as I myself do, then this normativity must be an external and derived one.* Consequently, I claim that, if the Herder-tradition is right in assuming that mastering a natural language is necessary for having at least some sorts of conscious mental states, we have, on pain of circularity or arbitrary assumptions, to do semantics in non-normative terms and to explain our mastering of

natural languages in a purely non-normative vocabulary. I see no serious problem in doing this. In this sense, we need to do semantics independently of theories of consciousness while admitting, at the same time, that there is a good sense in which we can say that to grasp the truth and to reason well are things we *should* do, and that this normativity goes back ultimately to feelings as parts of our phenomenal consciousness.

In this way, we can save basic insights of (Davidsonian) interpretationism without having to pay the price of introducing ad hoc assumptions or of falling pray to circularity. More importantly, we can explain genuine normativity in an illuminating, non-internal way by identifying the main sources of genuine normativity. In particular, this confirms also Plato's idea (if I am correct in my interpretation) that the normativity of what I have called semantic norms must have a source that is *external* to truth and good arguments and is connected to the specifically human mind.

It remains to be seen, of course, whether, even if there are feelings that can be said to matter to all creatures having them, including us humans, looking at this sort of normativity can be helpful in reconstructing kinds of human normativity such as conceptions of a good life or moral normativity that interest us most. In particular, I do not want to claim that the sense in which we *should* grasp the truth and reason well is *simply* and *only* that, if we grasp the truth and reason well, we feel better (where 'feeling' is something very basic at a sub-linguistic level). Rather, in the framework I have in mind, semantic normativity comes in degrees. So there are certainly kinds of human linguistic practices such that the semantic normativity of these practices depends on higher forms of normativity (such as concepts of a good life) which presuppose that we can master a natural language. The hope is, however, that we can reconstruct, to some degree, the various levels of normativity that come into play. At a very basic level, we need to work with pre-linguistic feelings and other elementary cognitive capacities. For instance, assuming that creatures are equipped with pre-linguistic feelings in the rich sense, we can probably account for sanctions based on physical conditioning and therefore for the capacity to follow rules in a basic sense.<sup>45</sup> This would be another kind of normativity. My contention is that we need an *analytics of normativity* that distinguishes, and accounts carefully for, the different levels of normativity, including a notion of *rational* norms that bind us in

<sup>45</sup> See e.g. Haugeland (1982). Brandom (1994) offers the criticism that, since Haugeland is talking about purely naturalistic phenomena, his account is vulnerable to the gerrymandering argument. If I am right about rich feelings, Brandom is wrong, because rich feelings cannot be completely naturalized.

ways that can ultimately be seen as contributing to *social* feelings, *ethical* objectivity, and even *moral* norms. But this would be another—and longer—story.

The overall theoretical strategy that should be pursued in modern ethics is, then, to put together:

(1) a naturalist theory of the evolution of living things that attributes a physicalist normativity based exclusively on Darwinian purposes to all organisms in terms of proper functions, and which includes a naturalist theory of non-conscious evaluative systems of the brain provided mainly by neurobiology and cognitive psychology;

(2) a non-normative semantics for natural languages in broadly teleosemantic and Davidsonian terms that shows that semantic facts exhibit a special and important case of physicalist normativity;<sup>46</sup>

and (3) a philosophical theory of consciousness formulated in part in a non-naturalist vocabulary<sup>47</sup> to account for the genuine normativity of feelings in general, and for the derived genuine normativity of semantic norms in particular.<sup>48</sup>

The hope is that, once we have the genuine normativity of semantic norms in place, we can then also account for a notion of *rational* norms in a sense that can ultimately be seen to contribute to *social* feelings, *ethical* objectivity, and even *moral* norms. Obviously, this is a modern strategy of building a hybrid theory of normativity that embraces, among other things, functional normativity, rational semantic normativity (at a sub-human and a human level), and the normativity which flows from what is specific about the human mind, including—one would hope—ethical and moral normativity. This hybrid theory could, if successful, integrate the basic insights of modern voluntarist, realist, and rationalist ethics while

<sup>46</sup> This description of stage 2 rests on the presupposition that I have succeeded, in the central sections of this chapter, in showing that not only teleosemantics but also a Davidsonian semantics for natural languages can be naturalized and therefore requires, like teleosemantics, only Darwinian or 'physicalist' normativity, although a specific one that extends to representation and truth.

<sup>47</sup> I proceed here from the assumption that consciousness cannot be described purely in terms of physics or biology.

<sup>48</sup> I see the true realm of genuine normativity as one which emerges with consciousness, and feelings as simply the most basic forms of consciousness.

avoiding their shortcomings and restrictions. The strategy of hybrid theory-building in ethics that I am recommending is intended as a rehabilitation of Plato's way of approaching these issues. It does the best it can to appreciate the lesson that Plato tried to teach us.

Finally, what about the question of whether the genuine normativity on which ethics must be built is founded in nature? The general answer that follows from the account that I have tried to outline and to defend is that, in a sense, genuine normativity is indeed founded in nature, and in another sense, it is not. It is founded in nature in the sense that some of its main sources, the physical normativity of non-linguistic (and perhaps of linguistic) representations and of subconscious evaluations, are surely part of our physical nature. I am also inclined to say that the very fact that some creatures have conscious states can also be called a fact of nature. But at the same time I endorse the claim, supported by many philosophers—and denied by others, of course—that consciousness cannot be naturalized (Chalmers 1995). That is, genuine normativity cannot be theoretically introduced, and explained, just by using the vocabulary of physics, biology, or teleosemantics. In this sense, genuine normativity and semantic normativity are part of something that transcends nature, at least if we conceive of nature as being describable exclusively in terms of physics, biology, or teleosemantics.

This is consistent with claiming that consciousness and genuine normativity as characterized here, can be *mildly* naturalized, that is, treated within the framework of teleosemantics and of a theory of drives and emotions that analyses their cognitive and semantic aspects in a way that depends, among other things, on empirical insights. More importantly, even if phenomenal consciousness and kinds of normativity that depend on consciousness can be mildly naturalized, they undoubtedly constitute *a new kind of phenomenon* compared to what we can describe in physics, biology or teleosemantics. It does not come as a surprise that new phenomena require a new vocabulary, for instance, among other things, a *normative* vocabulary or an *intentional* vocabulary that can account for the new aspects of subjectivity related to consciousness and feelings. These aspects are part of what is constitutive of being a person and of generating a difference between what is sometimes called a first-person perspective and a third-person perspective. It does not seem to make sense, and it does not seem to be consistent with, or required by, insights of current cognitive psychology or philosophical semantics to try to explain this difference away.

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## Commentary on Detel from a Stoic Standpoint

CHRISTOPHER GILL

I begin by summarizing the main claims of Wolfgang Detel's chapter, as I understand these. His starting-point is the restatement of a broad and familiar contrast between the naturalistic approach characteristic of ancient ethical thought and the non-naturalistic style of most modern ethical thinking. Detel proposes to refine and correct this contrast in two ways. He re-analyses the naturalism of ancient thinking—specifically, of Plato—as a 'hybrid' approach, which locates different kinds of normativity (including ethical normativity) in a larger framework of thinking about norms and reality. He also argues that modern theories of normativity would be more convincing if they were, as in ancient philosophy, hybrid theories. To show this, he focuses his discussion on ancient and modern ideas about semantic normativity since it is often held that semantic normativity is the most basic source of normativity in general. This forms the basis for his argument. He concludes by outlining the main elements of such a hybrid theory, which would locate semantic and rational normativity (roughly, as conceived in modern philosophy) in a coherent and inclusive framework. This framework, he suggests, if developed, would provide a credible basis for a modern analysis of ethical or moral norms.

There are three main modern semantic theories which Detel examines. One is teleosemantics, which offers a functional and, in a sense, biological approach to semantic normativity. The core idea is that semantic features such as representation and misrepresentation can be analysed—like biological organisms—by their capacity for functional effectiveness and evolutionary survival. Representation, by contrast with misrepresentation, is constituted by the effectiveness of mental states and signs in mapping the world and enabling the representational creature and user of signs to guide her actions accordingly. Representation thus has an integral role in the

processes of adaptation by which organic species evolve and survive. To this extent, the normative distinction between representation and misrepresentation has a naturalistic basis. Donald Davidson's theory of semantic norms such as truth is based on the idea of mutual interpretation. The fact that we can understand each other depends on our interpreting what others say in the light of their whole outlook (as a holistic system) and also on our supplying shared principles of rationality, such as consistency and truth. Truth is thus not amenable to wholly independent assessment. The truth or falsity of statements needs to be assessed in the context of the whole set of utterances of the speaker and on the basis of assumptions about the rational consistency of that system of utterances. In this respect, Davidson also offers a naturalistic analysis of semantic norms, based on the fact of human beings' ability to communicate with, and to understand, each other, and on the necessary preconditions of that fact. Robert Brandom also explains semantic norms by reference to the distinctively human capacity to deploy language based on rational principles including that of inferential consistency. But, more importantly, he sees those norms as grounded in pre-linguistic norms which arise out of the patterns recognized as normative in our behavioural practices. In this sense, again, there is a naturalistic basis for semantic and rational norms, namely the regulatory patterns embodied in our behavioural practices.

Detel has specific criticisms of each of these theories.<sup>1</sup> But a more general critique, implicit in the latter part of his discussion, is that they are too narrowly based in their analysis of semantic normativity and do not locate the source of genuine normativity correctly. Detel himself outlines an account of emotions and of the relationship between language and consciousness which combines dimensions treated separately or not at all in those theories. Thus, his view of (human) emotions or drives includes reference to the kind of pre-linguistic patterning of behaviour studied by Brandom, the idea that drives have biological teleo-content, and the conscious, rational evaluations associated with linguistic capacities by Davidson and others.<sup>2</sup> In particular, he argues that there are five features of pre-linguistic psychological functions (specifically, drives) that

<sup>1</sup> For instance, in teleosemantics, he criticizes the absence of reference to the idea of conscious assessment of intrinsic value (pp. 127–8 above); in Davidson, he highlights unclarity about whether 'truth' is a norm which is wholly internal to systems of communication or has some further, external basis (pp. 130–1 above); in Brandom, he questions the idea of *implicit* recognition of norms in behavioural practices (pp. 133–4 above).

<sup>2</sup> Detel presents his account as a synthesis of the insights of the (1) Cartesian (consciousness-based), (2) behaviourist, and (3) Aristotelian (cognitive) views of emotion or desire (pp. 136–8 above).

provide the basis of normativity, although the articulation of this normativity depends on the capacity for language and rationality (p. 141 above). This leads him to outline a three-part theoretical strategy for determining the source of normativity. This strategy embraces: (1) a naturalistic account of pre-conscious drives in terms of evolutionary biology explaining physicalist normativity, (2) a type of semantics, informed by teleosemantics and Davidsonian theory, that distinguishes purely linguistic or logical rules from the kind of normativity based on these pre-conscious drives, (3) an account of consciousness that shows how explicit, rational evaluation builds on physicalist normativity and thus defines semantic, and other, norms (p. 143 above). This represents Detel's version of a hybrid theory of semantic normativity; and he suggests that it would provide the basis for an account of ethical or moral norms that would bridge the gap between naturalistic accounts of human psychology and the kind of non-naturalistic forms of moral theory that are characteristic of modern philosophy.

In formulating and recommending the idea of a hybrid theory of semantic normativity, Detel refers, in positive terms, to ancient theory, notably to Plato. Although Plato stresses the importance of patterns of sound argument as a basis for the understanding of ethical normativity, he does not see semantic or logical norms as actually constituting ethical norms. Rather, patterns of argument or rationality serve ethical objectives by being instrumental for analysing forms of normativity which have a different source, namely in features of human nature or psychology (seen in the context of the universe as a whole) which provide the basis for understanding human happiness. What Detel commends in Plato is both (1) the distinction between purely formal or linguistic normativity and the use of argument to establish ethical normativity and (2) the relatively complex (hybrid) conception of normativity implied in this procedure, by contrast with the narrower conceptions of normativity in the modern theories examined by Detel.<sup>3</sup>

This commentary on Detel's discussion is presented as being made from a Stoic standpoint. Why choose this standpoint? Of course, this volume as a whole, particularly in Part I, is focused on the relationship between ethical ideas and issues in ancient and in modern philosophy. But Detel has already highlighted links between his approach and Platonic thought, so it may seem unclear why reference is needed to the perspective of another ancient theory. Stoicism is particularly relevant here because it

<sup>3</sup> See pp. 116–20, also p. 23 and p. 144 above.



represents a striking instance of what Detel is calling a 'hybrid' theory of normativity. Stoicism is more explicit and theorized on this point than Plato (though Stoicism is also partly indebted to Plato in this respect).<sup>4</sup> Correspondingly, Stoicism provides a good starting-point for raising questions, for instance, about the relationship between the different branches of knowledge in a hybrid theory and between the conceptions of normativity which figure in those branches of knowledge. There are also certain salient points of resemblance between Stoic thinking about human and non-human motivation and emotions and Detel's ideas. These features of Stoic thought provide a basis for posing certain larger conceptual questions about the nature and implications of Detel's discussion.

A distinctive and central feature of Stoic thought is the claim that wisdom, in its most complete form, consists in a combination, and indeed fusion, of the three main branches of philosophy: dialectic or logic, ethics, and physics (study of nature).<sup>5</sup> This claim has important implications for understanding the norms which fall under each of the branches of knowledge or which are the object of all three branches. In this respect, Stoicism is a clear example of a hybrid theory of normativity, and one which can be compared with Detel's approach as regards the conceptual framework and the issues to which this gives rise. Although there is widespread acceptance that this Stoic claim is central to the theory and is philosophically important,<sup>6</sup> there is no general agreement about the precise implications of the claim, but, rather, active disagreement and debate. Although this complicates the attempt to correlate Stoicism with modern thinking, the scholarly debate brings to light issues raised by hybrid theories which are of more general interest and significance. The traditional, and still dominant, view is that cosmic nature, as the object of physics (in the Stoic sense), constitutes a norm of goodness for ethics. More precisely, the natural universe, conceived as the highest embodiment of reason, order, and structure, functions as the norm by which human beings can best understand the notion of good and can pattern themselves accordingly.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup> On later ancient thought about the way that Plato prefigures Stoic thinking about the synthesis of ethics, logic, and physics, see Annas (1999), 109–16.

<sup>5</sup> 'Dialectic' is conceived broadly, as embracing study of language as well as logic (hence, covering 'semantics'); physics is the study of nature, including causation; see Long and Sedley (1987) (= LS), section 26 (subsequent LS references are to section and paragraph unless otherwise indicated).

<sup>6</sup> It is given a prominent place in the survey of Hellenistic philosophy in Algra et al. (1999), xiii–xvi.

<sup>7</sup> See e.g. White (1985), (2002), 312–15, Striker (1996), 225–31, M. Frede (1999).

However, this view has been strongly challenged, on various grounds, by Julia Annas. One of her claims is that the bulk of the relevant ancient evidence does not support the hierarchical model implied in the traditional view. What our sources suggest, rather, is a non-hierarchical, reciprocal model in which all three areas inform and support each other. What does this imply about the status of norms in Stoic theory, for instance, semantic or ethical norms? Do they remain conceptually located in one area or is their meaning transformed by the synthesis of the three areas? Annas suggests that we should conceive a two-stage process, in which each area is studied first independently and then as part of the synthetic whole. The meaning of normative ideas is set, essentially, by the specific branch of philosophy under which it falls (logic, ethics, or physics), even though that branch and the norm it presents is placed, in turn, in a wider and more holistic framework of understanding. I am persuaded by Annas' view that the Stoics advocate the non-hierarchical synthesis of norms derived from all three branches of knowledge, and not the attempt to ground ethics (or logic) on physics. However, I think that the Stoic ideal of knowledge constitutes a more complete form of integration than Annas envisages, in which the core concepts in each area are progressively transformed and become, in effect, trans-categorical.<sup>8</sup>

Two examples may serve to illustrate the Stoic approach, as I understand this. One is that of Fate, the subject of a penetrating recent study by Susanne Bobzien (1998). The Stoic understanding of Fate involves the combination of ideas in all three areas. Within physics, as Stoics understand this, falls the idea of universal causal determinism, the seamless web of non-random causation.<sup>9</sup> Within logic are a set of arguments bearing on determinism; a salient one is the principle of bivalence, that all future statements must be, determinately, *either true or false*, and not open and indeterminate.<sup>10</sup> The main ethical idea is the distinction between external and internal causes, the latter type consisting in the nature of the animal or object in question. In the case of adult humans, for instance, their nature ('internal cause') entails that their actions depend on a rational response to their situation (in Stoic terms, 'assent' to 'rational impressions' is a prerequisite of motivation or 'impulse').<sup>11</sup> It is by combining

<sup>8</sup> See Annas (1993), 159–66; for critical responses, see Cooper (1995), with a reply in Annas (1995), Inwood (1995a), 653–61; for a review of the debate and a fuller statement of my position, Gill (2004e), more briefly Gill (1995b), 77–9, (1998c), 2–3.

<sup>9</sup> LS 55, especially J–N; Bobzien (1998), ch. 1.

<sup>10</sup> LS 34, especially c, 37, especially H (5–6), 55; Bobzien (1998), chs. 2–5, especially ch. 3.

<sup>11</sup> LS 62, especially c–D; Bobzien (1998), ch. 6.

these ideas, as they figure in the three branches of knowledge, that we can form an overall understanding of what 'Fate' means. We can see, for instance, how universal causal determinism is compatible with the special kind of responsibility for actions that adult human beings have (which derives from the specific way in which they function as internal causes). We can also see how this is compatible with logical principles such as bivalence: the fact that future statements are, determinately, true or false (and not open) derives from the fact that all events, including adult human actions, represent the non-random, determinate outcome of a given set of internal and external causes.

How does this point bear on the understanding of the normative ideas involved? The theory depends on ideas and principles that originate in a specific area and function as normative in that area. But in the theory, taken as a whole, these ideas take on a larger, trans-categorical, normative role. Thus, for instance, the idea of universal causal determinism takes on an important ethical role as well as figuring as a key idea in physics. Recognizing that the universe constitutes an ordered, structured, and rational whole (as a seamless web of causes) and is in this sense good, is a crucial theme of Stoic ethics as well as physics. This recognition also depends on understanding (what one might call) the 'logic' of determinism, including the principle of bivalence.<sup>12</sup> In other words, in Stoicism, the hybrid character of the theory entails that ideas with normative weight are significant not only in the special branch of philosophy from which they originate and with the meaning that they have in that branch but in other areas too, and that they thus acquire a trans-categorical significance.

A similar analysis can be made of the idea of 'good' in Stoicism. Although this idea is, obviously, a key one within ethics, it seems also to be one which is seen as significant in all three areas. Hence, for instance, forming a complete understanding of the good is taken to be dependent on combining insights derived from all three branches. How is this process envisaged? The salient marks of goodness are order, structure, and rationality, which are, in turn, naturally linked with ideas of wholeness and benefit.<sup>13</sup> How should we understand the relationship between the three branches in providing an understanding of 'good'. The traditional view is

<sup>12</sup> This underlies the familiar Stoic commendation of passionless acceptance of Fate (when recognized), as a manifestation of cosmic order and goodness; see e.g. LS 58 J; also Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* 3.11, Epictetus, *Discourses* 1.17 (taken with Dobbin 1998: 161–8).

<sup>13</sup> LS 60, especially G–I. The underlying thought is that order, structure and rationality are fundamental to making things 'whole' and thus benefiting them.

that a recognition of the goodness, conceived as order, structure, rationality in the natural universe or cosmos (the realm of physics) provides the basis for an understanding of the good which can then be applied in the ethical sphere, both conceptually and in practice.<sup>14</sup> However, a more plausible view, taking into account the full range of evidence, is to see a complete understanding of goodness as the outcome of a synthesis of the grasp of good in all three areas. This explains, for instance, the stress on recognition of order, structure, and rationality within ethical development and in the observation of goodness in personal behaviour and social institutions.<sup>15</sup> Yet more striking are the indications that dialectic or logic play an integral role in this process. We are told that dialectic not only depends on virtue but *is* a form of virtue, and also that ‘the wise person [the norm of complete goodness] is the only dialectician’. We also hear that making a mistake in a syllogism can be as much of a crime or error, in that sphere, as burning down the Capitol in the sphere of ethical action.<sup>16</sup> Although Stoic thinking on this topic is not easy to unravel fully,<sup>17</sup> the main line of thought seems to be this. Dialectic, properly practised in its own terms (practised with ‘virtue’) represents one version of the combination of order, structure, and rationality that constitutes goodness. However, complete wisdom depends on the integration of dialectical virtue with the understanding of goodness in the spheres of ethics and physics; and it is only this complete wisdom that would enable someone to be a dialectician, physicist or ethicist in the full sense. Hence, again, the notion of good, like that of Fate, emerges as a trans-categorical one, the full significance of which depends on the integration of its meaning and status in all three areas.

The features of Stoic thinking outlined here provide, on the one hand, a partial analogue for the kind of hybrid theory of normativity Detel has in view and, on the other, a basis for raising questions about his version of that type of theory. For instance, what type of relationship does Detel envisage between the three strands in his projected theoretical strategy for defining normativity (p. 143 above)? I think it is clear that the relationship is not a reductive one: there is no suggestion that rational or ethical values are to be reduced to biological or neurological drives. However, it is less clear what positive account we should offer of the relationship. Is it a hierarchical or, perhaps, foundational one, as in the traditional

<sup>14</sup> See n. 7 above. Evidence supporting this view includes LS 60 A–B, Cic. *Fin.* 3.73.

<sup>15</sup> See e.g. LS 59 D(3–5), 60 D, E, especially (8), G, Q, 67 especially L.

<sup>16</sup> See LS 31 B–C; Epict. *Diss.* 1.7.30–2.

<sup>17</sup> See further Long (1996), 85–106, (2002), 116–21.

interpretation of Stoic thinking?<sup>18</sup> More specifically, is the first strand, the naturalist account of organisms in terms of functions and pre-conscious evaluation, in some sense primary or foundational for the other two strands, and thus, ultimately, for the analysis of moral normativity in the fullest sense? Or is Detel's theory more like Stoicism (as interpreted here) in that the strands have an equal and reciprocal relationship; and that the desired outcome would be a synthesis of the implications of all three strands? My impression is that Detel's view is the former, and that this marks a partial difference between his approach and that of Stoicism. To put the point differently, his programme seems to be a progressive one, in which each stage presupposes, and builds on, the—more fundamental—subject-matter and distinctions of the previous stage. Although the Stoic philosophical curriculum is sometimes characterized in this way, it seems to me that it is better understood in terms of the synthesis of non-hierarchical frameworks of understanding. Hence, Stoic logic or dialectic provides a basis for defining a kind of 'semantic normativity' that is valid in its own terms; in more Stoic terms, dialectic constitutes a mode of virtue and represents *one way* of grasping or expressing order, rationality, and structure. However, Stoicism, like Detel, also recognizes a richer conception of normativity (a conception of the good, for instance) that depends on the synthesis of the three branches of knowledge and on an understanding of the relationship between their subject-matters.

This point can be taken further if we move from the question of the relationship between branches of theory or knowledge to that of the substantive content of the Stoic world-view and that envisaged by Detel. On the face of it, Detel's stress on the pre-conscious dimension of human (and non-human) motivation and his inclusive, three-fold analysis of feelings (drives) implies a very different picture of reality from that of Stoicism, and, thus, a very different basis for thinking about ethics. However, there are, in fact, some rather striking similarities between the two accounts. The Stoic doctrine of *oikeiôsis* ('appropriation' or 'familiarization') includes the idea that non-human as well as human animals are instinctively motivated towards objects and behaviour that maintain their organic constitution and that enable the performance of their characteristic functions.<sup>19</sup> This aspect of Stoic thinking about animal motivation is, strikingly, close to Detel's account of the five preconditions of higher-level

<sup>18</sup> See n. 7 above.

<sup>19</sup> LS 57 B–C; also 53 B, G; see further Inwood (1984), Long (1996), chs. 10–11, especially 258–62.

conscious and rational evaluation (p. 141 above). A similar point could be made about the two accounts of feelings or drives. The Stoic theory is sometimes interpreted as an extreme version of the cognitive model of emotions; but I think that this is misleading. Rather, the Stoic theory combines a view of emotions as psychophysical responses with a view of them as ‘impressions’ embodying (rational) evaluative responses to features of the agent’s environment. What is striking is not just the conceptual inclusiveness of the Stoic model but also the idea that emotions are seen as having (in modern terms) ‘teleo-content’, in that they register the impression that features of the environment are favourable or unfavourable for the maintenance of organic life or characteristic functions of the agent.<sup>20</sup> These features of Stoicism present a view of human and animal motivation that is markedly and surprisingly similar to that offered by Detel.

However, this similarity also enables us to specify a salient difference from Detel’s approach. Detel’s theoretical strategy represents an example of what one might call a ‘bottom-up’ approach, in which an understanding of the more basic aspects of human and non-human motivation is seen as fundamental for an understanding of the more advanced and complex aspects. This approach also figures, as just indicated, as part of the Stoic theory. But it is combined with a strongly ‘top-down’ aspect, which, for instance, distinguishes bad or good emotions by reference to the extent to which they do or do not reflect the understanding and outlook of complete or perfect wisdom (as envisaged, it is acknowledged, by non-perfect Stoic teachers).<sup>21</sup> Hence also, the analysis of the ‘teleo-content’ of human and non-human responses forms part of a ‘teleological’ world-view which, almost certainly, differs in its assumptions about the underlying or inherent orderliness or goodness of the world from that of Detel or the modern approaches on which he draws in constructing his theoretical strategy. That difference is related, in turn, to the contrast noted earlier regarding the relationship between the branches of knowledge or parts of theory. (Detel envisages a progressive, three-stage theory grounded from the bottom up; the Stoic model is that of the convergence or synthesis of three branches of knowledge, each of which has equal status

<sup>20</sup> LS 65 A–H; see further Brennan (1998), (2003), especially 269–79.

<sup>21</sup> On ‘top-down’ and ‘bottom-up’ approaches, see e.g. Annas (1981), 143–6, also Long (2002), 182–3; this point underlies the contrast between (bad) emotions/passions and ‘good emotions’ (*eupatheiai*) (for references see n. 20 above). Stoic teachers standardly deny that they have achieved the synoptic wisdom of the wise person which they, nonetheless, treat as normative for assessing non-wise people.

and can serve as a starting-point.) These differences, which are not confined to the relationship between Stoicism and Detel's version of the modern outlook, might repay closer study. But they should not lead us to overlook the extent to which the hybrid theory of normativity in Stoicism not only provides a basis for raising questions about Detel's version of this type of theory but also contains certain striking analogues to his account.

**PART II**

**Readings in Ancient Philosophy**  
**Ethical Virtue and Objective Knowledge**



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## Socratic Ethics: Ultra-Realism, Determinism, and Ethical Truth

TERRY PENNER

I offer an outline here of a rather unusual ethical theory which I find in the Socratic parts of Plato's early dialogues<sup>1</sup> and which I shall call 'Socratic Ethics'. This is a remarkable theory by modern lights, first for its naturalism or descriptivism: no norms, no values, no practical principles—just matters of fact, objective truths about the agent's good. The good referred to here is that real good (happiness) which the agent wants to see realized in his or her life to the greatest extent possible, given the circumstances that the agent is in. The desire in question is egoistic, in that it is within one's own life that one wants the good maximally realized. It is, nevertheless, the same good, the same happiness, that each of us wants maximally realized in our own lives—I that this happiness be maximally realized in my life, you that this same happiness be maximally realized in your life, and so forth. So it is not the case that the real good (or happiness) is something different in different lives (so that we each have a different end). Rather, it is the same thing we wish to be maximally realized, each in his or her own lives. We all have the same end, and employ the same science of good in seeking it. The science of good is not egoistic; nor is the good which we seek to see realized in our own lives, I in my life, you in yours. But our desire that the good be realized in our own lives *is* egoistic.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> For what I count as Socratic, what as Platonic, in Plato's early dialogues, see Penner (2002).

<sup>2</sup> Contrast, in a Platonic context, the view of Morris (1934–5) that in *R.* 8–9, the timocratic, democratic, and aristocratic persons must differ from each other by having different ends. This makes reason *instrumental*. From the point of view being taken here, where we all have the *same* end, all reason is equally instrumental or equally non-instrumental. Put in another way, from the anti-Kantian, naturalist perspective, the distinction between instrumental and intrinsic is an untenable dualism. The views of the

As for what that real good is, it emerges from the psychology of action employed in Socratic Ethics. This is a version of psychological egoism: what scholars call *Socratic Intellectualism*. But as interpreted here, an agent's desire to do a particular action as a means to maximally realizing the real good in the agent's life has to be treated in a certain ultra-realist way, quite unfamiliar in modern philosophy. The agent's desire is treated as making reference not to the action done and the good aimed at *as viewed by the agent*, but as referring to the action done and the real good *as they are in themselves, with all their properties known and unknown, and regardless of how the agent may view them*. It is not that we desire to do a particular action *under a certain description*, for instance, under the description 'the really best action available'. (To do that would be to desire the *apparently* best action.) It is the really best action itself that we desire. This same Socratic–Platonic ultra-realism will be evident from the following famous passage from Book 6 of the *Republic* (505d10–e3):

So, then, what every soul pursues, doing everything it does for the sake of it, divining it to *be* something, but in perplexity and unable to grasp what in the world it is, not even able to use in connection with it such stable belief (*pistei*) as it has about other things, and because of this missing whatever benefit these other things might bring—[could our guardians be ignorant of such a thing?]

Once more, it is the real good itself that the agent ultimately desires, even if he or she does not know what that is.<sup>3</sup> This ultra-realism is, within a

mostly under-appreciated Morris (1934–5) are important because they lie behind the dominant tradition in *Republic* criticism—Mabbott (1937), Kirwan (1965), Irwin (1977), (1995), Annas (1981), and the like, who all appear simply to follow the opening paragraphs of Mabbott (1937, revised 1971), in supposing that the famous worries of Prichard (1968*a*, first published 1928) about Plato's apparent naturalist and descriptivist tendencies had been adequately dealt with by Morris. I depart from this entire tradition in arguing that what Prichard worried might be so in some passages in the *Republic* is exactly what *is* so—and throughout the *Republic*.

For more on the real good (which each of us, egoistically, wants to have realized in our own lives) as not itself egoistic, see below, pp. 180–1, comment (A).

<sup>3</sup> The best evidence for this idea of desire being for the real good as opposed to the apparent good is (a) *Grg.* 466a–468e (where doing what one wants is distinguished from doing what seems best precisely by one's only doing what one wants if the good sought is the *real* good); and (b) the doctrine that no one errs willingly (one who acts on a false belief isn't acting willingly!—*R.* 3, 412e–413b). I discuss the *Grg.* passage below.

Another illustration of the point Socrates is making here is this. What it is to desire my children's good is not, surely, to desire something under the description 'my children's good', as if what I wanted was that what my children get should be something answering to *my* conception of their good. For I am old enough to know that I don't know enough to want for them what *I* suppose will be good for them. Similarly, I do not want for them what

modern context, entirely novel, being quite different from any treatments I know in the Frege-inspired philosophies of language that have dominated philosophy of language since Frege more or less invented the subject. (I include here as Frege-inspired the theories of all of the following philosophers, each in some ways quite different from the other: Russell, Carnap, Church, Quine, Kaplan, Perry, and Fodor.)

What concerns me at the moment, however, is something in this Socratic ultra-realist account of all desire that must immediately strike one, once one gets into a sufficiently adventurous frame of mind. This is that, since this theory gives the real good as the ultimate end of all desires productive of voluntary action—in everyone, good or bad<sup>4</sup>—it immediately gives promise of an entrée into ethics. For we have here, just in the psychology of action, promise of an objective, factual account of the human good. True, this does not yet give us an account of human goodness. But for human goodness we need only the surprising suggestion, found clearly enough in the *Hippias Minor*, that we should apply to the kind *human being* a certain objective, factual account of ‘good thing of kind *K*’ in terms of being good *at* fulfilling the function belonging to the kind *K*. The good person will then turn out to be the person good at getting the human good. (Virtue turns out to be knowledge.)<sup>5</sup> Other than

answers to *their* conception of the good. For they too don’t know enough as to what their real good is. What I want for them—and this is why parenting is hell—is their real good, even if that is different from what I or they think is good for them. Even with drastic reformulation, the very simple idea underlying this illustration cannot be adequately fitted into the ‘under description *D*’ format. Nothing less than a different approach to philosophy of language is required if we are to make progress here. See Penner (unpublished *a*).

<sup>4</sup> See *Meno* 78b6–7.

<sup>5</sup> See Penner (1973) for the way in which this ‘good = good *at*’ requires, if it is to be at all plausible, both ‘No one errs willingly [at getting his or her own good]’ (which can be inferred from Socratic Intellectualism) and ‘Harming others always harms you’ (which, if it *can* be inferred from Socratic Intellectualism, can only be inferred with some considerable argument). With this idea of goodness as goodness *at*, compare the account in Ziff (1960) of good in terms of ‘answering to some interests’, and Santas (2001) on the functional theory of good in *R*. 1, 4.

Two points need to be insisted on here. The first concerns the contrasting Kantian belief that, primarily in connection with just one case, the case of a *good person*, goodness has nothing to do with being good at anything, and is even compatible with not being very good at anything, so long as one *sincerely tries* to act in accordance with certain rules. This gets one ‘the moral sense’ of the word ‘good’. By contrast, in the view I am presenting here, the Socratic account tries to do without any special moral sense of ‘good’. This reading of Socrates is strongly supported by the *Hippias Minor*, which seems clearly enough (and paradoxically enough) to oppose this Kantian idea that sincerity in trying to speak truths rather than falsehoods *by itself* constitutes goodness in a person, even without any

a few other straightforward corollaries of Socratic Intellectualism, the account of Socratic Ethics which I shall offer requires only two further premisses. The first concerns the determinism that I claim this psychology of action implies, and with it the pointlessness and futility of punishment and reward, blame and praise.<sup>6</sup> The second concerns the surprising factual claim that an agent's harming of others will never be beneficial to the agent.

I shall proceed as follows. In the first section, I try to explain the idea of the real good as object of desire. In the next section, I elaborate on how Socratic Intellectualism works on this ultra-realist conception of the real good as object of all desire that produces voluntary actions. And in the final section, I make a number of observations aimed at further clarifying how one may proceed from Socratic Intellectualism to Socratic Ethics.

### Desiring the Real Good

The best introduction I can give here to my idea of an ultra-realist psychology of action in Socrates—and the resulting purely descriptivist ethics—is to offer an interpretation of a certain highly paradoxical claim for which Socrates argues at length (466a–468e) in the *Gorgias*. This claim

considerable success in actually stating truths. (See Kant, *Groundwork*, Prussian Academy edition, vol. 4, 394 (1948: p. 60), where a person's bungling attempts to do the right thing still allow the person's virtue to 'shine forth like a jewel'.)

The second (frequently overlooked) point is that there are two *goods* involved in any case of functional good—not just the one involved in someone's or something's being good *as a means* (to fulfilling the function). There is also the relevant good which is secured as *end*. A good knife is good *at* cutting. But cutting is the good to which the knife is a means. Thus there are *two* goods involved in Ziff's 'answering (no. 1) to some interests (no. 2)'. There is a tendency in Ziff, and in modern moral philosophy generally, to treat 'good of its kind' as yielding an autonomous sense independent of any ends that are good (or hypothetically good, as cutting is good in certain contexts). I view such a tendency as obtuse. So too, in the present treatment of Socratic ethics, happiness is the good end which the good person is good at getting. (There are not two autonomous senses, the human good (happiness) and goodness in a human (virtue)—each distinct, incidentally, from the Kantian moral good.)

<sup>6</sup> I find the Socratic view of punishment at *Ap.* 25c–26a, *Hp. Mi.* 372a–373a, on which a little more below at comment (G), p. 184. The account of punishment which we find in at least the Callicles part of the *Gorgias*, like the account of chastising (= punishing) pleasures, and like the Pythagorean myths of parts of the soul and of the afterlife, I take no longer to represent Socratic views. See Penner (2002), as well as comments (B), (E) and (G), pp. 181, 183–4 below.

occurs in the course of Socrates' argument in defence of the equally paradoxical view that orators of the sort Gorgias is, and tyrants of the sort Archelaus is, *have no power*. The topic of power naturally leads to the topic of *wanting to do something*, since for a person to have power is, presumably, for that person to be able to *do what he or she wants*. For present purposes, I ignore other aspects of this argument.<sup>7</sup> The claim in which I am interested here is that:

'we do not want to slaughter, exile, or expropriate *thus simply*, but if these actions are beneficial, we want to do them; when they are harmful, we don't want to do them.' (*Gorgias* 468c2–5, cf. d1–7; all translations from Plato are mine)

What? If the action I apparently wanted to do turns out well for me, I did indeed want to do it, while if it turns out badly for me, I didn't want to do it?! An extraordinary claim!

We have no chance of understanding this claim without a philosophy of language of a sort radically different from all modern philosophies of language that I know of. Such modern theories will all, in their different ways, break down the description of the desire to do the action into two different ways of thinking about the action—one via the 'outside' of the action (how it is with the action, regardless of how the agent may view it) and one via the 'inside' (how the agent views the action, regardless of how it is with the action, where, in addition, it is assumed that the agent pretty much knows how he or she views the action). I have called such theories 'inside/outside' theories.<sup>8</sup> Thus the desire to do a particular action becomes *the desire to do action x under description D*, where the *x* position gives the outside of the action (whatever the agent may *believe* about the action), while the *D* position gives the inside of the action—that is, it gives what the agent *believes true* of the action (whatever may *be* true of the action). So it is that the interpretation of the familiar Socratic–Aristotelian–Thomist view that all rational action<sup>9</sup> aims at the good takes the form—in Aristotle, Thomas, and in modern philosophy of language, though *not* in Socrates—of a claim that

(I/O-1) for any rational action *x*, the agent did *x* under the description 'good.'

<sup>7</sup> For other aspects of the argument, see Penner (1991).

<sup>8</sup> See Appendix below on the wide range of theories I classify as Inside/Outside theories.

<sup>9</sup> I ignore for present purposes Aristotle's supposed irrational voluntary actions that, as in Plato's parts-of-the-soul doctrine, proceed from the irrational desires of spirit and appetite.

This comes to much the same thing as the Aristotelian formula that  
(I/O-2) every rational action aims at the *apparent* good

—since the description in (I/O-1) may or may not be true of the action. That is, the description *appears* to the agent to be true of the action, though it may not be. It will be evident right away that no such theories could possibly come up with the view that

(1s) when an action turns out badly the agent didn't want to do it.

On the contrary, it is thought to be a positive feature of any one of the theories I call Inside/Outside views that

(1F1) when an action *x* turns out badly, the agent *did* want to do the action *x* which would turn out badly, but wanted to do it *under the description* 'action that will turn out well'.

(After all, say proponents of Inside/Outside views, why did the agent do the action if not because he or she wanted to do it? Isn't our whole point to provide an explanation of why such actions are done?) Since the description 'action that will turn out well' is, by hypothesis, false of the action in question, we have, equivalently to (1F1),

(1F2) when an action *x* turns out badly, the agent wanted to do the action *x*, though in doing the action, the agent was aiming at his or her apparent good.

This contrast between (1F2) and (1s)—as to whether when the action turns out badly, the agent wanted to do it or not—makes clear the stark contrast between Aristotelian and modern theories of wanting to do an action on the one hand and the ultra-realist Socratic theory of wanting to do an action on the other.

It will help to bring out this contrast if we consider two cases, which I shall call the case of the Philosopher-King and the case of the Tyrant.<sup>10</sup> The Philosopher-King, having thought through the situation with which he is confronted, refrains from killing his annoying Prime Minister and thereby brings about a good result, while the Tyrant—who, like rhetoricians, ignores considerations of knowledge on the grounds that he has *power*

<sup>10</sup> These two cases, I claim, illustrate precisely the Socratic argument at *Grg.* 466a–468e as a whole—concerning tyrants as *having no power*. The Tyrant is explicitly in question. The Philosopher-King I present merely as a foil illustrating what it takes actually to have power in the *Gorgias*—knowledge.

and so doesn't *need* knowledge<sup>11</sup>—kills his Prime Minister and gets thereby a bad result. I will use these two cases to reveal where Socratic ultra-realism differs from Inside/Outside views.

I begin with the Philosopher-King, where the two views in fact coincide in the result they predict—the result that the agent did want to do the action he or she did. Thus, in the Socratic view, when the action turns out well, the agent wanted to do it, while according to Inside/Outside views, if the action turns out well, then the apparent good at which the agent aims is identical with the real good, and the agent did indeed want to do the action he did. Still, even in this case we can begin to see the difference between the Socratic view and Inside/Outside views if we begin by describing the way in which the Philosopher-King's deliberation leads to the action done. Inside/Outside views generate the action done via the notion of desire as desire for the *apparent* good (DAG), while the Socratic view generates the action done via the notion of desire as desire for the *real* good (DRG). According to Inside/Outside views,

The King wants whatever is the best action available in his circumstances  
The King believes that the best action in question = this particular action of refraining from killing his P.M.

So,

(DAG) the king wants to do this particular action of refraining from killing the P.M. which = the action the King *believes* best.

So,

the King does this particular action of refraining from killing his P.M., that being the action he believes is best, and because the King's belief is correct, he does what is in fact the best action available in the circumstances.

What we have in (DAG) is an account of how it is that the King did the action he did—he *wanted* to do it—as well as an account of the King's

<sup>11</sup> Penner (1991) shows, first, that orators such as Gorgias do not think they need to know the truth about the subject-matter involved in their persuasion, which is why things do not turn out well for them (cf. *Grg.* 456a–c and 466e13–467a1). Penner (1991) also argues that this same degree of insouciance about truth is probably intended to characterize the tyrant Archelaus that Polus cites as an example. This insouciance explains why things do not turn out well for the tyrants. The connection between orators and tyrants is very evident in the *Republic*, e.g. in 577d taken with 588e ff. On the Socratic view of power, power *is* knowledge, provided that one restricts one's end to the maximum of happiness achievable by starting from where one is now.



reason for doing the action (he *believed* that it was the best action available to him). This is the belief-desire form that captures the approach of Inside/Outside theories (the ‘under the description’ theories).

But there is another way to schematize the belief-desire way in which the above deliberation leads to the action done. This is the Socratic way, employing desire for the real good (DRG):

The King wants whatever is the really best action available in his circumstances

The King believes *truly* that the best action in question = this particular action of refraining from killing his P.M.

So,

(DRG) the king wants to do this particular action of refraining from killing his P.M. which = the action which is really best.

So,

the King does this particular action of refraining from killing his P.M., in so doing, doing what he wants, given that he wants the really best action available in the circumstances.

Here the reason the King wanted to refrain from killing his P.M. is that this refraining from killing *is* the really best action that he wanted to do. Thus, on the one hand, we get the same results—the same action is wanted—from both Inside/Outside views and the Socratic view. And, on the other hand, we get comparable, though different, explanations for why the King wanted to do what he did. For on Inside/Outside views, the King wanted to kill the P.M. because he *believed* that was the best action. (On Inside/Outside views, it is a mere detail of the psychology involved that the belief happened to be true.) By contrast, on the Socratic view, the King wanted to kill his P.M. because it *was* the best action; and what he wanted to do was the action which was in fact best. (That the King’s belief here was true is no mere detail, but essential to the King’s having wanted to do that action.)

To get different *results* between Inside/Outside theories and the Socratic theory, we have to turn to the case of the Tyrant. For this case, Penner (1991) imagines us considering two scenarios involved in one way or other in an actual case of a tyrant killing his prime minister. We may call the two scenarios ‘the happy scenario’ and ‘the sad scenario’ respectively.

## HAPPY

The Tyrant kills his P.M.

The killing of the P.M. leads to peace in the kingdom.

Peace in the kingdom gives the Tyrant more time for gardening.

Having more time for gardening leads to the Tyrant's real maximal good (happiness).

## SAD

The Tyrant kills his P.M.

The killing of the P.M. leads to bloody revolution.

The bloody revolution leads to the Tyrant being thrown into a brutal prison.

This prison life leads to the most miserable life the Tyrant could have fallen into.

Let us suppose that

(a) the happy scenario represents what the Tyrant envisages.

(The basis for this supposition is that, given a choice between the happy scenario and the sad scenario, it would only be the happy scenario that would have led the tyrant to the action of killing his Prime Minister.) Let us also suppose—given that tyrants, like the orators described in the *Gorgias*, think they have *power* even without knowledge of what is so (see nn. 10, 11 above)—that

(b) the likely effect of this official indifference to knowledge as any part of power is that the actual situation that the Tyrant is in won't be the one he takes it to be.

(He takes no advice from his vizier who tries to point out to him the overwhelming likelihood that killing the Prime Minister will result in the sad scenario—interrupting the vizier before the poor man can make any point of substance, and saying to him, 'Don't give me any of your intellectual flim-flam. I have *power*; I don't need you.') So let us take it that the scenario that actually describes the actual circumstances the Tyrant is in is the sad scenario.

On these suppositions, the sad scenario represents what proponents of Inside/Outside theories will call the outside of the action, while the happy scenario represents what such proponents will characterize as the way the tyrant sees the action from the inside—his process of deliberation as seen by him from inside—and explains why he does the action. We can, accordingly, arrange schematically the way the above deliberation leads to the action done according to Inside/Outside views, with special attention to the desire for the apparent good (DAG2):

The Tyrant wants whatever is the best action available in his circumstances  
 The Tyrant believes that the best action in question = killing his P.M.

