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## **Comments on Sarah Broadie “Virtue and beyond in Plato and Aristotle”**

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Sarah Broadie’s rich and subtle paper argues that both Plato and Aristotle class as genuine virtue—not as a facade or a mere scare-quoted “virtue”—the decency of those nonphilosophers who do as virtue requires without reflection, or even on the basis of misguided beliefs about why virtue is valuable. Such are two figures who make brief but memorable appearances near the end of two major ethical works: the Spartans of *Eudemian Ethics* VIII.3 and the nameless unfortunate who takes the spotlight in the Myth of Er, who by living in a well-ordered state had “participated in virtue through habit and without philosophy” (*Rep.* 619c)<sup>1</sup> but who turns out to be rudderless when faced with a free choice of his next life. Broadie’s thesis is not a matter of terminology or emphasis, a claim that Plato and Aristotle see the moral glass in these cases as half-full rather than half-empty. Rather, her view is that we can come to a clearer understanding of precisely what Platonic and Aristotelian virtue consists in by seeing that decency—as I will term the state of the person who acts virtuously without understanding—counts as the real thing. (I will not have anything to say about the differences between the two types of decency represented in these texts, summarized by Broadie at the end of her section 2: since both go wrong by overvaluing the natural goods, they perhaps represent fundamentally the same type.) On the “natural account,” as Broadie takes it to be, virtue consists simply in a stable disposition to do the right actions and to feel the right emotions as a direct response to external events. And an agent’s views as to *why* anyone should be virtuous are extraneous to these dispositions themselves: saying that someone is a good person tells you no more about their *reasons* for being good than describing someone as a good tennis player tells you why they took up the game. Broadie is not saying that those deeper questions are irrelevant to our overall moral evaluations; nor is she denying that it is important to be reflective in order to reach the right understanding of the value of virtue. As she notes, virtue divorced from understanding cannot be stably transmitted across generations—a major worry on Plato’s mind in the *Meno*, *Protagoras*, and *Laches*, and

perhaps expressed in eschatological form in the Myth of Er. But this means that decency is a less valuable way of being virtuous than the philosopher's way, not that it is different in kind.

Broadie's paper is not only an important contribution to our understanding of how Plato and Aristotle conceived unphilosophical virtue, a puzzle that has only recently begun to receive the attention it deserves;<sup>2</sup> it also gives vivid and original insights into such matters of moral psychology as the possible conflicts between the decent person's theory and his practice and the moral significance of fantasy—philosophy's evil twin. My comments will necessarily be narrower, and will fail to live up to the sheer interestingness of Broadie's paper.<sup>3</sup> My principal argument will be that her central claim should be rejected: for good reasons Plato and Aristotle do not count mere decency as virtue. My focus will be less on the direct textual evidence for and against Broadie's reading, much of which is ambiguous along half-empty/half-full lines, than on some of the larger philosophical considerations that drive her reading. For I agree that there is something important to be learned about virtue from considering how Plato and Aristotle treat the unphilosophical decent person, but I disagree about what that is.

### **1. Virtue and Decency in Action**

In discussing the "natural account" of virtue, Broadie brings out an important way in which she thinks the natural account recommends itself to us: namely, by serving to ward off a false view, sometimes imputed to Aristotle, about what virtuous agency involves. This view is that the virtuous agent must, in acting for the sake of the fine, think some thought along the lines: "This is the fine [or virtuous] thing to do." Broadie takes this thought to be not only unnecessary to the virtuous agent (though it must, she admits, be available to him upon reflection); it threatens to "destroy the immediacy" (106) characteristic of virtuous agency, curdling it into a kind of moral narcissism. Even worse are the "superfluous and corrupting" (107) thoughts of the allegedly virtuous agent whose reflection involves rehearsing the eudaimonistic and egoistic rationale for virtuous action, roughly: "This would be the fine and virtuous thing to do, and doing the fine and virtuous thing is good for the agent; so I can possess the good for myself by doing it". In order to exclude such "unpleasant self-reference" (107) from the virtuous agent's deliberation, Broadie emphasizes the immediacy of the good person's action. Properly conceived, the generous person is one whose actions spring directly from her perceptions of the needs of others, not from thoughts about how generous it would be for her to act that way. Broadie goes so far as to argue, implausibly, that Aristotle's claim that the good person acts "for the sake of the fine" can be understood as merely a relation of "tracking" (113, n. 37). If this means merely