So,

(DAG2) the Tyrant wants to do this particular action of killing the P.M.  
 which = the action the Tyrant *believes* best.<sup>12</sup>

So,

the Tyrant does kill his P.M., that being the action he believes is best; and he does it because he wants to do it, even though, unbeknownst to him, the action will in fact turn out badly. What he wants to do is that action which is the action of killing the P.M. and which = the action he *believes* best.

We see from (DAG2) that the action the Tyrant wants to do is the action the tyrant (falsely) *believes to be* the best action available—the *apparently* best action.

We also see, from this, that the Inside/Outside view, since it speaks of wanting to do the action the agent *believes* best, should also be prepared to back up to the first premiss, and import *the apparent* here as well. This would give us, as first premiss in the deliberation,

The Tyrant wants whatever he *believes to be* the best action available in his circumstances (that is, the *apparently* best action available).

The idea here is to keep coherent *from the inside* how the agent views the object of his desire throughout the passage from deliberation to action. (We see here the same article of faith noted above, that the agent pretty well knows the inside of his or her desire: that the agent doesn't *think* the object of desire is incoherent; so it *must* be coherent, at any rate from the inside.)

By contrast, in the Socratic account, we have that

The Tyrant wants whatever is the really best action available in his circumstances

The Tyrant believes *falsely* that the best action in question = killing his P.M.

So—and here is the crucial point, the crucial identification of what the tyrant wants (from the inside) with the action which is really best—

<sup>12</sup> Notice the crucial identity claim here. It will loom large when we come to the corresponding identity claim in (DRG2) below.

(DRG2) the Tyrant wants to do this particular action of killing the P.M. which = the action which is *really* best.

So,

the Tyrant does kill his P.M., in so doing thinking falsely that the action he actually did = the really best action available in the circumstances. But the action he actually did is the *worst* action in the circumstances.

So the Tyrant *did not want to do* the actual action that he did—he did not want to do the killing of the P.M. that occurs in the *sad* scenario. Hence the action he did *is not identical with* the object of his desire in (DRG2), that is, this particular action of killing the P.M. *which is also the really best action in the circumstances.*

What then of the objection of proponents of Inside/Outside views, as we see it in the question, ‘Well, if the Tyrant didn’t want kill his P.M. (on the grounds that the action turned out badly for him), why did he do it?’ The answer is that his doing of this action was brought about by the incoherent desire we have been speaking of—the desire for that particular action of killing the P.M. which was also identical with the action which was the really best means to his good.

It is that desire—for an action that *could* not be done, since there *is* no such action—which led him, by misdirection, to the particular action of killing of his P.M. which is in fact in question: an action, it turns out, which was *not* the really best means, though he thought it was.

Thus, by keeping as part of *what the action is* that the Tyrant wanted to do, the action’s being the *really* best means to the Tyrant’s end, we make it the case that the action done is *not* the action the Tyrant wanted to do. I hope it will be evident that this account of the ultra-realist Socratic explanation of the action gets us precisely the conclusion we see in the *Gorgias* passage with which we began this section—that if an agent’s action turns out badly, the agent did not want to do it.

This conclusion Inside/Outside views find frankly incredible. Why? One reason will certainly be because Inside/Outside views want to insist that the inside of an agent’s desire should be internally coherent. I return to this insistence directly. Before I do so, however, notice that the Socratic view as described here predicts that the Tyrant did not do the action he wanted to do only because of the following two ultra-realist ideas:

2s within the Tyrant’s psychological state that we call ‘desiring the good,’ the good in question is the *real* good, and not merely the Tyrant’s *apparent* good;

and

3s within the Tyrant's psychological state that we call 'desiring to do the particular action of killing the P.M.', the particular action referred to is *the actual action the Tyrant did*, and not merely the particular action *as the Tyrant was thinking of it*.<sup>13</sup>

(The agent wanted to do the action he actually did which also (!) leads to the really best end. Such is the incoherence in the agent's desire.) Since these two ultra-realist ideas in the Socratic account have the consequence that the Tyrant did not do the action he wanted to do (and since no other half-reasonable alternative account seems available), I infer that we have reasonable grounds for supposing it is this ultra-realist account of psychological states that Socrates had in mind in the *Gorgias*.

If we look at Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.4., 1113a15–19, we see this same contrast laid bare between

the Inside/Outside view of the apparent good as object of desire referred to from within the agent's psychological state

and

the ultra-realist, Socratic view of real good as object of desire referred to from within the agent's psychological state.

Here Aristotle argues that the object of wanting (*to boulêton*) is not the [real] good, but merely the apparent good, since otherwise we cannot explain bad actions (or actions that end badly). In this, moderns simply follow Aristotle. The idea is this: you go into the reasoning which gives the structure of the agent's desire (what the agent sees as good in the action); you take the fundamental good which is the end to which the action is supposed to be a means, which is seen by the agent as his or her own real good; and you make this the *description under which* the agent wanted to do the action. This of course converts the real good, within the description the agent himself gives it, to the apparent good (what *appeared the best end to the agent* even though it was not in fact the best end).

On my account above, Socrates will want to give a different account. It is further confirmation of this claim I am making about the Socratic view, that Aristotle exploits exactly this point against the Platonic account of

<sup>13</sup> This claim is required if we think the agent's desire was one that brought about the actual action that he did—and not some action in some other possible world, some dream-world of the Tyrant.

rational desire (which corresponds to the Socratic account of *all* desire that brings about so-called voluntary actions: cf. text to n. 9 above). Thus at *Topics* 6, 146b36–147a11, Aristotle suggests that if you want to refute the Platonists, just ask them to define wanting (*boulêsis*). Then they will have to say what the object of wanting (*to boulêton*) is. They'll say 'The Good'; but this answer is hopeless, Aristotle thinks, since Aristotle takes it to be obvious—by the reasoning in the preceding paragraph—that the object of wanting can only be the apparent good. But, says Aristotle, the Platonists do not allow that there is any Form of the apparent *anything*, let alone a Form of the *apparent good*. That is my point. For Aristotle there is such a thing as—such a *real kind* as—the apparent good which is what must be appealed to in the explanation of all action, since we have to speak of the apparent good in the case of actions where the agent is wrong about where his or her good resides, and we *can* speak of the apparent good also in the case where it coincides with the real good. Thus the ontology of Aristotle's psychology is in this respect more luxuriant than the ontologies of Socrates and Plato.<sup>14</sup> Aristotle in my opinion has things exactly right here about the difference between Socrates and Plato on the one hand and himself on the other. At the same time, he quite wrongly supposes it perfectly obvious that it is his own theory which is the right one. But his perfectly correct claim about what the Socratic–Platonic claim is has been largely neglected in the history of Plato scholarship.<sup>15</sup> This neglect is hardly surprising: scholars and philosophers since Aristotle (with the exception of Boethius, in Book 3 of the *Consolation of Philosophy*) have simply taken it for granted that, on the present point, it is obvious that Aristotle is right.

What Aristotle and moderns accomplish by retrenching from the Real Good to the Apparent Good, and from the actual action done to the action under the description 'good,' is to render the Tyrant's belief system coherent. This rendering coherent of the Tyrant's inner thoughts is accomplished, of course, at the price of making the Tyrant's thought-about-the-action not be thought about the actual action done (he is thinking about some killing that makes him happy—a killing in some private dream-world of his own—and not the killing he actually did, which is the one that made him unhappy). And it also makes the Tyrant's

<sup>14</sup> Instead of having a plurality of kinds *apparent good*, *apparently slighting*, *apparently reflecting well on oneself* for the Aristotelian objects of wish, anger, and pride, Aristotle could simply add a single function to his ontology, namely the function 'apparent(ly) *F*'. This is still something that neither Socrates nor Plato would allow, as something neutral between *being truly F* and *being falsely believed to be F*.

<sup>15</sup> For an exception, see Penner (1988).

thought-about-the-real-good not be thought about the real good, but about something different, namely, the Tyrant's apparent good. Thus Aristotle and modern philosophy give us internal coherence to the Tyrant's thought at the price of abandoning the very things the Tyrant *thought* he was thinking about:

(a) the actual action as it is in itself with all its properties known and unknown, to which the Tyrant, in doing the action, surely wants to commit himself;

and

(b) the real good with all its properties known and unknown which is what the Tyrant surely wants (even if he is mistaken about what it is and to which the Tyrant also commits himself).

'But surely the Tyrant's thought must be coherent, at least when taken independently of what is in the world', I hear it being objected. Yes, undoubtedly one can take this view—privileging thereby a thought that has been made immune to what is so in the real world. But is that really the picture we want to convey of the thoughts of someone in error? Do we really want people's descriptions of people, things, and actions—including our *own* descriptions of people, things, and actions—to have been sanitized for coherence by being made immune to what is so in the real world? When I want to think about a particular child or grandchild of mine, is it not that person as he or she is in himself or herself that I want to think about, and that I want my thoughts and desires to be committed to, rather than what I get from some conception of the person in question doctored to the needs of coherence?

This idea about what we want our psychological states to refer to and to be committed to is also evident in the passage in the *Cratylus* where Socrates says:

So actions are done in accordance with their own nature, and not in accordance with our own opinion [or 'our conventions for using the words', cf. 385d9, e5, 386a7, *ethemên... phainetai... dokei*]. For example, if we try to cut something should we cut it just however we want and with whatever we want? Or is it rather that if we want to cut something in accordance with the nature of cutting and being cut and with the natural instrument, then we will get somewhere in cutting, and rightly do this action? And that if we cut contrary to the nature of cutting, we will miss the mark entirely and do nothing? (*Crat.* 387a1–9)

That is, when I refer to cutting (or to cancer) what I want to refer to—and take myself to be committed to referring to—is not whatever is determined by any conventional meaning of the word 'cutting' (or of the word

‘cancer’); nor is it whatever is determined by people’s beliefs about cutting (or cancer); rather it is what is determined by the real nature of cutting (or cancer) *even if that is different from what I suppose it to be* (or indeed from what anyone else in the society, experts included, supposes it to be).

Now it is true that this account of psychological states is bought at the price of giving up the internal coherence of the way in which the agent thinks of his or her psychological state. This does not bother me particularly, however. As I have remarked elsewhere, I would be considerably more worried about my proposal that we treat the agent’s thought as being about the actual actions and the real good desired if I thought that other theories could escape the problem of having to deal with incoherent psychological states. But even to analyse Frege’s thought about extensions for every predicate already involves incoherent belief states—since that thought presupposes the contradictory belief exposed by the Russell paradox. Such cases suggest that the concern should not be that the agent’s belief-state should be coherent, but at most that the agent *believe* it coherent.

Indeed, if one combines

(i) an ultra-realist theory of reference even for one’s own words (so that one wants oneself to be committed to using the expression ‘the man in the corner drinking a martini’ to refer to *that man* even if, unbeknownst to us all—and even to himself—he is drinking water from a martini glass),

with the idea that

(ii) I have a number of false beliefs,

then it is inevitable that one commits oneself to incoherences in one’s thought. For to want to refer to *that man* even if the description ‘man in the corner drinking a martini’ is false of him, is to treat that person as simultaneously a person who *is* drinking a martini and as a person who is *not* drinking a martini (since one is importing the truth about that man into one’s own inner states.)<sup>16</sup>

So much, then, by way of explanation of how this ultra-realism works, and of how it is that it is the real good (not the apparent good or something *under the description* ‘real good’) that we all want to be realized

<sup>16</sup> On such grounds, I have suggested (Penner [unpublished *a*]), may one justify the notion of material implication according to which any false sentence implies every other sentence whatever. (I take it that logic is designed for reasoning about things as they are in *this world*, not as they are in all possible worlds.)



in our lives. It is now time to lay out how I take desire for that real good to work in the psychology of action from which almost everything else in Socratic Ethics follows.

### A Formulation of Socratic Intellectualism<sup>17</sup>

I have said above that in this psychology of action, every voluntary action is generated ultimately by a fundamental desire of the agent for that maximum of the agent's own real good (or happiness) that the agent's circumstances allow, over the rest of his or her life. Henceforth, I shall use the following abbreviation:

the expression 'the agent's *MAXHAP*' will abbreviate the cumbersome phrase 'the maximum of the agent's own real good (or happiness) that the agent's circumstances will allow, over the rest of his or her life'.

I need to explain this idea that every voluntary action is generated (ultimately) by the agent's desire for his or her *MAXHAP*. To do so, I shall introduce the following simplifying feature that focuses us more directly upon the particular voluntary actions that one does. Instead of speaking of:

D-END the agent's desire for the agent's own *MAXHAP* which is the agent's own ultimate *end*,

I shall speak, in the case of particular actions, of the following generalized desire:

D-MEANS the agent's desire for whatever action might really be means to the agent's *MAXHAP* that is available to the agent.<sup>18</sup>

Such a desire, like the desire (D-END) for one's own ultimate end, is of course too general for us to be able to derive from it the desire to do *any* particular action. For it is a desire for *whatever* action *might be* the really best means available to the agent's *MAXHAP*. On the other hand, if we can

<sup>17</sup> Penner (2002) gives an earlier, and less adequate formulation of Socratic Intellectualism.

<sup>18</sup> As I point out in Penner (2002), 195, given that humans are not just oysters, but the sorts of beings whose fundamental desire for their own *MAXHAP* leads them to *act* so as to fulfil that desire, we may derive the point about desiring the best means available to their *MAXHAP* immediately from the point about desiring the best end. (This is not a logical derivation, but proceeds via what Socrates in effect takes to be a law of psychology.)

arrive at a belief as to *precisely what particular action actually available to the agent in the agent's circumstances would be* the really best means in question, it might seem that we can then substitute the particular action so identified for the phrase 'whatever action might be the best means available', and so transform the generalized desire into the quite particular desire to do that particular action, and thereby bring about the voluntary doing of that particular action. (I say this 'might seem' to be so. As the previous section makes clear, it would be seriously under-describing the action merely to speak of 'this particular action'—as if it were the same action whether it brought about the really best end, or a less good end. On the ultra-realist view—as indeed on any view, one might have hoped—there is no such particular action as *this particular action-regardless-of-what-end-was-brought-about-by-it.*)

But how do we get to this belief as to precisely which particular action is the best means available in the circumstances to the agent's *ΜΑΧΗΡΑ*? Well, as Aristotle saw very well (*Nicomachean Ethics* 3.3, and elsewhere), what we have to do in such deliberations is to bring together both general and particular considerations. More fully, we have to bring together (B1) beliefs about what is *good generally* for human beings (these are matters discussed in the science of human good), (B2) beliefs about what is true generally about other attributes that may be involved in the deliberation, such as health, safety at sea, the dangers of weather, and so forth (these are matters discussed in the sciences of medicine, navigation, meteorology, and so forth), as well as (B3) beliefs about what general attributes may be involved in the situation I am confronting, as well as (B4) beliefs about particular circumstances involved in the situation I am confronting and about the particular circumstances of my own life. This bringing together of (what are taken to be) general and particular facts has to be sensitive to (mostly) small changes in what is involved, as the agent's view alters, over the time of deliberation, as to what the particular circumstances are that are involved in the situation. But then if one's estimate of a particular circumstance changes, then other beliefs in the web of belief—both general beliefs and beliefs about particular circumstances—will be called into play to make corresponding adjustments in the action one undertakes. In the end, hardly any belief in the agent's web of belief is proof against becoming relevant to settling on what the best action available is. The endeavour of bringing together one's general beliefs and one's particular beliefs may be described thus: as the endeavour of constantly adjusting the beliefs one calls into play in such a way as eventually to fix on some one particular *pathway through one's web of belief*, from

general (scientific) beliefs both as to human good and as to other (scientific) attributes that are involved in the deliberation,

and

general and particular beliefs as to the situation with which the agent is confronted,

to

a decision as to precisely which particular action it is that constitutes the best means to *MAXHAP* that the agent seeks.

To sum up, the psychology of action known as ‘Socratic Intellectualism’ may be characterized as follows (with the references to comments (I)–(V) referring forward to further explanations in the immediate sequel):

SI There are no voluntary actions actually done [Comment (I)] that are not explained entirely in terms of

D a single fundamental desire for whatever particular action *now* is the really best means available to the agent’s *MAXHAP*.

taken together with

B all of the beliefs in my total web of beliefs [Comment (II)]—including

B1 general beliefs about the human good (beliefs we might think of as aspiring to be truths of the science of human happiness);

B2 general *scientific* beliefs (beliefs we might think of as aspiring to be truths of sciences, for instance, medicine, that are distinct from the science of human happiness);

B3 general beliefs about one’s present situation, and

B4 particular beliefs about one’s present situation—

where

C at least *some* of those beliefs [Comment (III)] have been organized into a pathway running through the agent’s web of belief, that pathway connecting one’s own *MAXHAP*, via many intermediary beliefs, to the particular voluntary action one in fact undertook.

More briefly, the particular action that one does is determined by

(a) the ‘whatever’ desire in (D) for whatever is the really best means to *MAXHAP*,

and

- (b) the pathway through the web of belief described in (c), which *identifies* the particular action,  $M$ , which [as the agent supposes] is the really best means currently available to the agent's  $MAX_{HAP}$ , and so supplies a substituent for the 'whatever' in (D).

By substitution of the particular action  $M$  identified at the end of the pathway in (c) into the 'whatever' place in the desire (D), we get that transformation of the original generalized 'whatever'-desire into quite particular desire which I call the *executive desire*, that is,

- $D^*$  the desire to do the quite particular action which is both *precisely this action* and also *the action which is the really best means to the agent's  $MAX_{HAP}$* .

This is the desire which brings about 'straightaway' the action  $M$  [Comments IV and V]. But of course the fact that the desire brings about the action  $M$  does not mean the desire brings about the quite particular action which is the object of the agent's desire, namely, the action which is both *precisely this action  $M$* , and also *the action which is really best means to the agent's  $MAX_{HAP}$* . As noted above, there are in fact two cases to be considered here. In the case where the agent's beliefs are all true (or close enough to being true that it makes no difference to what happens)—and without that, the agent will be unlikely to hit on what is in fact the really best means<sup>19</sup>—the executive desire which brought about the action the agent in fact did will actually be the desire to do the action that was done. This case is unproblematic. In the other case, the pathway through the agent's web of belief operates via some false beliefs that result in the agent choosing the wrong particular action to constitute the really best means to the agent's  $MAX_{HAP}$ . The result is that there *is* no action which is both *precisely this particular action* and also *the really best means to the agent's  $MAX_{HAP}$* . Hence, as suggested above, there are cases where the action  $M$  which the agent did is one which the agent did not want to do.

As I have already suggested, it is in connection with this second case that Socratic Intellectualism (and, I would argue, the Platonic account of rational action: see text to nn. 9, 13 above) differs from the Aristotelian

<sup>19</sup> I assume here that living a good life and picking the best means is necessarily always sufficiently difficult that one is unlikely to hit on the right action from the point of view of the whole of the rest of my life by chance. See my remarks at Comment (F) below, p. 184.

account—and indeed all modern accounts—of desire to do a particular action. What Aristotle does is to drop any reference to the *really* best means to the agent's own *real* happiness, in favour of the *apparently* best means to (possibly) the agent's *apparent* happiness. Hence Aristotle commits himself to the view that Helen of Troy, as we see from her action in (disastrously) running away with Paris instead of staying with her daughter Hermione in Sparta, never desired the really best means to her happiness, or even her own real happiness. What she desired was the *apparently* best means to her *apparent* happiness. She desired to run away under the description 'best means to her happiness' as a means to living with the jet set in Troy under the description 'her own happiest life'.

Thus the ultra-realist Socratic–Platonic philosophy of language is entirely dropped in Aristotle. But this is not what happens in Socratic Intellectualism. For Socrates, to drop the desire for the really best means or the desire for the really best end, in favour of keeping desire for precisely the particular action that was done, is precisely to make the actual circumstances *dominant over* the generalized desire that drove the entire process in the pathway through the web of belief to the action done. (On this view, one chooses to keep the actual action done over keeping the actual good that was the agent's end.) For Socrates, it is rather the desire for the really best means to the real good that is dominant—the arrival at precisely the quite particular action that was done being a mistake that occurred in the execution of the fundamental desire for whatever might be the really best means to the really best end. So for Socrates there is no replacing of the really best means to the really best end by the apparently best means to the apparently best end. But since it is precisely the quite particular action that is to be explained, we also cannot drop the idea of the desire being also a desire to do the quite particular action that was done. Hence the double-dose of ultra-realism—one for the action in question, and one for the good in question.

The result of this ultra-realist insistence that even in her action of running away with Paris, Helen seeks her own real good is what I have described as an 'incoherence in the desire'. And it is this incoherent desire for what is both the running away with Paris that she actually did *and* the particular action that is the really best means to her really best end that causes Helen to run away with Paris. And this also establishes that Helen *did not do what she wanted to do*. For again the ultra-realist account of wanting to do the precise particular action that she did would yield that she wanted that running away with Paris which would leave her miserable in Troy, and miserable about all the Greeks and Trojans killed because of

her. But *that* action—the one she did with all the misery it caused—she did not want to do. She merely *thought* she wanted to do it.

It is time now to offer some comments on this account of Socratic Intellectualism just given.

*Comment I:* The reason why the executive desire is taken to be a desire that has produced *an actual action* is in order that the desire that causes the particular action done be *that particular action* in all its particularity—that is, with all its properties known and unknown. But prior to an actual action the desire cannot contain any such particularity. (I should point out that no Inside/Outside theory can admit the existence of such a desire—at any rate not without countenancing a *de re/de dicto equivocation*.)

*Comment II:* Why *all* of the beliefs in one's web of beliefs? Why not just those beliefs that show up in the practical syllogism, for example, the following?

It will be best to seek a more congenial mate while making sure my daughter is looked after;  
 the best way to escape is at night;  
 someone will look after my daughter Hermione if I run away;  
 and there won't be any guard at this entrance at 3 a.m.;  
 so I shall make my get-away with Paris at this entrance at 3 a.m.

The reason we need *other* beliefs is that any deliberation needs to deal with alternative possibilities that will perforce arise during deliberation and which will in turn evoke further beliefs—for instance:

Will Hermione be turned over to my sister Clytemnestra?  
 And—somewhat wild woman as Clytemnestra shows herself to be from time to time—will she really be a good person to look after Hermione?  
 Will a mother be happy if her child is miserable, even if the mother has no knowledge of how the child is?  
 And do all these considerations mean I need to reconsider more fully just how bad it would be continuing with that jerk Menelaus?

And so on. What is more, the entire deliberation is made against the background of beliefs that are taken for granted—or, at the very least, against the background of the belief that none of the beliefs that I have so far considered, and indeed none of the beliefs I have not explicitly considered, counts against my doing what I shall do.<sup>20</sup> (It is the possibility

<sup>20</sup> I understand this treatment of *beliefs taken for granted as not counting against the action* to be sufficient to justify the claim that one undertakes such an action 'all things

of such further considerations obtruding themselves on one's deliberation that makes for the possibility of that instability of belief as to what the best action is that gives us the Socratic equivalent of *akrasia*.)<sup>21</sup>

The reason why this discussion of what beliefs are actually involved in one's deliberations is important is that any perturbation in the beliefs that are operative in one's deliberations may result in a change of the action one does. For a 'whatever'-desire (usually a maximizing desire) is, we may say, 'rationally redirectible'. If one's beliefs change as to what action maximizes, then the desire to do the original action simply collapses, and is replaced by the desire to do the new maximal action. ['Purely irrational desires' such as thirst or desire for insulin-rush—at any rate as conceived by Plato in the parts of the soul doctrine of *Republic* 4, 436–441—are *not* of this nature. Learning that this is not water but poison does not change my thirst. Thirst, as Vlastos used to say, 'doesn't quit': it doesn't 'collapse',<sup>22</sup> nor is it rationally redirectible. (This is why, in Aristotle, appetite is not opposite to appetite, only to choice. You can only get a desire *not* to do something by substitution into a 'whatever' desire.)]<sup>23</sup>

*Comment III:* This psychology of action is determinist, in that, first, we are all the same in our fundamental desire for our really best end, and indeed for the particular action which is the really best means to that end—by something like a law of nature;<sup>24</sup>

So we could not have desired otherwise. Second,

what we believe is a matter of our former beliefs together with subsequent experiences, perceptual or dialectical; and we are not free to reject

considered. (I suppose that to take it for granted that certain beliefs—taken as a group—will not count against the action is to have considered them.) I do not take 'all things considered' to require that one has *explicitly* considered all things, or indeed that one has considered any of these things *correctly*. (I am grateful here to a conversation with Martha Gibson—one in which I fear I did not persuade her of this point.)

<sup>21</sup> On *akrasia* in Socrates, see Penner (1996, 1997).

<sup>22</sup> In conversation; but see also Vlastos (1991), 86–8, 99–101, (1971a), 15–16.

<sup>23</sup> The essential clue here, in Aristotle, was first spotted by Joseph (1935), 53–4 n. This view of irrational appetites in Plato is disputed in Irwin (1995), 211 ff., esp. 214. Irwin takes irrational appetites to be rationally redirectible by considerations other than what is best, for example, such considerations as what is most pleasant. I shall present elsewhere my arguments against this suggestion.

<sup>24</sup> On its being the same real good that we all desire to be maximally realized in the rest of our lives, see the opening paragraph of this chapter.

what strikes us as true without some other belief or perception that seems true to us coming into conflict with what strikes us as true.<sup>25</sup>

So we could not have believed otherwise than we did.

Hence, since every so-called voluntary action is determined by the desires and beliefs just described, all voluntary action is determined.<sup>26</sup>

*Comment iv:* In this psychology of action, I take it that only maximizing 'whatever'-desires can function as the desire-half of a belief-and-desire explanation of a voluntary action. Why can't purely irrational desires function, by themselves, as the desire-half of a belief-and-desire explanation? The reason, in brief, is that mere co-occurrence of belief and desire won't do. For in general I have a plurality of such irrational desires and a plurality of beliefs. So if I have, on some principle of counting, six beliefs and seven desires, then by the theory that generates a voluntary action merely from the co-occurrence of a belief with a desire, there may be as many as forty-one other actions which I should be doing simultaneously with the one I actually do. What is needed here is a selection function for integrating beliefs and perceptions with desires. This we have with rationally redirectible desires. The device in question is the substitution of one's conclusion as to what precise particular action is the best action available into the fundamental desire for whatever particular action may be the best action available. This device of substitution is precisely *not* available for irrational desires.<sup>27</sup>

From this account of Socratic Intellectualism, we can derive in a particularly clear way most of the Socratic doctrines familiar to anyone from the Socratic parts of the early dialogues: Virtue is knowledge [of one's own real good]; no one errs willingly [at getting his or her own good]; good people differ from bad people in their beliefs only and not at all in their ultimate desire for their own real good (*Meno* 84b4–6); vice is ignorance; virtue is one; *knowledge* is something strong, which cannot be

<sup>25</sup> As Plato says that, with respect to desire, good is the one attribute which no one is content to have merely seem to apply to what one gets (*R.* 6, 505d5–9), so too we may say that truth is the one attribute which no one (at any rate, no one with any foresight at all) is content to have merely seem to apply to one's beliefs. (Contrast the Rawlsian suggestion that Helen might be happy merely in falsely believing Hermione happy.)

<sup>26</sup> It may seem that the description of an action as 'voluntary' must always fail if determinism is true. I shall take 'voluntary' here simply as what is caused by the agent's beliefs taken together with the agent's belief that this action is best. There is a good deal more that needs to be said about the voluntary, since neither Socrates nor the Plato of either the *Republic* or *Laws* thinks that even actions based on a false belief are voluntary. But this is not the place to attempt to say this.

<sup>27</sup> See Penner (1990).



overcome by pleasure, weakness being ignorance;<sup>28</sup> and wisdom *is* good luck. Most important for present purposes is that we can see from this account why it is that Socrates acknowledges that he knows nothing [concerning the human good], even though he is the wisest person there is [concerning the human good]. For since each judgement as to which action to do involves one's entire web of belief, the potential for missing the mark is evidently very high. This explains also why it is that the unexamined life is not worth living: for Socratic-style cross-examining is our only hope of coming any closer to getting things right in one's life. I shall not, however, attempt to show how *all* of these doctrines emerge from this account of Socratic Intellectualism, since to do so would require more space than is available here.<sup>29</sup>

### Proceeding from Socratic Intellectualism to Socratic Ethics

So far, I have given an account of human good as it emerges in the Socratic psychology of action. As I have already indicated at the end of the introduction and in n. 5 above, I derive the Socratic account of human goodness employing, even for 'good person', a functional theory of good.<sup>30</sup> It remains to add a few comments on how we proceed from Socratic Intellectualism to Socratic Ethics.

The first point that needs to be made here is that (A) the real good which is the ultimate end of every voluntary action in Socrates is a purely descriptive or factual notion, as is happiness. This gives us an objective and descriptivist notion of good, and so an objective and descriptivist notion of the basis of ethics. At this point we must be careful not to suppose—as I have done in the past—that since Socratic Intellectualism is a version of psychological egoism (the view that we *do in fact* always act to maximize our own good), therefore the ethics that flows from this must be a version of *ethical* egoism (the view that we *ought* always to act so as to maximize our own good).<sup>31</sup> This would be a mistake. For the claim that

<sup>28</sup> See the works cited in n. 21 above.

<sup>29</sup> See Penner (2002); and there will be more on these topics in my New Mexico lectures (= unpublished *b*).

<sup>30</sup> See n. 5 above. The usual modern view shows some sympathy for reading 'good thing of kind *K*' as in some way functional (cf. 'answering to some interests'). But it tends to make an exception for 'good person'.

<sup>31</sup> I have in the past spoken of Socratic Ethics as an 'ethical egoism'. But this was a misdescription. It is not. Nor have my fuller characterizations of the position ever carried this implication (except purely verbally).

we *ought* to maximize our own good is a normative or evaluative claim. But the theory I am explaining here has nothing to do with norms or values. We *do in fact aim at our real good, and at our real happiness*. That is, on the Socratic view, a fact of human psychology. Hence no norms—and no faculty of practical reasoning—are needed for the theory of the human good. It is true that specifying what happiness is in general, let alone in particular cases, may well be beyond us. But to say that is not to deny that what happiness is, or what a particular agent's happiness is, is a perfectly factual or descriptive matter—any more than the ignorance of physicists as to what the fundamental building-blocks of the universe are makes the question what these are anything other than a perfectly objective and factual matter.

Next (B), I draw some consequences of the determinism of this account of Socratic Intellectualism.<sup>32</sup> For one thing, this determinism rules out all norms, values, or practical principles as sources of the human good. For *ought* implies *can*, so that *ought to have done* implies *could have done otherwise*; but determinism rules out *could have done otherwise*. It is true that there are compatibilist surrogates for *could have done otherwise* such as *would have done otherwise if I had chosen*, and that these surrogates do help us to mark useful distinctions, for example, the idea of Stampe, and of Gibson and Stampe (1992), of a will that is 'stuck'.<sup>33</sup> But the doctrine that this surrogate suffices to justify practices of punishment as means of reform and deterrence, while fully embraced by Plato in Book 9 of the *Laws*, seems to me entirely heartless and totally inefficacious (as millennia of penology should have made abundantly clear). Indeed, I do not believe that this cruel and inefficacious practice would have continued but for the despair of those in positions of power—whether familial, social, or governmental—of otherwise getting the people in their power to behave as those in power suppose they want them to behave.

But, one might wonder: (C) How, without norms, values, or practical principles, can good human action be motivated? As Hume points out, ethics requires us to impose on it the condition that, whatever morality consists in, it must be sufficient to motivate us to act: 'Tis one thing to

<sup>32</sup> At various times astute interpreters have come up against the possibility that various Socratic or Platonic doctrines may have determinist implications; and the general reaction has been to rule out this possibility out of hand. See e.g. de Strycker (1966), 428, and Morris (1934–5).

<sup>33</sup> There is much more agreeable and unusual material on questions of the will in Dennis W. Stampe's still unpublished manuscript on the Freedom of the Will, not all of it obviously compatible with the view taken here.

know virtue, another to conform the will to it' (*Treatise* 3.1.1, para. 22.) As against this, the present account of Socratic Intellectualism makes for an objective descriptivist ethics that is practical—that can motivate us to ethical action—without values, norms, or practical principles (let alone any Humean 'sentiment[s] of [approbation or] disapprobation' that result when 'you turn your reflexion into your own breast': *ibid*). For we all *do* want the real good to be present in the rest of our lives to the maximum extent possible. As already noted briefly (under comment A), this fundamental desire common to all of us in all of our voluntary actions fully meets Hume's requirement that ethics shall be practical. To account for the variety of human voluntary actions, we do not need a Kantian will to purely moral action; nor even the kind of brute altruism argued for by Butler, Hume, Sidgwick, Broad, Feinberg, Frankena, Thomas Nagel, and others; nor yet the kind of brute self-destructiveness that is, surprisingly enough, common to Butler and the later Freud. (My idea here is that adequate alternative accounts of all of these supposed motives can be generated from hypothetical imperatives involving the desire for happiness—those counsels of prudence for which the end is, however, the agent's real good, not just the agent's apparent good. For example, if keeping one's promises is ethically good, this is not because I have a primitive obligation, or at any rate a primitive *prima facie* obligation to keep promises, but because keeping promises is in one's interest—at any rate for as many cases as a good theory should want.)<sup>34</sup>

(D) Since this ethical theory makes no room for obligations or commands, but merely for hypothetical imperatives (counsels of prudence), the theory is neither deontological nor teleological (as 'teleological' is usually understood). For the usual understanding of the debate between deontological and teleological positions is that deontological theories impose the requirement that one should obey certain general rules, while teleological theories impose the requirement that one should promote happiness, whether this be one's own happiness or, as in utilitarianism, the greatest happiness of the greatest number. The Socratic Ethics here discussed involves no requirements whatever—which makes it teleological in a much stronger way than the way in which utilitarianism is teleological. For there is no *requirement* to maximize your own happiness, as there is in ethical egoism proper, the theory that you *ought* to promote

<sup>34</sup> Kant all but admits that keeping promises is always in our interest, in *Groundwork*, Prussian Academy edition vol. 4, 402–4 (1948: pp. 67–8). So too Mill—with exceptions that prove the rule—in *On Utilitarianism*, e.g. sec. 2, para. 23.

your own good. In Socratic Ethics, you simply *do* desire to promote your own good: no further motive is required.<sup>35</sup>

(E) It is true that moralists will object that on this reading of Socrates we seem to be left entirely without explanation for the ubiquity of moral judgement within human civilization. To meet this objection, we need to provide an alternative explanation of the widespread occurrence of moral judgement. As it seems to me, there is more than adequate explanation of this ubiquity of moral judgement in the fact that there is the strongest political, legal, and even familial pressure to social control in every society there has ever been from the beginning. This pressure takes the form of remarks of the sort: ‘There have to be rules. There have to be consequences.’ Socrates and a tiny band of followers aside, no one is content to resort to the Socratic device of intellectual discussion to change people’s views as to what it is good for them to do. We ‘don’t have time’ for that sort of thing. So instead—starting with Plato and Aristotle—we try to train people’s characters by conditioning, using the devices of reward and punishment. (‘What would happen if you allowed to people to do *that*? We’ve got to forbid it and back that prohibition by punishment.’) No further explanation is required for the wide extent of moral and legal judgement. Indeed, I would suggest that only this extraordinary social pressure from leaders of family, society, and a legal system could explain the persistent strength of the institutions of legal punishment, responsibility, and moral blame and censure, in the face of their obvious failures.

(F) This ethics is entirely intellectual. Ethical failures, not being due to one’s fundamental desire for the real good (since that is the same in everyone, and so cannot be the basis of ethical success or failure) can only be due to mistakes of belief from which one generates the desire that causes particular actions. There is no reference to character (as in Aristotle) as producing different apparent goods. And there is also no reference (as in Aristotle *and* Plato) to irrational appetites as overpowering one’s reason or corrupting it. Ethical education is, accordingly, based solely on dialectic, this being the reason that the unexamined life is not

<sup>35</sup> Notice that this kind of teleology—the teleology of a system of hypothetical imperatives—is unavailable to utilitarians, at any rate without a claim that the greatest happiness of the greatest number goes with the agent’s own good. In fact, they tend to resort to a principle promoting moral obligation to promote the greatest good of the greatest number—quite a different conception of teleology. (Cf. Mill’s complete failure to see the conflict between his purely moral convictions and certain of his more Socratic impulses, as in the famous and much-misinterpreted parallel in *Utilitarianism* ch. 4, between the ‘desirable’ and the ‘visible’, I will speak elsewhere.)

worth living. This is also what underlies the Socratic claim at *Crito* 44d6–10 that there is no great harm that the many (or anyone else) can do to you by any means other than making you more foolish. For, if we take one's present circumstances as beyond changing—the luck with which one starts, and any sheer luck that may result in the future (cf. *Euthd.* 278–282)—then it is only acting wisely that stands a reasonable chance of improving one's state.

(G) Further to this purely intellectual feature of Socratic Ethics, and to its determinism, it will also be the case that punishment and blame will never be appropriate. As Socrates says at *Ap.* 25c–26a, harming others inevitably leads to harm to you, so that not punishment but instruction is what is called for in the case of anyone harming anyone else. The lesson is not generalized beyond Socrates' own case here in the *Apology*. Socrates was in *enough* trouble at his trial without his drawing this general moral! What is more, when Socrates in the *Hippias Minor* casts doubt on the Kantian and legal notion that ignorance makes speaking what is in fact a falsehood ethically acceptable—sincere efforts at truth-telling being all that is required by Kantian and legal standards—he is careful not to allow his opposition to the idea that ethical merit attaches to mere sincerity, regardless of one's state of knowledge as to what is true or false, to be too overt. Rather, he represents it as one of two possible positions that, generally speaking, he is unable to make up his mind between, even though at the moment, he says, he leans towards the view that the best person is the one who has knowledge and so is best able to tell falsehoods willingly. But it is in fact quite clear what his position really is: see Penner (1973).

(H) The reference in the preceding paragraph to the idea that harming those around you leads to harm to you reminds us that this ethical theory depends upon Socrates being right not only in his psychology of action, but also in his belief that harming others inevitably results in harm to you. I grant that this is no easy sell, however much I may be convinced in my own life that this belief is true.<sup>36</sup> It is no easy idea to sell even if we grant the claim just discussed, that there is no great harm that the many (or anyone else) can do to you by any means other than making you more foolish.

But the most serious difficulty created by admitting the dependence of this theory on the thesis that harming others harms you is the admission

<sup>36</sup> This belief can be seen in the discussion of the position of Thrasymachus in Book I of the *Republic* which we find in Foot (1958–9: 103–4).

that the ethical theory would not be worth much if this thesis were not true. For the admission that

4s even granting that the claim about harm *is* true, the theory would not be worth much if the claim *weren't* true

tends to evoke the following objection: that the admission of the need for Socrates to be right about harm shows that the defender at bottom accepts the requirements of morality. For why otherwise, it is asked, would they attend to this need for Socrates to be right about harm? So, it is held, the proponent of a Socratic Ethics who makes this admission implicitly commits himself or herself to a morality prior to this Socratic Ethics.

This objection does not seem to me conclusive. The issue is solely whether the claim in question concerning the effect of harming others is true. If it *is* true, then it is true in all possible worlds with the same laws of nature as this one. This seems to me to undercut the argument that, as it was put above,

4s even granting that the claim about harm *is* true, the theory would not be worth much if the claim *weren't* true.

For this asks us to go to possible worlds other than those with the same laws of nature as there are in this world. But what if (as I believe) there are no such worlds, or if Socrates would not grant the existence of such worlds? I have argued elsewhere that it is tendentious to insist that ethics must deal with what is so in all logically possible worlds, rather than having to deal with the world as it is in *this* world (or—at most—in all possible worlds in which the same truths about human nature hold as hold in this world). The claim that harming others results in harm to you seems to me, similarly, to require being settled solely in terms of worlds in which the same general psychological truths hold as hold in this world.<sup>37</sup>

## Conclusion

I have argued here that, provided that we accept as philosophically viable a certain interpretation of the Socratic account of desire (and indeed of the Platonic account of rational desire), we have to hand a naturalist, descriptivist theory of ethics—here called simply ‘Socratic Ethics’. This theory is

<sup>37</sup> See Penner (1973) for an earlier discussion of alternative possible worlds in which there are ‘moral evil geniuses’.

based upon a quite particular psychology of action—a variant of psychological egoism, in which, contrary to the usual assumptions, the object of desire is not the *apparent* good but the *real* good. The theory also presupposes a number of other things—including determinism and the bankruptcy of the notion of moral responsibility if determinism is true. Most problematically for many, no doubt, it presupposes that over a whole lifetime one is never sufficiently assured of being better off for having harmed someone else when that was avoidable. Evidently, it would not have been feasible to attempt to defend all of these assumptions here. I will be content if I have said enough to bring some to reflect that it might be worth examining (and re-examining) these presuppositions and the assumptions with which they conflict.

### Appendix

Inside/Outside theories include those that make use of (a) the opaque/transparent or oblique/transparent distinction, (b) the *de dicto/de re* distinction, (c) the formal object/material object distinction, or (d) the internalism/externalism distinction. There is another more sophisticated variant of inside/outside theories (produced by the concern with indexicals in recent years) which instead of treating the object of the psychological state as opaque or oblique or *de dicto*, in effect treats it as transparent or *de re*. The recipe is as follows:

(1) treat the *object of the desire that I speak to my neighbour* in such a way that it is the same *object* as that of *the desire that I speak with the Dean*, even though I don't know that my neighbour is the Dean.

(So in general I do not know what the objects of my psychological states are—I do not know what propositions I believe on this [Russellian] conception of proposition.) Nonetheless,

(2) treat the *psychological state of wanting to speak to my neighbour* in such a way that it is not to be identified with the psychological state of *wanting to speak to the Dean*.

(So in general I *do* know what my psychological state is.)

In such theories, the *object* of desire is to be understood in terms of the *outside* of my psychological state, whereas the desire itself—the state of *wanting to speak to my neighbour*—is to be understood in terms of the *inside* of my psychological state, one that is known to me. For this reason,

the theory in Fodor (1990a) which conforms to this description (and which apparently derives from the invaluable Perry (1977), (1979), (1997)) remains a mere variant of Inside/Outside theories.

On my own view, by contrast, the actual object out there is (in favourable cases, at any rate) *in my mind*. Put in reverse fashion, my mind reaches out of itself to the actual object, so that (once more, in favourable cases) I have *it* in mind, with all of its properties, known and unknown. (Such, I say, is Socratic and Platonic desire for the real good.) Thus I give up entirely the Fodorian idea that while I do not know the object of my desire, I do know how I *think of* the object of my desire. If I want the object of my desire to be the real good of my children, say, as in n. 3 above, then I will have to rest content with not knowing what exactly I suppose that real good to be which I desire for them. If I want my psychological states to commit me to objects *as they are in the real world* and not just to objects *as they are in some dream world of my own*, then I will have to give up the Cartesian idea that I know without any doubt what my psychological state of desire is.



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## Out of the Labyrinth: Plato's Attack on Consequentialism

MARY MARGARET McCABE

What is the relation between Plato's account of virtue and his defence of ethical objectivity? Some views of Platonic virtue may relegate it to a role severely subordinate to objective value. In what follows I reflect on Plato's attack on consequentialism in the *Euthydemus* and consider how that dialogue, read as an integrated whole, may provide a view of value inimical to consequentialism. From this view, I argue, flows an account of the nature of value to which virtue is central; but the metaphysics of that account explains objectivity too. This, in turn, may illuminate our modern concerns: for it provides a distinctive starting-point for the metaphysics of value, and hence for any debate with the consequentialist.

### Consequentialism and Socratic Intellectualism

'Surely (said Socrates) all of us want to do well?' His question is notoriously suspect; but its sentiment has often been endorsed in the history of moral philosophy. Leave on one side (if you can) the question of whether its self-regarding aspects should make us uncomfortable.<sup>1</sup> Focus instead on how easily, when we think of doing well, we imagine it as some optimal

I am grateful to many people who have given me advice: notably Zsuzsanna Balogh, Sarah Broadie, Peter Gallagher, David Galloway, Christopher Gill, Michael Lacewing, Terry Penner, Anthony Price, Patrick Riordan, Christopher Rowe, Janice Thomas, and Ann Whittle. They should not be held responsible for the consequences of their advice.

<sup>1</sup> As I was revising this paper, I was also learning from Penner and Rowe's interpretation of the *Lysis* (forthcoming), who confront this issue, in the context of Socratic eudaimonism, head-on.

*state of affairs*, the turning up of which will constitute our happiness.<sup>2</sup> One thought may bring another: that our ethical task is to discover the means to this end, so that (all other moral things being equal—of course they ain't, often) any means is good just so long as it leads to this end.<sup>3</sup> On such an analysis (and barring some other, independent, moral imperatives) means are evaluated *just by* their effectiveness. There is nothing morally significant in wondering whether *I* should bring this state of affairs about *or* whether I should leave it to someone else to benefit me *or* whether I may rely on luck.

This is what I shall take consequentialism to be: a theory which rejects the independent importance of *the agent* in reaching ethical outcomes in favour of the value of some *state of affairs* as the outcome itself. It does not matter, that is, *how* the best state of affairs (whether for me, or overall) is brought about, just so long as I (or we overall) get it. Consequentialism is, of course, capable of far subtler specification than this.<sup>4</sup> But it seems, nonetheless, to make two connected claims about the nature of value:

(1) *Value is to be found in ends*, and not in the means to them (provided that the distinction between means and ends can be satisfactorily maintained). So, notoriously, without some other assumption acting as a restraint on what may be done to achieve the end, any means is justifiable by its end. Then, *value flows from the end to the means*, so that the means is instrumentally, but not independently, valuable.

(2) *Value is agent-independent* (where the agent is specified as the person who brings about the means to the end); even if it is enjoyed by the agent, it is not enjoyed *because* he is the agent.

It is commonplace to suppose that this sort of theory was offered by Plato's Socrates—the character we find in those dialogues often thought to have been written early in Plato's career.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps Plato's Socrates was

<sup>2</sup> This is a claim about what we *really* want: a psychological eudaimonism.

<sup>3</sup> An ethical eudaimonism; see Annas (1999), Irwin (1995). But see Penner in this volume on how Socratic 'ultra-realism' makes no room for ethical eudaimonism.

<sup>4</sup> See e.g. Scheffler (1982), (1988). In particular, the specification of a 'state of affairs' is vague. The refined consequentialist may include good, even moral, states of the agent in the specification of the end; but he will still, I think, construe the end independently of how the agent arrives at it. More hangs on this than I have space for here, where I argue that for Plato the state of the agent (or the person) cannot be contingent, or optional, in accounts of value; and I take this to be something the consequentialist cannot allow.

<sup>5</sup> I shall not discuss the 'Socratic question' here (but see the vigorous recent debate in, e.g. Vlastos (1991), Kahn (1996), McCabe (2001), Annas and Rowe (2002)), except to

(at some point) committed to the view that happiness is all we pursue, and that virtue is the instrument to it.<sup>6</sup> Consider, for example, the argument in the *Protagoras* which seems to deny the possibility of *akrasia* (351–358). Here, on the assumption that there is a single scale of value (whether hedonist or otherwise eudaimonist), Socrates denies that someone could know the better, and be able to do it, but nonetheless do the worse. Instead, he maintains, actions that look acratice are mere executive failures—failures to exercise the proper measuring skill, to compute where value lies.

This is an intellectualist thesis:<sup>7</sup> failure occurs just when the person who fails is ignorant. And it has consequentialist roots in taking value to come *simply* from the consequences of action.<sup>8</sup> There is no independent account to be given of what it would be to be weak, or tempted, or wicked, since all the ethical content is taken up in the ends whose value is to be computed for right action. If happiness is some end-state of our actions and affections, and virtue is its instrument, then not only virtue but the very engagement of the agent seems contingent upon virtue's achieving a successful outcome.<sup>9</sup> If there were some other means of getting happiness, virtue should be ousted from the sovereign place it seems to occupy in Plato's ethical theories.<sup>10</sup>

We might come to virtue's rescue by construing Plato as an 'evaluative dualist'.<sup>11</sup> He might suppose that there are two different (incommensurable, possibly conflicting) kinds of value, probably with two different sources; in particular, he might contrast the values expressed in the ends of action with those expressed in the virtue of the agent. So Plato might sharply contrast the value to be sought in the pursuit of happiness and the values to be expected from the good, virtuous agent.<sup>12</sup> The thought is an old one; what follows will suggest that evaluative dualism of this kind does

continue to insist that there are fruitful ways of understanding Plato as reflecting later on his own earlier views: see McCabe (2002), (forthcoming).

<sup>6</sup> See Irwin (1995), ch. 4, for some discussion.

<sup>7</sup> See Penner in this volume.

<sup>8</sup> See e.g. *Gorgias* 467c–468e on the derivation of the value of the means from their ends. The moral psychology is simple and intellectualist: the desire for good is universal; what we actually do is determined by what we know or believe about the goods before us. The metaphysics is simple too: there really is something (objectively) good before us; our problem lies in recognizing it. See Penner in this volume.

<sup>9</sup> See Nussbaum (1986), ch. 1.

<sup>10</sup> See e.g. *Gorgias* 469–481; *Republic* 4, *passim*.

<sup>11</sup> McCabe (2002).

<sup>12</sup> This used to be expressed as a contrast between the prudential and the moral: e.g. Vlastos, 1991, ch. 8. One great benefit of recent discussions of ancient and modern ethical

not characterize Platonic ethical theory, at least at some crucial stages of his philosophical career.<sup>13</sup>

### Platonic Objectivity and the Moral Phenomena

Socrates' argument in the *Protagoras* may be a travesty of what might be meant by the Socratic slogan 'virtue is happiness'; and it is surely to traduce the *Protagoras* as a whole to take this argument out of context and produce a theory of such minuscule moral muscle.<sup>14</sup> Nonetheless, critics have often applauded Plato's theory, as it supposedly moved away from the heavy influence of his master,<sup>15</sup> for providing a view of virtue and happiness in which the agent is central—the account in the *Republic* of virtue as psychic harmony.<sup>16</sup> But not so fast.

Although the *Republic's* moral psychology focuses close attention on states of soul—and even identifies the harmonious state of soul with happiness—it has its weaknesses when it comes to thinking about the position of the ethical *agent*. Those weaknesses become evident in Plato's metaphysics of value: in his account of the objective good. The good is explained in terms of some transcendent nature, 'beyond being'; and it is utterly impersonal.<sup>17</sup> That may be fine and dandy. It makes the good objective, all right, and confirms Plato's view of value (goodness, beauty, and so forth) as a real, *out there* property of the things we value. In the mode of the *Euthyphro* puzzle,<sup>18</sup> we value them because they are really valuable; they are not merely valuable because we value them. But this view, too, tends to diminish the moral agent. If the good is impersonal,

theory, however, has been to thaw the frozen grip of those two categories of value: see Williams (1985), Annas (1993).

<sup>13</sup> Whatever we should say about Plato's development, I (continue to) find a significant difference between the *Euthydemus* and what one might see in, e.g. *Meno* or *Lysis*. I take that difference to be the result of reflection; but this view is the source of some fruitful (for me, at any rate) dispute between myself and Penner and Rowe (forthcoming).

<sup>14</sup> Socrates may here use hedonism as a marker for the unacceptability of this moral psychology. Nonetheless, the denial of *akrasia* in the *Protagoras* is a powerful challenge to any subsequent moral psychology.

<sup>15</sup> This is Vlastos' view (1991), and has been mine. Here is an attempt to qualify this view.

<sup>16</sup> Penner and Rowe (forthcoming) take this to be the sole (significant) area of development and change in Plato's thought.

<sup>17</sup> See e.g. Kraut (1973), Annas (1981), ch. 10; for a range of interpretations of the idea of Good in the *Republic*, Reale and Scolnicov (2002).

<sup>18</sup> *Euthyphro* 10a–11b.

and if this impersonal good determines happiness, the state that is happiness is expressly detached from the person who achieves it. So if happiness is defined in terms of objective value, but virtue is a character of persons, then virtue turns out, once again, to occupy a subordinate position. Platonic happiness seems to have nothing to do with *me*.

This may generate a difficulty for any account of objective value. To suppose that value is objective may conveniently suggest that we can be right about it, that disputes can be settled and conflicts resolved in its light.<sup>19</sup> But that supposition may cause some trouble—as the example of the *Protagoras* makes clear—when it comes to moral psychology. For objective value, it might be thought, is what *causes* our pursuit of whatever is valuable. In that case, our failures to succeed in our search for value may only be ascribed to failures in cognition; and in *that* case (it might be thought) there is no room for a richer account of the psyche that does the pursuing. When we end up *not* pursuing what is objectively valuable, is this just because we didn't know what we were doing? In that case, is there any virtue in the pursuit, or any vice in its avoidance? If value is just out there, can anything interesting, from an ethical point of view, be said about *in here*?<sup>20</sup>

Well, why should we care about the role of the moral agent in an account of value? Why should it make any difference to the way I feel about some state of affairs that comes about that *I* was somehow responsible for it doing so? Does it make me happier if my happiness was my own doing? Perhaps it does; and perhaps in any case this is the wrong question to answer. For it may come at the business from the wrong end. The starting-point should be, some say, moral anthropology.<sup>21</sup> We do in fact think that it makes a difference to the value of a state of affairs, how, and with whose connivance, it came about. The moral emotions of regret and remorse, for example, as well as the positive sense of pride in an achievement, cannot be explained without citing the agent in stating the value of what she makes happen. So, if consequentialism fails to include the agent in its explanation of value, it fails to account for the moral phenomena. And that is a serious blow to the explanation itself.

<sup>19</sup> I am not sure how far this would mean that there are no ethical *norms*, as suggested by Penner, in this volume: does the existence of norms require the possibility that we might be blamed for mistakes?

<sup>20</sup> To render this difficulty acute we need some extra assumptions: for example, that real value is transparent to our true desires (e.g. *Gorgias* 466e–470e); again see Penner in this volume.

<sup>21</sup> See e.g. Anscombe (1958), Williams (1985).

That criticism is characteristically Aristotelian—as, many suppose, is moving the moral agent to a central position in moral explanation.<sup>22</sup> Aristotle insists that in ethics as elsewhere we should begin with the phenomena;<sup>23</sup> any account which leaves them out is correspondingly deficient. So much the worse for Plato, whose starting-points are not the phenomena at all. Socrates himself makes a virtue of disagreeing with the many; and all the wise are suspect—except for Socrates himself, who knows nothing. Does Plato have any response to the displacement of virtue in the structure of value? And should he care whether the agent is part of the characterization of value? Is there any interest, for Plato, in the rejection of consequentialism?

This question will go hand in hand, then, with another, about the methods of ethics. What are the *starting-points for ethical inquiry*? Someone might deny that moral anthropology is of any significance: what people actually think may make no difference to how they ought to think. So (someone might say) the collection of data about people's ethical beliefs can only tell us about those beliefs; it is inevitably banal, useless for the formulation of ethical starting-points.<sup>24</sup> No explanation is to be found in a collection of the *explananda*.<sup>25</sup> In that case, where should we begin? Consideration of the Platonic approach might make the question more pressing: for Plato often implies that the deliverances of moral anthropology are inadequate.<sup>26</sup> But then what will ground our ethical methodology? If ethics is to provide its own starting-points, is it ineluctably circular? Or if its starting-points come from elsewhere, can those starting-points carry any weight, or provide the basis for an explanation (rather than merely a restatement of the evidence)? To this I shall return.

### Good Luck or Good Management?

Two passages in the *Euthydemus*, I argue, give us grounds to suppose that Plato is interested in the rejection of consequentialism. The dialogue is

<sup>22</sup> See e.g. Hursthouse (1999), Nussbaum (1986), chs. 9–12.

<sup>23</sup> See *EN* 1045b2–6. Even if the phenomena of physics were obvious (Are they? Are they raw data? Or information already processed by judgement?), we might still be puzzled about what counts as a phenomenon for ethics. An action? A belief? See Owen (1961), Barnes (1981), Nussbaum (1986).

<sup>24</sup> See Nussbaum (1986), ch. 8.

<sup>25</sup> Even a 'simple-minded answer' insists on more: the beautifuls are beautiful by virtue of the beautiful, *Hippias Major* 287c–289d, *Phaedo* 100e.

<sup>26</sup> Inadequate does not mean non-existent, nor false: this does not commit Plato either to the Socratic fallacy, or to extreme other-worldliness. See Geach (1960), Burnyeat (1977).

divided into five episodes, framed by an elaborate narrative. Three of the five are dominated by the Sophists; the second and the fourth are led by Socrates, talking first to the young man Cleinias and then, in an interruption of the frame narrative, to Crito. In the interplay of the Socratic episodes with each other and with their frame lies a quite different moral theory, located in an argument that consequentialism cannot be rationally defended.

The first Socratic episode begins with the eudaimonist commonplace with which I began: 'surely all of us want to do well?' When Cleinias agrees, Socrates asks a trickier question: 'since we all want to do well, *how* are we to do well?' The ambiguity of that question often escapes notice: is Socrates wondering how we can bring it about that we do well? Or is he asking a deeper question: *what is it* to do well? The sequel disambiguates: although his interlocutors think that Socrates is talking about executive skills, Socrates himself is trying to understand the nature of happiness. In replacing his interlocutors' assumptions with his own, he shows up the dangers of an executive model of virtue; and he replaces—or so I shall suggest—his interlocutors' consequentialism with his own account of value. The argument turns on *explaining* happiness; it invokes, therefore, Socrates' account of the metaphysics of value: of the direction in which value flows.

How are we to do well? Surely, by having many goods—such as wealth, health, a good reputation, virtue, and wisdom—and good luck (279c). And yet good luck seems to be supplied by wisdom—since expertise reliably controls success. So it is wisdom that makes people do well; and there is no need to ask for good luck too (280d). Cleinias agrees to this instrumentalist thesis: wisdom is what supplies the goods, the accumulation of which constitutes happiness. But now Socrates demurs. Having lots of good things is only happiness if the good things actually benefit us; and they only do that, if we use them—indeed, if we use them correctly (280e). Incorrectly used, conversely, we are better off without them. Correct use is supplied by nothing but wisdom, because it is wisdom which supplies good fortune and success (281b). Then Socrates produces a surprise.<sup>27</sup> If we are not wise, we are better off poor, weak, inactive, and out of the public eye. And in that case, the original list of goods

<sup>27</sup> 'So, by Zeus, is there any benefit to arise from anything else without intelligence and wisdom?' (281b5). This question marks the shift in Socrates' argument from a discussion of how we are to realize the benefit of such goods as we have to the question of what makes them good at all. Here, I think, the views expressed in the *Euthydemus* diverge from those of *Lysis* 220 or *Meno* 87–88.



(wealth, power and so on) turn out not to be good, themselves in themselves; instead, their value depends on whether they are led by wisdom or by ignorance. Only wisdom, on the contrary, is good (itself by itself); and only ignorance is bad (itself by itself) (281e). Indeed, wisdom is worth any sacrifice; and it can be acquired by teaching. So we should philosophize (282d).

This argument seems to end up at a very different place on the ethical map from its starting-point. And it reaches its destination by two marked changes of gear. Firstly (280e), against the initial thought that doing well is 'having many goods belonging to us', Socrates insists that possession is not enough: at least our goods need to be ruled by wisdom. Secondly (281b), the very conception of a list of goods is called into question by the claim that there is, after all, only one good 'itself by itself': wisdom. So consider the route of the argument again.<sup>28</sup>

At 279a Socrates starts with wealth, moves on to health and a good reputation and only then (with some hesitation) mentions the virtues, and then wisdom itself. *En passant* he toys with the relation between wisdom and good luck. *Socrates* does that? This is the Socrates who is old and unattractive (he uses the sons of Crito as bait to induce the Sophists to take him on, 272c–d), slow to learn and absurd (272c), the object of the Sophists' contempt (273d), and lacking in the elaborate lineage of the young Cleinias (275a). This is the familiar Socrates, who listens to his *daimonion* at inconvenient times (272e), and who seems to care as little for the slings and arrows as he does for the good fortune of others—he is interested only in wisdom and turning others to philosophy. But in that case, his list of goods is offered in a thoroughly disingenuous manner. Why?

Well, this is not merely a list of goods: it is from the outset a discussion of the grounds for their acceptance—or their rejection. Thus, for the first premiss, we *all think* (that we want to do well). In the second, it is *obvious* (that doing well is having goods). In the third, even someone not very important will get the point of wealth, and health; while the assets of public reputation are just (apparently) obvious. Once Socrates moves on to disputed cases, however, the ground shifts: Cleinias should answer not what everyone thinks, nor what is obvious, but what *he thinks himself*

<sup>28</sup> Other interpretations of the argument see no such radical revision towards its close: see Annas, (1999) 40–2, Gill (2000a), Irwin (1995), ch. 4, Long (1996), 23–7, Vlastos (1991) ch. 8; but see e.g. Burnyeat (2003), and Broadie in this volume on how the good 'itself by itself' comes out as a radical postulate.

(278b6–7).<sup>29</sup> Having persuaded Cleinias to take sides in the case of the disputed goods (the virtues, 279b4–c2), Socrates then discovers him blank and amazed in the face of yet another proposition which, he says, everyone believes: that wisdom is good luck (279d6).

The Platonizing reader might feel blank and amazed too. How can this be Socrates' view? 'Good luck' fits well enough in the vulgar list of putative goods (health, wealth, and so on). Cleinias' easy assent to its inclusion trades, we might think, on the idea that it is obviously a good thing to be *lucky*; in that sense, good fortune is on a par with the assets of wealth or good looks. Call this *passive (good) luck*: the merely passive state of having good things happen to you (it has, of course, a bad counterpart—passive bad luck, disasters, and catastrophes). In this sort of luck the agent is not actively involved and takes no deliberate or conscious part in the lucky outcome.<sup>30</sup> Passive good luck is like the other assets by virtue of its contingency; and it is a general descriptor of them all: being wealthy, being beautiful, being well-connected may indeed be matters of pure luck.<sup>31</sup> The luck is 'pure', that is to say, just because it does not come subject to its beneficiary's control: the causal arrangements for beauty, for example, come from the genes, not the active participation of the person with them.<sup>32</sup>

Socrates resists this view—as we might expect. He first reformulates good luck as *success*.

'Wisdom everywhere makes men have good luck. For wisdom does not miss the mark, but necessarily hits it, and does well. Otherwise it would no longer be wisdom.' We agreed in the end, I do not know how,<sup>33</sup> that in summary this is so: whenever wisdom is present, to whomsoever it is present, he does not need good luck in addition. (280a6–b3) (All translations from Plato's dialogues are mine.)

<sup>29</sup> On the demand for sincerity see McCabe (forthcoming).

<sup>30</sup> The lottery winner who chooses to buy a ticket does participate in his own good fortune. But his action is, from a statistical point of view, so blindingly daft, that it only takes its sense from the outside chance of a win, and not from the rational engagement of the agent.

<sup>31</sup> There is a major debate about the significance of ethical contingency in Greek thought; see e.g. Williams (1976) and Nagel (1976), Nussbaum (1986). If the present passage finesses the role of luck in happiness, Socrates' point is to *rule out* the importance of luck for our explanations of happiness.

<sup>32</sup> A vigorous entrepreneur might not agree, of course, that wealth is outside the control of its owner; the plastic surgeon might say the same about beauty. I leave it to my reader to supply the likely response of Plato's Socrates to such counterexamples.

<sup>33</sup> A reminder to the reader to wonder about the structure and sequence of the argument.

This move trades on the notion of a craft. It is the nature of a craft to make sure that what the craftsman does hits the mark;<sup>34</sup> in doing so, he provides good luck—success, nothing to do with lucky accidents. Now if good luck is what you want, you want it no matter what its source and irrespective of your own involvement in its turning up: you want passive good luck. Success, however, is a different beast: to be successful seems to require agency. This *active luck* is both a matter of causation and a matter of responsibility. Causation: the craft controls its outcome; so the craft is both successful and reliable. If I am a craftsman, therefore, I have a reliable means to success because I control what happens, and need not wait for fickle fortune to produce good things for me. Responsibility: if I am *not* a craftsman, I can still go to one for help: provided his advertisement is reliable, then by entrusting my affairs to him, I can ensure that I share in his success.<sup>35</sup> So active luck can be *delegated*; it is not crucial that *I* be the craftsman, so long as I exploit a man who can. The location of the skill, we might therefore say, is indifferent to success, just so long as the skill is exercised on my getting the goods. Those goods, however, are *valuable* independently of the skill which provides them: the *value* of the consequences of my (or my colleague's) exercise of skill is unconditional upon that skill.

But now Socrates rethinks and reformulates, again. The final phase of the argument emphasizes the (mental) state of the agent; and it reconsiders 'doing well'.<sup>36</sup> 'Is there any benefit in any other possessions without prudence and wisdom?' This now is the agent's *own* prudence and wisdom: borrowing it won't do. Does a man<sup>37</sup> with many assets and activities but no intelligence do better than a man with few assets but with intelligence?<sup>38</sup> Surely, a man does not get any benefit from many assets or activities if he has no intelligence; while he gets more benefit from few

<sup>34</sup> That Plato is deliberately forcing our attention towards the scope of the expression *eutuchia* is reinforced by his use here of the idiom of hitting/missing the mark (*hamartanein*, *tunchanein*, 280a7–8; *tunchanein* provides the root verb for *eutuchia*). This vocabulary runs right through the passage (281c1) and is, I think, no mere dead metaphor.

<sup>35</sup> This is taken up in the discussion of teaching at 282c.

<sup>36</sup> Does Plato just muddle a vital distinction between doing well (= acting virtuously) and doing well (= succeeding)? On the contrary—his careful exposure of the breadth and scope of these expressions is designed to clarify, not to obscure, the complexity of 'doing well', of 'good luck' and, later, of 'wisdom' and 'knowledge'.

<sup>37</sup> The gender is in Plato's Greek: for ease of reading and no other reason I retain the masculine pronoun throughout.

<sup>38</sup> The text at 281b8 is disputed; I follow Burnet and reject Iamblichus' version, which omits '... but with intelligence'. I defend this reading in McCabe (2002).

assets if he has intelligence. Of course, when a man does less, he makes fewer mistakes, and so he does less badly, and is less wretched. He is more likely to do less if he is poor and powerless, weak and cowardly, lazy and slow. So (281d-e):

'In short, Cleinias,' I said, 'it seems probable that as for all the things which we said at first were goods, the argument is not about this—how they are by nature goods themselves by themselves—but it seems that matters stand thus: if ignorance leads them, they are greater evils than their opposites, to the extent that they are better able to serve a bad leader; but if intelligence and wisdom lead them, they are greater goods; but themselves by themselves neither sort of thing is worth anything.'

'It seems to be exactly as you say,' he said.

'So what follows for us from what has been said? Surely it is that nothing else is either good or bad, but these things alone are so—wisdom is good and ignorance is bad.'

The putative goods—wealth, strength, a powerful reputation<sup>39</sup>—are in fact greater evils than their opposites if they are led by ignorance, and greater goods than their opposites if led by wisdom: they are not *worth anything* 'themselves by themselves'. Wisdom is the only good, ignorance the only evil; everything else is neither. And, to reiterate—this is the happy person's *own* wisdom, the miserable person's *own* ignorance; delegation won't do.

The sense of the final clauses of this argument has been disputed.<sup>40</sup> But Socrates cannot (on pain of contradicting himself)<sup>41</sup> mean that wisdom is the only good *at all*; he must mean that it is the only good *itself by itself*. In so doing he exposes the relation between wisdom and ignorance, on the one hand, and the other goods on the other; and claims that this relation is not an executive one at all (as we might have supposed). The other goods are *not* ranked below wisdom because wisdom is the instrument to their acquisition, but because wisdom is the *source of their value*.<sup>42</sup> Someone ignorant could easily be wealthy; but they would not be happy. For poverty and wealth benefit or harm depending on the presence or absence

<sup>39</sup> 281b-c recalls the initial list of putative goods, including the virtues of courage and *sôphrosunê*. The argument later revises these earlier assumptions; as a whole it is thus self-critical.

<sup>40</sup> See n. 28 above.

<sup>41</sup> 281d6 allows the putative goods to be comparatively good, under the leadership of wisdom: they are not completely valueless. Aristo and Zeno fell out over this: McCabe (2002).

<sup>42</sup> Burnyeat (2003) makes the same claim for *Apology* 30b.

of wisdom.<sup>43</sup> Likewise someone prudent or brave may easily be ignorant; and their courage or prudence will benefit them only when made valuable by wisdom.<sup>44</sup> Wisdom, therefore, is the source of the goodness of everything else. Its unconditional (itself by itself) nature marks its metaphysical function: it is 'the good'.<sup>45</sup>

What does that mean? Early stages of the argument have established that wisdom is necessary for doing well; its final stages seem to ask about wisdom's sufficiency.<sup>46</sup> How could someone who is wise and poor be better off than the rich man who is ignorant? Even if the ignorant man is unable to exploit his wealth, how is the wise pauper any better off? Socrates' conclusion does not rely on what he has argued for earlier: that wealth cannot be exploited without wisdom. On the contrary, wealth has no value at all without wisdom; wise poverty is *better*. So wisdom is not merely our ability to use what we have; it turns what we have from a disadvantage into an asset, while ignorance renders null the assets we thought we enjoyed.<sup>47</sup> Indeed, we can count nothing as either an asset or a disadvantage unless we know how wisdom is related to it; then,

<sup>43</sup> Socrates' comparative claim is crucial to understanding this point, but it is tricky to interpret. For his conclusion, he need not show that nothing but wisdom is good; but he must show that nothing but wisdom is good itself by itself. He does so by arguing that everything else depends for its value upon wisdom. So the ignorant man with wealth is worse off than the ignorant man without it; and the wise man with poverty is better off than the ignorant man with wealth. What of the wise man with wealth? The argument does not deny (and for symmetry should maintain) that the wise man with wealth is better off than the wise man without. So wealth may have value: but not independently of wisdom. Wealth may have, for example, some potential, which is only realized when accompanied by wisdom (wealth is good *when led by wisdom*: material facts may be transformed by wisdom into something valuable). And on that account wisdom retains its status as the only good (itself by itself). So is the wise poor man happy? Yes—he is better off than the ignorant rich man; but he may not be as happy as the wise rich man. So wisdom seems to have some value, as well as conferring it (I return to this below). Socrates need not deny that, nor insist that wisdom exhausts all value, provided that wisdom is the only source of value (wisdom is in this sense the only good itself by itself). Wisdom is sufficient, therefore, for some value, and some happiness, on its own; and for complete happiness wisdom is necessary, because it is the only source of value.

<sup>44</sup> This may come as a surprise: what of the 'Socratic' claim that the virtues are a unity?

<sup>45</sup> Korsgaard (1983): the *intrinsic* good. She distinguishes, on the one hand, between goods which are final and those which are instrumental to those ends; and, on the other, between goods which are independently valuable (intrinsically good) and those whose value depends on something else (extrinsically good). See also Williams (2003). During the Exeter conference, this specialized use of the expression 'intrinsic' caused some dispute; in what follows here, I eliminate the expression but not the idea.

<sup>46</sup> Irwin (1995), ch. 4.

<sup>47</sup> Thinking we enjoy something is insufficient for that thing to be a component of our happiness; see *Gorgias* 466–470.

anything that is accompanied by wisdom will (somehow) turn out to be an asset, anything without it, a disadvantage. So if wisdom is the source of value, *which* things are in fact rendered good by it may be radically revised: we cannot presume, unless we ourselves are wise, that avoiding the rack *or* being brave will be on that list.<sup>48</sup> We must—as Socrates urges Cleinias to do—revise completely any received ethical opinions we might have had. We cannot assume in advance that the avoidance of pain is of any significance—any more than we can assume that it is not. By parity of reasoning, we should not presume that courage or prudence will be good come what may: they too depend on wisdom for their value. The ethical phenomena are overturned.

Consider the structure of explanation exploited here. Socrates' point is not that wisdom is the best end that we may have, an end which trumps or transcends any other; the relationship of wisdom to doing well is not based on a scale of relative value. Nor is his point merely that wisdom is the only good we can have on its own, while the others are dependent for their occurrence upon it. For here the sovereignty of wisdom<sup>49</sup> is a matter, not of the extremity of its goodness, but of the role it plays in making other things good. We understand value, that is to say, not in terms of an ordering of ends, but in terms of its causal structure. That structure shows that everything else depends for value on wisdom. It also shows that wisdom always confers some value: for even the man with no apparent assets at all (poor, incapable, disenfranchised) will be better off than someone who is ignorant, no matter how fortunate they may seem. Wisdom is the sole source of value, necessary for any goodness and sufficient for some.<sup>50</sup>

This causal structure declares consequentialism to be false, for two reasons. Firstly, in respect of the analysis of value: the source of value is a state of the wise man; happiness cannot be specified merely as the acquisition of a collection of goods. Secondly, in respect of the relation

<sup>48</sup> See n. 43 above. If wealth accompanied by wisdom is more valuable than poverty accompanied by wisdom, but wisdom is the only source of goodness, wealth will not have some residual value of its own. Wisdom, Socrates' argument implies, does not render everything other than itself indifferent but causes distinctions in value.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. Broadie in this volume. Vlastos' treatment of the sovereignty of virtue takes it to indicate virtue's absolute preferability; see e.g. (1991), 209–14, 228, n. 94; this is not, on the interpretation canvassed here, what the *Euthydemus* maintains.

<sup>50</sup> It might be objected that this claim is fatally weak: surely, if wisdom is not sufficient for all goods but only for some, there must be some other, independent, source of goodness. This objection underestimates the force of Plato's objectivity about value: while wealth may have some features which would render it useful only under the leadership of wisdom, those features are not its value nor its goodness.

between means and ends: the value of wisdom does not lie in its ability to supply some end-state other than wisdom itself; wisdom is not an executive skill. No more, however, does wisdom seem to be the end to which everything else is a means: instead, its role is to supply the value to the things from which a life is constructed. It has the effect, therefore, of providing value (by being its source) and of unifying it (by being its only source). It is in this sense that we might say that it is the intrinsic good; without it there is no goodness at all.

So is wisdom then agent-centred? Even this characterization may fail to capture the extremity of Socrates' point. Wisdom is not, on this account, something like a disposition to act in certain ways (for then the value of the disposition would have to derive, at least in part, from those ways of acting), so it is not valuable *as* a character of agents who do such acts. How then *does* wisdom work as a source of value? And how will this give us any help with the problem of how best to live? The consequentialist, rising from the last punch, may ask this question with some insistence: if a story told about agents, or about states of mind, is to replace a story told about ends, it had better *work* to explain how best to live, especially if the received opinions have been thrown away.

### One must Philosophize

The first practical consequence of the claim that wisdom is the only good itself by itself seems to be this: if wisdom is the sole source of goodness, and wisdom is acquired by philosophy, then one must philosophize. To reach this conclusion is the point of the dialogue: to turn young Cleinias to philosophy. It is facily reached at the end of the first Socratic episode,<sup>51</sup> and reappears at the beginning of the second (289d). But then the argument seems to run into trouble; and it directly questions whether (or how) this good 'itself by itself' can support an account of value. The injunction to philosophize, moreover, exposes an unclarity in the conclusions reached so far: if wisdom is the source of value, is it also valuable? Is wisdom an end, worth having, *in itself*?

The second Socratic episode focuses our attention on the differences between treating 'the good' as the *source of value*, and treating it *as an end*.

<sup>51</sup> If my account of the argument in 281b–d is correct, Socrates is disingenuous in his reprise regarding the putative goods; hence the tense of the claim that this is how 'it seemed to us' at 282a2.

Socrates (surprisingly)<sup>52</sup> relies on the assumptions of the early stages of the first Socratic episode. If philosophy is the acquisition of knowledge, then surely knowledge is only worth having if it is correctly used? But for correct use, we need knowledge, as agreed at 281a; so do we need the kind of knowledge that will show us both how to make and how to use what we have made? Then do we need a knowledge which will show us how to make knowledge and how to use it? What knowledge would that be? Socrates and Cleinias spend some time trying to figure it out; but they end up stuck:

We were completely absurd: like children chasing larks, we kept thinking that we had just about caught each of the knowledges; but they kept slipping through our fingers. Why should I elaborate? When we reached the kingly art, and inquired whether that was what provides and creates happiness, then we seemed to tumble into a labyrinth, thinking we were at the end, but then it became clear that we had come round the corner and back to the beginning of our inquiry, and still as far off as we were at the beginning. (291b)

And a labyrinth indeed it seems to be. If knowledge is one of the things whose value must be supplied by knowledge, the analysis is either *circular* (*the labyrinth*) or *regressive* (*chasing larks*)—the strategy to explain value by appeal to what is good itself by itself becomes hopeless when the good itself by itself demands explanation in turn.

They continued the search, nevertheless, but ended with a similar difficulty. Suppose that the kingly craft is what accounts for the correct use of other things. What exactly is it that the kingly craft does, when it does that? What is its product? If the kingly craft is a good thing, then it must have a good product. But it was agreed that the only good is knowledge;<sup>53</sup> so that must be the product of the kingly craft—making

<sup>52</sup> Given, that is, the striking shift of perspective by 281d–e. But this surprise, I claim, is part of Plato's strategy to expose the difficulties of a consequentialist account of value. So the new phase of argument is introduced at 288d by anticipating that it will run into difficulties (Socrates expects that his fate in the argument will force the Sophists to take pity on him); and with some worries about whether they have the right starting place (Socrates asks Cleinias to remind him). In the event, although Socrates begins (288d6–7) with the injunction to philosophize, he replicates the argument of the previous episode only as far as the penultimate stage, missing the significant final phase (281b–e). It is a result of this omission that the present argument falls to a regress. Notice also the heavy irony in which this exchange is encased: Socrates' act of innocent ignorance with the Sophists at 287–288; and his wide-eyed admiration of the speechwriters at 289e.

<sup>53</sup> 292b1–2: 'But Cleinias and I somehow agreed with each other that the good was nothing but some [i.e. some particular] knowledge.' Of course what was agreed was that wisdom is the only good (itself by itself); and this was earlier taken to mean that wisdom is the source of value, rather than an or the end. This revision of the conclusion of



the citizens wise and good. In respect of which of the (many) knowledges canvassed so far will they be wise? To escape the labyrinth, it must be knowledge of itself: but still, what is its product? Making other people good? But in respect of what will they be good? This falls foul of the *Corinthian move*—it *vainly repeats* the same point over and over.<sup>54</sup> Socrates is in despair.

We should be struck by the way in which this new phase of the argument is conducted in terms of knowledge and skill, and eschews mention of wisdom (*phronêsis, sophia*) until the discussion of the dispositions and capacities of the citizens, at 292b. It is, therefore, in sharp contrast with the conclusion of the first Socratic episode.<sup>55</sup> For the effect of Socrates' present emphasis on knowledge and skills is to push us back towards the early, instrumental phases of the first episode, to thinking about value as a means–end structure; and it invites us to ignore what we had come to understand by 281d. Knowledge here, that is to say, may have either instrumental value (as a means to some end which is happiness) or value as the end to which instrumental knowledge may be a means: it does not figure as the source of value. Once this construal of knowledge as an end runs into trouble, however, we are invited by the frame to reconsider our position.

By this stage of the dialogue, then, we have been given two quite different models of 'the good'. It may be the source of value (as the first episode maintained) or it may be the most valuable thing (as the second episode presumes). The puzzles of the labyrinth, in fact, may cause trouble for either model. If we focus on the *source* of value, it unravels in opposite directions, and exposes the complexity of what it is to be good 'itself by itself'. If wisdom is the one thing which is good itself by itself so that everything else has its value by virtue of it, then the relation between what is good itself by itself and what derives value from it is an explanatory or causal one.<sup>56</sup> But if the good itself by itself needs to be explained by its relation to something else, a regress is inevitable—unless there is some definitive way in which the good itself by itself explains (or causes) value.<sup>57</sup>

281d–e is noticeably cagey; and it is put into the elaborate frame of Crito's interruption; see below.

<sup>54</sup> See Pi N. 7.104–6: to plough the same furrow over and over is bewildering, as if idly babbling 'Zeus's Corinth' to children. 'Bewilderment' is described by Pindar as *aporia*. Socrates would approve.

<sup>55</sup> The detailed allusiveness of the frame of the argument suggests that this is deliberate.

<sup>56</sup> These explanations, in the structure of value, are existentially committed: for they cite real features of the world in the *explanans*. See Sedley (1998a), McCabe (2000), ch. 6.

<sup>57</sup> This is a familiar problem for Plato: see *Parmenides* 130–135.

Contrariwise, the good might be definitive, if it is the sole (the dominant) *end*. But if the value of wisdom thus lies in its endlike qualities (it is definitively good, good without qualification) it is not clear how that will account for the value of anything else. Further, if we suppose that the regress stops with something definitively good (the regress is one of the ends of practical reason, not of explanation: the end provides a definitional stop), what is good about it? What is it for it to be good? Its goodness can't be explained in terms of its products (for then it is not the definitive end); but how can we account for it without?

The labyrinth argument, therefore, offers a critique of the argument of the first Socratic episode. For it suggests that our conception of the good itself by itself may invite one or other of two difficulties: a regress, or an unexplained definitional stop. If the function of the good itself by itself is to constitute an end which, by its very finality, will explain pursuit and action, it had better not be regressive. But such ends have the air of unexplained definitional stops (the Corinthian move). If, on the other hand, the function of the good itself by itself is to explain value, it is hard to see how its *finality* is explanatory (rather than just a refusal to explain). For explanations, then, regresses may seem more expansive, and thus more promising. But they may then be circular, or labyrinthine; in that case, they may not explain at all. The tension between these two difficulties in understanding the good itself by itself reflects a deeper problem: when the good itself by itself is the source of value, does it perform this role *by being an end*; or somehow otherwise?

Furthermore, this unravelling of explanation (good as the source of value) and pursuit (good as the end) exposes a gap between knowledge and wisdom. For the first episode *wisdom* needs to be the definitive source of good, and maybe also to be definitively good. But *knowledge* may not be definitive like that: twice. If knowledge is like a craft, then it may need to be subordinated to some other craft. And if knowledge is like a craft, it derives both its value and its content from something else—namely the thing of which it is the knowledge (its product). Knowledge—thus instrumentally conceived—fails to have explanatory power in itself. So then is knowledge distinct from wisdom? Is knowledge distinct from wisdom *here*? If it is, how exactly does *wisdom* constitute a definitive good, itself by itself?

Return to the rejection of consequentialism. In the first Socratic episode the wisdom of the conclusion is the wisdom of the person living the life under consideration: and as such it defies consequentialist analysis. For *my* life it is *my* wisdom: and that performs the role of the good itself by

itself for me. Knowledge, on the other hand, need not be mine to be ethically significant to me—it just needs to be effective in my life, to provide me with active luck (some philosopher-king would do the trick, as Socrates and Cleinias ostentatiously concede at 290b–e).<sup>58</sup> But knowledge is lost in the labyrinth, if knowledge is construed according to the two conditions of a consequentialist analysis: as deriving its value from something else (its end) and as not necessarily *mine* (borrowed knowledge is useful to the acquisition of ends, but not as the source of their value).<sup>59</sup> But if not knowledge, how does Plato offer us a *wisdom* which escapes the labyrinth?

This difficulty reflects another, and demands its solution in terms of the overall project of the dialogue. Socrates wants to show Cleinias a (serious) protreptic to philosophy. It seems, moreover, that he has provided one: if wisdom is the only good itself by itself, then we should philosophize, just if that is the process by which wisdom is acquired. But this may be too simplistic, especially in view of the puzzles posed by the labyrinth. Is philosophizing merely a means to the end of wisdom? And if wisdom is then endlike, does it lead us into the labyrinth? How else might the doing of philosophy relate to the doing well that is wisdom? If Cleinias is to be encouraged to philosophize, what exactly is in it for him?

### Who's Who?

It is at the point of impasse that the dialogue takes a new turn. The conversation between Socrates and Cleinias—about exactly which knowledge is the object of philosophy—had been going as such conversations usually do, when suddenly the worm turns. The hitherto passive and bashful Cleinias delivers himself of some opinions. Speechmaking is not the answer, he says, nor is generalship. Generals, after all, hand their catch over to others to deal with; likewise geometers, astronomers, and

<sup>58</sup> There is a clear reference here to the *Republic* which the argument exploits. In the *Republic* the happiness of the citizens can be provided by the knower (the philosopher-king) to whom they delegate their decisions; here, I say, Socrates rejects that view of the centre of ethical causation.

<sup>59</sup> The wisdom is owned by whoever lives the life in question—the wisdom is mine because this life belongs to me. There is nothing special here, as far as I can see, about a first personal perspective, other than its expression of ownership. There is still, however, a conception of the self here, albeit not one built on Cartesian introspection. See further on ancient and modern conceptions of self Gill (1996*b*), especially introduction, Sorabji (1999), and Taylor (1989).

calculators all hand their product over to the dialecticians. Cleinias seems to have sneaked a look at the *Republic* while Socrates was arguing with the Sophists about contradiction; and even Crito is astonished (290e-291a):

- CR What are you saying, Socrates: did that youth utter those words?  
 SOC Do you think he didn't, Crito?  
 CR No, I certainly do not. For I think that if he did, he would not need educating at the hands of anyone, whether Euthydemus or any other man.  
 SOC Well, by Zeus, perhaps it was Ctesippus who said this, and I have forgotten?  
 CR What sort of Ctesippus?  
 SOC Well I know for sure that it was not Euthydemus nor Dionysodorus who said that. But, my good Crito, maybe it was one of the superior beings who was present and uttered these words? For I know very well that I heard them.  
 CR Yes, by Zeus, Socrates—it seems to me that it was one of the superior beings, and very much so. And did you find what you were looking for, or not?

It is tempting to read this little exchange in code. Who *really* said all this stuff about knowledge and dialectic? Why is Crito sceptical about its author? Is it because it was a clever thing to say? Or is it because it displays unusual cooperation with the Socratic enterprise—so it couldn't be Ctesippus or the brothers either? Who does Crito think did say it? Does he think Socrates said it (a superior being)? Or does Plato make Crito imply that *Plato* said it? And why should any of that matter so much? (Should we read Plato's dialogue as a code?)

These questions devolve onto another—why should this be an extraordinary thing to say, anyway? First the content: the reference to dialectic and its advantages over astronomy seems to be an elaborate appeal to the high theory of the *Republic*. Second the argument: Cleinias here argues with vigour, supported by reasons and on his own behalf. Crito's insistence that it could not have been Cleinias suggests that there is something special—even divine—about being able to argue vigorously, on your own behalf, and with grounds. But that ability does not seem to be productive (Cleinias just forces renewed *aporia*): instead, this kind of reasoning seems to be (divinely) valuable in itself, and certainly what education is for (since if he has it, Cleinias doesn't need educating). Does that make this reasoning an end, without entering the labyrinth? Does this somehow, whether as an end or otherwise, account for its being the *source* of value?

How you reason is here understood to be *internal* to who you are ('what sort of Ctesippus?').<sup>60</sup> This thought is not new in the dialogue. Consider,

<sup>60</sup> See McCabe (forthcoming).

for example, the earlier attack by the Sophists on the importance of consistency (285d–286b). When Socrates complains that what they say is inconsistent with what they said before, they reply that what they said before has no bearing on what they say now: if Socrates insists that it does, that is because he is an old Cronos (287b). Socrates' characterization of intellectual positions repeatedly cashes issues in rationality (consistency, contradiction, the differential commitment to some point of view) in terms of *who someone is*. Someone may tell the truth over time (like Proteus at 288b–c); observe consistency over time (like Cronos); or insist on saying what they really think (as Socrates advises Cleinias at the beginning of the first Socratic episode). These are no mere myths nor metaphors: on the contrary, the justification of consistency, of telling the truth and of saying what you really think is delivered in terms of the person who does so, the person whose identity is conceived as reason. Reason—or wisdom—is both developed and deployed through philosophical discussion. It is not something that can be delegated or borrowed; in a philosophical conversation, both parties are actively engaged just so long as they speak for themselves (recall Socrates' insistence on this in the discussion of the putative goods). And it is not something which derives its value from its product or its effects: if reasoning well is an aspect of divinity,<sup>61</sup> it must be itself a part of the good.

So *why* should Cleinias philosophize? How does his philosophizing make any difference to how he best should live? The process of argument, on Socrates' account in this dialogue, is one of establishing the internal coherence and consistency of someone's view: and this is sharply differentiated from sophistic argument, in which it does not matter what you say (you will be refuted, whatever). But coherence and consistency, once established, are not the means to wisdom; they are *constituents* or *conditions* of wisdom.<sup>62</sup> And if wisdom is the good itself by itself, it will give value to its conditions not instrumentally, but as a matter of its own constitution. It is necessary to philosophize, therefore, because philosophizing is the development of wisdom; both its value and its conditions are dependent on wisdom.

Philosophizing, what is more, is the process in which each interlocutor is himself engaged, on his own behalf (it is not the consequence of luck, whether active or passive). In philosophizing—so the *Euthydemus* con-

<sup>61</sup> See Sedley (1999).

<sup>62</sup> Notice, for example, the connection between consistency and the ancient divinity, Cronos, at 287d.

tends—the philosopher develops (or changes or integrates) himself (thus, the protreptic works on Cleinias by 290b).<sup>63</sup> In so doing, the philosopher proceeds towards wisdom at the centre of the best life, the source of its value. So is wisdom valuable *in itself*? And is it by being valuable *in itself* that it confers value on everything else? How far does this account of the centrality of reason move away from an account of value which is determined by the relation of means to ends?

Certainly, wisdom itself, once developed (if it is ever developed),<sup>64</sup> equally imparts value to other things: nothing here entails that there are no other goods, or no other ends than wisdom. So it does not follow that the happy life just is philosophizing, nor that philosophy exhausts all the dependent goods. But it does show that the relation between philosophy and wisdom will transform the life of the philosopher. It will transform, of course, the list of dependent goods (for that list is still up for grabs); and it will transform the philosopher herself. It is thus part of a structure of value which centres on the person who may live the happy life; wisdom makes that life coherent and integrated, at the same time as it identifies the liver of the life. Then wisdom seems to have two roles: it is, for the individual, the source of happiness in his life; and it is itself a good thing, a state of soul incontrovertibly worth having. Wisdom is both the source of value and an end; and so an end like no other.

There is, therefore, a dialectical relation between the two Socratic episodes of the *Euthydemus*. The first concludes by representing wisdom as the source of value, and places little emphasis on its function as an end. The second, by contrast, begins by treating knowledge as an end, and claims that to be incoherent. The way out of the labyrinth is found by postulating the *wisdom of individual persons* (if it is attainable) as what renders things valuable, since this is what structures a person and a life. But then wisdom is also valuable: not as its own product, but in itself. In that case, wisdom's role as an end is sharply demarcated from that played by the putative goods with which Socrates began. The effect of this dialectic is to show just how the claim that wisdom is 'the good itself by itself' needs to be interpreted; and thence to distinguish the source of value from valued ends. That distinction is a weapon in Plato's armoury against consequentialism.

<sup>63</sup> The theme of personal identity is pervasive; McCabe (1998)

<sup>64</sup> This is a thorny issue: does Plato need to insist that there ever is or will be a wise man if he is to make this account of wisdom make sense? See Gerson (2003).