that the virtuous person's actions correlate reliably with what it is fine to do, it cannot, I think, be right: "for the sake of" [*heneka*] picks out a *causal* relation, and the Aristotelian "final cause" in particular. And though "for the sake of" relations in natural teleology need not involve deliberation or motivation at all, this is the standard vehicle for final causality in *human* agency. This is not to say, however, that action for the sake of the "fine" must be assumed to invariably follow on deliberation explicitly incorporating that concept; I will argue that it does not.

Broadie's concern here falls under the heading of worries about "a thought too many" in moral deliberation. But questions about what constitutes a thought too many are immensely complicated and delicate, I think, and our intuitions may be overly sensitive to the presentation of possible cases. ("This is *wrong*; I cannot do it" has one sound, "This is wrong; *I* cannot do it" quite another.) I will confine myself to three points here.

First, I am not sure that the Aristotelian agent who chooses an action *qua* fine should really be thought of as thinking in a self-referential or overly theorized way—even if he has available a eudaimonist rationale for acting for the sake of the fine, and even if all his actions are in some sense a bid to possess the good for himself. Why not think of him as an aesthete, moved simply by the perception of a prospective action as beautiful, a perception that follows directly on the realization that it would help a friend, or uphold justice, or be what courage demands? That does not seem to me to introduce an unhealthily wide gap between agency and the external circumstances to which it should respond. And though the issue is too large to explore here, my impression is that Aristotle, like Plato, uses the concept of the *kalon* precisely for what attracts and motivates us immediately, without thought of one's further advantage, or of oneself at all.

Second, I think we need to distinguish carefully between the propositions endorsed by and available to the moral agent and the occurrent thoughts that play a more or less explicit role in motivating her. Though the analogy can be misleading, I find it natural to envisage the virtuous agent as a practitioner of something like Kuhnian "normal science." Like a scientist who has adopted a scientific theory or paradigm, she works with a framework of basic principles that determine what counts as a relevant consideration and a correct procedure. She then goes about doing her moral problem-solving without having to think about her first principles all the time; the extent to which they surface explicitly will depend on the nature of the problem at hand. (There are of course problems and puzzles about how to work out this analogy: for example, should eudaimonist arguments in favor of the virtuous life be taken as first principles of the "paradigm" of virtuous deliberation or as external argu-

ments for adopting it?) Now Broadie's central claims here are perfectly consistent with this two-level picture: in fact, she needs something like it to explain how Aristotle can say, as he repeatedly does in VIII.3, that the decent person does not act for the sake of the fine (1248b34-7, 1249a2-3, 5-6, 14-6). *Within* the framework of virtue, the Spartan presumably *does* act for the sake of the fine (otherwise he could not count as virtuous), but the fine is not what motivated him to adopt it.

This "Kuhnian" picture should, it seems to me, be equally available to every type of moral theory and certainly to every viable interpretation of Aristotle. And it strongly suggests that there is something unreal about the threat of "superfluous and corrupting thoughts." For such thoughts are most likely to be attributed to the virtuous agent when the interpreter jumbles together her occurrent thoughts with her "framework" commitments. At the same time we cannot stipulate that the framework commitments should *never* play a direct or explicit role in deliberation; so far as I can see, no simple rule can be given as to how much of the framework the virtuous agent might have to summon up to get the deliberative job done. Broadie seems to suggest that a well-oiled moral agent need *never* think "This would be the virtuous thing to do." But it seems to me that in hard cases—if, for instance, the *prima facie* requirements of generosity conflict with those of justice—the *phronimos* might well have to work through a train of reflection, the conclusion of which would be naturally expressed in just that way. I can also imagine situations ("hard cases" in a different sense) in which, the stakes being high and the costs of right action dreadful, the virtuous agent might find it necessary simply to remind himself of his deepest commitments and the reasons behind them, as a sort of Platonic incantation (cf. *Phaedo* 77e-8a, 114d-e, *Crito* 54d, *Symposium* 215d-e).