### The Moral Phenomena and Objectivity

Only if we read the sequence of arguments in the *Euthydemus* in this dialectical way will a distinction emerge between wisdom as the course of value and wisdom as valuable itself. But such a dialectical reading is pressed upon us by the frame arguments, whose complex interplay allows us to understand the structure of the dialogue as a whole.<sup>65</sup> What does it give us, as a moral theory? What does it say to the consequentialist? And what—to revert to the questions with which I began—does it tell us about objectivity in ethics?

We might think that consequentialist explanation is inadequate because it fails to give sufficient weight to the agent in ethical explanation. And we might think this, as I suggested, just as a matter of the moral phenomena: no ethical explanation will satisfy that fails to give a full account of what it is like for the agent to be involved in the moral life. But is this Plato's point? His arguments here, if I have them right, are not primarily focused on the *agent* as such. Instead, they insist that the central location of value should be the *person*. This gives no commitment (one way or another) to whether the best life for a person is one which characterizes him as an agent, as a doer of deeds, rather than as a thinker of thoughts. This is a far cry from consequentialism, because it locates all primary value in the person; and its explanation of value does not specify how that should be translated into action, nor how it views the accumulation of ends. As Cleinias is brought to see, Socrates maintains that we should not pre-empt the theory by assumptions about the moral phenomena. The life of the wise man may be active; or it may be quiet—whichever will depend on how, as a matter of fact, wisdom organizes its value in a life.

All this should force us to rethink what is meant by Platonic intellectualism. A common view of the intellectualist focus of Plato's ethics takes it to be based on something like a craft: since value is an objective feature of the world, and is computable, then what we need for happiness is the craft that allows us to make successful ethical computations: a measuring skill. This sort of claim, I suggested, may be what we find in arguments such as the *Protagoras*' denial of *akrasia*; and these arguments proffer an intellectualist ethic as a strategy for arriving at the most possible goods. For they suppose that there are no countervailing psychological drives than knowledge (so that failure is ascribed to ignorance). So knowing what course of action maximizes the good is sufficient to motivate us to

<sup>65</sup> See Gill (2002*b*), Penner and Rowe (forthcoming).

do that action; and, as I argued above, this makes tangential the role of the agent herself in the ethical life (since reliable luck, or reliable and clever friends, would suffice). On such a consequentialist account, as I argued, virtue occupies a subordinate position in the explanation of value.

The arguments from the *Euthydemus* that we have considered, however, take a different view. They are intellectualist because they suppose that wisdom is the source of value, rather than the source of our acquiring value. Wisdom, then, is central to ethical explanation. But that centrality, I argued, puts the person in central position: and it supposes that value flows from there to the exercise of rationality: philosophy. So far, so intellectualist. But does this now move Plato right away from any claim he might have to ethical objectivity? If the good is not in the known (such as the form of the good) but in the knower, how can it be objective?

Of course if the virtue that is wisdom is a state of mind, it does not follow that its value is merely mind-dependent. On the contrary, in fact: for wisdom is a real disposition of the person: it has character over time, and coherence at a time (indeed, the Sophistic sections of this dialogue are dedicated to examining these metaphysical assumptions).<sup>66</sup> What is more, wisdom's content is (I take Plato consistently to suggest)<sup>67</sup> what corresponds to reality out there: knowledge is of what is, how it is. The good itself by itself, in both these ways, is real, even if it is a real feature of *persons*, and as such it is a suitable object for metaphysical study. This real feature of persons, moreover, will be, in this very specialized sense, virtue, and as such it is a suitable object for ethical study. Plato's metaphysics of morals, that is to say, rests on his account of the person who is wise; and that person is who the philosopher is becoming. Plato is, notwithstanding his silence about the form of the good in this dialogue,<sup>68</sup> committed to the thought that ethics and metaphysics are mutually dependent; and that inspires his account of the objective good. Virtue is determined by the nature of things.

What does that then mean for Plato's moral theory? What we find here is not, as I have argued, a theory that begins from the moral phenomena; and as such it would find little sympathy with the prevailing wind nowadays. Plato's methodology does not start from the middle of things;<sup>69</sup> and it is a consequence of this that the theory which eventuates is so startling.

<sup>66</sup> McCabe (1998).

<sup>67</sup> See e.g. *Republic* 476–480; *Sophist* 243–245, despite what I think are radical changes of mind.

<sup>68</sup> We need not suppose that the form of the good is the only way in which objectivity about value might be expressed by Plato.

<sup>69</sup> Williams (1985).



It is a theory which eschews the thought that, while wisdom may explain happiness, there is some other source of the imperatives of morality (it is not, then, an example of evaluative dualism). No more, as I have suggested, is this theory based on the great metaphysical structures of the *Republic*—whether the *Euthydemus* anticipates the *Republic* or corrects it or is merely ignorant of it, there is no form of the good here. But that does not mean that in this dialogue Plato's moral theory starts from nowhere. On the contrary, it starts from some striking (and strikingly persuasive) claims about the identity of persons; and continues with some insights into how that may be related to the proper practice of philosophy. The starting-points, that is, are not the moral phenomena; they are metaphysical theory. The *Euthydemus* does not suppose that there are lines of demarcation already drawn between the study of value and the study of what is real. This appeals to objectivity most of all.

Suppose we grant Plato all of this: what then does his theory say to a modern account of consequentialism? We might start, perhaps, with the labyrinth; and recall the way in which Plato gives structure to the ways in which the good may function in ethical accounts. For his arguments, I have suggested, separate the good as the source of value from the good as an end, insisting that endlike explanations are insufficient for explanation. In doing this, they make the claim that in reaching ethical explanations we should look, not to the value of some good external to the ethical agent, but internal to him: to some state of the agent which in itself explains value. Nay more: Plato insists that the intrinsic good is not a state of an agent, as such, but rather a state of persons—leaving undetermined whether what constitutes happiness does in fact arise from agency at all.

This is, you might complain, a thoroughly rarefied conception of the source of value, which begins from a highly abstract conception of what the person is, the idealized possessor of wisdom. In that case, such a response to the consequentialist approach to value and action may seem to be entirely beside the point; a theory which just fails to start where it must, from things as they seem to us from amid the hurly-burly. But why, Plato might respond, should the highly abstract *not* figure in the determination of value? Why, he might object, has it become a matter of doctrine that we should start from the deliverances of moral anthropology?

Plato does not—we should remind ourselves—proceed from what he says about wisdom to a view of the best life which *must* be ascetic, or quietist. Rather, he argues that *whatever* actually turns out to be the best life has its source in wisdom; and that state of mind is one which we do not yet occupy. In that case, what he has to offer here is not actual suggestions

for the content of the best life; rather, he offers us some account of how to go about thinking about it. This approach (and not a pre-existing prejudice against the goods of the vulgar conception) is what makes for the abstractness of the account. But does this in turn mean—as the advocates of moral anthropology insist—that ethical inquiry, conducted in such an abstract way, is thoroughly limited, unable to engage with any of our own realities? If our realities are limited to the phenomena of ethical experience, they may well be inimical to an abstract approach. But it is not obvious that this tells against abstraction, except for the broad sceptic. For the phenomena, by virtue of their very particular nature, are vulnerable to the objection that they are mere collections of subjective appearances, with no application beyond the fact that they are believed, or acted upon by someone, somewhere.

Plato offers us a different view, one which responds both to a complaint that ethical theory should not be self-absorbed, and to the objection that it should provide more than a collection of subjective opinions. For his account of the origins of value relies, not on anthropology, nor on market research, but on theses from elsewhere in the philosophical spectrum—from metaphysics and epistemology. He suggests that there are answers to be found to the structure of ethical explanation from considering broad philosophical questions: what counts as a person? How is it that a person may be related to their wisdom, to their actions, to their own experience of happiness? If the origin of value is wisdom, what constitutes wisdom? How are wisdom and knowledge to be separated from belief and confusion? How are they to give us access to the truth? This, I submit, provides us with an approach to the study of value which confronts the issues of subjectivity and objectivity where they belong. For this is not a separate puzzle among the moral phenomena of ethics, but one to which ethics, metaphysics, and epistemology may jointly contribute when we try to understand just how to go about asking 'how best to live?'

Plato does not espouse subjectivism; but he supposes that real value depends on the person who is involved in it. This implies in turn that any view of value which dissociates it and makes it independent from the person involved, is just wrong; so that consequentialism must be false. Plato attacks consequentialism, that is to say, on the grounds of ethical metaphysics—and not, as other opponents of consequentialism do, on the grounds of the moral phenomena, or moral anthropology; nor yet on the basis of some other a priori truth which generates evaluative dualism.<sup>70</sup>

<sup>70</sup> The conclusion of the argument of *Euthydemus* 281 denies pluralism, and so dualism.

Consequentialism gives us the illusion that in talking about ends, we speak of facts; and it hopes to ward off the vagueness of virtue theory (let alone the austerity of categorical imperatives) by offering something like objectivity. Plato has a response: objectivity may not be just out there, in what we pursue; that does not preclude value's being real, nor its being ours.

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## What Difference do Forms make for Platonic Epistemology?

CHRISTOPHER ROWE

It will presumably be uncontroversial to claim that the so-called Platonic ‘Theory of Forms’ (whatever we understand that name, ‘Theory of Forms’, to refer to) represents the first attempt in Western philosophy to work out a *theory* of ethical objectivity. Under the heading of ‘Platonism’, or ‘Platonic essentialism’, it still represents something of a benchmark for objectivist and realist theories; so, for instance, for the deconstructionists, if there are any of that tribe still remaining. In this chapter I shall be asking whether and how this ‘benchmark’ theory of Plato’s can in the end properly be called ‘objectivist’.

I shall pass over the jejune question of whether Plato has left us with anything that can in fact properly be called a ‘theory’, since at any rate we can *construct* a theory on the basis of what he has provided; it is just that, perhaps, he never quite got round to saying what the theory was, all at one go. (But then, when did Plato ever do that, on any subject? It is not his way: the author of the *Seventh Letter* got that much right.)<sup>1</sup> What is assuredly true is that modern interpreters of Plato have decided that Forms make a tremendous difference: enough difference to mark one of the decisive turning-points in the dialogues—the point at which Plato moves from being an ‘early’, or Socratic, Plato to being a ‘middle’ one. And this is all the more remarkable, when three of the so-called ‘middle’ dialogues, namely *Cratylus*, *Phaedo*, and *Symposium*, actually belong, according to the best stylistic criteria (or at least the only ones available),

<sup>1</sup> ‘There exists no *sungramma* of mine, on the really important subjects’ (*Letter* 7, 341c), i.e. no systematic account?

to the earliest group: so Charles Kahn, though in fact he claims no more than to have pointed out what was there for all to see.<sup>2</sup>

However, chronology is not what I mean to talk about in the present essay. I introduce it to give some bite, or background, to my title. Forms make so much difference, for the interpreters who take it that way, that the introduction of such entities marks—for those interpreters—the boundary between two distinct periods in Plato's writing. The idea roughly is that in dialogues such as *Phaedo* and *Republic* Plato introduces the 'classical' theory of Forms, so marking himself off decisively from Socrates. (The term 'classical' theory will serve to identify the version we allegedly find in the 'middle' dialogues, as opposed to later developments, and perhaps to some 'early' or primitive theory associated, for example, with the *Euthyphro*.) This reading of the development of Plato's metaphysics ultimately derives, of course, from Aristotle, and from passages such as the following:

...two things may be fairly ascribed to Socrates—inductive arguments and universal definition, both of which are concerned with the starting-point of science. But Socrates did not make the universals or the definitions exist apart [did not make them separate, *chôrista*]; his successors, however [i.e. Plato and his followers], gave them separate existence [*echôrisan*], and this was the kind of thing they called Ideas [or Forms]...<sup>3</sup>

We tend to describe Platonic Forms as 'transcendent', and as inhabiting some sort of other world (the 'two-world' theory), but this is—or so I shall claim—in large part Aristotle's construction, dressed up with the language of Platonic similes and metaphors.<sup>4</sup> Like Aristotle, the move we tend to think of as decisive—the one that finally marks Plato as his own man—is the move from (what one might call) immanence to (what we regularly call) transcendence, involving the identification of a type of things that are not only separable from particular objects in the familiar world of sense,

<sup>2</sup> Kahn (1996), 42–8, and (2002). This division of the dialogues into 'early', 'middle', and 'late' is particularly dear to the hearts of Anglophone scholars, even though much of the original work on which it is based—or *claims* to be based—was carried out in continental Europe. It will be one of the subordinate purposes of the present chapter (or at any rate one of its effects) further to undermine the alleged significance of the early-middle-late paradigm.

<sup>3</sup> *Metaphysics* 13, 1078b27–32, trans. Ross (in Barnes 1984).

<sup>4</sup> I refer here, not to the rather sophisticated kind of 'two-world' idea attributed to Plato by e.g. Silverman (2002), 15–16 and 252, but to the caricature of a theory that can all too easily be constructed and attributed to Plato on the back of an image like that in the myth of the *Phaedrus*, where the Forms exist literally in some 'place above the heavens' (*Phaedrus* 247c). Of course (a) Forms as such have no spatial location, and (b) for Plato there is nothing outside the universe ('the all'), not even place; what unsophisticated modern interpreters attribute to Plato, assuming him to be unsophisticated, is a kind of non-spatial location, 'outside' the universe but without actually being outside it.

but actually separated from them. The decisive move, then, is ‘separation’: since our habitual ways of understanding Platonic metaphysics are so heavily influenced by Aristotle, I see no harm in borrowing his term, at least for dialectical purposes. (I stress that I am by no means committed myself to this Aristotelian reading, and shall ultimately be supporting its abandonment. Indeed I do not know of any way of making sense of it.)

Now my first substantive proposal is that, despite the general importance that we tend to attribute to this ‘separation’, everyone recognizes that any difference it would make is in the context of *metaphysics*, not in that of ethics. Forms, as we like to say (again, following Aristotle in the *Metaphysics* passage cited above), are the very things Socrates was setting out to define—only now they are separated, *hypostasized*. Socrates’ obsession with definition—as we call it, encouraged by the presence in the Platonic corpus of a number of dialogues in which his primary purpose seems to be just that: *defining* things<sup>5</sup>—presupposes a decent set of stable objects waiting to be defined; Plato provides them. Whatever is *hosion* is not *hosion*<sup>6</sup> because the gods approve of it—rather the gods approve of what is *hosion* because it is so; a fortiori, it isn’t *our* thinking the *hosion* *hosion* that accounts for its being such; ergo—we are tempted to conclude—it’s just a brute fact for Socrates that it’s *hosion*, just as it’s a brute fact that there are hard objects in the world, ones that tend to give you severe bruising if you bump into them. But while everyone accepts the reality of hardness, the reality of *hosiotês* is not so secure, and indeed tends to be questioned by certain dubious characters (characters such as Protagoras).<sup>7</sup> Plato’s new move—the identification of a collection of new objects: ‘separated’ Forms—then provides the necessary assurance.

Or so the familiar story runs. According to Aristotle, it is also a terrible, and fundamental, mistake—one so fundamental that he can use it as what marks off *his* account of things from Plato’s (he, Aristotle, avoided the Platonic error). But there are no obvious grounds in any of this for supposing that (the move that I am currently labelling as) separation by itself affects the substance of Platonic *ethical* theory. There are important

<sup>5</sup> The so-called ‘dialogues of definition’—usually excluding the *Theaetetus*, which is ‘late’, or later, and so not ‘Socratic’ in the same way as the ‘early’ dialogues. (‘Socratic’ signifies ‘closer to, and to a greater or lesser degree trying to mimic directly the activity of the real Socrates’: see n. 8 below.)

<sup>6</sup> I here refer to one specific example among the ‘dialogues of definition’, the *Euthyphro*, in which Socrates appears to set out to define *hosiotês*, ‘piety’ or (in some, usually older, translations) ‘holiness’.

<sup>7</sup> Attacked at considerable length in the *Theaetetus* (but not, at least on the surface, in the *Protagoras*) for his relativist, or subjectivist, ideas.

discontinuities between Socrates and Plato in ethics, for example in relation to the explanation of action, and in relation to that good ‘for the sake of [which] every soul does everything’, as Plato has the character Socrates declare in the *Republic*.<sup>8</sup> Such differences, however, have nothing whatever to do with the ‘separation’ move. Separation—or so it seems—merely cements an already existing commitment to ethical (and other) objectivity.

But does it? Harold Cherniss, in a classic piece from the 1930s,<sup>9</sup> talked about the ‘epistemological necessity for the existence of the Ideas [Forms]’:

The epistemological necessity for the existence of the Ideas is proved by the same indirect method as was used in establishing the ethical necessity.<sup>10</sup> Since the phenomena to be explained have first to be determined, it is essential to proceed by analysis of the psychological activities, to decide the nature of these activities and their objects. In brief, the argument turns upon the determination of intellection as an activity different from sensation and opinion.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> *Republic* 6, 505d–e. I am assuming here what I believe to be true, that the *Republic* (specifically, Book 4) announces a move that takes Plato decisively away from the kind of theory of action that he explores and, implicitly, recommends for our attention in other dialogues such as *Lysis*, *Euthydemus*, and *Symposium*: see especially Penner and Rowe (forthcoming). I am also assuming that the good (or the Good) that makes such a splendid stage-entrance in the central books of the *Republic* is something altogether grander than the kind of good that is, by and large, being talked about in ‘Group One’ dialogues, i.e. those that the stylometrists claim to have been written before the group that includes the *Republic* (see Kahn 2002): grander, in that it has political and indeed cosmic dimensions which, if they are present in those other dialogues, are markedly less conspicuous. The Socrates of *these* dialogues is happy enough to inquire into the good of the individual. It would be disingenuous to suggest that the goods of different individuals will not, under this perspective, have something in common (otherwise, what sense would it make to mount a general inquiry into them?); still, it seems perfectly possible, in principle, to ask about the *human* good without bringing in a political or cosmic perspective, and by and large that is what the dialogues of Group One seem to do. I myself now feel no great qualms about saying that this non-political, non-cosmic perspective was also that of the historical Socrates; Aristotle’s evidence certainly seems to confirm that the pre-*Republic* theory of action (see above) came from that source (Rowe 2002) and that theory itself gives no purchase to talk of ‘political’, let alone ‘cosmic’, goods. (See Part II of Penner and Rowe (forthcoming), which provides an extended account of the theory.)

<sup>9</sup> Cherniss (1965 [1936]); page numbers cited subsequently are those in (1965).

<sup>10</sup> Cherniss (1965 [1936]), 3: ‘To compare and contrast one must have a definite standard of reference which must itself be underivative lest it become just another example of the characteristic in question and so lead to an infinite regress. The “dialogues of search” [examples cited include *Euthyphro*, *Laches*, *Lysis*], by demonstrating the hopelessness of all other expedients, show that the definitions requisite to normative ethics are possible only on the assumption that there exist, apart from phenomena, substantive objects of these definitions which alone are the source of the values attaching to phenomenal existence.’

<sup>11</sup> Cherniss, (1965 [1936]), 5.

Further:

The possibility of abstraction itself [as outlined at *Phaedo* 96B], if it is to have any meaning, Plato believes, requires the independent reality of the object apprehended by the intellect. That is the basis of his curt refutation of mentalism in the *Parmenides* [at 135B5–C3]. So the process of abstraction and analysis outlined in the *Philebus*, which is there said to be possible because of the participation of the phenomena in real Ideas [*Philebus* 16c10 ff.], and which in a simple example of its use in the *Republic* [596A] is called ‘our customary method’, is in the *Phaedrus* [249B5–C4] designated as *anamnêsis* [i.e. ‘recollection’] and said to require the substantial existence of the Ideas and previous direct knowledge of them by the intellect. The successful ‘recollection’ of the Ideas by means of the dialectical process is in the *Republic* [479E–480A] said to constitute intellection as distinguished from opinion, and the man who is capable of such activity is there described in terms parallel to the ‘mythical’ description of the ‘winged intellect’ of the *Phaedrus* [249C].<sup>12</sup>

‘Separation’, then, on this account, leaves a gap between knowledge and its objects, needing to be filled by ‘recollection’ (which claims to explain how we ever get acquainted with ‘separated’ objects). So the accuracy of the Aristotelian diagnosis is confirmed: ‘separation’ is the key Platonic move. (I do not endorse every aspect of this narrative, which I use merely as an exemplar of a particular kind of interpretation of Plato which is still fairly standard, and some aspects of which I am proposing to reject).

All of this looks plausible enough as a reconstruction. ‘Recollection’ itself, seen here as bridging the gap left by ‘separation’ between soul/mind and Forms, is after all not so bad a theory, if it can be made into a theory of innate ideas—whether we understand it in its ‘Kantian’ (‘κ’) version or its ‘Demaratus’ (D) version (as Dominic Scott labels them).<sup>13</sup> Thus by κ, ‘human understanding... comes out as the product of an interaction between the information that our senses give us about particular physical objects and the concepts, for instance, of equality or beauty, under which we classify those particulars’.<sup>14</sup> D, by contrast,

... makes Plato more generous about what the senses, for instance, are capable of giving us. They can inform us that a particular object is beautiful or that two particulars are equal without any help from our innate knowledge of the forms. He uses innateness only to explain a philosopher’s knowledge of the transcendent entities, the forms, with which particulars are to be unfavourably compared as being deficient.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Cherniss, (1965 [1936]), 7–8.

<sup>13</sup> Scott (1995).

<sup>14</sup> Scott (1995), 17.

<sup>15</sup> Scott (1995), 19. ‘Deep in our souls... is knowledge of entities that exist in separation from the particulars, [separated] entities of which most people have no consciousness at



So far so good. But here is the rub: whichever of the two models,  $\kappa$  and  $\mathfrak{D}$ , may be in play, Plato does not in fact use recollection for bridging purposes, except perhaps in the *Meno*; and the set-up in the *Meno* does not clearly include separated Forms, even though it does involve an analogous gap between knower and known.<sup>16</sup> That is to say,  $\kappa$  is not used, as it surely might have been, to say ‘so, you see, there isn’t a problem: because of recollection, and its easy combination with perception, access to those other entities is perfectly straightforward’ (though we might read this kind of answer into the *Meno*); and  $\mathfrak{D}$  actually seems to *emphasize*, not obliterate, the separation between particulars and Forms. As it happens, Scott argues that  $\mathfrak{D}$  is the dominant interpretation of recollection, being what is at issue in both *Phaedo* and *Phaedrus*,<sup>17</sup> and also consistent with the epistemology of the *Republic*:

In the *Phaedo* the senses are unequivocally said to deceive us. This type of epistemological pessimism comes out just as strongly in the *Republic*, especially in the story of the prisoners in the cave in Book VI . . . This is a brilliant parable for the way philosophical discoveries were for Plato startling revisions of ordinary ways of thinking . . .

Yet, Scott goes on,

[o]nce we have felt the full force of Plato’s pessimism about the pre-philosophical state, we can begin to appreciate his enormous optimism about the ability of human understanding to transform itself. Plato was not a sceptic. In his view, if we now happen to be imprisoned in the mundane perspective, we are not condemned to remain so. And the greater the inadequacy of that perspective, the more remarkable is the power of philosophy to transform it.<sup>18</sup>

If  $\kappa$ , then, just is not in fact used as a bridge between knower and Forms,  $\mathfrak{D}$  actually *cannot* be used for such purposes, even in principle. There is no

all; most people would deny that there exist those entities that Plato talks of as Forms. But just as the Persians were misled about Demaratus’ intentions [there is another message under the wax in which the message the Persians understand is written], so most people are deceived by the surface message into thinking that the world of particulars is all there is. Only the philosopher, who has become puzzled by the confusions and contradictions inherent in our external sources, takes so different a view of reality.’

<sup>16</sup> I am myself convinced by Scott’s account of ‘ $\kappa$ ’ and ‘ $\mathfrak{D}$ ’ as the alternative readings available; there is probably no need to commit myself, on the present occasion, on the question as to which is in play in any particular context in Plato.

<sup>17</sup> ‘The *Phaedrus*, in fact, seems to treat the theory of recollection much as the *Phaedo* does, tying it down firmly to the separation of copy and model that is one strand in the middle-period [*sic*] theory of forms’ (Scott 1995: 80).

<sup>18</sup> Scott (1995), 84–5.

need for the Persians to scrape off the wax (the ‘mundane perspective’ will be enough to get them through), and in fact they do not. On this model the gap caused by separation, so far from being bridged, might even be said to be widened.

So what recollection gives us, at most, as thinking beings, is a notional link—a link *in principle*—to the objects of thought, preventing that extreme sort of separation that Parmenides is allowed to introduce after the failure of different models of participation in the *Parmenides*.<sup>19</sup> But all the hard work is still to do, at any rate in relation to those Forms that *matter*: what we might want to call the ‘moral’ and ‘aesthetic’ Forms, which in the dialogues are sometimes summed up by a reference to ‘the good, the fine, and the just’. The elusiveness of these Forms, even for the philosopher, is one of the standing themes of the so-called ‘middle’ dialogues.<sup>20</sup> The Forms of goodness, beauty, and justice are in principle accessible; only it’s the devil’s own job actually to get all the way there. So while recollection offers us a theoretical solution to the problem of separation, in practice we still seem to be left so far away from the things (Forms) we really want to get hold of that we seem hardly any better off. Recollection, after its showing in *Meno*, *Phaedo*, and then *Phaedrus*, fades from the picture; is that because it really provides no answers?<sup>21</sup>

So does Plato think that philosophers ever achieve knowledge? (This is the question that Cherniss’ reconstruction ultimately seems to raise: yes, Forms are there to give bottom, as it were, to Socrates’ intuitions; but what if we cannot get access to them? Was Socratic inquiry after all just a wild-goose chase?) The evidence seems to point in both directions. On the one hand, if the philosopher-rulers in the *Republic* lack knowledge, then there will apparently cease to be any justification for putting them in power, since Book 5 argued for philosophical rule precisely on the basis of the difference between knowledge and inferior states of mind.<sup>22</sup> Then again, Diotima in the *Symposium* gives no indication that the ascent of love is beyond human capacities. But there are more than enough places in the

<sup>19</sup> See *Parmenides* 133b–134e.

<sup>20</sup> For the list good/fine/just, see e.g. *Phaedrus* 276c (actually in the order just/fine/good); for the particular difficulty of grasping these, see e.g. *Phaedrus* 263a–c (comparing getting a hold on just and good with getting a hold on what, e.g. ‘iron’ or ‘silver’ refer to), or—a paradigmatic passage—*Republic* 5, 474b ff.

<sup>21</sup> Or is recollection simply taken for granted—as Cherniss, for example, seems to suppose (see above)? There is actually no reference at all to recollection in Books 5–7 of the *Republic*.

<sup>22</sup> This is 474b ff. (cf. n. 20 above).

dialogues where Socrates seems to tell us that knowledge *is* beyond human capacities.<sup>23</sup> Now if knowledge is thought of as (difficult to acquire, but nevertheless) achievable, then there is no problem: at least some philosophers, given the right techniques and a sufficient degree of acumen, will be able to gain access to the truth and give us the benefits of it. All very straightforward: it would fit perfectly with the view of Plato as the Platonist, the essentialist, the paradigmatic representative of the idea of ethical objectivity.

I have argued elsewhere, however, that this is not in fact Plato's position.<sup>24</sup> I shall do no more than summarize my argument here. This is that (a) we have no reason for supposing Plato to be anything other than serious about the claim, made twice by the Socrates of the dialogues,<sup>25</sup> that the wise will not be philosophers (one does not *love*, or desire, what one already has);<sup>26</sup> (b) that it then follows, if wisdom consists in the possession of knowledge, that philosophers do not possess knowledge;<sup>27</sup> and (c) that their state of mind must therefore be one ('merely') of some sort of belief, or *doxa*. This is—to say the least—surprising, particularly because it seems in direct conflict with (for instance) that passage at the end of *Republic* 5,<sup>28</sup> where Socrates seems to tell us that the difference between philosophers and non-philosophers is precisely that it is non-philosophers who merely have beliefs, while philosophers *know*.<sup>29</sup> How are we to resolve this apparent conflict? In short, my answer (based largely on an analysis of

<sup>23</sup> See e.g. *Phaedrus* 278d; or *Lysis* 220d, which treats us all (sc. all human beings) as 'between good and bad'—in a context where being good seems to be the same as being wise, being bad the same as being (terminally) ignorant (217a–218b); or—the most obvious choice of text in this context—*Apology* 23a–b (Socrates' comparison between divine wisdom and its human counterpart, which consists only in consciousness of one's own *lack* of knowledge).

<sup>24</sup> Rowe (2004).

<sup>25</sup> *Lysis* 218a, *Symposium* 204a.

<sup>26</sup> Admittedly, in the *Symposium* Diotima adds that one can go on desiring something one has in so far as one desires still to have it in the future (200b–e); but wisdom, after all, ought to be a stable possession. Or if it is not (see Diotima at *Symposium* 207e–208a on how even knowledge, or 'pieces of knowledge'—as I propose to translate the plural of *epistēmē* at 207e—tends to pass out of us, and to have to be replaced by memory), that too will count against Plato's having supposed wisdom to be achievable by mere human, and mortal, beings.

<sup>27</sup> Even though they may possess 'pieces of knowledge', on a temporary basis (see preceding note).

<sup>28</sup> i.e. 474b ff. (cf. n. 20 above).

<sup>29</sup> Similarly, perhaps, in *Republic* 7: when the golden few of Callipolis have made the ascent to the Good, they are envisaged as having 'seen the truth about fine, just, and good things' (520c). But see below—and it is as *philosophers* that these chosen individuals will despise political rule (521b).

the argument of *Republic* 7)<sup>30</sup> was, and is, that when *Republic* or *Symposium* portrays the philosopher as actually arriving at his destination, what they are portraying is not what actually occurs, or what we can actually hope for, but rather what things *would* be like *if* philosophy did what it promises, or hopes, to do. The ascent from the Cave in the *Republic*, and its counterpart in Diotima's account of love in the *Symposium*, are—as one might put it—descriptions of *the limiting case*.<sup>31</sup> In reality, so I claim Plato holds, the best we can do is *approximate to the truth*.<sup>32</sup>

But how are we to understand this 'approximation'? The only treatments we are given that bear on the topic seem to make everything turn on dialectical agreement.<sup>33</sup> Even if the process is treated as the recovery of innate knowledge, still the only guide to the success of such recovery will be the contingent fact that a given proposal—'this is how I (Socrates, or some other philosopher or *dialektikos*) see the matter', that is, whatever is under discussion—has stood up to challenge and not been refuted (and so on). So at *Republic* 7, 534b–d (my translation):

'Then, do you call someone the person who is able to give an account of (*ton logon . . . lambanonta*) the being of each thing dialectical? But in so far as he's unable to give an account (*mè echèi logon . . . didonai*) of something, either to himself or to another, do you deny that he has any understanding of it?'

'How could I do anything else?'

'Then the same applies to the good. Unless someone can distinguish in an account the form of the good from everything else, can survive all refutation

<sup>30</sup> The 'conflict', then, as this suggests, is actually internal to the *Republic* itself, and this seems to rule out the possibility that Plato simply *changed his mind* about whether knowledge was achievable or not.

<sup>31</sup> i.e. like the end-point of an infinitely diminishing series of fractions; or (an analogy closer to home) like that absolute and complete grasp of a technical skill after which practitioners are always striving. (Will anyone ever build *perfect* bridges, or play the violin *perfectly*?)

<sup>32</sup> One can remark immediately how this will fit with the myth in the *Phaedrus*: even the best souls only get a glimpse of the Forms, and that will, if that glimpse is nurtured properly, get them off seven spells out of the ten they would otherwise have to spend in the cave of the ordinary world—but then (after their seven-hundred-year holiday) they have to take their chances again, and again the best they can hope for is a glimpse . . .

<sup>33</sup> Again, see Rowe (2004). The term 'approximation' is, of course, my own rather than Plato's, but it seems to me accurately to represent the intention of what is probably the most complete—or at any rate the most explicit—account of the dialectical process that we find in Plato's dialogues, at *Phaedrus* 275c ff. What is at issue seems to be especially a progressive *refinement* of one's account of the subject in question, based on repeated statement and challenge; and this seems to fit well with the longer, though by itself perhaps slightly less informative, treatment of dialectic in *Republic* 7 (see text cited immediately below).

(*elenchoi*), as if in a battle, striving to judge things not in accordance with opinion (*doxa*) but in accordance with being, and can come through all this with his account still intact, you'll say that he doesn't know the good itself or any other good. And if he gets hold of some image of it, you'll say that it's through opinion (*doxa*), not knowledge, for he is dreaming and asleep throughout his present life, and before he wakes up here, he will arrive in Hades and go to sleep forever.'

Plato may insist for all he's worth that he is a Platonist,<sup>34</sup> but in practical terms—one might say—he might just as well not have been. It is all very well saying that there are in principle objective answers to all important (again, for Plato, mainly ethical) questions, but that will not be worth much if we in fact have no access to the answers. Indeed, if there is literally *no* access to the objective truths that are alleged to lurk somewhere and somehow out there, it is not clear that there will be any appreciable distance—in practical terms—separating Plato's position from an openly intersubjective one: in default of any external point of reference, agreement between dialectical partners will actually turn out, in practice, to be *constitutive* of the truth, and 'approximation' will just be a matter of a kind of adjustment between points of view.

There are, however, at least two things that make attributing any such position to Plato distinctly implausible.<sup>35</sup> The first point is that, as I understand it, any respectable intersubjectivist view—one, that is, that will prevent it from shading into mere *subjectivism*—will require a *community* of subjects or speakers, where 'community' at any rate indicates a number considerably higher than the two or few partners required for a Socratic/Platonic dialectical exchange (make it more than two, or a handful, and dialectic actually becomes impossible). The second, and probably more decisive, point is that Socratic/Platonic dialectic, while undoubtedly aiming at agreement, seems in practice to be a locus of *disagreement*: Socrates typically challenges and criticizes others' views, proposes paradoxes, and if in the end his interlocutors assent at all to his proposals, it is

<sup>34</sup> That is, he may insist that he believes in the existence of things *out there*, as it were, waiting for us to grasp them.

<sup>35</sup> I write here in full consciousness that some such a position has in fact been attributed to Plato, by H.-G. Gadamer: see, most recently, Renaud (1999), and Gill (2002a), which partly draws on Renaud. (Gadamer does not, of course, claim that Plato's epistemology is explicitly intersubjectivist; it is a question of where Plato's thoughts *are headed*—or, perhaps, what the truths are that he is, in however a sketchy way, trying to express.) I do not wish here to become involved in a full-scale critique of Gadamer's views in particular; however my argument will ultimately take me to a fork at which one of the available turnings will be a Gadamer-like solution. See p. 230 below.

often a pretty grudging and conditional assent.<sup>36</sup> So if there are truths around in Plato that are actually accessible, they are not the product of agreement between communities of speakers. Are they then to be thought of as based simply on the so-called ‘elenchus’, in the way that Gregory Vlastos suggested—that is, as a kind of second-grade ‘truths’, to be distinguished from their first-grade (but inaccessible) counterparts, and consisting just in the content of those propositions that have survived challenge (the ‘elenchus’)? That would certainly fit that Platonic passage last quoted above (from *Republic* 7, 534b–d). But it would be an extraordinarily disappointing outcome, given that on Vlastos’ own view, the ‘elenchus’ is capable only of detecting inconsistency; we might, it seems, end up with a set of propositions that was consistent, but nevertheless totally *false*.

We can try saving the situation, as Vlastos did, by assuming Socrates/Plato to hold that everyone has at least some true ‘moral’ beliefs, which would entail the negations of his false ones—so that all that is needed (and what the ‘elenchus’ allegedly does) is to get a person to put his beliefs in proper order, getting rid of what is false. Now as the late Donald Davidson accurately pointed out, ‘it is . . . obvious that there is absolutely no argument in the *Gorgias* or any of the earlier dialogues to support [this] assumption.’ Nevertheless, Davidson claims in the first part of the same sentence, ‘it is clear . . . that something very like this assumption is necessary if the elenchus is to be defended as a way of reaching truths.’<sup>37</sup> Davidson’s own view is that having abandoned the ‘elenchus’ after the ‘early’ dialogues, Plato came back to it (especially in the *Philebus*).

What explains Plato’s renewed confidence in the elenchus? As Vlastos explains, the elenchus would make for truth simply by insuring coherence in a set of beliefs if one could assume that in each of us there are always unshakable true beliefs inconsistent with the false. It is not necessary that these truths be the same for each of us, nor that we be able to identify them except through the extended use of the elenchus. Thus someone who practices the elenchus can, as Socrates repeatedly did, claim that he does not know what is true; it is enough that he has a method that leads to truth. The only question is whether there is reason to accept the assumption.

I think there is good reason to believe the assumption is true—true enough, anyway, to insure that when our beliefs are consistent they will in most large

<sup>36</sup> I am here, of course, using Plato’s dialogues as examples of Socratic/Platonic dialectic; this seems simultaneously inevitable and unobjectionable.

<sup>37</sup> Davidson (1993), 184–5. For Vlastos’ views, see (1983*a* and *b*), also Kraut (1983), commenting on Vlastos (1983*a*).

matters be true. The argument for this is long, and I have spelled it out as well as I can elsewhere.<sup>38</sup> But the argument hinges on a good Socratic intuition: it is only in the context of frank discussion, communication, and mutual exchange that trustworthy truths emerge. The dialectic imposes the constant burden of interpretation on questioner and questioned, and the process of mutual interpretation can go forward only because true agreements which survive the elenchus carry a presumption of truth.<sup>39</sup>

So, according to Davidson, Vlastos' instinct was right, and so was Plato's: the 'elenchus' is a way, however imperfect, to the truth. On Vlastos' view, this truth is likely to be an uncomplicated affair: it is the kind of truth that believers in 'moral truths' believe in (however verifiable, or if verifiable at all). Davidson's perspective on the matter, so far as I can make it out, is rather more complicated,<sup>40</sup> though evidently it will still count as some sort of *realist* perspective.<sup>41</sup>

Davidson's general position here might be the right one, philosophically speaking; I take no position on that. It might even be the position that Plato came to, or, again, where he was headed<sup>42</sup> (which, if Davidson has hold of the truth, will at least trivially be the case, since truth is plainly what Plato wants too). However as a straightforward interpretation of what Plato is saying, it is built upon sand. First, Vlastos' treatment of 'the elenchus', though widely accepted (at least in Anglophone scholarship), will not bear close scrutiny. This is for a variety of reasons, of which it will here suffice to mention just two. First, what Socrates sets out to examine are not usually, or typically, the beliefs of individuals; rather more often, he examines proposals on a given subject that he has either put forward, or helped to put forward, himself.<sup>43</sup> (The aim, in that case, is not the sorting

<sup>38</sup> Davidson refers here to his (1983), reprinted, with 'Afterthoughts', in (1990) and (2001), 137–57.

<sup>39</sup> Davidson (1993), 193–4.

<sup>40</sup> (2001), 156: 'Truth emerges not as wholly detached from belief (as a correspondence theory would make it) nor as dependent on human methods and powers of discovery (as epistemic theories of truth would make it). What saves truth from being "radically non-epistemic" (in Putnam's words) is not that truth is epistemic but that belief, through its ties with meaning, is intrinsically veridical.'

<sup>41</sup> (2001), 137–8: 'My slogan is: correspondence without confrontation [that is, between what we believe and reality]. Given a correct epistemology, we can be realists in all departments. We can accept objective truth conditions as the key to meaning, a realist view of truth, and we can insist that knowledge is of an objective world independent of our thought or language.'

<sup>42</sup> See discussion above on Gadamer.

<sup>43</sup> Take, as one example, the successive proposals considered in the *Euthyphro*: Euthyphro has the greatest difficulty in articulating what his beliefs about piety are, and it is not at all clear that what Socrates and he put together is in any significant sense *his*—he may

out of inconsistent belief-sets, since if they are—as it were—to be interestingly inconsistent, all the members of the sets must belong to the same individual. Sometimes, Socrates' interlocutors need his help to establish exactly what it is that they want to say, or are saying.) Second, Vlastos gives no clear justification for supposing Socrates to be concerned primarily with *consistency*; it would be more accurate to say (so I claim) that Socrates is preoccupied just with whether any given claim is *true* or not, a question which he pursues by a large variety of means (even while having special favourites, such as arguments from analogy).<sup>44</sup> It is in this much more straightforward way that Socratic argument—whether it has the particular form Vlastos identifies as 'the elenchus', or some other (as it very frequently does)—is thought of as reaching the truth. So when Davidson says, in defence of the idea that Plato 'returns' [in the *Philebus*] to<sup>45</sup> the 'elenchus' as a source of truth, that

... we can see for ourselves that none of the alternative methods [that come to the fore in the 'middle' and late dialogues] can provide a firm basis for moral truths, while there is, after all, support for the assumption which, in the *Gorgias*, is [implicitly] recognized as sufficient to defend the elenchus—the assumption that (in ethics at least, and perhaps metaphysics more generally) there are enough truths in each of us to make it plausible that once our beliefs in these matters are consistent they will be true. It would not be foolish to suppose that Plato figured this out for himself...

I am inclined to reply simply that there is no evidence at all that Plato *ever* 'figured out' the Vlastosian–Davidsonian defence of the elenchus.

So if Plato does not think knowledge is achievable, and if he is neither an intersubjectivist nor a Vlastosian–Davidsonian, what is he, and where does he stand in relation to ethical knowledge? What, in particular (to return to the specific subject of this essay) is the role of *Forms* in Plato's ethical epistemology? One of the most interesting aspects of Davidson's treatment is how small a role he attributes to Forms:

In the late dialogues [and at about the time he took up again with the elenchus, as in the *Philebus*] he found more and more reasons to be dissatisfied with his earlier doctrines ['earlier', that is, but not so early as those other 'elenctic' dialogues?]

genuinely assent to it all, but does it represent 'his beliefs'? None of it, in fact, seems to be entailed by the one thing that he seems indubitably to believe, namely that his prosecution of his father under the circumstances given is 'pious'.

<sup>44</sup> What I have offered here is of course rather less than would be needed properly to dispose of Vlastos' reading of Socrates; but see further below.

<sup>45</sup> Davidson (1993), 189.



about the forms, and no aspect of this dissatisfaction is more evident than the abandonment of any close connection between the forms and value. . . . Value in the *Philebus* can no longer be connected with the forms as such; it may be that limits, or mixtures that have limits, are forms and are good; but what makes them good is not that they are forms or limits or mixtures, but that they have symmetry, commensurability, and truth—that they are *proper* limits or *appropriate* mixtures.<sup>46</sup>

Forms, on this account, make only a somewhat secondary and ill-defined contribution to ethical discourse (ill-defined, especially, because it is not quite clear how exactly ‘forms’ are being taken). But Davidson in any case clearly thinks Plato was better off without them (and, incidentally, without ‘recollection’, which he thinks of as an inadequate, temporary substitute for the ‘elenchus’); the qualified (?) realism that he attributes to Plato appears to be more or less independent of talk about Forms. This takes us about as far as it is possible to go from Cherniss’—and perhaps the standard—view, that the Forms are *emblematic* of Platonic realism (or ‘Platonism’).

But Davidson has, I think, here caught an important aspect of the truth about Plato’s view. Here is why; the explanation takes us back to ‘separation’. One of the points about which Plato makes his Socrates most insistent is that Forms should not be confused with particulars: Beauty is not the same as, say, the things we see, hear, or smell and call beautiful. This is surely what lies at the bottom of the idea of ‘separation’ (which is not any kind of quasi-literal separation, removing Forms from this world into some other one: that is the crude version of the ‘two-world’ interpretation I referred to earlier). The next step—and there is plenty of circumstantial evidence to suggest that Plato took it—is to treat ‘Beauty’, ‘Justice’, and the rest as distinct entities, a distinct category of *onta*, which we can only reach—or return to—by indirect means: language and argument, and—perhaps—a kind of memory (‘recollection’ again). ‘By indirect means’: what I have in mind is that there will not be any direct and immediate confrontation (even via memory)<sup>47</sup> between knower and object, so that the metaphor of ‘seeing’, so familiar from the similes of the *Republic*, will in fact be radically misleading, as Plato himself seems to acknowledge.

<sup>46</sup> Davidson (1993), 192–3.

<sup>47</sup> *Pace* Davidson, and Vlastos, ‘recollection’ is never, in Plato, thought of as a source of truth *on its own*; it always requires the accompaniment of dialectic (and so could not, even in principle, substitute for it—or the ‘elenchus’).

This takes me back to a proposal I made earlier: that the Plato of the *Republic* (or the *Symposium*, or—as I now add, of any dialogue) in the end commits himself to no more than the possibility of our (of philosophers') *approximating* to the truth. Contrast, for instance, *Republic* 7, 519b3–5, 'if... [the soul] were turned round towards the true things, then [it] would *see these most sharply*, just as it does now the things it is turned towards', with (especially) 519d2–3, 'and when they have made the ascent [to the Good] and catch sight of it *adequately*,' where the 'adequately' (*hikanôs*) itself recalls the pivotal passage at 473c11–d2: '[There will be no respite from bad things] until... either philosophers rule in cities or those who are called kings and dynasts philosophize genuinely and *adequately*...'. Of course, 'adequately' could in principle mean 'properly', 'in the way one should / in the way the object deserves', but that does not in fact seem to be how it works out in the sequel: the description of the philosopher-ruler's grasping of the good at 534b3–d1 has rather little to do with any 'seeing', and much more to do with dialectical agreement.<sup>48</sup> In this case, I suggest, Plato would very likely be attracted by Davidson's slogan,<sup>49</sup> 'correspondence without confrontation'. 'Yes', he would say; 'true statements will in principle correspond to the way things are out there (as it were). Of course there cannot be any *confrontation* with those things, except in some imagined after-death (and out-of-this-world: see the myth of the *Phaedrus*); you can just be sure they are there.'<sup>50</sup> (What I think would not attract Plato is just that further idea of Davidson's, that 'there are enough truths in each of us to make it plausible that once our beliefs... are consistent they will be true'. Whatever might be required to allow his arguments to provide a road to truth, Socrates does not *behave* as if he expects his interlocutors to have much in the way of true beliefs.)

But such a declaration would be no less compatible with the kinds of things Socrates is saying in those dialogues which, on the usual account, precede the (explicit) introduction of 'separated' Forms. If so, then once again Forms ('separated' ones) seem to make no difference; they are *simply* emblematic; and, one might add, Socrates/Plato is left looking merely like some kind of naive realist (though given the alternatives available, I am not entirely clear that that would be a bad thing to be). This takes me back close to where I began in this chapter: in ethics, at any rate, 'separation' is something of a non-event.

<sup>48</sup> See *Republic* 7, 534b–d (quoted on p. 223–4 above).

<sup>49</sup> Quoted in n. 41 above.

<sup>50</sup> See especially *Republic* 7, 533a1–5 (ending 'but that there *is* some such thing [as the Form of the Good] to be seen, that is something I [Socrates] must insist on').

Yet at the same time—and here my own dialectic will begin to reach a kind of closure—at least two significant philosophical readings of Plato, the Gadamerian<sup>51</sup> and the Davidsonian, take a significantly different view of the matter: that what we need, philosophically, is a Plato *without* Forms (that is, ‘middle-period’ Forms)—the Plato, in effect, of the ‘Socratic’ dialogues;<sup>52</sup> or, if we take the label ‘Socratic’ seriously, just *Socrates*. What drives such readings, and distinguishes them from their other, more standard, counterparts, is an approach that puts the discussion of methodological and epistemological issues before that of substantial ethical claims, not least because the epistemological commitments that lie behind them are such as to allow (or even to recommend) a rather open attitude to the precise ethical content of the arguments. It is the *dialectic* that matters, from this perspective, rather than what comes out of the dialectic; and after all, do not many of the ‘Socratic’ dialogues end, anyway, without any conclusion? What I have called ‘more standard’ readings, by contrast, tend to come to questions about method at least partly because of their commitment to certain truths, to which Socrates/Plato are alleged to subscribe. Thus Vlastos—certainly a ‘standard’ reader, in so far as he thinks that recollection (of Forms) is a stand-in for Socratic (‘elenctic’) method—needs to find a route in Socratic method to certain *moral* truths, which he both thinks Socrates committed to, and is committed to himself.

There is, then, a clear fork in the road as followed by modern interpretations. On the one hand (the left fork), there is a turning that veers more or less sharply away from attributing to Plato any sort of simple belief in ethical objectivity—and with a turning<sup>53</sup> off *that* turning which would end up not calling him an (ethical) objectivist at all. On the other hand, there is what may look like the obvious turning—a continuation, almost, of the main road: Plato is an objectivist, and a realist; he always was, and the Form-theory of the ‘middle’ dialogues (whatever it is) is just another expression of his objectivism.

I have argued that, while there are good grounds for being sympathetic to the radicals who choose the first turning, it is not ultimately a good way to go. Plato *is* an objectivist in ethics, a realist, and a Platonist, and his attachment to Forms is a mark of that fact. Here is my main, and perhaps unexciting, conclusion. That does not mean, however, that Vlastos and

<sup>51</sup> Again, I am turning my back in this paper on any detailed treatment of Gadamer; if the reading I am calling a ‘Gadamerian’ reading is not truly his, then my interest is in that reading and not in Gadamer (here).

<sup>52</sup> Which may include the *Philebus*: see p. 225 above.

<sup>53</sup> Rightly or wrongly, I have characterized it as ‘Gadamerian’.

those who travel with him have it right: first, because it is not at all clear that Socrates and Plato share Vlastos' own ethical (moral) concerns; and second, because even after so much discussion, it still remains considerably less than fully clear what it is to believe in, or posit the existence of, Platonic Forms. And there is also another objection that applies equally to the radicals and to the Vlastosians: that they all considerably underestimate how *non-standard* the Socratic/Platonic position is, both in relation to modern ways of thinking, and in relation to the context of the thought (philosophical and non-philosophical) of fifth- and fourth-century Greece. This is a point that has surfaced inconspicuously once or twice already in this discussion; it now deserves to take centre-stage. If it rules out once and for all the possibility that Plato, and his Socrates, could (in the end) have thought that truth is a matter of intersubjective agreement, or is lurking somewhere in our belief-systems, it also rules out the possibility that what Socratic/Platonic ethics is about is the endorsement of some set of acceptably liberal-looking set of moral values, of the sort Vlastos tends to believe in. For what emerges from the Platonic dialogues is a highly distinctive, even shocking, explanation of human action, together with an equally distinctive view of the human good—of what human life is *for*. Or rather (as I have suggested above),<sup>54</sup> the dialogues contain two different explanations of action, one of which may be less shocking than the other. But the fundamental outlook remains the same, and is in many respects disturbingly different<sup>55</sup> from anything we, or Socrates' interlocutors, might have expected.<sup>56</sup>

There is much here that no reader could conceivably be expected to take on trust. In particular, I have hardly been lavish in describing the *content* of the 'shocking' views in question. Yet everyone knows the Socratic paradoxes: this is where it all begins, and ends—as long as one sees that the paradoxes are not there to be disarmed, downplayed, or otherwise discounted. However strange the things that Plato's Socrates says, it should be a first rule, so I claim, to start off by supposing that he *means what he says*: that virtue (or excellence) *is* knowledge; that *no one* goes wrong willingly (only through ignorance); that *all* desire is for the

<sup>54</sup> See text to n. 8 above.

<sup>55</sup> In particular, the outlook remains unrelentingly *egoistic*. See especially Penner and Rowe (forthcoming), in which we give a full treatment of (what we call, and we persist in calling) Socratic 'egoism'—which is not, however, to be confused with mere selfishness.

<sup>56</sup> Perhaps some of Socrates'/Plato's contemporaries might have expected a different sort of egoism (one that did not allow for friendship, love, co-operation . . .); moderns, for their part, tend to react badly to any kind of egoism.

good—and not also, for example, for pleasure, or anything else; and so on. (Each of these claims is meant to state what is the case, not just to give us an initial shock and then allow us to go back to thinking roughly what we did before.)

I conclude, however, with a more general, and programmatic, set of proposals. The first is that if we start from what Socrates says about dialectic in *Republic* 7, as a means by which its practitioners may reach the Good, and if, in order to understand that, we examine closely those examples of hand-to-hand dialectic, much of it about the good, that the Platonic corpus offers us (for instance in *Euthyphro*, *Lysis*, *Euthydemus*, Socrates–Agathon and Diotima–Socrates in *Symposium*; and also in *Philebus*), then we shall have the best chance of understanding what it is that ethical knowledge, for Plato, will consist in. The second claim is that what such an examination will reveal is a quite systematic set of ideas, argued for dialectically, which, though paradoxical, is offered as—objectively—*true* (because argued for). And the third claim is that grasping this set of ideas will put us in a good position to understand the main ethical thrust of the rest of Plato.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>57</sup> Again, see Penner and Rowe (forthcoming). Our argument in this volume leaves it open whether the ‘first friend’, introduced at *Lysis* 219b–220b, is or is not a Form (the Form of the Good). If it is a Form, then our notions of what a Form is may need to be thoroughly revised—but then there is precious little agreement on the subject in any case. Or if it is not a Form, still, for the reasons I have given in the main body of this chapter, the (explicit?) ‘separation’ of Forms will make little difference.

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## ‘The Good Man is the Measure of All Things’: Objectivity without World-Centredness in Aristotle’s Moral Epistemology

TIMOTHY CHAPPELL

I begin by contrasting Aristotle’s ‘world-centred’ general epistemology, and his ‘mind-centred’ (more exactly, ‘*agathos*-centred’) moral epistemology. I argue that Aristotle takes this approach, not because he doubts the objectivity of ethics, nor because he is an ‘ethical particularist’ (whatever one of those is), but because of the reflexive nature of ethics as a study. I further argue that, by taking the notion that ‘the good man<sup>1</sup> is the measure of all things’ as central to Aristotle’s ethics, we can see how to unify coherently the rather embarrassingly diverse ethical resources that Aristotle offers us.

### ‘World-Centred’ and ‘Mind-Centred’ Forms of Knowledge

The usual Aristotelian picture is that the standard (*kanôn*) for knowledge is, simply, the way things are.<sup>2</sup> ‘We may speak of knowledge or perception

Thanks for helpful comments to Sarah Broadie, Christopher Gill, Adam Morton, and the members of my Spring 2003 graduate class on Aristotle’s ethics at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver BC.

<sup>1</sup> People who want to retain the old-fashioned use of the word ‘man’ that applies to a human of either sex sometimes say that this application is part of the normal meaning of ‘man’ in English. However that may be, it is certainly not what Aristotle’s use of the Greek masculine gender means. Like any other classical Greek, Aristotle uses *anthrôpos* to refer primarily to male humans, and only secondarily to female humans. Indeed, as G. E. L. Owen saw, Aristotle himself invented just the distinction to rationalize this usage: Aristotle would say that ‘male human’ is the ‘focal meaning’ of *anthrôpos*, ‘female human’ only its secondary meaning. Hence, it would be anachronistic and distorting for me to replace Aristotle’s sexist vocabulary with non-sexist terms. Apologies for this should be sought, not from me, but from Aristotle.

<sup>2</sup> See e.g. *de Anima* 417a18, 429a17; *Nicomachean Ethics* 1139a27–9. Cf. *Categories* 4a8–10, on ‘the way things are’ as the standard for truth.

as a measure of things, but the reason in both cases is the same: that we are informed by them, because they are *measured* rather than *measures*' (*Metaphysics* 1053a31). Your mind knows just in so far as it is conformed accurately to its object. (Here the word 'con-formed' may be taken very literally indeed: *de Anima* 429a16.) In any area, the object of your knowledge, and that object's innate structure and organization, is the *measure* (*metron*) of your knowledge in that area, and of how your knowledge should be structured and organized. As we might say, Aristotle's usual view of knowledge inverts Protagoras' view: it is that 'All things<sup>3</sup> are the measure of man.'

Aristotle's robust—or naive—realism might be called a *world-centred* conception of knowledge. (The contrast is with *mind-centred* conceptions, such as Descartes' or Hume's or—more subtly, but also more radically—Kant's.)

When Aristotle comes to consider knowledge in ethics,<sup>4</sup> he seems to tone this world-centredness right down. Perhaps, indeed, he abandons it altogether:

The good man (*ho spoudaios*) judges each of these questions correctly, and what *appears* (*phainetai*) true to him in each of these cases *is* true. For each sort of character there is a particular (*idion*) account of what is noble, and of what is pleasant. It is, perhaps, the greatest mark of the good man to see (*horân*) the truth about each of these things. He is, as it were, the standard (*kanôn*) and the measure (*metron*) of them.<sup>5</sup>

This remark is not an isolated one. Elsewhere in the *Nicomachean Ethics* we find, for instance, that 'the end and the best . . . appears (*phainetai*) to no one if not to the good man (*tôi agathôi*); wickedness distorts other people, and causes them to be deceived about the first principles of action'

<sup>3</sup> Since 'all things' are possible objects of knowledge: *de Anima* 429a18. Protagoras' claim was that 'Man is the measure of all things' (DK B1).

<sup>4</sup> 'If someone professes to be expounding Aristotle and talks in a modern fashion about "moral" such-and-such, he must be very imperceptive if he doesn't constantly feel like someone whose jaws have somehow got out of alignment: the teeth don't come together in a proper bite' (Anscombe 1958: 26). Aristotle knows nothing of the modern sense of 'moral' that makes moral reasons a special sort of reasons, apparently unconnected to other sorts; he treats the study of the practical as essentially unitary. I think he is right about this. My use of 'ethical' and 'moral' does not imply a denial of this point. A second modern distinction that Aristotle rejects is that between ethics and politics (see e.g. *Nicomachean Ethics* 1095a15–16). On this too I think his view is basically correct, though I shall not pursue the point here.

<sup>5</sup> *Nicomachean Ethics* 1113a30–4; the context is a discussion of *boulêsis*, wanting or wishing. (Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.)

(1144a33–5). We read that what is pleasant to those with bad characters (*kakôs diakeimenois*) is not necessarily pleasant as such (1173b23). We see that 'in all cases [to do with pleasure], what appears to the good man is' (*einai to phainomenon tôi spoudaiôi*, 1176a16). Perhaps there is even a deliberate echo of Protagoras DK B 1, when Aristotle claims that 'virtue (*aretê*)<sup>6</sup> and the good man (*ho spoudaios*) are the measure (*metron*) of each thing' (1166a13, cf. 1176a17).

To say that 'the way things are' is the measure of knowledge in general, but that 'virtue and the good man' are the measure of *ethical* knowledge, is, obviously, to make a special case, and perhaps a specially problematic case, of ethics. After all, as Aristotle himself observes at 1138b22–32, the parallel remark about *medical* knowledge, or knowledge of any special science, would be true—but a truism. Is the truth about medicine 'whatever medical science dictates, and what someone possessing this science' would say? Of course. But 'this, while true, is hardly revealing' (*alêthes men, outhen de saphes*, 1138b26). What is revealing is an account of medical knowledge that explains what right reason (*orthos logos*) is in medicine, and how it is defined (*tis horos*, 1138b34). This will be a *scientific* account of medicine.<sup>7</sup> And as before, it will be an account that is properly world-centred, not centred on the human mind.

Aristotle does not think that he himself has anything like a full scientific account of medicine, any more than he thinks this about any other special science except perhaps logic. Nonetheless, he clearly thinks that such full accounts of the special sciences are both feasible and desirable. At times—1138b26 is one of them—he seems to think that an equally full and scientific account of ethics ought to be developed. But his more usual view, especially in the rest of *Nicomachean Ethics* Book 6, is that nothing of the sort is even a remote possibility. Political knowledge (*epistêmê*) is inexact (1094b12–28, 1098a30), practical wisdom (*phronêsis*) is concerned with particulars (1141b15), the practical is a subcategory of 'what admits of holding otherwise' (1140b1), and 'about some things there can *be* no correct universal statement' (1137b15), because 'that is what the matter of

<sup>6</sup> The best way to translate *aretê* has been much debated. Nowadays, the importance of this debate is conveniently undercut by the fact that everyone is aware of it. I shall say nothing about it here.

<sup>7</sup> Strictly speaking, Aristotle's remarks at 1138b22–32 are about medical practice rather than medical theory. I doubt that this fact essentially alters my point. The implied noun after *iatrikê* at 1138b32 is clearly *epistêmê*, not *technê*; as it also is at 1143a2. (This, incidentally, puts a large question-mark by David Bostock's recent claim (2000: 77–8) that Aristotle's conception of *epistêmê*, absurdly, implies that 'theory is never relevant to practice'.)



actions is like' (1137b20). Most notably of all, not only is practical wisdom or political knowledge not the best (*spoudaiotatên*, 1141a22) form of knowledge (*epistêmê*); if we take the word *epistêmê* in its strict sense,<sup>8</sup> neither practical wisdom (1140b2) nor goodness in deliberation (*euboulia*) is knowledge at all. Correctness (*orthotês*, 1142b9) may be possible for goodness in deliberation; and there may be such a thing as 'practical truth' (*hê alêtheia praktikê*, 1139a27).<sup>9</sup> But, apparently, Aristotle's considered view is that, strictly speaking, there is no such thing as *the science of the practical*—no moral or ethical science.

### Ethics and Other Types of Knowledge

This may help us to see why Aristotle thinks that the idea that 'The good man is the standard' is not the uninteresting truism in ethics that it would be in any science. What it does not help us to see, yet, is how Aristotle thinks truism (even interesting truism) can be avoided. We learn next to nothing about medicine, or geometry, by being told that the truth in these areas is what the expert medic or geometrician tells us it is.<sup>10</sup> How do we learn any more from the parallel claim for ethics?

But in fact examples and authority can have their uses even in science. A crucial ingredient of a modern medical student's training is her development of 'clinical skills', which she largely learns by shadowing and observing a consultant at work. (No one who has watched medical students being put through this experience will be left in any doubt about the place of authority in modern medicine, either.) A modern scientific training is usually imparted in a similar way, by putting junior scientists, at doctoral or post-doctoral level, into research teams supervised by senior and more expert scientists. This sort of teamwork

<sup>8</sup> The strict sense is not always what Aristotle has in mind: 'Aristotle is... employing perfectly ordinary Greek words, but twisting them into his own special and technical meaning' (Bostock 2000: 76).

<sup>9</sup> See Anscombe's famous essay 'Thought and Action in Aristotle: What is "Practical Truth"?' (1981a: 66–80).

<sup>10</sup> Another qualification: 'Learning that the truth in medicine is what the expert medic tells us it is, is informative. It tells us that medicine is a very different business from, e.g., love or immortality, where what the "experts" tell us is hogwash.' The mere fact that *anything* counts as expertise in a given area of inquiry already privileges that area above those where no rational inquiry at all is possible. (Thanks to Adam Morton for this comment and others.) For the worry that there is no expertise in virtue, cf. Plato, *Apology* 21b–23b, *Meno* 89e, *Protagoras* 361a–c.

obviously teaches the junior doctor or scientist more than how to do a convincing impression of his seniors. It teaches him all sorts of inarticulable lessons about judgement, experience, and knack. So even if the only way to learn in ethics (or in science for that matter) was by example, it would not follow that ethical (or scientific) learning was no more than what Plato's *Gorgias* (465a) calls an *empeiria*, a knack or an imitative aptitude.

In a typical modern university, this phenomenon of teamwork is one of the most striking differences between the research cultures of the sciences and the humanities, where things are generally much more individualistic. Aristotle might have expected it to be the other way round (at least for Ethics and Politics departments).<sup>11</sup> While there is plenty to be learned simply by watching and trying to copy the experts in the special sciences (he might have said), there is even more to be learned from that practice in the case of ethics: 'it is obvious that, in all things, we need to imitate the superior man' (*ton beltio*, 1171b12). And at least part of the reason *why* there is more to be learned by imitation in the case of ethics is that there is so much less else to go on there than in the special sciences.

I say there is 'less else to go on', because three distinctions that are material (or extensional) for any special science are, in Aristotle's view, only formal (or intensional) distinctions for ethics. In the sciences these distinctions pick out different classes of things; in ethics they pick out the very same things, but under different descriptions.

One is the distinction between skill in studying the subject, and excellence as a human being. Medical research skills are such things as the ability to design useful experiments, or the deft writing of grant applications; skill in geometry is (for instance) a matter of knowing which equation to use when. Having these skills does not require you to be a good person; nor does it, directly, make you a good person. Skill in ethics, by contrast, *is* being a good person, and the true name of the study of ethics is not 'moral science' but 'practical wisdom' (1103b26–9): 'The point of our present business (*pragmateia*) is not contemplation (*theoria*), as with our other works; we are not inquiring to find out the definition of virtue, but *so as to become good people*.'<sup>12</sup> The ethicist's research skills *are* his virtues; for ethics, the distinction between research skills and excellence

<sup>11</sup> As one reader has pointed out to me, there does seem to be at least one humanistic discipline where inquiry is certainly not individualistic. This is the law. The point is especially clear if you take a Dworkinian view of how legal decisions are made.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Plato, *Republic* 578c: 'Our inquiry is about the greatest question there is: about the good life and the bad.'

as a human being can only be made as a distinction between two different ways of talking about the same thing.<sup>13</sup>

The second distinction I have in mind is that between the *subject matter* that the scientist studies and the *researcher* or *student* who does this studying. The medical researcher studies medicine, drugs, therapies, and pathologies—a subject matter quite distinct from himself;<sup>14</sup> the geometrician studies magnitudes (1143a2), which are also things quite other than he is. But the ethicist—in so far as he is a *good* ethicist—studies *himself*, or at any rate, lives and practices just like his own. ‘Practical wisdom is about what things are just and noble and good for humans—but these are the very things that it is a good man’s part to do’ (1143b22). Further, practical wisdom and the moral virtues can only be acquired together (1144a30). Hence, anyone is a good ethicist just in so far as he is a good man. The distinction between what it takes to be a good student of ethics and what it takes to be a good person can indeed be made. Obviously, there is more to ‘real life’ than moral philosophy seminars. (One is tempted to add that there is more to moral philosophy seminars than ‘real life’, too.) But the distinction is only formal or intensional: it is a distinction between two different ways of talking about the same thing.<sup>15</sup>

To see the third distinction, consider Aristotle’s claims that ethics is the study of the most final ends or goals of human action (1094a21), that *politikê technê* is ‘architectonic’, a master-builder’s craft (1094a28), and that what we seek, when trying to define the human good aimed at by ethics (in the Aristotelian sense that includes politics), is ‘the end of all ends’ (*teleiôtaton telos*, 1097a31). One of the points that these claims bring out is that the ends of the various special sciences are subordinate to the end of ethics. Certain aims or ends are internal to the ‘practices’<sup>16</sup> of

<sup>13</sup> This goes some way towards justifying Aristotle’s notorious remark that the young are not suitable students of *politikê technê* (1095a2)—especially when we note what he immediately adds, that the kind of immaturity he has in mind is immaturity in character, not in mere years (1095a7; cf. 1143a27, b8, 12–16).

<sup>14</sup> His area of study is, therefore, not simply the human body, still less exclusively his own body.

<sup>15</sup> One obvious objection that we want to make here is this: being a good person and studying ethics cannot be as closely associated as I have made out, because you have to be intelligent to study ethics, and you do not have to be intelligent to be good. Aristotle simply dismisses this objection. He thinks that, to count as a fully virtuous person, you *do* have to be intelligent. If the kind of intelligence that a philosophy seminar seems to require is sometimes different from the kind of intelligence that virtue requires, Aristotle is at least open to the possibility of retorting ‘So much the worse for the philosophy seminar’. He will not be content, as we too often are, to leave these kinds of intelligence simply disconnected.

<sup>16</sup> I am using the word in MacIntyre’s sense (1981), ch. 14.

medicine or geometry; the aim or point of these practices themselves is something that it belongs to ethics to state. This is another crucial difference between ethics and the special sciences, and another place where a material distinction (between the external and the internal points of a practice) becomes merely formal.

The fact that these three distinctions are only formal in ethics, and not material as they are in the special sciences, leaves us with less to go on than we have in the special sciences. For any science or field of study, ethics included, we can raise the questions 'Who counts as an expert in this field?', 'What is the subject matter of this study?', and 'What is the objective of this study?' Usually, when we ask these questions about a given field of study, we get answers that give us plentiful, and fairly uncontroversial, information about that field. With medicine, for example, the answers are, respectively, 'The qualified doctor', 'Disease and its treatment', and 'Health'. Of course, these answers do raise *some* difficulties: nonetheless, they still give us plenty of straightforward information about what medicine is like and how to practise it well. But, in the case of ethics, we might say that Aristotle's answers to these three questions are, respectively, 'The good man', 'The good man', and 'The good man'. And to recognize the good man is neither straightforward, nor unproblematic, nor—even if you can manage it—uncontroversial.

### **The Good Man and Practical Truth**

Ethics for Aristotle is not only non-scientific because it is too untidy to count as knowledge (*epistêmê*). It is untidy; but it is also non-scientific for a much deeper reason. This deeper reason is visible at 1103b26–9. Ethics is not a science because, if it were, expertise in ethics would have to be shown in (for example) the ability to state, in a form that could be written down, explicit and watertight definitions, not only of the particular virtues, but also of what expressing these virtues involves for particular people in particular cases. Aristotle does offer us schematic definitions both of virtue overall and of some of the particular virtues. Nonetheless, it is clear that he believes that the ideal for ethical knowledge is not the derivation of a series of abstract definitions, or the finding of a set of abstract universals which will serve as the first principles from which everything else may be deduced, as in a typical Aristotelian science (*Posterior Analytics* 75b21–76a37). Still less (as we see in *Nicomachean Ethics* 1.6) is Aristotle's ideal for ethics the kind of abstract Ideal that Plato

talks about. Aristotle's ethical ideal is not some capitalized The-Good-Itself (*auto to agathon*). It is not even a list of definitions or properties, such as the virtues. His ethical ideal is no sort of abstract or universal entity, but something particular and incarnate—the good man himself. Correspondingly, Aristotle's 'practical truth' is not something that is understood most clearly by reading a book. You come to understand it by actualizing the disposition of *phronêsis* that Aristotle dares to define as a *true* disposition (*hexin alêthê*, 1140b7), and by doing the particular actions (1107a29–32) that are themselves the conclusions of good practical reasoning (1139a21–32, b5–6; *de Motu Animalium* 701a14–15).<sup>17</sup> This is why I began by saying that Aristotle's view of ethical knowledge is that the good man is the measure of all things.<sup>18</sup>

Even if ethics were what (to say it again) it most certainly is not, as tidily universal a science as geometry, it would still be a self-reflexive science, a study whose study is itself.<sup>19</sup> This is why, as we saw above, we have to give the same answer, in the case of ethics, to questions that normally have quite different answers: 'What is it to excel?' and 'What is it to excel *in this study*?'; 'What is this study a study of?' and 'Who is studying it?'; 'What is the *telos* of this study?' and 'What is the *telos*?'. No wonder, then, that it should seem peculiarly difficult, in ethics, for the novice to find his way into the circle.<sup>20</sup> Some of the crucial distinctions, that would normally help her to get at least her initial bearings when beginning any *other* study, seem to be no help at all in the case of ethics.

'Seem to be no help': in fact, of course, to grasp these identities is already to grasp something crucial about what doing ethics is like. What is shown by the collapse of these distinctions for ethics is that the role of expertise in

<sup>17</sup> For further discussion of whether the practical syllogism concludes in an action, see Charles (1984), ch. 4, and Chappell (1995), 83–4. See also Price, pp. 264–71 below.

<sup>18</sup> Hence Aristotle's stress on the value of examples in ethics: cf. the tag of 1171b12, already quoted: 'clearly, the better man should be imitated in every way'. See also McDowell (1988), 93 n. 7: 'The content of [Aristotle's] general conception [of what doing well is] cannot be definitively written down, in a shape suitable for the deduction of particular practical conclusions. No doubt it can be gestured at... by listing virtues and giving character sketches of their possessors, as Aristotle of course does in Books III–IV.'

<sup>19</sup> Hegel, in his own tortuous way, says something similar: 'It is Spirit that knows itself in the shape of Spirit' (Hegel 1977: 485).

<sup>20</sup> And no wonder, either, given the famously self-reflexive nature of Aristotle's God ('Mind (*nous*) thinking itself'), (1072b20), that Aristotle should give us an ethics that leads us in the end to the pleasures of the truest part of ourselves (1178a3), the divine life of the mind. Cf. Aristotle's view that the good man is 'the self-lover *par excellence*' (*philautos malista*, 1169a3). This view often puzzles commentators, or is taken to be a sign that Aristotle is an egoist. If my reading of the *Ethics* is correct there is no puzzle here, and no egoism either.

ethics is quite different from its role in science. It is merely *true* of scientific understanding that the expert is the standard there; but it is *constitutive* of ethical understanding that the expert is the standard. This is why, in ethics as opposed to science, the claim that 'The good man is the standard' is not just an uninteresting truism.

### Three Unsolved Problems

Maybe it is not uninteresting, then; but it is still a truism, apparently. The reader might reasonably complain that I have still not shown how Aristotle's appeal to the good man as the standard in ethics can be *informative*. Nor have I done much to solve a second problem, not yet addressed, about how, if at all, I propose to reconcile the emphasis on the good man in Aristotle's moral epistemology with other emphases that are equally patent: for example, Aristotle's naturalism. A third worry is the one I began with: whether this admittedly 'mind-centred' (or at least '*agathos*-centred') approach to ethics can vindicate its objectivity when ethics is contrasted with what Aristotle apparently admits are more robustly 'world-centred' inquiries.

Part of the reason why the third of these worries is so difficult to address is, of course, to do with the deep problem of translating from our way of talking about ethical objectivity into Aristotle's. Aristotle does not even have a word for 'objectivity' that takes us beyond the simple notion of truth in ethics. So it is hard, and possibly anachronistic, even to pose the question whether or not Aristotle believes in the objectivity of ethics.

One possible way forward would be simply to ignore this problem. Maybe we should just forget about the anachronisms and incommensurabilities involved, and baldly ask—what is anyway an interesting question—whether Aristotle's approach to ethics counts as a form of objectivism when measured against present-day tests of objectivity. So we might ask, for instance, whether ethics, as Aristotle understands it, would pass all of the four tests for realism proposed in the work of Crispin Wright.<sup>21</sup> Wright's tests are as follows (and I add my own brief suggestions about how well, if at all, Aristotelian ethical objectivity passes them):

(1) *Cognitive command*: a discourse passes this test 'just in case it is *a priori* that differences of opinion arising within it can be satisfactorily explained

<sup>21</sup> Wright's tests are most fully laid out in Wright (1992). For a helpful survey see Hale (1997), 295–7, from which the quotations in the main text are drawn.

only in terms of... a cognitive shortcoming in one or other of the disagreed parties.’

The objectivity of Aristotelian ethics pretty clearly does pass this test: see, for instance, 1176a16–19 (‘What is *really* enjoyable is what *the good man* enjoys’).

(2) *The Euthyphro test*: a discourse passes this test if its best judgements are true ‘because they match up with independently constituted facts’, facts which are ‘more than a reflection of [those] best judgements’.

This is less clear. On the realist side see, for example, 1139a27, for Aristotle’s preparedness to talk of practical *truth*. However, it is also easy to see how Aristotle’s use of the *agathos* as a standard for ethics—and for pleasure, as just cited under test (1)—could be used, in the context of this test, as evidence on the non-realist side. This casts doubt on whether Aristotle passes test (2). Given the close connection between the idea that the good man is a standard for ethics, and the idea that ‘What is *really* enjoyable is what *the good man* enjoys’, it also casts retrospective doubt on whether Aristotelian ethical objectivity does pass test (1) after all.

(3) Wright’s third test for realism requires the facts stated in a discourse’s best judgements to have a *wide cosmological role*. They have this ‘if they have a role to play in explanations’ of facts stated in the best judgements of at least some other discourses.

It looks as if Aristotle’s ethical objectivity passes this test fairly easily: consider his evident belief that the notion of human flourishing has both zoological and ethical import. See also David Charles’ comment (1995: 161): ‘In Aristotle’s view, to secure the objectivity of discourse about a particular natural kind is to establish that it does in fact fit with other kinds in a type of appropriate explanation... In this we come to know that we are in touch with genuine kinds and relations.’

(4) A discourse is *evidence-transcendent* if and only if there is a real distinction to be made, for that discourse, between *what we would be justified in believing under epistemologically ideal conditions* (= what is ‘superassertible’) and *what is true*.

Whether Aristotelian objectivity satisfies this fourth test is contentious again. See, for instance, 1172b36–a2 (‘What seems good to everyone, we say that this *is* good’), with my discussion of it below. This is a passage that can be read, as I read it, as evidence that Aristotle believes in human

convergence on objective ethical truth. But it can also be read as an endorsement of truth-by-consensus, that is, of a view of ethical truth that is at best intersubjectivist.

It looks as if Aristotle's ethical theory definitely passes tests (1) and (3) for objectivity; but it is unclear whether it also passes tests (2) and (4). Moreover, the main evidence against the idea that Aristotle's ethical theory definitely passes test (2) tells against that idea in such a way as to cast doubt on our initial decision about test (1) as well. In short, when we try to apply modern tests for realism directly to Aristotelian texts, we get a split verdict.

So perhaps we need to look in another direction to make progress with our problem of what sort of an objectivist Aristotle is, if any. Perhaps a *direct* solution is unavailable; Aristotle himself shows, as we have seen, little sign of wanting to address the problem head-on. He is, for instance, notably unexercised by the sort of problems of relativism and subjectivity that had obsessed Plato. (See 1094b16 for a characteristically relaxed mention of the common opinion (*doxa*) that 'what is honourable and what is just' (*ta te kala kai ta dikaia*) is merely conventional (*nomôi* and not natural (*phusei*)).) I now want to suggest that the reason for this apparent nonchalance is not that Aristotle is uninterested in relativism. It is rather that, when he explains, for example, how actions can issue in practical truth, or how the mean can be correctly located, he takes himself to be doing precisely what is needed to explain how ethical truth, and so ethical objectivity, is possible.<sup>22</sup> Aristotle addresses these issues mainly when he is addressing the first two of our worries; so let us now move on to consider those. (I will come back very briefly to the question of objectivity at the end of this discussion.)

Take the worry about reconciliation first. Alongside the idea that the good man is the standard for ethics, we find a striking variety of other ideas in Aristotle's moral epistemology. Apparently, Aristotle not only thinks that the good man plays the role of touchstone of ethical truth; he also thinks that this role is played by the mean (1106b15), by pleasure (1104b9; cf. *Physics* 247a9), by the human *ergon*<sup>23</sup> (1097b25), and by a proper conception of human life's aim or aims (*telos* or *telê*, 1096b21).

<sup>22</sup> See again Price, pp. 264–5, 270–1 below.

<sup>23</sup> The usual translation of *ergon* ('function') is seriously misleading, and, I think, still causes confusions (contrast the point made about *aretê* in n. 6 above). But there is no succinct and satisfactory alternative, so I shall leave the word untranslated.



What, it might be asked, are we to make of this profusion of resources? We might take it simply as evidence of confusion. Or we might take hold of one of these different ideas, and try to run it as the main story of what Aristotle's ethics 'is really about', while ignoring or downplaying the other resources. Neither alternative is satisfactory. But I might myself be accused of taking the second alternative, since I have developed the idea that Aristotle takes an '*agathos*-centred' approach to ethics, and so—it could be alleged—I have ignored or downplayed the things in his ethics that do not fit into my picture.

The answer is that these other resources do fit into my picture. My thesis that Aristotle takes an *agathos*-centred approach to ethics is perfectly compatible with the idea that Aristotle also treats a variety of other resources as genuine ways to access ethical truth. What Aristotle says about pleasure is clearly meant to be compatible with his *agathos*-centred approach:

It seems that in all cases, what appears to the good man *is*. And if this remark is well said, as it seems to be, and if virtue and the good man as such (*hêi toioutos*) are the measure of each thing, then pleasures too will be the pleasures that appear to him (*hai toutôi phainomenai*), and what is enjoyable (*hêdea*) will be what *he* enjoys. (1176a16–19)

What Aristotle says about the mean is also clearly compatible with the *agathos*-centred approach:

Virtue, therefore, is a disposition to choose (*hexis proairetikê*), lying in a mean relative to us, this mean being determined<sup>24</sup> by reason and as the man of practical wisdom (*phronimos*) would determine it. (1106b36–1107a2)

Considerations about pleasure and the doctrine of the mean constitute independent tests of ethical truth, which we can use to gain a more substantive understanding of ethical truth than can be provided by the appeal to the *agathos* alone. Often the deployment of these tests will be fairly unproblematic. But, in difficult cases, the question will come up: *how*, exactly, are we to deploy these tests? As my last two quotations show, Aristotle's answer is: 'As the man of virtue would deploy them.'

The idea that the *agathos* is the standard for ethical knowledge is not supposed to preclude the possibility of any other standard for ethical knowledge, as if all we had to go on was the deliverances of a mysterious

<sup>24</sup> Reading *hôrismenêi* with Alexander of Aphrodisias, and Bywater's Oxford Classical Text. The alternative reading, *hôrismenê*, makes it *virtue*, not *the mean*, that is 'determined by reason'.

faculty of moral intuition. The *agathos* finds indispensable a number of different informative tests or criteria for ethical truth. But there is such a thing as using these tests well or badly; and what counts as the good use of them is definitively settled by the good man's use of them. To put it another way, if there is 'ethical perception' in Aristotle, that perception is never simply and nakedly a perception of *what is right*, as it sometimes seems to be in Ross, for instance.<sup>25</sup> Rather, the perception is of a rich variety of informative moral criteria—and, crucially, of *how to apply* those criteria. Certainly, these criteria are neither universally nor algorithmically applicable. But that does not mean that they are no use at all. As anyone who has tried to use them will know, the criteria that do the work in science are often not much more universally nor algorithmically applicable. At least in practice, the novice physicist's question, which equation to use where, often seems to be best settled by simply asking what the expert physicist does.

### Ethical Perception and Particularism

I say 'if there is "ethical perception" in Aristotle', because I suspect there is at least a difference of emphasis between Aristotle himself and those of his interpreters (the particularists, as I shall call them) who want to stress the allegedly Aristotelian idea of ethical perception. This point may be worth a little discussion.

The particularists' idea is that Aristotelian 'perception of particulars' (1143b5) is, typically, perception of what is morally salient: of facts about the world which will strike the morally sensitive observer as important.<sup>26</sup> Few particularists nowadays mean by this that perception of particulars is *literally* sensory or quasi-sensory (and Aristotle himself explicitly tells us at 1142a26–7 that the perception of particulars is 'not like one of the special senses such as hearing or taste'). The idea is, rather, that perception of particulars is 'seeing' things in the metaphorical sense in which we 'see' plain truths or bare facts: 'it is perception in the sense in which, for

<sup>25</sup> Ross (1939: 168–71): 'When I reflect on my own attitude to particular acts, I seem to find that it is not by deduction but by direct insight that I see them to be right, or wrong.' To the assessment of this sort of intuitionism, Bernard Williams' 'appropriately suspicious rule of method' seems apt (Altham and Harrison 1995: 204): 'Never explain the ethical in terms of something special to ethics if you can explain it in terms that apply to the non-ethical as well.'

<sup>26</sup> See McDowell (1979: 70), Wiggins (1987: 227), Dancy (1993), ch. 7.

example, we perceive the analytical priority of the triangle in geometry' (1142a28–30).

The particularists think that there is, in Aristotle's view, some class of distinctively *ethical* plain truths or bare facts that are 'seen' in this way. If they are right, then Aristotelian perception of particulars must be a distinctively ethical sort of perception. But, on Aristotle's account, the perception of particulars seems more down-to-earth than this.<sup>27</sup> Aristotle tells us (1143b3–4) that the 'perception of particulars' is a grasping of the 'ultimate and contingent', and of 'the other premiss' (*tês heteras protaseôs*), i.e. of the premiss in the practical syllogism that corresponds to the minor premiss of a theoretical syllogism. But this 'other premiss' is the *factual* premiss, not the moral premiss, of practical reasoning. This is clear from the examples of such premisses given at 1147a25 and 1141b20. 'This thing is sweet' and 'This is light meat' are obviously not the moral (or rather normative) premisses in the practical syllogisms in which they appear. The normative premisses in these syllogisms are, respectively 'Everything sweet should be tasted' and 'Light meat is healthy to eat'. Moreover, the faculty that grasps this 'other premiss' is not the highly morally-relevant intellectual virtue of *phronêsis*, as the particularist argument seems to require, but the much less obviously morally relevant intellectual virtue of *nous*.<sup>28</sup>

The particularists think that the perception of particulars is exemplified by the second conjunct in the sentence 'Courage is a virtue, and *this* is a case for its exercise'; but Aristotle thinks the perception of particulars is exemplified by the second conjunct in the sentence 'It would be kind to buy my wife some chocolates, and *these* are some chocolates.' Certainly this rather down-to-earth sort of perception of particulars is normatively loaded too. But it is so only in the rather thin sense that the facts so perceived need to be practically relevant, which is something that *phronêsis* will have to provide for. The evidence that Aristotle ever means the perception of particulars to be *more* normatively loaded than this, or that Aristotle is in fact a particularist at all, seems very exiguous indeed.

<sup>27</sup> For the claim that Aristotelian perception of particulars is less exciting than particularists think, see also Irwin (2000: 127–9), citing 1112b34: 'We must be able to make some judgements without deliberation, if our deliberation is to be a feasible task. Some of these are what we call ordinary perceptual judgements—in this case, something that anyone can notice [namely: that "it's a loaf"], whether or not they know how to bake bread. Others are judgements that have to be perceptual, but which refer to features that we have to be trained to notice—in this case, the signs that a loaf is baked.'

<sup>28</sup> Broadie (1991: 247): 'an intelligent grasp of particulars' is a '*factual* awareness'.

To see this, consider two frequently cited passages that allegedly provide evidence for the particularist reading. One is Aristotle's remark that 'One needs to be born with an *eye* for it, so to speak' (*phunai dei hôsper opsîn echonta*, 1114b7). This remark is irrelevant for particularist purposes, as are Aristotle's comments about 'the eye of experience' (*ek tês empeirias omma*) at 1144a30, 1143b14, 1179a18. In all these cases, the 'eye' that one needs to be 'born with' is an eye 'for the true good'; and that means the perception of truths 'about the universal', not particular ones.

The other passage I have in mind is the evidence that Ross (1939), 168–71, takes to be decisive for his influential reading of Aristotle. It is this remark: 'The crucial judgement lies in the particulars (*tois kath' hekasta*) and in perception' (*têi aisthêsei*, 1126b4). This may appear to support a particularist reading; but it needs to be placed in its context. The phrase is not a particularist slogan, but an answer to the question, 'How much deviation from the mean, and of what sorts, is blameworthy?' (1164b3). In other words, it is an explanation of how to apply a *non*-particularist criterion of rightness.

So far as I can see, outside *EN* 6, there is little or no other evidence for the particularist reading of Aristotle. But anyway it is none too clear what would be achieved by classifying Aristotle as a 'particularist' rather than (to use the usual contrast-term) a 'generalist'. Aristotle is a generalist, if it is generalism to address ethical questions using criteria such as the doctrine of the mean, pleasure, nature, and the *ergon* argument. Aristotle is a particularist, if it is particularism to say that you need to use these criteria with judgement and discernment—that they cannot be, as particularists usually put it, 'mechanically' applied.<sup>29</sup> By these tests, then, Aristotle is both a particularist and a generalist—and so is almost everyone else. No one would think of doing ethics without appeal to *any* moral criteria, and no one would think of denying that you need to be discerning to apply moral criteria well. This just shows how tenuous the alleged distinction between particularism and generalism really is. (If the difference between them is supposed to depend on what is sometimes called 'an order of explanatory priority', things get murkier still.)<sup>30</sup>

If all of this is right, then 'ethical perception' is not the name of another resource for Aristotle's moral epistemology, to go alongside the doctrine of the mean, considerations about pleasure, the appeal to nature, and the listing of the ends of man. Of course, we can, if we like, use 'ethical

<sup>29</sup> Here the particularists are attacking a straw man; I have yet to find even one generalist who thinks that rules *can* be mechanically applied, still less that they *ought* to be.

<sup>30</sup> See Chappell (2004: n. 19).

perception' as a general description of the phenomenology of the *agathos* who is putting these various resources to work. But there is little reason to insist that this is an Aristotelian description.

### The *agathos*, Nature, and the Ends of Life

What about the other resources that—I said—*do* go alongside the doctrine of the mean and considerations about pleasure, as providing criteria that the *agathos* can deploy to attain ethical knowledge? The two I mentioned were the appeal to nature, and the consideration of the ends of human life. Is it plausible to suggest that these too are criteria that the *agathos* puts to work in roughly the same way as he puts to work the concepts of the mean, and of pleasure?

At first sight, this part of my proposal might seem more problematic. For one thing, the textual evidence looks less promising. Aristotle explicitly says that pleasure and the mean are what the *agathos* says they are; he does not say explicitly that the human *ergon*, or the human end, is what the *agathos* says it is. For another thing, we are perhaps used by now to a strong and exclusive contrast between readings of Aristotle as a 'world-centred' naturalistic ethicist, and readings of Aristotle as a 'mind-centred', '*agathos*-centred', or 'perceptualist' ethicist.<sup>31</sup> In fact, I think, this contrast cannot be sustained. Even if he does not say so explicitly, it *is* Aristotle's view that the human *ergon* and the human end are what the good man says they are. So the distinction between the Aristotle who refers everything to the judgement of the good man, and the Aristotle who refers everything to the 'facts of human nature', is an unreal one. What the facts of human nature *are* is itself a question for the judgement of the good man.

Here is one reason for saying this. On examination, Aristotle's own positive account of the way in which the facts of human nature determine the facts about the human good and the human end is remarkably exiguous. On this, I am in complete agreement with McDowell (1998*d*: 35–6):

To many commentators [the *ergon* argument] suggests that Aristotle envisages an external validation for his ethic, starting from the facts about human nature. [But] in fact there are only two substantive points on which Aristotle suggests that facts about human nature constrain the truth about the good human life, in a way that might be supposed to be independent of inculcated propensities to value

<sup>31</sup> The perceptualist and mind-centred Aristotle is McDowell's; the most sophisticated version of the naturalistic and world-centred Aristotle is Foot (2001).

this and despise that. First, a good human life must be an active life of that which has *logos* (1098a3–4)...Second, human beings are naturally social (1097b11, 1169b18–19)...Obviously these two points fall a long way short of purporting to afford a validation of Aristotle's ethic in full. But it is the whole substance of his ethic, not just these two somewhat structural features of it, that he wants to represent as objectively correct.