I infer that the real moral objection is not to superfluous and corrupting thoughts, but to thoughts that we naturally interpret as *expressing* antecedent corruption. To take a simpler case of a "thought too many," we would be quite disturbed if on asking a student about his plans over the summer, he were to respond, "Well, I certainly *won't* go around shooting and killing lots of people. That's *right out*." The problem here is not that the propositional content is incorrect, or that the explicit thinking of such a thought could *cause* moral harm: rather, the fact that he's thinking it shows he's in deep trouble already.

It might be objected, however, that there is a distinctive problem to be raised about the agent who has a compulsive need to justify *every* action as a deduction from first principles, say about the eudaimonistic benefits of virtuous action; in this case it does seem easy to imagine such a habit of reflection itself as "corrupting." Even in this case, though, I would suggest that such reflection is not necessarily in itself a cause or even

an expression of corruption. A compulsive recourse to first principles in deliberation *might* be as morally harmless (though epistemically neurotic) as any other compulsion, such as the need to check over and over whether one has locked the front door. If we imagine the hyperdeductive agent as a corrupt agent, it is, I think, because we imagine his reasoning as an attempt to persuade or bully himself, indicative of tenuous continence rather than virtue—again, as the symptom of a problem rather than the cause of one.

So too, it seems to me, in the Aristotelian or pseudo-Aristotelian cases Broadie is concerned about. Moreover, I would hazard the claim that there are no particular thoughts that *always* express moral narcissism or crass egoism; nor, conversely, are there any particular thoughts that are *required* for these forms of moral weakness to warp or contaminate our deliberations. This is why our intuitions are so sensitive to the context and presentation of “a thought too many” cases; we are really judging the character traits that we read off from the thoughts imputed to the agent, and the propositional content of those thoughts always underdetermines the traits.

In sum, it seems to me that we should avoid the temptation to prescribe general rules as to what the deliberation of the virtuous agent must or must not involve: “acting for the sake of the fine” should be allowed to involve as many thoughts or as few as any particular situation might demand. The upshot of all this for Broadie’s argument is as follows. It may well be that the virtuous agent and the decent agent will think the same thoughts in deliberation, most of the time at least. After all, they share either a common “framework” or two largely overlapping ones (the analogy, as I’ve said, could be worked out in different ways). But nothing about this offers any particular support to the natural account of virtue. To avoid imputing a thought too many to the virtuous agent, all we need to do is guard against confusing her theoretical commitments with her occurrent thoughts on particular occasions. And if the natural account entails that the motivating thoughts of the virtuous person *cannot* go beyond those available to the decent person, it seems to me to place her in an unnecessary deliberative straitjacket.

## **2. Decency and the Stability of Virtue**

So it remains perfectly possible that for Plato and Aristotle, virtue and mere decency, for all their resemblance in operation, are still two very different states. To see whether this is so, we need to turn to the portraits of decency the two provide. Broadie’s reading of the Myth of Er seems to me right in many important ways, but I want to question her claim that the decent man depicted in the Myth should be considered