No one who has ever seriously tried to bridge the conceptual gap between Aristotle's *ergon* argument and Aristotle's lists of virtues can possibly doubt that McDowell is right about this. The best version of the *ergon* argument gives us, at most, the conclusions that humans are beings with a capacity for reason as well as for sensation and vegetative functioning, and that *something* counts as their flourishing (see 1102a5–1103a10). Exactly how this rather small result is supposed to be the basis for claiming, for instance, that such very specific character-traits as greatness of soul (*megalopsuchia*), magnificence (*megaloprepeia*), or urbanity (*eutrapelia*) are moral virtues in humans, or that insight (*nous*) or practical wisdom (*phronêsis*) are intellectual virtues in humans, or again that honour and wisdom are natural ends of human life (1096b16–26), is something that Aristotle does not even try to explain. When he introduces his two lists of virtues, he shows little sign of wanting to justify their content. He just announces it:

It is necessary to do more than just make this general statement [of the doctrine of the mean]. We must apply it to the particular virtues... So let *us take them in turn from our table of the virtues*. (1107a28–33; cf. *EE* 1220b37)

Let us make a new start, and reconsider [the intellectual virtues]. *Let there be five* whereby the soul attains truth by assertion or denial... (1139b15–16)

As the italicized passages show, there is not a shred of argument here for Aristotle's particular conceptions of the moral and intellectual virtues. He just helps himself to those conceptions.<sup>32</sup> And there is hardly any further argument to be found anywhere else:

<sup>32</sup> As noted by Broadie (1991: 38–9): 'Not long after delivering his definition of the human end as "the soul's activity according to excellence"...he starts to use the term "excellence" to refer specifically to such qualities as justice or generosity (1099a18–20), without having argued in the interim or anywhere else that when we are talking about human beings as such, *these* qualities must count as virtues.' Broadie at once explains this by reference to commonly accepted opinions: 'Aristotle can do this, not because there is a logically immediate connection between the uninterpreted meaning of "excellence" and this particular range of interpretations, but because he can take it for granted that his hearers have supplied the interpretations themselves.' (On the other hand, as Broadie has pointed out to me in correspondence, Aristotle does say something in *EN* 1.13 to justify his distinctions between the moral and intellectual virtues, and between *sophia* and *phronêsis*.)

Virtue too is definitionally distinguished (*diorizetai*) in accordance with this distinction [between the ‘vegetative’, ‘desiderative’ and ‘rational’ parts of the soul: 1102a27–1103a3]. We call some of them *intellectual* (*dianoêtikas*), others ethical... (1103a4–6)

There cannot be a single wisdom concerning the good of all creatures, but there is a different wisdom for each [species of creature]. (1141a32)

Are these remarks supposed to be an *argument* for the derivation of Aristotle’s particular lists of moral and intellectual virtues from the characteristics and the *ergon* of the human soul (hence, from human nature and the human *ergon*)? That seems an over-charitable reading. This is nothing like a full argument to establish the correctness of Aristotle’s two lists. At most, it is a programmatic indication of how such an argument might be constructed. When we look elsewhere in *EN*, we find that Aristotle does hardly anything to fulfil this programme.<sup>33</sup> Hence, apparently, the gap between Aristotle’s account of human nature and his list of virtues remains unclosed.

Or so it must seem to many moderns, whose most characteristic assumptions include the denial that the descriptive can ever imply the normative (the notorious ‘is–ought gap’), and who will see the problem just described as no more than an instance of this gap.<sup>34</sup> Aristotle, I think, will put things rather differently. If he sees this problem—it is impossible to be sure whether or not he *does* see it—his view will be that the kind of arguments that are needed to close this gap are arguments that depend on a more fully spelled-out understanding of the facts of human nature. When we try to do this, and go beyond the bare and rather uninformative facts that Aristotle himself actually gives, we will quickly find—as believers in the ‘is–ought gap’ are always happy to tell us—that a fully spelled-out understanding of human nature is morally controversial. But this discovery need not be seen as implying an unbridgeable divide between the descriptive and the normative. It can also be seen as Aristotle might see it: as playing straight into the hands of the *agathos*-centred approach. For what the discovery tends to show is that the criterion of human nature to which the *ergon* argument appeals is yet another criterion that you need to be a good man to apply well.<sup>35</sup> Hence, Aristotle’s *ergon* argument, and his

<sup>33</sup> As McDowell says, the virtue that comes nearest to being an exception to this is friendship, which is ‘most necessary for life’ (1155a2) and natural for humans (1169b–1170a). But these are scattered and unsystematic remarks.

<sup>34</sup> The classic statement of the doctrine of the ‘is–ought gap’ is Hume (1969), 3.1.1. See also Hudson (1969).

<sup>35</sup> Stephen Everson sees (I think) the same gap, but draws a different moral (Everson (1998a: 103)): ‘A theory according to which things are valuable just in so far as they

naturalism in general, is not merely, in McDowell's phrase, 'a rhetorical flourish, added to a conclusion already complete without it' (1998*d*: 19). It is one of a number of criteria, all of which Aristotle thinks have useful and informative work to do in ethics, provided they are applied well.<sup>36</sup>

Support for this reading can be found in the latter part of Aristotle's definition of *phronêsis* (1140b6). This says that *phronêsis* is 'a true practical disposition, accompanied by reason, concerning things that are goods and evils for a human'. This definition, and in particular the italicized clause, shows that *phronêsis* has essentially to do with what benefits or harms human nature as such: *phronêsis* is defined as having a naturalistic parameter. But, of course, it takes an *agathos* to display *phronêsis* (1145b25). It follows that someone who is perfectly *agathos* will have a perfect understanding of the facts about human nature that set this parameter. Conversely, a less than perfect understanding of those naturalistic facts is the sign of less than perfect virtue.

My suggestion is that Aristotle can fill the gap between his naturalism and his list of virtues, but only by so filling out his account of human nature that it becomes morally controversial, and thus, only available (in its correct and complete form) to the *agathos*. If this is his move, Aristotle certainly does not make it explicit in the case of naturalism. But compare the case of pleasure, where, as we have already seen, Aristotle offers exactly the same move. A hedonist such as Eudoxus (1101b27) wants us to start our ethical reflections from the very plausible thought that pleasure is a clear, simple, and uncontroversial notion. Certainly you can *start* from that thought, rejoins Aristotle; but you cannot get very far with it and

contribute to *eudaimonia* and the nature of *eudaimonia* is determined by the nature of man... can now be seen to get things the wrong way round: it is not that something is valuable because it contributes to happiness, rather it contributes to happiness because it is valuable.' This point does not seem to me to undermine the usefulness of the *ergon* argument; it only means that the *ergon* argument finds out *what's valuable* via *what's natural*, rather than the other way round. I agree with Everson, of course, that the *ergon* argument is not the only resource that Aristotle offers us to find out how to live well.

<sup>36</sup> Bernard Williams (Altham and Harrison 1995: 201) praises Aristotle's ethics for using 'the kind of material that one needs to consider in arriving at any sensible view of the status of ethics, namely the richest account available of human powers and social arrangements'; but immediately adds that Aristotle's own attempt to put such material to work failed, because of his false biology (cf. Smith 1991: 409). This objection to Aristotle's naturalism seems to me to miss the point. The falsehood of Aristotle's biology is not the problem, because it is not the strictly *biological* part of Aristotle's account of human nature that could be relevant to the derivation of a complete Aristotelian ethics anyway. It is, rather, the more contestable and less scientific part—perhaps the bit about 'social arrangements' that Williams mentions. (If Williams wants to add that Aristotle's account of 'social arrangements' is *also* false, I agree.)



nothing else. There are cases where we have to ask whether we should count something as pleasant—truly pleasant—at all, even though these are, patently, cases where someone is finding something pleasant. The best way to settle this issue, is by asking what the good man finds pleasant (1176a16–19). If we replace ‘pleasant’ with ‘natural’ in that last sentence, the resulting argument is, I suggest, no less Aristotelian, and no less plausible.

It is important to remember here that the notions of nature and pleasure are connected, for Aristotle, in two ways that they are not connected by typical modern accounts of pleasure, from Jeremy Bentham’s on. First, Aristotle does not, like the moderns, take pleasure to be, roughly speaking, any positively experienced sensation.<sup>37</sup> Instead, he defines ‘pleasure’ as the ‘unimpeded actualization of a disposition in accordance with nature’ (1153a14). If this is the right way to define pleasure, and if, as before, the *agathos* is the best person to say what really counts as pleasure, then the inference is obvious. For the *agathos* to make his judgements about what is pleasant *is* for him to make judgements about what is natural.<sup>38</sup>

Second, there is in Aristotle a crucial distinction, which looks at first sight like a distinction between natural and unnatural forms of pleasure (1148b15). In fact, of course, this cannot be quite the distinction Aristotle means. We have just seen the reason why not. If a pleasure is, by definition, the ‘unimpeded actualization of a natural disposition’, then, presumably, all genuine pleasures are by definition natural, and an unnatural pleasure is a contradiction in terms. We may however speak of false or illusory

<sup>37</sup> This is implicit in modern accounts; though it is striking that neither Bentham nor Mill offers any definition of ‘pleasure’. Bentham (1970), ch. 5, classifies pleasures as ‘interesting perceptions’. But then he classifies pains as interesting perceptions too. So what is the difference between these two sorts of interesting perceptions? If it is only that the pleasures are *pleasant* interesting perceptions, and the pains are *painful* interesting perceptions, then the circularity is obvious. The first person to recognize how difficult it is to define ‘pleasure’, and to attempt to address this difficulty, seems to be Henry Sidgwick, whose attempts are not very convincing. ‘Pleasure is a kind of feeling which stimulates the will to actions tending to sustain or produce it’ (Sidgwick 1874: 42); ‘I propose therefore to define Pleasure [strictly] as a feeling which, when experienced by intelligent beings, is at least implicitly apprehended as desirable or—in cases of comparison—preferable’ (127). These proposals are not equivalent; and both face the obvious objection that we are often ‘stimulated’ to sustain, produce, desire, or prefer many sensations that are nothing like pleasure—many of which, indeed, are actually pains.

<sup>38</sup> Perhaps unwittingly, of course: someone might not realize that their correct judgement that *X* is pleasant (in the morally loaded sense) is also a correct judgement that *X* is natural (in the morally loaded sense); and vice versa. But presumably a *true agathos* will be aware of these identities.

pleasures which are unnatural. Under this heading, there are 'pleasures' for which we acquire a taste by wickedness (*mochthêria*), by (bad) habits (*ethê*), by 'impeded development' (*perôseis*, 1153a14), by illness (*nosos*), by madness (*mania*), and by 'beastliness' (*thêriôdes*). As before, it will be a mark of *virtue* to pursue the natural and genuine pleasures and shun the unnatural and illusory ones. And as before, it will be the *agathos* who does this most adequately.

As for the sketchy lists of goods or ends of human life that Aristotle occasionally offers or hints at, for instance at 1094a1–16, 1096b16–26, 1174a6, these lists too can be used as a criterion for ethical thinking; but it takes an *agathos* to use them *well*.

This conclusion might seem to be blocked by Aristotle's apparent belief that the human goods, or the ends of human life, are just those ends that *all* humans pursue or desire. So, for instance, Aristotle says (1136b8) that 'nobody wishes for what he does not think to be good'; he thinks it an argument for hedonism to point out that pleasure is something that everyone desires (1175a17); and he seems to hint that existence and *energeia* are goods, precisely because all things desire them (1168a7). Most famously of all in this strain, Aristotle writes this (1172b36–a2):

Those who resist the idea that the good is what all creatures pursue<sup>39</sup> are completely mistaken (*mê outhen legousin*). For what seems [good]<sup>40</sup> to everyone, we say that this *is* [good] (*ha gar pasi dokei, taut' einai phamen*); the person who takes away *this* conviction, can have nothing *more* convincing to put in its place.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Cf. 1094a3. In that passage, incidentally, Aristotle does not commit the fallacy of which he is standardly accused. He does *not* move from 'Every activity pursues some (perceived) good', to 'There is some good that every activity pursues.' (If he did, it would be very odd of him to add immediately that 'But there is an evident variety among the ends', 1094a4.) Rather, he moves from 'Every activity pursues some good', to 'There is something that every activity is, namely *directed at the good*.' (Here 'the good' relates to different particular goods as determinable to determinates. Cf. the inference from 'Every horse has some colour' to 'There is something that every horse is, namely *coloured*.') This is no fallacy: the argument is sound. Cf. Oderberg (1998).

<sup>40</sup> The context justifies this reading. (I would call it an *interpolation*, but the meaning 'seems good' for *dokei* is, as is observed by LSJ, *Greek-English Lexicon*, a perfectly standard one.) In the context, Aristotle is talking about the claim that what everyone pursues is (some) good. So, presumably, he is still talking about that in the passage I quote. Certainly, he has no reason to interject a sudden endorsement of consensus epistemology to go alongside his slogan *tithenai ta phainomena* ('take the appearances as true', 1145b1–2), as he is sometimes thought to (e.g. by Owen 1986: 243 n. 15).

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Mill's famous argument: 'The only proof capable of being given that an object is visible, is that people actually see it. The only proof that a sound is audible, is that people hear it: and so of the other sources of our experience. In like manner, I apprehend, the sole evidence it is possible to produce that anything is desirable, is that people do actually desire it' (Mill 1962: 288).

In line with his theory of the natural tendencies of things, Aristotle identifies what is good with what is universally desired.<sup>42</sup> It obviously does not follow that any particular instance of some kind of thing that is universally desired is itself something that should be desired or pursued in any particular case. No doubt, much can be learned about the good by examining those desires that are, as a matter of fact, universal among humans. All the same, it takes discernment to decide which desirable things should be desired or pursued right now. This discernment is, once more, proprietary to the *agathos*.

Aristotle's appeal to the *agathos* as the standard in ethics is not, then, uninformative (the 'first unsolved problem' of the three unsolved problems). Aristotle gives us more than bare assertions about 'what the good man would do'. He does insist that the various criteria for ethical truth that he discusses can only be fully understood by understanding the good man's deployment of them, and that (since ethics cannot be a science) this understanding is more central to ethics than the parallel understanding would be to geometry, for instance. But to say this is not to leave us with no ethical resources beyond a series of edifying truisms. On the contrary, it is to shed a great deal of light on what resources an *agathos* might actually use in his decisions about ethical problems. So this point also settles the 'second unsolved problem', about how to reconcile the *agathos*-centred emphasis in Aristotle's moral epistemology with his other emphases. Finally, it also says something to address the 'third unsolved problem', about how an *agathos*-centred ethics can be objective. It does this by describing some of the ways in which Aristotle thinks ethical truth is attained within such an ethics.

### Objectivity and Élitism

But who says who counts as an *agathos*?

Though Aristotle never explicitly answers this question,<sup>43</sup> the obvious and inevitable answer is that the best judge of who is an *agathos* is simply the

<sup>42</sup> Notice here the parallels between Aristotle's moral epistemology and his general theory of knowledge. Why is the *agathos* the standard of ethical truth? The answer is: Because, *qua agathos*, he is the *telos* of a naturalistic process; the *agathos* is the outcome of the full development of human flourishing. And why are *ta endoxa* generally reliable (1098b29, *Topics* 100b22)? The answer is: because they are what *we humans* naturally believe—and we humans have a natural 'flair for the truth'. See Denyer (1991: 183–9).

<sup>43</sup> Perhaps he comes close to simply rejecting the question at *Metaphysics* 1011a3.

*agathos* himself. After all, the *agathos* is the best judge of all the other important ethical questions. So the more important this question is, the more inevitable it seems that he must be the best judge of this question, too.

That sounds élitist. When it is presented with the implicit assumption that *we ourselves* are *agathoi*, it is élitist. ('We must be right about what we say is good, because *we're* good; and we *must* be good, because we *say* we're good'—a truly Carrollian argument.)<sup>44</sup> Aristotle sometimes endorses this sort of moral élitism; but there is little reason why an Aristotelian has to. To avoid it, we need simply to have the humility to recognize our own fallibility and imperfection. 'From the inside', from the internal perspective, we are trying to be good people, and can of course have no knowledge of a better way of trying to do this than our own. 'From the outside', from the external perspective, the sceptical possibility that we in fact know nothing at all about what virtue really involves, and 'have all this while only been building a castle in the air',<sup>45</sup> can never be conclusively eliminated. The completely good person, the *teleios agathos*, we will perhaps understand either as a 'regulative ideal', or as an (impossible?) amalgam of the best points of the best people we have ever known; or as both.

The price of this understanding is to remove the (*teleios*) *agathos* from actual existence, which Aristotle will balk at both because he wants an *incarnate* ethical ideal (see p. 240 above) and because he holds the general belief that any genuinely natural tendency must be fully actualized somewhere. To avoid élitism, this price may be worth paying—unless we are prepared to accept the alternative proposal,<sup>46</sup> that there has been some actual human being,<sup>47</sup> other than ourselves, who *was teleios agathos*.

<sup>44</sup> For other doubts about this argument see Loudon (1997: 213) 'Within the context of a [small face-to-face community like] a *polis*, the strategy of pointing to a *phronimos* makes a certain sense. However, to divorce this strategy from its social and economic roots [*sic*] and then to apply it to a very different sort of community—one where people really do not know each other that well, and where there is wide disagreement on values—does not. And this, I fear, is what contemporary virtue ethicists have tried to do.'

<sup>45</sup> Locke (1975: 562).

<sup>46</sup> Aquinas accepts this proposal: *Summa Theologiae* 3a.15.3, 10.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. Mark 10:18: 'Why callest thou me good? There is none good but one, that is, God.'

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## Aristotelian Virtue and Practical Judgement

A. W. PRICE

### Ethical Objectivity

J. L. Mackie drew a notion of ‘simple truth’ from Aristotle:<sup>1</sup> ‘To say of what is that it is, or of what is not that it is not, is true’ (*Metaphysics* 3.7, 1011b27). In his paraphrase, ‘To say that a statement is true is to say that things are as, in it, they are stated to be.’<sup>2</sup> This truism already conveys an abstract notion of objectivity: when a statement is true, there is *a way things are* that is identical to *how it states them to be*. How things are is not always independent of how they are stated to be: saying something of the form ‘I promise to do X’, or even ‘I state that *p*’, may, in context, *make* things be as it states them to be. Yet there should be, or become, *a way things are* that may or may not be as stated. Moreover, as Michael Dummett has emphasized,<sup>3</sup> it is the primary criterion of success for a statement that it be true; in making an assertion one conveys, whether sincerely or not, an intention to be telling the truth. The direction of fit is *of* what one says *to* how things are (or become).

As well as stating that *p*, one can *hypothesize* that *p* (as within saying ‘If *p*, then *q*’), or give that *p* as a reason or explanation (as within ‘Because *p*, therefore *q*’). One thereby presents a way things are, or can be supposed to be, as having *corollaries*. This does not reduce just to a matter of the speaker’s commitment: if I tell you ‘Do X’, this may indeed commit me—so long as it stands—not to tell you ‘Don’t do X’; but this commitment itself derives from the exclusion of one way things might turn out (that you don’t do X) by another (that you do).

<sup>1</sup> In this section (added on the suggestion of the editor), I have drawn some material from Price (2003).

<sup>2</sup> Mackie (1973).

<sup>3</sup> See, Dummett (1958/9) reprinted with a postscript (1978), 1–24.

A further requirement emerges. If my statement is sincere, I must intend it to possess a content that is *determinate* enough for there to be a way things are that makes it true or false. Of course, a generality of description may exactly match a generality of fact. (That a pillar-box is coloured is no less true than that it is red.) Of more concern are vaguenesses and indeterminacies, for I cannot intend these to preclude the truth-valuation of what I am saying if I am making a statement sincerely. (Writing a poem or telling a joke is a different matter.) If instead, in saying ‘*p*’, I leave it centrally open to interpretation what it is for that to be the case, I succeed in stating nothing—not even that *p*. Here, the simple and the complex forms of statement connect. What I am stating (if anything) when I say ‘*p*’ is not independent of what assertions of the form ‘If *p*, then *q*’ I and my hearers accept. A way things are is not a monad (constituting, as it were, a tiny possible world), but takes on definition within a network of actualities and possibilities.

These truisms, as I trust they are, define a kind of objectivity (a fairly modest kind, as I shall discuss at the end). They carry over into ethics, for ethical discourse is full of what purport to be statements. Many of these fall, at least at first sight, within a dichotomy drawn by David Wiggins. He distinguishes what he calls *evaluations*, expressed by the use of an evaluative predicate, general or specific, ‘thin’ or ‘thick’ (at one extreme, the philosopher’s old favourites ‘good’ and ‘beautiful’, at the other such terms as ‘brave’, ‘generous’, ‘honest’, ‘mischievous’, ‘diverting’), and what he calls ‘*directive or deliberative (or practical) judgements*’ (commonly expressed, in English, by certain uses of the modal terms ‘must’ and ‘ought’, though also by gerundive phrases like ‘thing to do’).<sup>4</sup> Hence, either our practice is systematically defective, or the truisms of truth carry over even to predications of ‘good’, and applications of ‘must’. Suppose that it was entirely, as we say, ‘a matter of opinion’ how things have to be if an action is to be ‘good’, or ‘necessary’; then applying the terms could never amount to making a statement, for all the concrete criteria of success in capturing a truth would be disputable.<sup>5</sup> It would be like playing croquet *à la* Lewis Carroll, with flamingoes as mallets: individuals would have

<sup>4</sup> Wiggins (1998), 95. Wiggins attempts no general characterization of practical judgements, and is content to indicate their nature through examples. A formulation to fit might run as follows: practical judgements are judgements with a content of a kind to conclude a piece of practical deliberation, and direct the formation of an intention.

<sup>5</sup> A follower of G. E. Moore might object: ‘I may know that you are speaking truly if and only if the act *is* good, even if it is entirely open what makes an act good.’ But one might ask him what would empirically distinguish applications of ‘good’ with *that* meaning from others that only apparently had any meaning.

to start by a free choice of concrete criteria of applicability before they could investigate whether these were met. Imagine a community who communicated indifferently and macaronically in two languages that attached quite different meanings to some predicate 'F'; outside disambiguating contexts, no one could succeed in stating anything by use of 'F', since his hearer would be free—or rather forced—to interpret him at will.

We may conclude that a certain pretension to objectivity is ubiquitous within ethical discourse as we know it. No doubt there are periods (perhaps not especially our own) during which moralists incline to be opinionated, insisting that they are *right*, and others are *wrong*. There are also periods (of which ours may be one) when a 'cognitive' reading of ethical language is *de rigueur* among philosophers. Yet a demand for a kind of objectivity cannot be set aside as a display of dogma or fashion. Either it can be met, or our ethical discourse—indeed, all ethical discourse familiar to us—is radically defective.

This is already one reason for raising the issue also within the context of ancient Greek moral philosophers (even though 'objective' was not a word they could have anticipated or readily translated). There are others, one of which may take us some way into their distinctive views. Recent fashion can suggest a quick and easy means to meeting the demand of objectivity. Frege famously supposed that sentences have *senses*, derivative from the senses of their constituent expressions, that are routes to reference (in their case, a truth-value). Thus the predicate '...is red' has a sense, determining its extension or range of application, that makes 'This is red' denote the true if and only if an object denoted falls within the set of red things. In this case, it is natural to identify the sense of the predicate with its linguistic *meaning*, for someone who fails to know that the extension of 'red' is the set of red things plausibly fails to understand the meaning of 'red'. It may then be supposed that the same *has* to be true of 'brave', say. Otherwise, it may appear, applications of the term lack a determinate sense, and so fail to *say* anything, true or false. An adequate discrimination of virtues and vices is then taken to be yielded by a full grasp of the meanings of the words of a language. Another term is often adduced from Frege: any inability to apply the term 'brave' correctly, even with adequate background information, displays an incomplete mastery of the *concept*. For an English-speaker, it may seem, fully to grasp the concept of courage is fully to grasp the meaning of the term 'brave'. If this is right, we have a purely semantic solution to a semantic problem. This is a stance of *semantical complacency*.



We could hardly apply this semantic conception of ethical objectivity to Plato and Aristotle without anachronism. However, we can identify a common strand in their thinking that tells against it. A brief and early passage in the *Republic* contains in germ a point that is crucial. Socrates objects to Cephalus that it is wrong to identify being just with telling the truth and returning what one has borrowed, for these acts are not always just (as when a borrower is asked to return some weapons by a lender who has gone mad, Book 1, 331c1–d3). A more resilient participant than Cephalus might suppose that one has only to try again; but the objection falls within a pattern to which Socrates later alludes when he describes how the young can be corrupted by counterexamples to attempts to define the just or the fine by appeal to general laws or maxims (Book 7, 538c6–e4). It becomes evident that the exceptions are practical, and not notional: it is unjust to return an axe to a lunatic not just because the term ‘just’ fails to apply, but because it is wrong; an act’s being just (or brave, or whatever) is a way for it to be *the thing to do*. Aristotle takes over this practical reading of virtue-terms. Thus an act is brave if the circumstances are appropriate (*Nicomachean Ethics* 3.6, 1115a28–66), and it is such as a brave man would do (2.4, 1105b5–7); and the brave man is the one ‘who faces and who fears the right things and from the right motive, in the right way, and at the right time’; for he ‘feels and acts according to the merits of the case and in whatever way the *logos* directs’ (3.6, 1115b17–20).<sup>6</sup> The brave thing to do turns out to be the right, recommendable thing to do, all things considered, in circumstances of non-commonplace danger.

On this conception, what is it to know, in modern jargon, the extension of terms such as ‘just’ or ‘brave’? It is not to have perfect knowledge of linguistic meanings, but to know how to act in situations of various kinds. The effect is to give ascriptions of virtue-terms to practical options the force of practical judgements. This opens their application to an indefinite number of considerations that may be practically relevant from occasion to occasion. If this is right, we may still speak, after Frege, of the *sense* of (for instance) ‘brave’, meaning by that whatever fixes its extension in the world as it is. We may even still speak of *mastering a concept*, so long as we keep in mind how open-ended an achievement that turns out to be in this kind of case. But it becomes misleading here to equate grasping a sense or mastering a concept with learning the meaning of a word. There is no semantic shortcut to knowing what is brave, and so recommendable,

<sup>6</sup> I take, or adapt, translations of the *EN* from Ross (1915).

in situations of danger. There are no lexical restrictions that rule out most considerations as irrelevant.

There is another, related corollary of Socrates' correction of Cephalus. This is the *uncodifiability* of each of the virtues. What it is to be just is not to be spelled out in a concrete paraphrase such as that which Socrates offers to Cephalus: telling the truth and returning what one has borrowed. For experience can quickly suggest instances of telling the truth (say) that are not just, and instances of justice that are not cases of telling the truth (or of returning what has borrowed—or any of a surveyable list). Ethical sensitivity is therefore not happily modelled upon any simple and reassuring stereotype either of knowing a language or of mastering a concept. Freed of stereotypes, analogies may always be welcomed. If mastery of a concept is *not* always a matter of having up one's sleeve a set of principles, or of necessary and sufficient conditions, just waiting to be applied to situations as they arise, then it may be all right, after all, to think of the ethically educated as having achieved mastery of ethical concepts; but then talk of mastering concepts is not a route to complacency. If (in John McDowell's Wittgensteinian analogy) the rails are not laid down in advance, what constitutes going off track?<sup>7</sup> Is going the right way just going the usual way? That would exclude the notion of a better-than-average sensitivity of the kind that Aristotle expected of the sensible and experienced (6.11, 1143b11–14), the people from whom one is wise to take advice. And if all right ways were also usual, hopes of codification would return.

The real insights of Plato and Aristotle may, therefore, land them and us in difficulties. How were they to find a way out? Here they may well diverge. On the face of it, Plato maintained, what Aristotle dismissed, that an agent or act is good if he or it participates in the Form of Goodness. Taken by itself, this risks *metaphysical complacency*; as a starting-point, it awaits explanation and elaboration. That good things partake of the Good is a heady thought, but how does it begin to distinguish the good from the bad?

It may help to recall other points of agreement. Expert statesmen, like all practical experts, we read in the *Statesman*, must be able to measure excess and deficiency in relation not only to each other but 'to the attainment of due measure' (*to metrion*, 284b9–c3). And due measure is subject to multiple assessment: it is 'the moderate, the fitting, the timely, the necessary, and all else that falls into the mean between extremes' (284e6–8). However, Plato places his hopes within 'arithmetic, measurement, and weighing', which he contrasts with 'guessing, by constant use

<sup>7</sup> McDowell (1998a), 203–12.

and experiences training one's senses and then using one's capacities for estimating—capacities that develop their power with laborious practice' (*Philebus* 55e1–56a1, trans. Gosling 1975; cf. *Laws* 720b2–5, 857c6–e1). Just how dialectic is to flesh this out the Socrates of the *Republic* does not, and cannot, spell out; after all, he claims to be no dialectician himself. The best hints may lie within his extended sketch of the mathematical disciplines that lead into dialectic. Myles Burnyeat finds that 'concord, proportion and order' turn out to be the fundamental concepts at once of mathematics, and of ethics and aesthetics.<sup>8</sup> This is schematic, and yet indicative. Plato evidently has hopes of illuminating situational variations on earth by the bright lights of evaluative constancies in heaven. He envisages that an exact perception of a situation, married to a schooled sensitivity to structural values, can generate a discrimination between practical options as achieving or missing the mean. This remains fantasy, we must suspect; it is not mere vacuity.

Aristotle takes over Plato's notion of the mean, and makes it salient and celebrated. Yet he dismisses Forms as 'sounds without sense' (*teretismata*, *Analytica Posteriora* 1.22, 83a33), and expects no practical derivations from abstract values apparent within geometry. How then can he hope to satisfy expectations of objectivity and determinacy?

### The Unity of the Virtues

We have seen that in Plato and Aristotle the application of a virtue-term (such as 'just' or 'brave') to a practical option takes on the force of a practical judgement, and that this bears problematically upon its objectivity. Should we follow them? We might well want to discriminate: might it not be *just* for the borrower to return the weapons whenever the lender asks for them, even when it is also *unwise*—indeed, irresponsible? Yet Socrates is evidently refusing to allow any such contrast. Perhaps this example is unclear: in a broad sense of 'just' as *what is owed to another* (cf. *EN* 5.1, 1129b25–7), to act so irresponsibly may be just to the lender, unjust to his potential victims. So take a different case, that of courage. Neither Plato nor Aristotle finds room for a retrospective judgement of this kind: 'Leonidas and his men showed great courage, but they would better have acted differently.' Yet surely it is intelligible to judge so. No doubt, even at the level of pre-theoretical intuition, there are connec-

<sup>8</sup> Burnyeat (2000), 76.

tions. Courage cannot be criminal. It is not courageous to rob a bank with a dummy pistol, even if it takes nerves of steel. And yet a failure to act justly that is not criminal seems compatible with courage. A witness who commits contempt of court in frustrating the course of justice by refusing to betray a personal confidence may certainly be displaying courage, even if she is arguably offending against moral as well as legal justice. The moral that I drew against a lexical comprehension of courage still stands, I think; for it remains the case that the range of considerations potentially relevant to ascriptions of courage is inconveniently open-ended.<sup>9</sup> Complacency is not restored, nor restorable.

So Plato's and Aristotle's conception of the force of terms such as 'just' and 'brave' is distinctive. What explains it? Not, I think, any idiomatic difference in sense between our terms for virtues and vices and their Greek equivalents. Gregory Vlastos cites from Sophocles' *Philoctetes* one indicative text among many.<sup>10</sup> Neoptolemus, urged by Odysseus to prevail over Philoctetes by trickery, remarks of a more honest mode of proceeding that, if it is just, it is better than prudent (1216). What we have in Plato and Aristotle is rather, I suggest, a distinctively philosophical conception; for it is a corollary of their belief in the unity of the virtues, and their derivation of that from the primacy of wisdom. Already in the *Laches*, Socrates argues that endurance can only count as courage if it is accompanied by wisdom (192e). In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, every ethical virtue involves practical wisdom, which yields all (or perhaps almost all) the ethical virtues. The simplest and strongest version of this view was that every virtue is identical to every other, an identity disguised by our idiomatic tendency to use different labels in different contexts of action. Thus the quality of character which, in commercial dealings, we call 'justice' may be really identical to the quality which, on the battlefield, we call 'courage'. The *Republic* and *Nicomachean Ethics* defend more complex variants of

<sup>9</sup> The same holds within aesthetics. On ascriptions of beauty, compare Savile (2000). And take a more specific term: it would be a perversion of taste to find a woman inelegant because she was visibly pregnant, but not, say, if her swelling was caused by dropsy. Aesthetic values, thick or thin, are impurely phenomenal; hence it is hard to delimit a priori what may be relevant to their realization.

<sup>10</sup> Vlastos (1991), 211. There is further evidence in Thucydides. In the debate about the fate of Mytilene, Diodotus supposes, 'Whereas Cleon claims that this punishment combines justice and expediency (*to auto dikaion kai xumphoron*), it appears that in such a policy the two cannot be combined' (3.47). And, during the Melian Dialogue, the Athenians convey that it is a *fault* in the Spartans' conduct of foreign affairs that they 'consider what is pleasant to be fine, and what is expedient just' (5.105). See also, for evidence that what is just may yet be shameful, and may not be equitable (*epieikês*), passages cited by Dover (1974), 190–1.

the view. Though interpreters disagree, the *Republic* can be read as contrasting perfect with popular virtue, and contending that the full virtues of philosophers are corollaries of a wisdom that is autonomous, while the half-virtues of artisans are corollaries of a half-wisdom that consists of obedience (see especially Book 9, 590d). The *Nicomachean Ethics* distinguishes different passions as the fields of different virtues, but denies that *any* passion can be perfectly ordered by anything less than a practical wisdom capable of directing *every* passion. Quite how Aristotle would argue this is less clear. A plausible line of thought to suit him is this: though passions can be distinguished, acts excluded by the proper regulation of one passion might, on occasion, be prompted by another one; for example, a man might be led to perform *an act of intemperance* (if not to act *in an intemperate manner*, cf. 2.4) through cowardice; so if temperance is to exclude intemperate action, it must imply courage.

How does a doctrine of the unity of the virtues, derived from the central role assigned to practical wisdom, connect with the use of the language of the virtues to yield practical judgements? I suggest as follows. Our common possession of the concept of courage rests upon a degree of consensus about appropriate reactions to the presence (or imminence) of danger. (I say 'a degree': of course there is a significant margin of uncertainty.) In Aristotle's view, this consensus arises from an ability that we share, to the extent that we are practically wise (or have the experience that can often serve instead, 6.11, 1143b11–14), to identify how best to act in situations of danger. This is a more demanding conception. We suppose that there are proper reactions to danger that save the agent from criticisms of cowardice (and—if Aristotle's doctrine of the mean applies—rashness). This need not imply that there is often such a thing, in situations of danger, as *the thing to do*, only that there are things to do that are not subject to that range of criticisms. On Aristotle's picture, the more restricted use of 'courageous' would arise by subtraction from a practical judgement which addressed *all* the features of the situation relevant to practical decision. It is hardly surprising that he preferred an all-in use, deriving from Plato, that bestowed upon the application of the term to a practical option the force of a practical judgement.

### Choice and Deliberation

The concept of a practical judgement goes back to Aristotle. He defines a concept of practical wisdom (*phronêsis*) in terms at once of *action* and

of *truth*: ‘Practical wisdom must be a state, concerning human goods and involving reasoning (*logos*) that is true and practical’ (*EN* 6.5, 1140b20–1).<sup>11</sup> It is a function of thinking to be true or false, and thinking that is ‘theoretical’, that is, neither practical nor productive, functions well if it is true (6.2, 1139a27–9). The success of practical thinking is more complex: it is ‘truth in agreement with right desire’ (*orexis*, a29–31). The fulcrum between thought and action is a special species of desire, choice or decision (*prohairesis*), which is ‘of something and for the sake of something’ (*Eudemian Ethics* 2.11, 1227b36–7), and so a child of *deliberation* (*bouleusis*) about ways or means for achieving an end. Aristotle does not conceive that an agent could approve an end and not have a ‘wish’ for it (*boulêsis*), or make a practical judgement and not choose accordingly. It is the converse relation (with wish or choice entailing belief) that is more often explicit: no one wishes for what he does not think to be good (5.9, 1136b7–8, cf. 3.2, 1112a7–8); but we do read that the deliberation that determines judgement also determines desire (3.3, 1113a11–12). Choice is a linkage of opinion and desire, generic or specific: perhaps it amounts to *opinion and desire*, arising out of deliberation as its conclusion (*EE* 2.10, 1227a3–5); or (consistently with that) it arises *out of opinion and wish* (which is a species of desire) without being identical even to their conjunction (*EE* 1226b2–4); or else (perhaps less consistently—if ‘out of’ excludes even partial identity) it arises *out of deliberative opinion* (b9). Most succinctly, we make a choice *to take or avoid something*, but form an opinion about *what it is*, or *in what way* it is beneficial; choice is commended for having the right object, opinion for relating truly to its object (*EN* 3.2, 1112a3–7). An Aristotelian form of words that does not appear in this context, yet may capture his intentions, is this: choice is identical to practical judgement though their *being* is not the same.<sup>12</sup>

An insight that goes back to Aristotle is that a practical judgement should be understood not in isolation, but by reference to the reasoning

<sup>11</sup> It is partly to suit the debt from Aristotle that I focus on first-person judgements; for he places practical judgements within the context of the agent’s deliberations about how to act. Yet he recognizes a category of vicarious judgements, sharing (in a manner) the content of first-person judgements, when he distinguishes ‘understanding’ (*sunesis*) from practical wisdom (*phronêsis*); see *EN* 6.10, and 6.11, 1143a29–31. Quite how to interpret the distinction is debated. A passage in the *Rhetoric* (2.18, 1391b8–12) supports the reading that understanding is the discrimination that an agent exercises upon practical advice, ideally displaying practical wisdom, received from others.

<sup>12</sup> In Hume’s terminology, opinion is a representative existence, choice an original one; see (1888), 415. No doubt Hume excluded that one and the same mental state, under different categorizations, could be *both* representative *and* original.

that lies behind it, of which it is an encapsulation or summary. We can agree with Anselm Müller when he writes this (in my translation): ‘An inferred practical judgement presents as *means* (to a previously named goal) what the judger in his inference has ascertained to be expedient. Such a practical judgement is less a “limiting case” than a “concentrate” of practical thinking.’<sup>13</sup> Müller refers appositely to Aristotle’s conception of choice, which encompasses end and means: choice is ‘of something and for the sake of something’ (*tinou kai heneka tinou*, *Eudemian Ethics* 2.11, 1227b37; cf. 2.10, 1226a11–13). Sarah Broadie has explained that formulation as follows:

Choice is a three-term relation between the agent, what he chooses and what he chooses what he chooses for. Thus in saying what that is for the sake of which he chooses as he does, the agent completes an otherwise incomplete description of his choice. . . . It is the same if, instead of saying ‘for the sake of Y’, we say ‘because I desire Y’ or ‘because I intend Y’. The clause following ‘because’ does not invoke some factor (e.g., a desire for Y) extraneous to the choosing of X, as if the choice of X were itself a complete entity. . . . The reason of a rational choice is structurally part of it, as distinct from being an interesting further fact *about it*.<sup>14</sup>

The close relationship between choice and practical judgement evidenced earlier implies that we should say the same about the practical judgement out of which, immediately, a choice comes (*EE* 2.10, 1226b9). If so, the explicit conclusion of a practical inference does not exhaust the content of the practical judgement; to capture that fully, we need to look behind the conclusion to the premisses in order to abstract the judgement from their combination. Schematically, suppose that I decide to  $\psi$  in order to  $\phi$ , judging ‘I must  $\psi$ ’: my meaning, in context, is that I must  $\psi$ , in order to  $\phi$ , which encompasses end and way or means without confusing them.  $\psi$ -ing is picked out as necessary for  $\phi$ -ing, which is the relevant end of the agent’s.

Aristotle offers us the ideal of a mature and rational agent who acts deliberately, and on the basis of a refined and correct conception of happiness or *eudaimonia*, that is, roughly, of how best to live. A choice, in the restricted sense he gives to the term *prohairesis*, is thus of the form: I must  $\psi$ , in order to be *eudaimôn*. This leaves crucial options open. Some things that he says readily suggest what Broadie calls the ‘Grand End’ view, according to which rational action is the enactment of a full blueprint for the good life, a detailed specification of what fills the bill of living as a man

<sup>13</sup> Müller (1994), 166.

<sup>14</sup> Broadie (1991), 180.

should live. I want now to follow her in questioning whether we need understand Aristotle so.

One remark that can be read as alluding to such a specification is this: ‘Practical syllogisms (*sullogismoi tôn praktôn*) have a starting-point, viz. “since the end, or what is best, is such-and-such, whatever that may be” ’ (EN 6.12, 1144a31–3). If this end is taken to be single and invariable, then ‘such-and-such’ marks a space for a determination of it in concrete terms adequate to yield a judgement and choice in any situation of action. The target of choice then becomes *eudaimonia so specified*, which is at once an object of desire, and an end sufficiently concrete to permit a calculation of ways and means.

Other things that Aristotle says, or which one may say on his behalf, can be accommodated within this picture. We must understand a remark ‘Those who have no goal before them are not in a position to deliberate’ (EE 2.10, 1226b29–30) not as allowing some men to have no desire even for *eudaimonia*, but as applying to anyone foolish enough to have failed to take some earlier advice: ‘Everyone who can live according to his own choice should adopt some goal for the fine life, whether it be honour or reputation or wealth or cultivation—an aim that he will have in view in all his actions; for, not to have ordered one’s life in relation to some end is a mark of extreme folly’ (EE 1.2, 1214b6–11). We can also make use of a distinction that Broadie proposes for technical deliberation:

For the medical practitioner, the ordinary notion of health does not provide a starting-point from which to deduce what medical action to take for a particular patient under particular circumstances . . . One way of being an inferior doctor is to work from an inaccurate professional specification of the end. Hence the end which *defines* the art or science of medicine is the same for all practitioners since all ultimately aim to produce or preserve what everyone values and refers to as ‘health’, but the end which *figures in the premises of medical deliberation* differs with experts of different calibre or different training.<sup>15</sup>

Deliberation is a marriage of desire and calculation. It is as a specification of *happiness* that some blueprint speaks to desire, but as a *specification* of happiness that it feeds into calculation.

However, I have cited nothing that has to be so construed. ‘The end, or what is best’, which is ‘such-and-such, whatever that may be’ (EN 6.12, 1144a31–3), *may* indeed be *eudaimonia* (which is called ‘what is best’ at EE 2.1, 1219a34). However, as Anthony Kenny remarks, Aristotle’s examples of practical syllogisms start not from *eudaimonia*, but from some less

<sup>15</sup> Broadie (1991), 194.



abstract goal.<sup>16</sup> We might understand, instead, that ‘such-and-such, whatever that may be’ is a situational variable, identifying some goal of action that falls under the umbrella of *how to live* and is pertinent to the occasion of action. If so, the ‘goals’ required at the start of *Eudemian Ethics* 1.2 are different, being goals of a whole life. For there Aristotle is urging, rather oddly, not just that every action should be directed towards an intrinsic good, but that there should be a single intrinsic good that becomes a man’s target in all his actions. Yet the goals he instances are very general: ‘honour or reputation or wealth or cultivation’ (1214b8–9). No such value can constitute a blueprint; and Aristotle cannot be thinking that it is foolish not to be governed by an insane thought of the kind ‘I will sacrifice everything to making money.’ (Anyone who says that cannot mean *everything* by ‘everything’.) He must rather be supposing that a man already brought up to behave in certain ways, and acceptably, can and should make a unity of his life by giving *salience*—but not, literally, awarding a monopoly—to a single kind of good. Thus a man may find direction in his life by identifying himself with a role, say as ‘a money-maker’, which doesn’t require him to adopt the thought I have called insane by discarding all other goals and all constraints.<sup>17</sup>

Broadie’s talk of a ‘Grand End’ naturally conveys scepticism, both about the attractions of such a view, and about the plausibility of ascribing it to Aristotle. Some of her points are these. He assumes that we are already familiar from experience with what practical deliberation is like; yet few of us have any notion of what it would be like to deliberate with a view to achieving a Grand End.<sup>18</sup> He allows that an agent may renounce an end after finding its realization impossible (*EN* 3.3, 1112b24–6); yet no one could renounce the Grand End.<sup>19</sup> He says several times that moral excellence makes the end right (6.12, 1144a7–8, 34–6; 7.8, 1151a17–19; *EE* 2.11, 1228a1–2); but how could the virtues as we know them generate the kind of blueprint, waiting only to be applied, that it might be a pretension of ethical theory to provide?<sup>20</sup> Perhaps Broadie’s most powerful point is

<sup>16</sup> Kenny (1979), 112.

<sup>17</sup> It is true that, if we take Aristotle strictly at his word (especially the words ‘an aim that he have in view in all his actions’, *EE* 1214b9), he must mean that, e.g. wealth will be *a* goal of *all* a man’s acts. Thus a City-trader on holiday might always intend to be refreshing himself for his next bout of trading. This is compatible with total honesty, but hardly with being a good friend, husband, or father. Aristotle cannot really believe that it would be ‘a mark of extreme folly’ (b10–11) to be less focused than *that*.

<sup>18</sup> Broadie (1991), 198.

<sup>19</sup> Broadie (1991), 199.

<sup>20</sup> Broadie (1991), 200; cf. 243.

directed against the necessary concession, if this view is at all to fit our experience, that the Grand End is, and must be, mostly implicit. As she well asks, ‘How do we (as he says) “calculate”... the means if the end is defined by a set of desiderative premises many or most of which are not articulately present to consciousness?’ She offers a nice comparison: ‘It may be wise to acknowledge that our identified target is no more than the tip of some iceberg, but it does not follow that the entire iceberg is our target, or that we can approach a submerged whole otherwise than by setting our sights on what we can see of it.’<sup>21</sup> She can concede that an action may primarily be explained by reference to some target, perhaps habitual, that was not actually summoned up by the agent, in words or images, before he made his choice. But such a target must at least be *preconscious*: to say the agent had it in mind may not be to ascribe an inner experience, but is refutable if he is unable to bring it to mind when asked the purpose of his action.

Pointers towards a more credible reading of Aristotle may be found within his discussion of deliberation in *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.3.<sup>22</sup> There he offers a pronouncement, and a set of examples: ‘We deliberate not about ends but about means. For a doctor does not deliberate whether he shall heal, nor an orator whether he shall convince, nor a statesman whether he shall produce law and order, nor does any one else deliberate about the end’ (1112b11–15). Aristotle cannot be excluding that a man might deliberate about whether to become a doctor, and a doctor about whether to practise as a doctor, or to take a holiday, next week. He must rather be supposing a practical context in which an end is already presupposed, as when a doctor is planning the treatment of a patient, and so is already presuming ‘I will (or want to) heal this man’. This is an end concrete and precise enough to invite a calculation of ways and means (b15–20):

Having set the end they consider how and by what means it is to be attained; and if it seems to be produced by several means they consider by which it is most easily and finely produced, while if it is achieved by one only they consider how it will be achieved by this and by what means *this* will be achieved, till they come to the first cause, which in the order of discovery is the last.

<sup>21</sup> Broadie (1991), 236.

<sup>22</sup> Aristotle’s later distinction between action and production (*praxis* and *poiêsis*, *EN* 6.2, 1139b1–3) is not present here, and we should not re-interpret 3.3 retrospectively as a discussion of technical, not practical, reasoning—as the ‘Grand End’ theory is bound to do.

Here Aristotle envisages two things: reasoning from an end through a series of necessary means; and selection between sufficient means, when none is necessary, on grounds of convenience or fineness. In the second kind of case, the initial goal is supplemented by what Müller has called ‘quasi-goals’ (*quasi-Ziele*): these are background or standing considerations, not necessarily moral, which do not set deliberation in train themselves, but tell for or against certain ways of behaving or modes of proceeding, and so, with varying stringency, constrain or influence the choice of means.<sup>23</sup> Between deliberation and action fall the making of a judgement and the forming of a desire: ‘When we have decided (*krinantes*) as a result of deliberation, we desire in accordance with our deliberation’ (1113a11–12). The decision (which is what *krisis* has to mean here) is thus a product of an initial goal without which there would be no deliberation, and quasi-goals that discriminate between ways and means where there are conceivable alternatives.

No doubt Aristotle is making his points by restricting his attention to unproblematic cases. He does mention that the deliberation may be abortive: ‘If we come on an impossibility, we give up the search, for example, if we need money and this cannot be got; but if a thing appears possible we try to do it’ (1112b24–7). Here possibility is a matter of ability and opportunity: ‘By “possible” things I mean things that might be brought about by our own efforts’ (b27). However, he should recognize a more interesting possibility: an agent deliberating from an unexceptionable goal may find that a necessary means is excluded by his quasi-goals (in Müller’s term). Thus I may find that, in my situation, the goal I am considering is either simply too expensive, or available free but only if one acts impermissibly; and I will then discard my goal, at least for the time being. Schematically, the agent may discover that, although he wishes to  $\varphi$ , and there are practicable ways of  $\varphi$ -ing, there is *no* premiss of the form ‘To  $\varphi$ , I must  $\psi$ ’ that is sufficiently sensitive to his quasi-goals, that is, no way of  $\varphi$ -ing that is acceptable to him. (He may well retreat to saying, ‘To  $\varphi$ , I would have to  $\psi$ ’, which can also accompany wondering whether to  $\varphi$ .)

So far, my reconstruction of Aristotle’s view has been fairly promissory. And there is further indication of more needing to be said. Aristotle offers conflicting indications as to whether a piece of deliberation in pursuit of a bad goal, and uninhibited by good quasi-goals, might not consist of true propositions.<sup>24</sup> He appears to be saying in two places that it might: some

<sup>23</sup> See Müller (1994), 164.

<sup>24</sup> On this question, contrast, *pro*, Kenny (1979), 94, with, *contra*, *ibid.*, 73–4, and Broadie (1991), 225.

form better opinions than choices (3.2, 1112a8–11), perhaps because they make practical judgements that are true as they mean them, but not the right ones to act on; and a weak or bad man may deliberate correctly, despite achieving a great evil (6.9, 1142b18–20). Another passage makes a perceptive distinction between two spheres of weakness, anger and appetite (7.6, 1149a32–b1): the man who loses his temper says ‘This sort of thing must be fought against’ in a context where he really knows it to be false; the man who is carried away by appetite merely says ‘This is pleasant’, which may be perfectly true. It is plausible to say the same of intemperance: there are immoralists who do wrong, as it were, on principle (translating a temptation into an ideal or even an obligation), and urge others to do likewise; yet it may be less typical of the intemperate to convert their goals into ideals or obligations than to be insufficiently inhibited by quasi-goals.<sup>25</sup> Aristotle’s own view about this may be less plausible, for he says that acting intemperately on choice goes with believing ‘One should always pursue the present pleasure’ (7.3, 1146b22–3, cf. 7.8, 1151a22–4). Yet that remark is not itself decisive: it might be that the general proposition hovers in the background of the agent’s reasoning, warding off any inhibiting quasi-goals but not making an appearance as a premiss. One needs to survey other evidence of how he conceives the practical syllogism, evidence that may well indicate indecision.<sup>26</sup> However, some of it certainly tells against permitting bad choices to rest on true judgements. Wickedness, he says, causes people *to be deceived* about the ends of action (6.12, 1144a34–6). It would seem to be as sides of the same coin that virtue makes the goal *right* (6.12, 1144a8), while practical wisdom gives a *true* supposition of the end (6.9, 1142b33). If so, the criterion of good practical reason, which is ‘truth in agreement with right desire’ (6.2, 1139a29–31), is complex but not conjunctive: ‘right desire’ may be rather an aspect of practical truth than an addition to it. But this needs explanation. ‘I must  $\psi$ ’ may only be intelligible as a condensation of ‘I must  $\psi$ , in order to  $\varphi$ .’ Yet it appears not to suffice for its truth that the speaker does want to  $\varphi$ , and is willing to  $\psi$ . How is practical truth to be identified if it does not reduce to instrumentality?

<sup>25</sup> In respect of things naturally pleasant, it is particularly plausible that intemperance should consist not in what enters into the practical syllogism, but in what it disregards. It is rather villainous than licentious to be led on by the thought, ‘She is another man’s wife.’

<sup>26</sup> Pertinent but ambiguous is the premiss ‘One must taste everything sweet’ (EN 7.3, 1147a29). This may be a conviction of intemperance (implicitly contrasted with weakness in respect of appetite). Or it may demand contextual interpretation, as by Kenny (1979, 139): ‘Mrs Beeton’s *Household Management* may state that the head pastrycook must taste everything sweet before it leaves the kitchen.’

### Ethical Perception and the Authority of the Good Judge

I take the balance of the evidence to be that Aristotle is happy to allow ethical considerations, even if they are rejected by the agent, to be relevant to the truth of practical judgements of the form 'I must  $\psi$ , in order to  $\phi$ '. Yet there is insufficient reason to suppose him to be holding, wholly implausibly, that such considerations are exhausted by an initial grand specification of *eudaimonia*. Rather, an uncodifiable conception of *eudaimonia*, distinctive enough to mark off a good man from a vicious one, but not articulate enough to yield practical judgements inferentially, is part of an agent's character, and influences his selection of goals, and his respect for quasi-goals, from occasion to occasion of action. As Broadie puts it: 'The practical agent differs not by being focused on another special sort of good that is special because unrestricted and categorically demanding, but by being focused on a restricted good (not always the same one, either) with a focus that sets no limit on the considerations that could affect which way he goes with regard to that good or to the points of view that might make a difference.'<sup>27</sup> If the role of practical inference is thus circumscribed, what supplements it in order to yield concrete decisions? And what can make a decision *right*?

Part of Aristotle's answer is likely to lie in a peculiar variety of perception that he is willing to identify with mind or intuitive reason (*nous*, *EN* 6.11, 1143b5).<sup>28</sup> This is instanced near the end of his discussion of the mean: 'Up to what point and to what extent a man may deviate before he becomes blameworthy it is not easy to determine by the *logos*, any more than anything else that is perceptible; such things depend on the particulars, and the discrimination depends on perception' (2.9, 1109b20–3, cf. 4.5, 1126b2–4). Whatever is being said here about assessing deviations from the mean must often apply also to locating the mean in the first place; for there also much 'depends on the particulars'. Such perception requires experience: it is 'because experience has given them an eye' that

<sup>27</sup> Broadie (1991), 211.

<sup>28</sup> Compare how Wiggins (1998: 236) expands that cryptic passage: 'For here, in the capacity to find the right feature and form a practical syllogism, resides the understanding of the reason for performing an action, or its end. For the major premise and the generalizable concern that comes with it arise from this perception of something particular. So one must have an appreciation or perception of the particular, and my name for this is intuitive reason.'

older people ‘see aright’ (6.11, 1143b13–14).<sup>29</sup> How does such perception fit into Aristotle’s general philosophy?

We may recall his division of things perceptible into three categories: sensibles are either *proper* to each sense, like colour and sound, or *common* to every sense, like shape and movement, or *incidental*, like ‘son of Diares’ (*de Anima* 2.6). Even proper sensibles are perceived incidentally by the other senses (3.1, 425a30–1). How do we perceive incidental objects? We may adduce *phantasia* in its role as imagination, while respecting his conception of it (both in the *de Anima* and the *Parva Naturalia*) as operating with images. Taking an example from the *Ethics* (*EN* 3.10, 1118a20–1), we may suppose that the lion perceives the sound as an ox’s lowing in that he associates it with visual and tactile and gustatory images that together constitute his pre-conceptual conception of an ox. However, a better term than ‘associating’ might be ‘combining’ or even ‘blending’: in *de Sensu* 7, Aristotle denies the possibility of two simultaneous perceptions; rather, things seen at the same time are ‘mixed’, and ‘a mixture tends to unity’ (447b9–11). Since imagining is an exercise of the same faculty as perceiving (*de Insomniis* 1, 459a15–17), the same should hold of perceiving and imagining. Hence—as fits the actual phenomenology—incidental perception is not experienced as perceiving *these* proper and common sensibles while also imagining *those*.<sup>30</sup>

Values must be incidental objects of perception. How may *they* impinge on perception? Let us start with a pretty basic example: ‘Appetite, if reasoning or perception merely says that an object is pleasant, springs to the enjoyment of it’ (*EN* 7.6, 1149a34–b1). *Seeing* that something is good to *taste* can only be a case of incidental perception. We must suppose that the visual perception is associated (or fused) with images of pleasant tastes. Even if these are not actual memory-images, they will be supplied by experience. A passage of the *de Anima* is evidently pertinent, though not easy: ‘To perceive then is like bare asserting or thinking; but when the object is pleasant or painful, the soul makes a sort of affirmation or negation, and pursues or avoids the object. To feel pleasure or pain is to

<sup>29</sup> In his interesting piece in this volume, Timothy Chappell takes it that what one needs an ‘eye’ for is universal, not particular (pp. 246–7 above). Yet it accords with my section on ‘Choice and Deliberation’ to suppose that talk of having an eye for the right end (as at *EN* 3.5, 1114b6–7, 6.11, 1143b13–14, and 6.12, 1144a31–3) refers to an end that is apt not universally, but in context. As Aristotle remarks of mixed actions, ‘The end of the action is relative to the occasion’ (3.1, 1110a13–14). If so, the idea of perception is still alive in the metaphor of the ‘eye’, since what is required is a sound discrimination of practical contexts that is indeed perceptual, though conceptually laden.

<sup>30</sup> Here I draw upon section V of Price (1996), 285–309.

act with the perceptive mean towards what is good or bad as such' (3.7, 431a8–11). I take it that in this passage 'pleasant' is materially equivalent to 'good', and 'painful' to 'bad'—as they indeed are from the point of view of natural appetite. The 'perceptive mean' is a state of the perceptive apparatus whereby it is ready to register, for example, the ratio of black to white that, according to Aristotle, constitutes some surface as being of a determinate colour. Rather as for the eye to see red is for it to take on a certain ratio, so, perhaps, for the affective soul (operating in the heart) to see an object as pleasant to some degree is for it to take on a certain ratio of pleasure to pain in connection with images of enjoying the object in some appropriate way. When the pleasure is gustatory, feelings of pleasure will answer to images of pleasant tastes on a graded scale. Thus, seeing an object as pleasant will involve a connection between images of the object, associated (or fused) with present perceptions of it, and feelings of pleasure. Appetite itself is perceptive because a feeling of pleasure is partly constitutive of the perception.

We may count pleasure as a value in that to think of something as pleasant *is* to have a desire for it. In Aristotle as in Plato, appetite enjoys a high degree of plasticity or adaptability in the hands of reason. While 'pleasant' is the only generic value-term of which it has, so to speak, a native understanding, it can borrow other value-terms (such as 'good') and apply them to pleasure. This is probably envisaged in the passage of *de Anima* quoted above (3.7, 431a8–11), and is confirmed in the *Eudemian Ethics*: the pleasant may appear good to one part of the soul even if it is not thought to be good by another (7.2, 1235b26–9). A more striking development is that appetite may borrow from reason not only foreign terms of appraisal, but new objects of aspiration. It is a familiar, if stringent, demand that a fully temperate appetite should desire, and take pleasure in, only food and drink and sex that reason approves (such as unadulterated food and unadulterous sex). Achieving the mean in one's affections as in one's actions amounts to no (or not much) less.<sup>31</sup> It is a yet more remarkable ideal that a temperate appetite adopt reason's values: it takes the fine (*to kalon*) as its *skopos* or target (*EN* 3.12, 1119b15–16)—where the term *skopos* conveys that the fine becomes for it an intentional, and not just coincidental, object. 'Fine' is to us an elusive value-term. It certainly connects with commendation: close relations are 'honourable' (*entimos*, cf. 4.3, 1125a26 with a29), and 'praiseworthy' (*epainetos*, cf. *EE* 7.15, 1248b19–20). Part of this transformation of appetite must be that it

<sup>31</sup> I simplify somewhat; cf. Price (1995), 123–5.

becomes sensitive to interpersonal evaluations. (To adapt an example of J. L. Austin's, I may feel no desire to take a second bombe at High Table if others would find that greedy.) While appetite, according to a nature that is rooted in the body, is perceptive of the pleasant, a temperate appetite, with a second nature that derives from a social culture, is also perceptive of the fine.

Appetite is only one of the species of desire that inhabit what Aristotle calls 'the perceptive and desirous' (*EE* 2.2, 1219b23) stratum of the soul. In general, evaluative perceptions may be conceived as fuelled by irrational desire that has taken on a second nature through its education by concepts supplied by reason. And these concepts are not derived by reason from elsewhere, for instance through recollection of a Platonic heaven, but emerge out of a reflective development of natural desires.<sup>32</sup> In a stepwise progress characteristic of mental development, desires fuel concepts by which they are then transformed. Within the education through habituation that Aristotle describes in *Nicomachean Ethics* Book 2, acquiring and refining concepts goes with training one's desires. To be educated in one's emotions and desires is to be able to perceive the world in the light of sophisticated value-concepts sensitive to circumstance. The theorist has two extremes to avoid. Universalism loses touch with experience if it takes the form of the 'Grand End' view already rejected. Particularism loses touch with our humanity if it reads ethical perceptions as pure pieces of cognition insulated from personal character. General evaluations (such as that there is usually something bad in a lie) and general rules (such as that, for the most part, one shouldn't tell lies) cannot simply be generalizations deriving from particular decisions (such as 'I should not say that'). The ethical agent brings to a situation certain predispositions to find certain features salient (such as that saying that would be a lie). What may then give him pause are saliences that reflect concerns which conflict in the context (as can arise between veracity and tact). Aristotle offers no decision procedure either for 'mixed' acts ('It is difficult sometimes to determine what should be chosen at what cost', *EN* 3.1, 1110a29–30), or for variable and possibly conflicting obligations ('Discussions about feelings and actions have just as much definiteness as their subject-matter', 9.2, 1165a12–14). Yet it cannot be that *nothing* mediates between the acceptance of a background truism ('Since we ought to render different things to parents, brothers, comrades, and benefactors, we ought to render to each class what is appropriate and fitting', 1165a16–18) and a

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Price (1995), 129–32.



perception of a particular situation as inviting a specific response. Because there are no exceptionless rules,<sup>33</sup> decision cannot be blindly deductive; the agent has to be sensitive to whether he can experience the situation as inviting the response. But this must involve a threefold relation between a context, an option, and a character that is in part constituted by a repertory of goals and quasi-goals. Of the ‘appropriate and fitting’ there can be no dispassionate grasp. We should pay heed to Peter Strawson’s warning, in a related context, against trying to fill a gap ‘with an intuition of fittingness—a pitiful intellectualist trinket for a philosopher to wear as a charm against the recognition of his own humanity’.<sup>34</sup>

It would be good if Aristotle had tailored an analysis of the incidental perception that is infused by desire or affection to fit two things: the selection of a goal as a starting-point of deliberation within a situation inviting deliberate action, and a sensitivity to quasi-goals that further influence or constrain the choice of ways and means. Both fall within what Wiggins, after Aristotle, has called ‘situational appreciation’.<sup>35</sup> The phrase leaves much unspecified, but at least conveys the negative lesson that neither goal nor quasi-goals should be supposed to derive deductively from the discursive specification of a grand end. Now both Aristotle and Wiggins retain the aspiration that what is yielded may yet be a *correct* apprehension of *the thing to do*. This may puzzle us. How one sees practical situations may seem rather explanatory of one’s own actions than authoritatively prescriptive of the actions of others. Here it becomes crucial that Aristotle places practical judgements within a context at once personal and communal. Intellectualist interpreters have been embarrassed by his relativization of practical truth to virtue of character: the good state of the practical soul is ‘truth in agreement with right desire’ (6.2, 1139a29–31); ‘Virtue makes us aim at the right mark, and practical wisdom makes us take the right means’ (6.12, 1144a7–9); ‘Perhaps the good man differs from others most by seeing the truth in each class of

<sup>33</sup> A few prohibitions make an exception (*EN* 2.6, 1107a11–12)—but possibly only with the use of terms (‘adultery’, ‘theft’, and ‘murder’) whose application is contestable at the margin. Within an important chapter on legal equity (*epiēkeia*), Aristotle writes, ‘About some things it is not possible to make a universal statement which will be correct’ (5.10, 1137b14). He never, to my knowledge, advances an exceptionless ethical principle that is both positive and concrete.

<sup>34</sup> Strawson (1974a), 24.

<sup>35</sup> See Wiggins (1998), 233–7. Yet what are we to say about vicarious or retrospective judgements that are distant from the agent’s situation in space or time? Rationalistic ethics is typically blind to the real problems that these confront, problems surmountable to a degree through common experience, and the empathetic exercise of the imagination.

things, being as it were the standard and measure of them' (3.4, 1113a32–3, cf. 9.4, 1166a12–13).<sup>36</sup> This is why Aristotle has to restrict his audience: 'Anyone who is to listen intelligently to lectures about what is fine and just . . . must have been brought up in good habits. For the fact is a starting-point, and if this is sufficiently plain to him he will not need the reason as well' (1.4, 1095b4–7). This not a relativization to the particular agent;<sup>37</sup> it rather presupposes a broad consensus about what constitutes an acceptable repertory of goals and quasi-goals, and whose opinions are worth listening to. Hence Aristotle can set aside the divergent perceptions of a Callicles or Thrasymachus. This is consistent with his practical rather than metaphysical conception of the purpose of ethics: 'We are enquiring what goodness is not in order that we may know it, but in order that we may become good' (2.2, 1103b27–8).<sup>38</sup> This is an aim that invites an articulate understanding of the structure of ethical thinking, but does not demand an external grounding irrelevant to decision and action.

Such an objectivity does justice of a kind to the truisms with which I began. So long as *my* stating that *p* does not suffice in itself to make it true that *p*, we can compare *how I state things to be* with *how they are*, and may take their identity to be not a matter of course, but a purported goal of my utterance and a criterion of its success. If I say of an agent's  $\varphi$ -ing 'He acted well' with reference to no identifiable standards, I fail to state anything determinately true or false. If I intend my utterance to be understood in the light of an agreed standard, when in fact those whose judgement we trust would advise against  $\varphi$ -ing in his situation in view of a conflicting quasi-goal that we expect one another to respect, then things are not as I state them to be.<sup>39</sup> However, deeper questions can be asked about the status of the implicit consensus (always imperfect, partly

<sup>36</sup> The focality of the good man is related well to Aristotle's rejection of any Platonic ideal of a 'science of the practical' in Chappell in this volume.

<sup>37</sup> As I discussed at the end of the section on 'Choice and Deliberation', the predominant evidence is that Aristotle does not relativize practical truth to individual goals and quasi-goals.

<sup>38</sup> So R. M. Hare translates, in an unpublished note. Ross' rendering (1915) ('We are inquiring not in order to know what virtue is, but in order to become good') denies the enquiring a topic.

<sup>39</sup> Of course, a moral system is very different from a legal one. Outside theocracies, it lacks a hierarchy of officials and verdicts. A moral reformer can appeal to a recognized reason, applied in a new context, to make out that he is the only one in step; and time may be the only test. So there are criteria of ethical truth rather than necessary and sufficient conditions. This broad contrast can generate the illusion among philosophers that we share moral authority not as members of society, but as rational monads—as if we were gods, rather than men. A salutary correction is Foot (1978), 189–207.

idealized, and constantly evolving) on which the moral judgements of a community purport to rest. Aristotle was not, and could not be, simply unaware of the old Greek debate between nature (*phusis*) and convention (*nomos*). He opens a brief and restricted discussion in 5.7 as follows: ‘Of political justice part is natural, part legal: natural, that which everywhere has the same force and does not exist by people’s thinking this or that; legal, that which is originally indifferent, but when it has been laid down is not indifferent’ (1134b18–21). Yet he then rejects constancy as the criterion of the natural by admitting that *all* justice is changeable, whether it holds by nature or otherwise, while still finding it ‘evident’ which is which (b29–33). Commentators have properly been puzzled; presumably Aristotle’s thought is that some variations in justice are purely arbitrary and conventional, while others reflect the varying exigencies of need and circumstance.<sup>40</sup> He can hardly be resistant to a recognition that different societies may, to an extent, develop different virtue-concepts and cultivate different virtues. However, he does not view human nature as a *tabula rasa*, but takes it to be inherently social. The individual agent has as much independence as a piece in draughts (*Politics* 1.2, 1257a7); this should be why anti-social agents are bound to be self-conflicted (*EN* 9.4, 1166b11–18). Ethical life is not a game to be played in accordance with any rules that may take on resonance.<sup>41</sup> Ethical values are neither fully explicable as effective instruments towards non-ethical goods, nor independent of the common or garden gains and losses that form the raw material of moral concern. Yet Aristotle rather puts us in the way of such reflections than pursues them himself.

<sup>40</sup> Consider the differences in intelligence and spirit that Aristotle ascribes partly to climate, partly to ethnicity (*Politics* 7.7).

<sup>41</sup> A commentator on Browning’s ‘Soliloquy in a Spanish Cloister’ quotes a passage (from *Brief Discourse of the Spanish State, entitled Philobasilis*, 1590, p. 24) that well illustrates how, in Renaissance fancy, revenge became a fine art: ‘One of these monsters meeting his enemy unarmed, threatened to kill him if he denied not God, his power, and essential properties, viz. his mercy, suffrance, etc., the which when the other, desiring life, pronounced with great horror, kneeling upon his knees; the hero cried out, *nowe will I kill thy body and soule*, and at that instant thrust him through with his rapier.’ There is no real possibility that this attitude could have sustained itself in reality as serving the ends of ethics.

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## An Aristotelian Commentator on the Naturalness of Justice

R. W. SHARPLES

### I

The question of whether justice or ‘what is right’, *dikaiosunê* or *to dikaion*,<sup>1</sup> is a matter of nature or convention is a central one in ancient Greek thought from the time of the Sophists onwards. It has a particular importance in the context of ancient eudaimonistic ethics. Justice in the more general sense of the term is, Aristotle argues, the aspect of virtue concerned with our behaviour towards other people;<sup>2</sup> and in a system of thought which assumes, as ancient eudaimonistic ethics does, that I should act in my own true self-interest, the question whether and why it is in my own interest to treat other people justly is nothing less than the question of the basis of morality.

In this chapter I am indebted to interventions in the discussion at the Exeter conference, and points made to me subsequently, by Edwin Brandon, Sarah Broadie, Wolfgang Detel, David Gallop, Christopher Gill, Alain Lenoùd, Anthony Price, and Christopher Rowe; where no further reference is given, acknowledgements refer to these oral communications. The responsibility for the use I have made of the views of others of course remains mine. Translations of Greek texts are my own.

<sup>1</sup> The Greek terms cover the meanings of both the English ones; indeed, ‘general’ justice as described by Aristotle is close to the archaic English ‘righteousness’. In the major part of this chapter, ‘right’ and ‘just(ice)’ should both be understood as translating the Greek terms as they apply to actions. The connection is that performance of ‘just’ actions is a necessary, though not in Aristotle’s view sufficient, condition for being a ‘just’ person (*EN* 2.4, 1105b5–9).

<sup>2</sup> *EN* 5.1, 1129b25–30.

It is also a question which has a certain topicality. In the early 1970s, if one told philosophically unsophisticated students that in ancient Greece ‘why should I do what is right?’ was a real question in a way that ‘why should I believe what is true?’ is not, their reaction, or at least the reaction they thought was expected, was one of shock. By the late 1980s they did not appear to be shocked at all. This may simply mark a decline in hypocrisy; but if the question ‘why should I do what is right?’ has now become a real one, appeal to the facts, in the ancient Greek style, provides one way to answer it. Similarly, Aristotle’s observation that ‘all human beings naturally desire to know’ (*Metaph.* 1.1, 980a1) may provide a basis for considering education in other than purely instrumentalist terms, and his remarks about money being a means to an end rather than an end in itself<sup>3</sup> may provide the basis for a challenge to current perspectives. For the ancient Greeks an ‘is’ *can* give rise to an ‘ought’. Those who reduce ethics to considerations of economics or biodeterminism can be challenged by arguing that values cannot be derived from facts; they can also be challenged by calling the alleged facts into question or by arguing that those facts are too narrow and impoverished in their scope.<sup>4</sup>

## II

Aristotle addresses the question whether justice is natural or conventional in *Nicomachean Ethics* 5.7. Characteristically, his answer is that it is both—natural in some cases, conventional in others.<sup>5</sup> But he says little about the content of natural justice, and the discussion is devoted more to showing that conventional and natural justice *can* co-exist, and to showing that it is inappropriate to demand complete invariability as a criterion for the existence of the latter,<sup>6</sup> than to establishing that natural justice *does* exist:

T1. Of justice in a city-state part is natural and part conventional; natural that which has the same force everywhere, and not according to what people decide, conventional that where at the start it makes no difference whether it is this way or that, but when they make the law it does, like paying a ransom of one mina or

<sup>3</sup> See Aristotle, *Politics* 1.9; Meikle (1994).

<sup>4</sup> On the claims of ‘science’ in antiquity see Sharples (2000); on ethical normativity and ‘nature’ in various senses in modern philosophy, see Detel in this volume.

<sup>5</sup> For the concern to accommodate both claims, one might compare his discussion of the apparent good at *EN* 3.4, 1113a15–33, and of slavery at *Pol.* 1.5–6, 1254a17–1255b15.

<sup>6</sup> See Joachim (1951: 154–6).

sacrificing a goat rather than two sheep, and also all laws made about individuals, as in the case of sacrificing to Brasidas, and decrees that are voted on. Some people think that all (justice) is like this, because they see that what is natural is unvarying and has the same force everywhere, just as fire burns both here and in Persia, but what is just changes (from one place to another). This is not so, however, though it is so in a way. Among the gods, perhaps, it is not so at all; among us there is some (justice) that is by nature, even though all is variable—nevertheless, there is some that is by nature and some that is not. What sort of thing among those that can also be otherwise is by nature, and what sort is not but conventional and by agreement, [even] if both are similarly changeable, is clear. And the same distinction will fit the other cases too: by nature the right [hand] is stronger, but it is possible for all to become ambidextrous. Justice that is according to an agreement and to what is advantageous is similar to measures; for the measures for wine and corn are not equal everywhere, but bigger where they are buying and smaller where they are selling. Similarly justice that is not natural but man-made is not the same everywhere; for neither are the constitutions of states, but (nevertheless) there is one which is in accordance with nature everywhere, (namely) the best. (Aristotle, *EN* 5.7, 1134b18–1135a5)

Christopher Rowe has argued that it is to the *Politics*, rather than to the *Nicomachean Ethics*, that we must look for Aristotle's account of natural justice. The discussion there, however, is tied to a specific type of society, the city-state, and its organization. There would thus seem to be scope for a more general consideration of the basis of morality, recognizing that human beings operate in societies, but regarding the question of the naturalness of justice as a general one applying to every form of human society and indeed to relations between human beings independently of any specific social structures. The text from later antiquity that I shall be considering gives prominence to the idea that justice is fundamental to human nature as such. It thus constitutes an argument both for the universality and for the objectivity of ethical norms, not only in the sense that human society requires *some* such norms but also, as we shall see, in the sense that some conceivable norms are unnatural and others natural. It is not surprising that the question should be approached in these more general terms in the period of the Roman Empire, when the city-state was no longer the most important unit of political organization and when the notion of a universal law transcending national frontiers—itsself drawing on Stoic sources among others—had become familiar.<sup>7</sup> The text we shall be considering also shows how an interpreter or interpreters

<sup>7</sup> See Watson (1971), Mitsis (1999), and Gill, pp. 35–40 above.

of Aristotle could draw upon the different and more universal perspectives and agendas of Hellenistic philosophy.

### III

This text is §19 of a collection transmitted in the MSS as Book 2 of the treatise *On the Soul* by the Aristotelian commentator Alexander of Aphrodisias (fl. c. AD 200), and labelled *Mantissa* ('makeweight' or 'supplement') by its nineteenth-century editor Ivo Bruns.<sup>8</sup> This so-called Book 2 is in fact a collection of originally separate texts, many of which consist of series of arguments for particular theses, in some cases presented in a summary form and in sequences in which each new item is introduced simply by a 'Moreover' (*eti*). The extreme case is §20, *That virtue is not sufficient for happiness*, which contains thirty-eight arguments for this thesis. The present text is not so much a catalogue as this, but still bears the marks of the type. And that is relevant to the question of the origin of the arguments it contains.

Whatever one may suppose regarding the other collections of short texts attributed to Alexander, in the case of the *Mantissa* there seems no reason to suppose that the texts in it may not all be, in some sense, from the hand or mouth of Alexander himself, and in some cases strong reasons to suppose that they are.<sup>9</sup> However, that claim needs to be qualified in three ways. First, §2 contains, in its latter part, reports of interpretations of Aristotle by, presumably, a teacher of Alexander, interpretations which Alexander then proceeds in one case to develop and in another to attack; so to say that the text as a whole is by Alexander does not mean that he endorses all that it contains.<sup>10</sup> Second, §22 can only be by Alexander if it is his report of a view he does not himself endorse but which he does *not* in this case go on to attack. Third, and most relevantly to our present text, to say that those sections that consist of catalogues of arguments for a particular thesis are by Alexander does not imply that he himself invented

<sup>8</sup> Greek text in Bruns (1887); an English translation in Sharples (2004) and a new edition of the Greek text with French translation, with the assistance of Alain Leroi-Gourhan, in Sharples (forthcoming *a*). The translations from the *Mantissa* included in this paper are taken from Sharples (2004); I am grateful to Gerald Duckworth and Co. for permission to reproduce these passages, and also material which appears in abbreviated form in the commentary in that volume.

<sup>9</sup> For fuller discussion see the Introduction to Sharples (2004), and Sharples (forthcoming *b*).

<sup>10</sup> See Accattino (2001: 9–15), Sharples (2004: 32–44).

all the arguments they contain. Clearly, such collections are likely to draw on a tradition of discussion in the Peripatetic school. However, the present section is more carefully constructed than, for example, §20, and so one may conclude that its author both endorses the arguments it contains and, in some sense, makes them his own, even if he did not originate them. Some of the arguments are dialectical in character; this is characteristic of much of the *Mantissa* and reflects its origin in school debate. Some of the arguments are better than others, but all apart from the last rest on one or other of two points: the nature of human beings and the observed existence of universal norms.

#### IV

Julia Annas has argued that *Mantissa* §19 improves on Aristotle's discussion in *EN* 5.7 by appealing to the claim that humans are naturally social.<sup>11</sup> At 157.9–13 that claim is supported by human possession of speech:

τ2. The greatest sign that human beings are communal by nature, and much more than all other living creatures, is that they alone are rational [*logikos*] and they alone can employ speech [*logos*], and that speech relates only to the indication to one's companions of one's own thoughts and what one sees.

Similarly in the twenty-fourth of the *Ethical Problems* attributed to Alexander (147.24–148.4):

τ3. Community is worthy to be chosen by human beings on its own account, as can easily be recognized from the fact that community is natural for them. The clearest sign of this is that a human being differs most from the other living creatures in that respect that is only useful to him in community with others. For speech is his peculiar [possession], and the use of this is for indication to one's neighbours of one's personal thoughts and feelings. And this is also clear from the fact that a human being is not able to live even for a short time if he becomes isolated. A human being's essence is in community, and speech is for the sake of this. The best and most perfect of the communities that come about in accordance with speech is political [community], and each thing is naturally judged [starting] from the things that are best. Therefore a human being will be capable of speech, and also political; and the preservation of [political] community will

<sup>11</sup> Annas (1993: 144–5, with specific reference to the present text): 'Aristotle agrees that actual just arrangements are subject to change, but adds that this is consistent with there being a natural justice which is the best everywhere. He does not make the point very clearly or convincingly, and his commentator Alexander does a much better job.'



be most natural for him and worthy to be chosen on its own account. And this is what justice is like.<sup>12</sup>

Aristotle does at *Politics* 1.2, 1253a9–18 use the argument that humans have speech by nature and that nature does nothing in vain to show that human beings are communal by nature, and in particular that human community is superior to that of other animals because it has a moral dimension:<sup>13</sup>

T4. Nature, we say, does nothing in vain. Human beings alone of living creatures have speech. Sound indicates pain and pleasure, and for this reason the other living creatures too have it; for this is the point their nature has reached, that of having a sense of what is painful or pleasant and indicating this to one another. But speech is for showing what is advantageous or harmful, and consequently also what is just or unjust; for this is peculiar to human beings in comparison with the other living creatures, that they alone have a sense of good and bad and just and unjust and the rest. And it is community in these that creates a household and a city.

But he does not there explicitly make this an argument for the natural rather than conventional character of justice. In doing so, *Mantissa* §19 is following the procedure of interpreting Aristotle through Aristotle, of relating different parts of the Aristotelian corpus—in this case *Politics* 1.2 and *Nicomachean Ethics* 5.7—to one another in order to clarify Aristotle's views and construct arguments for them, a procedure which is characteristic of the Aristotelian commentary tradition in general and of Alexander in particular.

One might therefore expect to find connections between *Mantissa* §19 and the commentary tradition on the *Ethics*. There is a problem in the lack of surviving material from that tradition. It is uncertain whether Alexander himself ever wrote a continuous commentary on the *Ethics*. Many of the collection of *Ethical Problems* attributed to him are discussions of specific passages from Aristotle's text. If he did write a continuous commentary, it is now lost.<sup>14</sup> Aspasius' commentary on the *Ethics* from the

<sup>12</sup> Translation from Sharples (1990a: 62–3). I am grateful to Gerald Duckworth and Co. for permission to reproduce it here.

<sup>13</sup> This was drawn to my attention by Richard Sorabji.

<sup>14</sup> On this question see Abbamonte (1995: 250 n. 4, arguing that he did), Sharples (2001: 593–5, arguing that he did not). In his commentary on *Topics* 3.1, 116b11–12, Alexander discusses the contrast between natural justice and the customs or laws of particular groups (*in Top.* 233.13–20), taking *dikaïou* in Aristotle's text as neuter, before adding an alternative interpretation (233.20–3) based on taking *dikaïou* as masculine, as the context clearly requires; but he gives no actual examples of natural justice. His comment at *in Top.* 426.14–427.2 on 6.2, 140a7–8 does not take up Aristotle's reference to natural justice, which is incidental to the point being made.

second century AD, the only substantially surviving commentary on any Aristotelian text that is certainly earlier than Alexander, is incompletely preserved, and does not now include a discussion of Book 5.<sup>15</sup> However, there are parallels between *Mantissa* §19 and two other commentaries.

At 157.32–158.3 *Mantissa* §19 has the following:

τ 5. If, because different things are just among different peoples, for this reason they are going to say that [what is just does] not [exist] by nature, it is clear that they will say that that which is the same among all [does exist] by nature. And if they are going to say that what is written down is based on an agreement, and not by nature, for the reason that it is written down, it is clear that it is necessary for them to say that what does not have its force depending on writing is by nature and is not based on an agreement. But there are many things like this, which we are accustomed to call, from the very [feature] that applies to them, ‘unwritten laws’, which are common to all human beings, at any rate those that are not incapacitated. Respecting one’s elders and revering the divine and honouring one’s parents and betters are unwritten and common [elements of] justice observed by nature among all human beings.

The point that natural justice is not found among those who are incapacitated, *pepêrômenoîs*, is not made by Aristotle himself in τ 1,<sup>16</sup> but it is added in comments on that passage, both in the anonymous commentary on Book 5 (*Commentaria in Aristotelem Graeca* 20), the date of which is uncertain but *may* be as early as the second century AD,<sup>17</sup> and in the twelfth century AD commentary on *Nicomachean Ethics* 5 by Michael of Ephesus (*Commentaria in Aristotelem Graeca* 22.3).<sup>18</sup> The two commentaries however use the term *adiastrophos*, ‘uncorrupted’, rather than (not) *pepêrômenos*,<sup>19</sup> and suggest rather more clearly than *Mantissa* §19 does that the exceptions may be whole peoples, not just individuals.<sup>20</sup> And neither commentary refers to ‘unwritten laws’ in commenting on *Nico-*

<sup>15</sup> That Aspasius did write a commentary on Book 5 is argued by Barnes (1999: 21).

<sup>16</sup> However, for the view that there are some people to whom normal moral categories do not extend, see Aristotle, *EN* 7.5, on conditions which we would now call psychopathic—to which Aristotle, significantly, likens the behaviour of savage tribes.

<sup>17</sup> 232.10, 233.15. See Sharples (1990a, 6–7), and references cited there.

<sup>18</sup> 46.10, 47.6, 13. See Browning (1990: 399–400).

<sup>19</sup> For *pepêrômenos* cf. *EN* 1.9, 1099b19, where Aristotle says, in support of his conception of happiness, that it can belong to all who are not incapacitated for virtue. Alexander himself makes similar qualifications more than once, using both terms, *pepêrôsthai* and *diastrephesthai*: *Mantissa* 23, 175.22, 28 (see Sharples 1983: 274); *Ethical Problems* 9, 129.10–11; 18, 139.9; 29, 160.34.

<sup>20</sup> Whether this is an indication that the anonymous commentary is primary and *Mantissa* §19 derivative is uncertain—it may just be due to the influence of the context in the commentary.

*machean Ethics* 5. There are therefore differences as well as similarities. The most significant similarity for the present purpose, however, concerns the examples of natural justice that the texts give.

Aristotle in  $\tau 1$  itself gives no specific examples of universally accepted justice, in the sense of norms of behaviour towards others.  $\tau 5$  gives the traditional examples of respecting elders, revering the divine, honouring one's parents and betters.<sup>21</sup> The anonymous commentary on the *Ethics* (232.11–12) gives the examples of revering the gods, honouring parents, and showing the way to those who are lost; Michael (*in EN* 5 46.13–16) gives the same examples, and adds those of assisting the needy and helping up someone who has slipped and fallen over.<sup>22</sup> None of these is actually an example of justice between equals,<sup>23</sup> which Aristotle in the previous chapter (5.6, 1134a28–30) has argued is a requirement for the existence of the political justice with which  $\tau 1$  too is concerned. This very fact confirms that both *Mantissa* §19 and the commentators have a different agenda from Aristotle himself. Thus, *Mantissa* §19 is in agreement with the commentary tradition, rather than with Aristotle himself in  $\tau 1$ , in supposing that (allegedly) universal *ethical* norms are relevant to the discussion of natural justice.

Aristotle does indeed give examples of universal or general laws in *Rhetoric* 1.13 and 1.15,<sup>24</sup> but there his examples are from literature: Empedocles' vegetarianism and Antigone's view that it is right for her to bury her brother in defiance of the ruler's edict. The first would certainly not have been generally accepted as a universal norm in Aristotle's time, and interpreters differ over how far Antigone's view of the moral issues is a complete and correct one.<sup>25</sup> Aristotle's concern in the passages in the *Rhetoric* is to argue that the examples show the possibility of appealing to unwritten law, rather than to endorse the specific examples he cites.

Christopher Rowe suggests that Aristotle in  $\tau 1$  gives no examples for what is universally just by nature, because what is universally just by nature is the best constitution, considered in the *Politics*.  $\tau 1$  is indeed

<sup>21</sup> Revering gods, honouring parents, and obeying laws are given as examples of *endoxa* at Alex., *in Top.* 553.14; the same three examples are also found at Euripides, fr. 853 Nauck.

<sup>22</sup> Whether showing the way to those who are lost, and helping up someone who has slipped, are to be understood literally or as referring to intellectual and moral error, or indeed both, is uncertain.

<sup>23</sup> I am grateful to Sarah Broadie for pointing this out. Better examples are in fact offered in  $\tau 6$  below.

<sup>24</sup> I am grateful to Richard Sorabji for drawing my attention to these.

<sup>25</sup> Skemp (1952: 198) notes that in ancient Greek culture unwritten law is not necessarily universal law. See also Ostwald (1973: 95–6).

explicitly concerned with *political* justice. The claim that ‘similarly justice that is not natural but man-made is not the same everywhere; for neither are the constitutions of states’ does suggest that justice that *is* natural is (more or less) the same everywhere *because* it derives from the best and natural constitution. But then one of three things seems to follow: either (a) Aristotle considers that natural and universal justice has no significant aspects not covered by or deducible from a discussion of constitutional arrangements; or (b) he thinks it does, but that it is not necessary to enter into a discussion of whether these hold universally; or (c) the lack of any such examples or discussion is due to the somewhat disorganized condition of *EN* 5.<sup>26</sup>

However that may be, the *Mantissa* in τ 5 and the ancient and Byzantine commentaries do feel the need to give examples of what is naturally just and universally regarded as just.<sup>27</sup> Their doing so may be no more than an unthinking reaction to Aristotle’s reference to natural justice at the start of τ 1; but if it serves, even inadvertently, to highlight the different concerns of Aristotle’s own account, that in itself seems significant. If moreover these texts miss Aristotle’s point because in the Roman Empire and Medieval Byzantium the connection between justice and the constitutional arrangements of the Greek city-state was less obvious than it had once been, this in itself, even if hardly a novel observation, merits comment.

## V

Alexander’s work is not only separated from the Aristotelian texts that inspired it by the activity of commentators for two-and-a-half centuries, from Andronicus in the first century B C onwards. It is also separated from these texts by the (partly overlapping) five centuries of philosophizing in traditions that began after Aristotle in the Hellenistic period. Alexander can frequently be seen engaging with, and drawing on, those traditions in

<sup>26</sup> I am grateful to Sarah Broadie for pointing out this possibility. Joachim (1951: 154) says that Aristotle’s question in *EN* 5.7 is ‘whether any of the *rights* enforced by the state is actually natural and hence universal’ (my italics). If ‘rights’ is understood, as is natural for the plural of the *English* term, in terms of constitutional arrangements (shares in power and rewards, etc.), this shows the limited scope of the discussion. But ‘rights’ in the plural may just be a rendering of *ta dikaia*.

<sup>27</sup> Universal acceptance does not form part of Aristotle’s own account of what is naturally just in *EN* 5.7, as Christopher Rowe points out to me.

other works. The question how this applies to the present text is not entirely straightforward.<sup>28</sup>

Pohlenz (1967: vol. 2, 169 and n. 17) argued that the appeals in our text to the social nature of human beings and to unwritten laws are signs of Stoic influence. The appeal to social nature is indeed Stoic,<sup>29</sup> as is that to human possession of language;<sup>30</sup> that the appeal to unwritten laws is Stoic seems more questionable. 'Unwritten', *agraphos*, does not appear in the index to the standard collection of Stoic fragments by von Arnim (1903–24) or in the ethical fragments of Chrysippus in *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* (1999). Perhaps Pohlenz had in mind the development of the theme by Cicero, especially in the contrast between natural and written law at *de Legibus* 1.19.<sup>31</sup>

Gisela Striker (1996: 266), rightly as it seems to me, *contrasts* the argument of *Mantissa* §19 with the Stoic argument for justice from a natural tendency to benevolence, and compares it rather with the Epicurean claim that it is natural for humans to make agreements for self-protection.<sup>32</sup> And, as she indicates, the analogy with Epicureanism can be pressed further. Twice in the discussion, at 157.18–22 and at 158.27–9, it is asserted that the claim that justice is conventional presupposes that it is natural for human beings to *make* agreements as to what is just, even if the agreements *themselves* are conventional. In other words, the answer to the question 'is justice natural or conventional?' is: 'both'. For a distinction needs to be drawn between the fact that agreements are made and the content of those agreements. This approach to the question is also reminiscent of the Epicurean claim that the *development* of language is natural, even if some *vocabulary* is conventional.<sup>33</sup> And that claim is itself echoed in another of the texts attributed to Alexander, *Quaestio* 3.11.<sup>34</sup>

There is a further parallel with Epicurus. The argument at *Mantissa* §19 158.17–33 is essentially that found in Plato, *Republic* 351c–352c: justice between the members of a band of robbers is what gives them their strength, however unjustly they treat those outside the group. This is, however, combined in our text with the observation that not just *any*

<sup>28</sup> This is not to exclude the influence, direct or indirect, of discussions even earlier than Aristotle himself. (I am grateful to Don Morrison for raising this point.)

<sup>29</sup> See texts 57D–H in Long and Sedley (1987), Schofield (1995: 197–9) and (2000: 450).

<sup>30</sup> Cicero, *de Officiis* 1.12. Schofield (1995: 202).

<sup>31</sup> See also Watson (1971: 226–7).

<sup>32</sup> Epicurus, *Principal Doctrine* 31.

<sup>33</sup> Epicurus, *ad Herodotum* 75–6.

<sup>34</sup> See Todd (1976).

agreement has the nature of justice; the point made is not just that their band would not survive if they treated each other in the way they treat outsiders, but that it would not do so *if they regarded the opposite things as just*—that is, if they had an unnatural, and hence self-defeating, view of what constitutes justice:

τ6. That it is justice that holds community together is clear from those who are thought to be most unjust. These are robbers, whose community with one another is preserved by [their] justice towards one another. For it is on account of [their] not taking advantage of one another and not deceiving [one another], and [their] respecting what seems to be superior and preserving what has been agreed, and assisting the weaker, that their community with one another endures, [though] they do altogether the opposite of these things to those whom they wrong. The greatest sign that these things are just by nature is that, if they agreed the opposite things to these with one another as just, their community could not endure, although it would have followed [sc. if justice *were* purely a matter of agreement] that everything that came about in [the context of] an agreement would preserve community in a similar way. (158.17–27)

Anthony Price has argued that this passage is conceptually incoherent in considering the possibility of agreeing that it might be just to do the opposites of the things listed—that is to take advantage of one another, to defraud one another, not to respect superiors, not to preserve what has been agreed and not to assist the weaker. But it is not impossible to imagine a society in which there was a tacit agreement that it is just (right, *dikaion*) to seek to maximize one's own share at the expense of others, or one in which it was generally held that it is wrong to show respect for superiors. Such a society might indeed soon destroy itself, but that is the point of the argument. And, regrettably, that justice requires the stronger to help the weaker—which is close to the Epicurean formulation of the original social contract<sup>35</sup>—is a principle not universally accepted by everyone in our own society. To be sure, the context of the present argument suggests not a tacit agreement but an explicit one; but first, even this does not seem conceptually impossible, and second, it may be a sign that the author of the argument has incorporated into the specific context of the band of robbers thoughts that really relate to society more generally.

An agreement that it is just not to preserve what has been agreed, on the other hand, would indeed be self-contradictory, and so too would an agreement that it is right to deceive (the Greek is *pseudesthai*, 'lie to')

<sup>35</sup> 'It is fair (*aequum*) to take pity on all of the weak': Lucretius 5.1023.

others, if this is understood, as it must be in the context, to mean doing so as a general practice. This criticism amounts to saying that the author, before writing 'agree' in 158.24, should have noticed that to do so would generate a particular conflict when combined with the opposites of *some* of the list of examples he gave in 158.20–2. This is indeed careless writing; but it may be explained, if not excused. First, the author may have expressed his point as he did in 158.24 because the general context is concerned with justice by agreement, failing to see the particular conflict this would generate. Second, if he had written merely, for example, 'if they regarded the opposite things to these as just', this would have seemed rather flat. In ancient texts, even ones with few literary pretensions, rhetorical expression may sometimes get the better of the requirements of logic.

The text goes on to describe agreement as a search for what is just by nature, and points out that not all searches are successful (158.29–33).<sup>36</sup> The notion of a possible *incorrect* agreement as to what is just is reminiscent not of Plato but of Epicurus,<sup>37</sup> and specifically of *Principal Doctrine* 37 where, although justice is a matter of agreement, agreements are only just as long as they continue to be in the interests of those who make them:

τ7. The attested [fact], that it is beneficial in the mutual relations of a community that what has been legislated be just, should occupy the place of justice, whether it is the same for all or not. But if someone merely establishes <a law>, and the result is not advantageous for mutual community, this no longer has the nature of justice. And if what is advantageous in justice changes, but for some time fits with the conception [of it], it was no less just for that time, for those who do not confuse themselves with empty sounds but consider the facts.

Unlike Epicurus, however, *Mantissa* §19 does not indicate that what is advantageous may change over time.

Whether we are to suppose any direct engagement with Epicureanism in the antecedents of our text is not clear. Aristotle himself connects justice and advantage both in τ1 and in τ4. Interest in Epicureanism does occur elsewhere in Alexander's works,<sup>38</sup> and the traditional picture of the Epicureans as ignoring other schools and being ignored by them is open to challenge.<sup>39</sup> It may be that Epicurean ideas have fed into the discussion on which our text draws through Academic scepticism. Striker (1996: 266)

<sup>36</sup> I am grateful to Wolfgang Detel for emphasizing this point.

<sup>37</sup> See Striker (1996: 266).

<sup>38</sup> Sharples (1990*b*: 94–5).

<sup>39</sup> See Schofield (1999: 339–41), on Epicurean epistemology as a target for Carneades.

argues that an argument based on the necessity of justice for communities is better able to resist Carneades' objections to justice than was the Stoic claim that virtuous behaviour is the natural fulfilment of human nature; she further suggests that *Mantissa* §19 may give us an indication of the type of argument Carneades himself presented in support of justice.

This raises the question of the identity of the opponents, alluded to at the start of τ 5, who 'say that what is just does not exist by nature'. Are they just hypothetical opponents of the theory that justice is natural, introduced for the sake of the discussion and not to be identified with any specific school? Or is Alexander drawing on Sceptic discussion? Carneades is reported by Cicero, *Republic* 3.13–18, as arguing that there is no such thing as natural justice because there are no universal laws;<sup>40</sup> perhaps then our text is drawing on both sides of Carneades' notorious double argument.

## VI

At 158.32–159.9 in *Mantissa* §19 it is argued that those 'who decide to act unjustly' do not check the laws first to find out what to do, as would be necessary if justice were purely a matter of law or convention. If the reference of 'decide to act unjustly' is to those who do what is wrong just because it is wrong, rather than for the sake of (for example) financial gain, this may seem open to question. Arguably, youthful rebels, who behave badly for the very sake of doing so, *do* take a particular delight in flouting laws and conventions, and to do that they first need to identify what these laws and conventions are. The phenomenon of deliberately outrageous behaviour was not unknown in antiquity; one may compare Thucydides 6.28 on the mutilation of the Hermae, and Demosthenes, *Against Conon* 14, 20, 39. But these are hardly typical examples of injustice, and the intended point may rather be that the actions unjust people perform, for whatever motives, *are in fact* similar everywhere. That is, it is not primarily under the description 'unjust' that the agents themselves decide to do the things they do.

On either view, however, the similarity of unjust actions, and the extent to which they are similar, *depends* on the similarity of justice everywhere. Consequently the argument loses all independent force. There is however a general question concerning the sections of the *Mantissa* which are

<sup>40</sup> Striker (1996: 264).



composed of sequences of arguments: how far are these arguments intended to be completely independent of one another, and how far to develop points already made in what has preceded? Edwin Brandon has pointed out to me that the argument may have rhetorical effect, for it is perhaps easier to find examples of injustice which will be accepted as such in many different cultures than it is to find similarly accepted examples of justice.

Anthony Price has objected that 'almost all the things that robbers do to those they wrong are the same among all [peoples]' (159.2–3) is a truism, since it simply reflects the basic meaning of 'robbery'. It is not a truism, however, if what constitutes 'robbery' *depends on* the significance of 'justice' and 'injustice' in each society. And that we do not know what constitutes robbery unless we know what justice and injustice are does not seem an unlikely thought for an ancient writer; it could be argued that this is what is implied by Plato's account of dialectic and the role of the Form of the Good in *Republic* 6–7. It is true that this defence of the argument, making 'robbery' an evaluative term rather than a purely descriptive one, involves the opposite move to that made above in defence of 158.24–5, which depended on 'take advantage' *not* being treated as a (negatively) evaluative term; it also goes against Aristotle, *Topics* 6.12, 149b27, where theft is defined as 'taking by stealth'. Perhaps (as with other sections of the *Mantissa*) we should not expect complete consistency in a text assembled from originally separate arguments.

*Mantissa* §19 concludes with the argument (159.9–14) that justice is shown to be natural by its being a moral virtue. This seems questionable. Aristotle at *EN* 5.1, 1130a8–5.2, 1130b5 distinguishes between justice in the broad or 'general' sense of moral virtue as displayed in one's interactions with others, and justice in the narrower or 'particular' sense concerned with the distribution of common goods and the righting of wrongs. At first sight it would seem to be the latter, particular sense that is at issue in our text; and its treatment as a virtue of character is problematic, as Bernard Williams (1980) has shown. It simply is not the case, Williams argues, that whether an action is just or unjust in *this* sense is a question of the agent's motivation; and Aristotle recognizes as much, in arguing that only some unjust acts are due to greed (*EN* 5.2, 1130a19–22). This, however, suggests that particular justice, treated as a moral virtue, will be narrower in scope than what is ordinarily meant by justice in distribution and rectification. Moreover Aristotle has to recognize (*EN* 5.5, 1133b32–3) that particular justice is not a mean between extremes in the same way as other virtues; it is not very plausible to suppose that there

is a vicious moral tendency that consists in always taking too little for oneself—or if there is, it may represent an excessive desire for something else, such as good reputation (*EN* 5.9, 1136b21–2).

The argument in the *Mantissa* might seem more plausible if taken to apply to Aristotle's general justice rather than to his particular justice. It would then, in effect, be an argument that morality in general, as exemplified in our dealings with others, has a natural foundation. But to read the argument as referring to general justice conflicts with the very fact that it compares justice to the other virtues; for Aristotle is explicit that *general* justice is not *a* virtue but complete virtue (*EN* 5.1 1130a8–9).

## VII

*Mantissa* §19 shows the strengths and weaknesses of scholastic philosophy in the second century AD. The arguments it contains vary in merit; but it develops Aristotle's own discussion by bringing together ideas from different parts of the Aristotelian corpus. It also shows the different agenda imposed partly by taking the arguments of other schools into account and partly by changed historical circumstances. A text of this type would hardly exist except as the result of a culture of live philosophical debate, conducted within the Peripatetic school but also influenced by interaction with other schools. Discussion of this text has involved at least brief allusion to the doctrines of every major ancient philosophical school. It also displays a range of philosophical ideas in later antiquity which may usefully be compared with contemporary discussions of the universality or objectivity of ethical norms.

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# INDEX OF ANCIENT PASSAGES

---

## ANONYMOUS

*Commentary on Aristotle, Nicomachean*

Ethics 5 (*Commentaria in Aristotelem  
Graeca* 20)

232.10 285

232.11–12 285

233.15 285

## ALEXANDER OF APHRODISIAS

*Ethical Problems*

24, 147.24–148.4 283

*Mantissa (On the Soul Book 2)*

157.32–158.3 285

157.9–13 283

158.17–27 288–90

158.29–33 290

158.32–159.9 291–2

159.9–14 292

*Quaestio*

3.11 288

## ARISTOTLE

*De Anima (de An.), On the Soul*

425a30–1 273

429a16 234

431a8–11 273–4

*De Insomniis, On Dreams*

459a15–17 273

*De Motu Animalium (MA), On the*

*Movement of Animals*

701a14–15 240

*De Sensu, On Perception*

447b9–11 273

*Eudemian Ethics (EE)*

1220b37 249

1214b6–11 267

1214b8–9 268

1214b9–11 268 n. 17

1219a34 267

1219b23 275

1226a11–13 266

1226b2–4 265

1226b9 265

1226b29–30 267

1227a3–5 265

1227b36–7 265

1227b37 266

1228a1–2 268

1235b26–9 274

1248b19–20 274

*Metaphysics (Metaph.)*

980a1 280

1011b27 257

1027b20 240 n. 20

1053a31 234

1078b27–32 216

*Nicomachean Ethics (EN)*

1094a1–b7 46

1094a3–4 253 n. 39

1094a21 238

1094a28 238

1094b12–28 235

1094b16 243

1095a14–22 55

1095a16 45

1095b4–7 277

1096b16–26 249

1097a15–21 55

1097a15–b21 46

1097a31 238

1098a18 58 n. 35

1098a30 235

1099a18–20 249 n. 32

1100b35–1101a8 101

1101a15 101

1101b27 251

1101b27–31 49

1102a3–4 50

1102a5–1103a10 249

1102a27–1103a3 250

1103a4–6 250

1103a23–6 102

1103b26–9 237, 239

1103b27–8 277

1105b5–7 260

1106b36–1107a2 244

1107a11–12 276 n. 33

1107a28–33 249



- 1107a29–32 240  
 1109b20–3 272  
 11101a29–30 275  
 1112a3–7 265  
 1112a7–8 265  
 1112a8–11 271  
 1112b11–15 269  
 1112b15–20 269  
 1112b24–6 268  
 1112b24–7 270  
 1113a11–12 265, 270  
 1113a15–19 168  
 1113a30–4 234  
 1113a32–3 277  
 1114a21–3 104  
 1114a33–5 234–5  
 1115a28–66 260  
 1115b17–20 260  
 1118a20–1 273  
 1119b15–16 274  
 1125a26, 29 274  
 1126b2–4 272  
 1126b4 247  
 1129b25–7 262  
 1130a8–b5 292  
 1130a8–9 293  
 1130a19–22 292  
 1133b32–3 292  
 1134a28–30 286  
 1134b18–21 278  
 1134b18–1135a5 281  
 1134b29–33 278  
 1136b7–8 265  
 1136b8 253  
 1136b21–2 293  
 1137b14 276 n. 33  
 1137b15 235  
 1137b20 235–6  
 1138b22–32 235  
 1138b34 235  
 1139a21–32, b5–6 240  
 1139a27 236, 242  
 1139a27–9 265  
 1139a29–31 265, 271, 276  
 1139b1–3 269  
 1139b5–6 240  
 1139b15–16 249  
 1140b1 235  
 1140b2 236  
 1140b4 251  
 1140b7 240  
 1140b20–1 265  
 1141a22 236  
 1141a32 250  
 1141b15 235  
 1141b20 246  
 1142a26–7 245  
 1142a28–30 246  
 1142b9 236  
 1142b18–20 271  
 1142b33 271  
 1143a29–31 265 n. 11  
 1143b3–4 246  
 1143b5 245, 272  
 1143b11–14 261, 264  
 1143b13–14 273  
 1143b22 238  
 1144a7–8, 34–6 268  
 1144a7–9 276  
 1144a8 271  
 1144a30 238  
 1144a31–3 267  
 1144a34–6 271  
 1145b25 251  
 1146b7 247  
 1146b22–3 271  
 1147a25 246  
 1148b15 252  
 1149a32–b1 271  
 1149a34–b1 273  
 1151a17–19 268  
 1151a22–4 271  
 1153a14 252–3  
 1164b3 247  
 1165a12–14 275  
 1166a12–13 277  
 1166a13 235  
 1168a7 253  
 1169a3 240 n. 20  
 1171b12 237, 240 n. 18  
 1172b9–18 49  
 1172b23–5 48  
 1172b36–a2 242, 253  
 1173b23 235  
 1175a17 253  
 1176a16–17 235  
 1176a16–19 242, 244, 252  
 1176a31–2 55  
 1178a3 240 n. 20  
*Politics (Pol.)*  
 1166b11–18 278  
 1253a9–18 283  
 1257a7 278  
*Posterior Analytics (Apo)*

- 75b21–76a37 239  
 83a33 262  
*Rhetoric (Rh.)*  
 1391b8–12 265 n. 11  
*Topics (Top.)*  
 146b36–147a11 169  
 149b27 292
- CATULLUS  
 76 52 n. 24
- CICERO  
*On Duties (de Officiis)*  
 1.12 286  
 3.21 37–8  
 3.52 38  
*On Laws (de Legibus)*  
 1.19 288  
*Tusculan Disputations*  
 3.83 80 n. 85
- DEMOSTHENES  
*Against Conon*  
 14, 20, 39 291
- DIOGENES LAERTIUS  
 7.116 79
- EPICLETUS  
*Discourses*  
 4.12.9 71  
 2.5.6 73–4 n. 55
- EPICURUS  
*Principal Doctrines*  
 37 290
- MICHAEL OF EPHEBUS  
*Commentary on Aristotle, Nicomachean  
 Ethics 5 (Commentaria in Aristotelem  
 Graeca 22.3)*  
 46.10 285  
 46.13–16 286  
 47.6 285
- MIMNERMUS  
 fr. 1 52 n. 24
- PLATO  
*Apology (Ap.)*  
 23a–b 222 n. 23  
 25c–26a 184  
 38a5–6 26  
*Cratylus (Crat.)*  
 387a1–9 170  
*Crito (Cri.)*  
 44d6–10 184  
*Euthydemus (Euthd.)*  
 272c–d 196  
 272e 196  
 273d 196  
 275a 196  
 277b–287b 118  
 278b6–7 197  
 278–82 184  
 278–83 279a 196  
 278–84 279b4–c2 197  
 279d6 197  
 280a6–b3 197  
 280d–e 195  
 280e 196  
 281b 195–6  
 281d–e 199  
 281e 196  
 282d 196  
 285d–286b 208  
 287b 208  
 288b–c 208  
 288d6–7 203 n. 52  
 289d 202  
 290b 209  
 290b–e 206  
 290e–291a 207  
 291b 203  
 292b1–2 203 n. 53  
*Gorgias (Grg.)*  
 456d–e 122  
 465a 237  
 466a–468e 160–2  
 466e–470e 193 n. 20  
 467c–468e 191 n. 8  
 468c2–5 161  
*Laches (La.)*  
 192e 263  
 194e–197e 118  
*Letter 7 (Ep.)*  
 341c 215 n. 1  
*Lysis (Ly.)*  
 217a–218b 222 n. 23  
 218a 222  
 219b–220b 232 n. 57  
 220d 222 n. 23  
*Meno (Men.)*  
 84a 120–1

- 84b–c 121  
 84b4–6 179  
*Parmenides (Prm.)*  
 133b–134e 221  
 136b–c 120  
*Phaedo (Phd.)*  
 74a–75b 117  
 101e 119  
*Phaedrus (Phdr.)*  
 227b 120, 121  
 263a–c 221 n. 20  
 276c 221 n. 20  
 278d 222 n. 23  
*Philebus (Phlb.)*  
 55e1–56a1 262  
*Politikus/Statesman (Plt.)*  
 284b9–c3 261  
 284e6–8 261  
 286a 120  
*Protagoras (Prt.)*  
 351–8 191  
*Republic (R.)*  
 33c1–d3 260  
 351c–352c 288  
 454a 119  
 473c11–d2 229  
 474b ff. 221 n. 20, 222  
 486a–b 26  
 498a 119  
 498d 106  
 505d–e 218  
 505d10–e3 158  
 519b3–5 229  
 519c2–3 229  
 519–21 5–7  
 520c 222 n. 29  
 520c4–6 30 n. 44  
 531e 119  
 533a1–5 229 n. 50  
 534b–d 223–4  
 534b3–d1 229  
 538c6–e4 260  
 578c 237 n. 12  
 590d 264  
 613a 105  
*Sophist (Sph.)*  
 218d 120  
 221c 120  
 253c–d 119  
 262d–263d 121  
*Symposium (Smp.)*  
 200b–e 222 n. 26  
 204a 222  
 207e–208a 222 n. 26  
*Theaetetus (Tht.)*  
 176b 105  
 176e 119
- SENECA  
*On Anger (de Ira)*  
 1.2.5 79  
 1.16.7 80  
 2.3.2 79–80  
 2.3.3 80  
*On Doing Kindnesses (de Beneficiis)*  
 (Ben.)  
 1.1.3 73  
 1.1.4 75  
 1.1.7 75  
 1.1.8 75  
 1.4.2 69  
 1.5.2 72  
 1.5.3 72  
 1.5.6 72  
 1.6.1 74  
 1.6.2 72  
 1.7.3 75  
 1.11.5 72  
 1.11.6 72  
 1.12.1 72  
 1.12.3 72  
 2.1.1 74  
 2.2.1 74  
 2.3.1 75  
 2.6.2 75  
 2.7.1 75  
 2.11.6 75  
 2.22.1 76  
 2.23.2 76  
 2.25.2 76  
 4.18.1 70  
 6.7.1 77
- SOPHOCLES  
*Philoctetes*  
 1216 263
- THUCYDIDES  
*Histories*  
 3.47 263 n. 10  
 5.105 263 n. 10  
 6.28 291

# GENERAL INDEX

---

- Alexander of Aphrodisias 282–93  
  *Mantissa* (Book 2 of *On the Soul*) 282–93  
  *Ethical Problems* 284  
  and Academic Scepticism 287–9  
  and deliberate wrongdoing 291–3  
  and Epicurus 289–91  
  and Stoicism 288–9  
  relationship to Aristotle 284–7  
  relationship to other Aristotelian commentaries 285–6  
  relationship to post-Aristotelian thought 287–91
- Annas, J. 5, 22 n. 19, 23 n. 20, 27 n. 35, 33, 101–2, 149, 283
- Anscombe, G. E. M. 1–2, 234 n. 4, 236 n. 9
- Antipater 38–9
- Archelaus (in Plato's *Gorgias*) 161, 163 n. 11
- Archer, Newland (in *The Age of Innocence*) 64
- Aristotelian ethics, modern versions of 2–5, 84, 101–5, 108, 112
- Aristotelian tradition, on emotions 136–7
- Aristotle:  
  and deliberation/choice 264–71  
  and desire 168–70, 175–6, 271, 274–6  
  and ethical character 84, 276  
  and ethical development 27, 102  
  and ethical knowledge 30, 83–4, 233–55  
  and ethical perception 20, 244–8, 272–8  
  and ethics/science relationship 235–9  
  and *eudaimonia* (happiness) 48, 101, 250–1 n. 35, 266–72  
  and Eudoxus 49, 251  
  and 'eye' of ethical perception 246–7, 272–3  
  and generality of moral rules 65 n. 16, 107 n. 10  
  and goal-directed reasoning 264–71  
  and 'Grand-End' view 266–9, 275  
  and highest good 45–6, 47–8, 50–1, 54–5, 58, 253–4  
  and human function (*ergon*) 23–4, 243, 248–51  
  and imprecision of ethical knowledge 235–6, 239–40, 275–6  
  and justice 277–87, 292–3  
  and kindness (*charis*) 71  
  and the 'mean' 244, 262, 272–3  
  and medical knowledge 235–9, 267  
  and moral particularism 20, 245–8, 275–6  
  and moral phenomena 194  
  and objectivity 241–5, 254–5, 257–62, 277–8  
  and perceptive mean 273–4  
  and Plato's Forms 216–17  
  and pleasure 48–9 n. 14, 244, 252–4, 274–5  
  and *phronesis* (practical wisdom) 237–8, 251, 263–5  
  and practical judgement 260, 262–71  
  and practical syllogism 246, 267, 271  
  and 'quasi-goals' 270–1, 276–7  
  and reflexivity of ethics 238–40  
  and unity of the virtues 262–4
- Aspasius, Aristotelian commentator 285
- Austin, J. L. 275
- Barker, P. 80 n. 83
- beliefs:  
  belief-knowledge distinction 26, 222–4  
  examination of, in *elenchus* 226–7  
  types of (ethical) 24–5  
  web of 173–80
- Belloc, H. 111
- beneficia*:  
  and intention 73  
  meanings of 69–70  
  and playing the role of a good person 74–6  
  and Stoic ethics 70, 72–3  
  and Stoic teaching 70–1
- Bentham, J. 19
- Block, N. 138

- Bobzien, S. 149
- body-language:  
 and emotion 77–8  
 and social development 77–8  
 ethical significance of 75
- Boethius 169
- Bostock, D. 235 n. 7, 236 n. 8
- Brandom, R. 132–4  
 and implicit norms 133–4  
 and norms in practices 133–4  
 and regulism/regularism 132–3  
 and semantic normativity 132
- Broadie, S. 246 n. 28, 249 n. 32, 266–9, 272
- Burnyeat, M. 262
- Buss, S. 66
- Cartesian tradition on emotions 136
- Charles, D. 242
- Cherniss, H. 218–19, 221, 228
- Cicero:  
*On Duties* 3 (on Stoic natural law) 36–40  
 and the *formula* (guideline) 37  
 commitments, ethical 51–4, 58, 62  
 consciousness, criteria of 138–42  
 degrees of 139–40  
 and Herder-tradition 139–40  
 and naturalization 144  
 and reflective self-consciousness 139
- consequentialism 189–90  
 and Plato 189, 194–5, 201–2, 205–6, 213–14  
 and Socrates 190–1
- conventionalism 65–7
- Cynicism, ancient 72
- Damasio, A. 136, 140
- Darwin, C. 77
- Darwinian theory, in semantics 127–8, 143
- Davidson, D. 8, 125, 127–32  
 and interpretation 128–32, 142, 146  
 and objectivity 129  
 and Plato 225–30  
 and rationalization 128–9  
 and reference 131–2  
 and semantic normativity 130–2  
 and truth 130–2  
 and T-theorems 129–30
- Dennett, D. 129 n. 29, 139
- Descartes, R. 136
- desire:  
 and Aristotle 168–70, 175–6, 271, 274–6  
 for the apparent good (DAG) 163–72  
 for the real good (DRG) 160–72, 181–2, 185–6  
 under a description 161–2, 168
- Diogenes, the Stoic 38–9
- Driver, J. 68–9
- Dummett, M. 257
- Ecclesiastes 112
- elenchus (Socratic) 225–7
- emotions:  
 and body-language 77–8  
 ethical significance of 62, 71 n. 36, 76  
 and evaluation 135–6  
 and favours (*beneficia*) 74  
 and post-traumatic stress 82 n. 89  
 and pre-emotions 79–81  
 and Stoic theory 78–82, 153  
*see also* feelings
- Engstrom, S. and Whiting, J. 4
- Epictetus 71
- Epicureanism:  
 and ethics and physics 24  
 and justice 288–91
- epistemology (ethical):  
 in Aristotle 233–55  
 in Plato 215–32  
*see also* knowledge, ethical
- ethical development 26–7, 91
- ethical dispositions:  
 and choice 104  
 and highest good 57–8  
 and right order of the soul 84–5
- ethical understanding, three levels of 24–7, 33, 37–8
- ethics:  
 agent-centred 28–35, 83–8, 190, 192–4, 198–9, 202, 205–14, 233–55, 276–8  
 ancient and modern morality 1–7, 15, 27–35, 42–5, 113–16, 157–8, 231–2, 279–80  
 Aristotle's conception of 233–55, 276–8  
 and medicine/science 235–9, 267  
 and metaphysics 192, 194, 211–12, 217–18  
 a practical matter 277  
 Plato's conception of 189–94, 210–14, 215–17, 230–2  
 and religion 106–7  
 self-reflexive 238–40  
 Socratic 180–5  
*see also* virtue-ethics, modern

- etiquette, *see* manners
- eudaimonia*, 'happiness':  
 in Aristotle 48, 55, 250–1 n. 35  
 in Stoicism 61
- Eudoxus, on pleasure and the good 48–50, 251
- eupatheiai* ('good emotions') in Stoicism 78–9
- evaluation-practical judgement distinction 258–9
- Everson, S. 250–1 n. 35
- fact–value distinction 87 n. 10
- feelings:  
 and Aristotelian tradition 136–7  
 and behaviourism 136  
 and Cartesian tradition 136  
 and consciousness 137  
 and ethical normativity 116, 135–8  
 physical basis of 135–6  
 rich account of 137  
*see also* emotions
- Fodor, J. 187
- Foot, P. 2, 89, 104, 109, 111, 248 n. 31
- foundationalism, in ethics 2, 32, 38, 42–5, 106–7, 113–16  
 'internal' 32, 38
- Frankena, W. 46 n. 10
- Frege, G. 159, 171, 259–60
- Freud, S. 81 n. 88
- friendship in ancient ethics 5–7  
 and the highest good 53–4  
 in Aristotle 71
- Gadamer, H.-G. 8, 224 n. 35, 230
- Gill, C. 7
- gift-giving:  
 and attitudes 75–6  
 in Seneca 72–3  
 and Stoic ethics 76
- God, as paradigm of goodness 255 n. 47
- Goffman, E. 77–8
- good:  
 in Aristotle 253–4, 268, 272  
 as a descriptive concept 180  
 desire for apparent (DAG) 163–72  
 desire for real (DRG) 160–72, 181–2, 185–6  
 and goodness 259  
 maximization of real 172–80  
 in Plato 23, 30, 50 n. 21, 117, 121, 123, 199–206, 208–9, 211–12, 218, 223–4  
 in Stoicism 24, 150–1  
 and web of beliefs 173–80  
 and 'whatever'-desire 178–9
- good man, as norm (in Aristotle) 30, 233–55, 276–7
- Graver, M. 80 n. 82
- Greatest Happiness Principle 18, 29
- Greenspan, S. 77
- Griffin, M. T. 69 nn. 31–2
- Hampshire, S. 66
- happiness:  
 maximization of (ΜΑΧΗΡΑΡ) 172–5, 182–3, 190–1  
 nature of 195–202  
 in relation to virtue 100–2, 105–6, 111–12, 191, 192, 282  
*see also eudaimonia*
- hedonism, types of (G- and R-) 46–7, 49, 53, 58
- Hegel, G. W. F. 84, 92, 240 n. 19
- Herder-tradition 139–41
- human and non-human psychology 140–1, 152–3
- human nature:  
 as an ethical norm 8, 23–4, 38, 248–54  
 and human community 284  
 and language as basis for rationality 139–41, 283–4, 288–9  
 and universal norms 282–3, 293  
 and unwritten laws 285  
 and the virtues 88–9, 94, 100, 102–3, 107–8, 111–12, 249–50, 282–93  
*see also* nature; natural law
- Human Rights, Universal Declaration of 16
- Hume, D. 86, 92, 181–2, 250 n. 34, 265 n. 12
- Hursthouse, R. 3, 100, 102–5, 107–10
- impartiality:  
 and universality 16–19  
 in ancient thought 22 n. 19  
 inside/outside perspectives 255
- Inside/Outside theories of action 161–8, 186–7
- intellectualism (Socratic) 172–80, 191; (Platonic) 210–11
- Inwood, B. 73
- is-ought distinction 250, 280

- intersubjectivity:  
  and Aristotle 242–3  
  and Davidson 225–7  
  and Plato 224–7  
  and virtue 85–6
- intuition, moral 244–5
- Irwin, T. 6 n. 18, 178 n. 23, 246 n. 27
- James, W. 36 n. 34
- justice:  
  in ancient thought 279–93  
  in Aristotle 278–87, 292  
  and deliberate wrongdoing 291–3  
  and highest good 56–7  
  and human community 284, 289  
  natural or conventional 278, 280–93  
  and unwritten laws 285–8  
  *see also* natural law
- Kahn, C. H. 216, 218 n. 8
- Kant:  
  and beneficence 66  
  and consistency 96  
  and freedom 103  
  and good will 51 n. 22, 159–60 n. 5  
  and logic 124  
  and manners/demeanour 61–2, 67–8  
  and moral law 43–4 n. 2  
  and promises 182 n. 34  
  and universality 17–18, 29, 31
- Kantian approaches 3–4
- criticisms of 31–2
- Kantian tradition on virtue and  
  intention 84–5, 87–8
- Kenny, A. 267–8, 271 n. 26
- knowledge, ethical:  
  in Aristotle 233–55  
  and belief 26, 222–4  
  contrasted with medical/  
  scientific 236–9  
  general and specific 28, 30–4, 245–8  
  as inherently valuable 122  
  and measurement 261–2  
  and normativity 122–3  
  and objectivity 28, 83–4, 241–5  
  philosophers' 221–4  
  in Plato 30, 122, 215–32  
  practical 237, 260–1  
  reflexive 238–40  
  in Stoicism 148–51  
  supra-human? 221–2  
  value of 203–4, 210–11
- as virtue 179–80
- 'world-centred' and 'mind-  
  centred' 233–6, 241, 248  
  *see also* truth (ethical)
- Kohlberg, L. 91
- Korsgaard, C. 3, 117, 200 n. 45
- Kraut, R. 6
- Kripke, S. 124
- labyrinth in Plato, *Euthydemus* 203–6,  
  208–9
- Louden, R. 255 n. 44
- McDowell, J. 103, 105, 107, 116 n. 3, 240  
  n. 18, 248–9, 250 n. 33, 251, 261
- MacIntyre, A. 2, 32–3
- Mackie, J. L. 117, 257
- manners, ethical significance of 60–1,  
  63–6  
  and acting a role 67–8  
  and being 'above suspicion' 68–9  
  and body-language 77–8  
  and conventionalism 65–7  
  and conventions 64–5  
  and duties 66  
  and inauthenticity 67  
  and playing the role of a good  
  person 74–6
- ΜΑΧΗΡΑ (maximum of agent's happiness)  
  (Socratic) 172–5
- Michael of Ephesus, Aristotelian  
  commentator 285
- military ethos 59–60, 68–9  
  and Stoicism 61 n. 6
- Mill, J. S. 18–19, 42–5, 182 n. 34, 183 n. 35,  
  253 n. 41
- Millikan, R. G. 127
- Moore, G. E. 44 n. 2, 48, 258 n. 5
- moral particularism:  
  in ancient thought 19–20, 30–1  
  in Aristotle 20  
  in Plato 20  
  in Stoicism 20
- morality:  
  changing attitudes toward 279–80  
  foundations of 2, 42–5, 106–7, 113–16,  
  143–4, 279, 281  
  *see also* foundationalism
- Morris, C. R. 157 n. 2
- Morton, A. 236 n. 10
- Müller, A. 266, 270
- Murdoch, I. 111

- natural law:  
 in Aristotelian thought 281–93  
 in Stoicism 35–40
- nature:  
 and convention 278, 280–1  
 as an ethical norm 8, 22–4, 113, 144, 148–52  
 and pleasure 252–3  
 and Providence 109–10
- Neander, K. 127
- Nietzsche, F. 109
- normativity, ethical:  
 analytics of 142–3  
 ancient and modern views 145, 147–8, 151–2  
 and consciousness 138–42  
 and feelings 116, 135–8  
 genuine version of 115, 127–8, 141–4  
 hybrid theories of 114, 123, 143–5, 147–8, 151–2  
 and knowledge of truth 122–3  
 and neurobiology/cognitive psychology 134–8  
 and physical normativity 135  
 and semantic normativity 115–16  
 and semantic norms 123–8  
 source of 113–16  
 and Stoicism 147–54  
 ‘thin’ version of 117  
 and truth 121–3, 130
- normativity, semantic:  
 in Brandom 132–4  
 in Davidson 129–32  
 and genuine (ethical) normativity 127–8  
 in modern theory 123–8  
 in Plato 117–20  
 and representation 127  
 in Stoicism 152  
 and teleosemantics 127  
 and truth 121–3, 125
- Nussbaum, M. C. 4–5
- objectivity, ethical:  
 and agent-centred ethics 2–3, 5–6, 28–35, 83–8, 192–4, 198–9, 210–14, 241–5, 254–5, 276–8  
 and Aristotle 241–5, 254–5, 257–62, 277–8, 280–7  
 criteria of 83, 85–8, 95–6, 241–5  
 and cognitive command 241–2  
 and cultural change and stability 91–6  
 and cultural relativity 87, 88–91, 278  
 and elitism 254–5  
 and *Euthyphro* test 242  
 and evidence-transcendence 242  
 and explicitness 29, 31  
 and historico-social reflection 93–6  
 and justice 281–93  
 and knowledge 28–31, 33–5, 39–40, 83–4, 122–3, 148–51, 157–60, 210–14, 215–17, 230–1, 233–6, 241–5, 257–62  
 and metaphysical complacency 261  
 and out there/in here contrast 192–3, 211  
 and Plato 189, 192–4, 210–14, 215–17, 230–1  
 and semantical complacency 259–60  
 and social context 84, 86, 92  
 and universality 16–19, 27–8, 241–5, 281–93  
 and wide cosmological role 242
- oikeiōsis*, ‘appropriation’ in Stoic ethics 34, 152
- Owen, G. E. L. 253 n. 40
- Perry, J. 187
- Philosopher-King/Tyrant  
 examples 162–70
- Piaget, J. 91
- Plato:  
*Euthydemus* 194–209  
*Euthyphro* 192, 226–7 n. 43  
*Hippias Minor* 159, 184  
*Laches* 263  
*Lysis* 232 n. 57  
*Parmenides* 221  
*Phaedrus* 229  
*Philebus* 23, 50 n. 17, 225–8  
*Protagoras* 191, 192, 193  
*Republic* 21, 23, 26, 30, 101, 192, 206 n. 58, 207, 218, 221–4, 228–9, 232, 260, 264  
*Statesman* 261  
*Symposium* 222–3, 229  
*Timaeus* 23  
 and agent/person 192–4, 198–9, 202, 205–14  
 and belief–knowledge distinction 26, 222–4  
 and consequentialism 189–90, 194–5, 201–2, 205–6, 209, 213–14  
 and degrees of virtue 264  
 and desire for the good 158



- Plato: (*cont'd*)
- and development of his thought 192 n. 13, 215–16, 218, 231–2
  - and dialectic 119–23, 223–4, 230–2
  - and dialogue Form 210
  - and 'doing well' 195–202
  - and epistemic progress 119–20
  - and epistemology 218–32
  - and ethical development 26–7
  - and evaluative dualism 191–2
  - and Form of the Good 23, 30, 117, 121, 123, 223–4, 292
  - and hybrid theory of normativity 123, 144, 147
  - and kingly craft 203–4
  - and knowledge–wisdom relationship 205–6
  - and luck 196–8
  - and metaphysics–ethics relation 217–18
  - and metaphysics of value 192, 194, 211–12
  - and moral psychology 192–3
  - and moral phenomena 193–4, 210–14
  - and nature of happiness 195–202
  - and objectivity 192–4, 211–14, 215–17, 230–1
  - and parts of soul doctrine 178
  - and patterns of argument 117–19
  - and philosophers' knowledge 221–4
  - and punishment 181
  - and recollection 120–1, 219–21, 228 n. 47
  - and selfhood/identity 206–9, 210–11
  - and self-sufficiency of virtue 100–1, 105–7
  - and Theory of Forms 117, 215–32
  - and true and false statement 121–2
  - and truth 121–3, 125, 223–32
  - and unity of the virtues 262–4
  - and value of philosophy 202–6, 208–9
  - and virtue–happiness relationship 100–1, 105–7, 191–2
  - and wisdom 195–202, 205–6, 208–9
- pleasure:
- definition of 252 n. 37
  - and desire 274–5
  - and the good man 244
  - as the highest good 46–50, 58
  - and nature 252–4
- Pohlenz, M. 288
- practices:
- in MacIntyre 239–40
  - as normative, in Brandom 133–4
- Price, A. W. 5–6
- Prichard, H. A. 1–2, 157–8 n. 2
- propatheiai* ('pre-emotions') in Stoicism 80–1
- Protagoras 234–5
- Providence:
- and Hursthouse 100–10
  - and Kant 106–7
  - and Plato 105–6
  - and virtue 100
- Railton, P. 83
- Rawls, J. 28 n. 36
- Raz, J. 83
- realism, moral 114, 117
- and Aristotle 241–5
  - crude versions of 109–10
  - and Plato's Forms 228–31
  - and ultra-realism (Socratic) 157–87
- reciprocity 7, 73, 73–4 n. 55
- Regulus, in Cicero, *On Duties* 3–37
- revenge 278 n. 41
- Ross, W. D. 245, 247
- rules, moral:
- and modern theory 29
  - and natural law in Stoicism 36
  - and universality 16–18
- scenario, happy/sad 164–8
- Scott, D. 219–20
- Sellers, J. 124
- Seneca:
- On Anger*, on pre-emotions 79–81
  - On Doing Kindnesses (de Beneficiis)* 61, 69–82
  - focus on imperfect human beings 71–2
  - and playing the role of a good person 74–6
  - and Stoic ethics 70, 72–3, 76
- Sherman, N. 3–4
- Sidgwick, H. 29 n. 41, 252 n. 37
- Socrates:
- contrasted with Aristotle 168–70, 175–6
  - and desire for the apparent good 163–72
  - and desire for the real good 158, 160–72, 181–2, 185–6
  - and determinist psychology 178, 181
  - and egoism 180–1, 189–90, 231 n. 55
  - and ethical education 184–5
  - and ethics 180–5
  - and harm 184–5

- and Intellectualism 158, 172–80, 183–4, 191
- and maximization of happiness (МАХНАР) 170–80, 182–3
- and not doing what you want 161–8, 176
- and ‘paradoxes’ 179–80, 231–2
- and punishment 183–4
- and ultra-realism 157–60, 168, 171–2
- and web of beliefs (general and particular) 173–80
- Socrates–Plato distinction 157 n. 1, 190–1 n. 5, 215–18, 231–2
- Sorabji, R. 80 nn. 82, 86
- soul, immortality of, and ethics 105–7
- Stampe, D. W. 181
- Stockdale, J. 61 n. 6
- Stoicism:
- and ‘benefits’ 70–1
  - and categories of value 70
  - and emotions 78–82
  - and ethical normativity 148–54
  - and Fate 149–50
  - and gift-giving 76
  - and integration of ethics, physics and logic 23–4, 148–9
  - and natural law 35–40
  - and practical ethics 71
  - and the good 45 n. 7, 150–1
  - and the sage 30, 71, 81–2
  - and virtue 61
- Strawson, P. F. 59, 276
- Striker, G. 288, 291
- subjectivism 224
- subjectivity 243
- summum bonum*, ‘highest good’ 41–58
- central in ancient thought 41
  - as foundation of morality 42–5
  - and justice 56–7
  - and Mill 42–5
  - and relation to other goods 45–6, 47–8, 50
  - relevance to modern thought 42
  - and right/wrong 45, 46–7, 56–8
- Tailhook Convention 68
- teleosemantics 125–8
- and brain-states 126–7
  - and genuine (ethical) normativity 127–8
  - and proper functions 125–6
  - and representation 125–7
  - and reproduction 125–8
- Ten Commandments 16
- top-down and bottom-up approaches 153
- truth (ethical):
- ‘approximation to’ 241–5, 254–5, 257–62
  - in Aristotle 240, 243, 254, 264–72, 276–8
  - in Davidson 130–2, 226
  - and objectivity 241–5, 254–5, 257–62
  - in Plato 121–3, 125, 223–32
- Tye, M. 138
- ultra-realism (Socratic) 157–60, 168, 171–2, 176
- universality (ethical):
- in ancient thought 21–7, 281–93
  - and definition of virtues 21–2
  - and explicitness 29, 31
  - and impartiality 16–19
  - and justice 281–93
  - and Kant 17–18
  - in modern thought 16–19
  - and natural justice/laws 35–40, 281–93
  - and objectivity 16, 27–35
  - and reality, in ancient thought 22–4
  - and three levels of ethical understanding 24–5
  - two levels of, in ancient thought 21–4
  - types of ethical beliefs 24–5
  - and Utilitarianism 18–19
  - and virtues 89
- Utilitarianism:
- and explicitness 29
  - and foundation of morality 42–5
  - and *summum bonum* 42–5
  - and universality 18–19
- Utility 18, 29
- value-terms in Plato and Aristotle 259–61
- virtue:
- and ‘appearances’ 74–6, 90; *see also* manners
  - and body-language 77–8
  - and character 84, 86
  - and consumer ideals 96
  - and cross-cultural contact 94
  - and cultural continuity 89–96
  - and cultural relativity 88, 96
  - definitions of 21, 239–40
  - and ethical discourse 259–61

- virtue: (*cont'd*)
- and happiness 100–2, 105–6, 111–12, 191, 192, 282
  - and historico-social reflection 93–6
  - and human nature 88–9, 94, 100, 102–3, 107–8, 111–12, 249–50, 281–93
  - and inner/outer distinction 87–8
  - and intention 85
  - and justice 56–8, 262–4, 281–93
  - in Kant 3–4, 61–2, 67–8, 84–5, 87–8
  - and knowledge 83–4, 179–80
  - and loss 103–4, 106–10
  - outer face of 62, 76
  - and Providence 100, 105–12
  - and rational agent 8
  - and right order of the soul 84
  - self-sufficiency of 100–1, 103, 105–6, 108
  - and social context 84–7, 90, 92, 97–8
  - in Stoicism 35–40, 61–3, 72–4, 148–51, 288
  - uncodifiability of 261
  - universal and particular meanings
    - of 88–9, 281–93
  - and universality 21–2, 88–9, 281–93
  - and world-order 22–4, 106, 109, 112–14, 148–51
  - see also* Aristotle; objectivity; Plato; Socrates
- virtue epistemology 8
- virtue-ethics:
- in modern philosophy 2–5, 17 n. 2, 31, 85, 99–100, 105, 107–8, 111–12
  - in relation to other theories 3–4, 99
- virtue-terms, as practical judgements 257–62
- Vlastos, G. 178, 201 n. 49, 225–7, 230–1, 263
- voluntarism 114
- Wharton, Edith 64
- Weber, M. 107
- White, N. P. 6–7
- Wiggins, D. 258, 272 n. 28, 276
- Williams, B. 2, 29 n. 41, 31–2, 102, 105, 245 n. 25, 251 n. 36, 292
- wisdom:
- as only good 199–201
  - in Plato *Euthydemus* 195–202, 205–6, 208–9, 211–12
  - practical, in Aristotle 237–8, 251, 263–5
  - in Stoicism 148
- wise person as norm:
- in ancient thought 33–5
  - in Aristotle 30, 233–55
  - in Stoicism 30, 71, 81–2
- Wittgenstein, L. 100, 124, 133–4, 261
- Wright, C. 241
- Ziff, P. 159–60 n. 5