genuinely virtuous. For Plato describes him in terms that seem calculated to raise doubts on exactly that point. The decent man, he says, “participated [*meteilêphota*] in virtue through habit and without philosophy” (*Rep.* 619c). Now “participation” [*metalambanein*] is what sensible particulars do in relation to Forms, and it gives equivocal results: the sensible particulars that participate in the form of Beauty are, notoriously, *not*-beautiful as well (*Symp.* 211a, *Phaedo* 74b, etc.). It is also telling that the decent man is said to be virtuous by habit [*ethos*] and without philosophy [*aneu philosophias*]. He is clearly the successor to those described at *Phaedo* 82a-b as having “practiced popular and social virtue [*dêmotikê kai politikê aretê*], which they call moderation and justice and which was developed by habit and practice [*ethos*, nb, *kai meletê*], without philosophy [*aneu philosophias*, again] or understanding” (82a11-b3). Such people have the happiest destiny of the nonphilosophers: they will be reincarnated as members of “a social and gentle group, either of bees or wasps or ants” (82b6-7). At the same time this passage hearkens directly back to *Phaedo* 68-9, where the tone is much darker: here, those who unphilosophically practice what is generally called courage and moderation are said to have “only an illusory appearance of virtue,” fit for slaves, involving nothing healthy or genuine (69b6-8). Now Broadie suggests that the Myth of Er could be read as a correction of the *Phaedo* (112, n. 22); and admittedly *politikê* is also used at *Republic* 430c for the courage of the Auxiliaries, which must be something better than a slavish illusion. In the most extended Platonic text on *politikê aretê*, the “Great Speech” in the *Protagoras*, Protagoras argues that, in order for communities to survive at all, it must be attainable by all and systematically fostered by society, through a “teaching” that sounds more like the nonrational inculcation of good habits (321d, 322e-3b, 324a). How this civic virtue relates to the unitary virtue, identical with knowledge, toward which Socrates repeatedly drives the argument is a question that the *Protagoras* leaves us to work out for ourselves. But in any case, taken together, these passages suggest that *politikê* as applied to virtue in Plato means something like “the virtue inculcated, recognized and relied upon by the city,” thus covering an enormous range from the pseudo-virtue of the “moderate” man in an ordinary, corrupt society to the courage of the Auxiliaries in the *kallipolis*.<sup>4</sup> And if this is what Plato means us to ascribe to the Er-man, his virtue is at best ambiguous and incomplete.

So Aristotle is using language with a history when he introduces Spartan decency as a “civic disposition,” *hexis politikê* (*EE* VIII.3, 1248b38). Earlier in the *EE*, he has spoken of “civic courage” [*politikê andreia*], saying variously that it is due to shame (1129a13, cf. 1230a21) and to law (1129a29-30);

and he sharply distinguishes it from the real thing (*alêtheia*, 1229a30, *alêthês*, *EE* III.1, 1230a25; cf. *NE* III.8, 1116a). (“Civic friendship,” on the other hand, a form of friendship based on utility, does count as a genuine form of friendship, though certainly not the best or primary kind [1236a-7a, cf. 1242a-3b, cf. *NE* 1163b34, 1167b2].) As to whether Spartan decency is real virtue, the evidence of VIII.3 itself is, as Broadie admits (111, n. 11), ambiguous, or rather confusing. The Spartans are flatly declared to be good (at least if we accept the plausible emendation of *agathoi* for, of all things, *agrioi* at 1249a1), so that good things are good for them (if we also accept Solomon’s reasonable supplement of *agatha* in 1249i). But they do not possess fine things *di’ auta* (1249a2-3), which seems to mean they do not act for the sake of the fine (1249a5-6), and instead do fine actions only *kata sumbebêkos* (1249a14-16), thus failing a central criterion of Aristotelian virtue—a criterion he here reaffirms, saying that the *kalokagathos* does fine things, that is, virtuous actions, for their own sake (1248b34-7). Broadie must insist that this distinction applies only “outside” the framework of virtue itself, while “within” it, on particular occasions, the Spartan too is motivated by the fine. If so, Aristotle does remarkably little to make his meaning clear—though admittedly, it is hard to think of a reading of this very confusing chapter that would not give that result.

The obvious philosophical objection to counting mere decency as virtue is raised in the last part of Plato’s *Meno*. Socrates here insists, perhaps surprisingly, that right opinion is every bit as good and beneficial, while it lasts, as knowledge (97b-c, 98c-e). But this “while it lasts” makes all the difference, for right opinions are like the statues of Daedalus: they run away and so are not worth much after all. Socrates assimilates this kind of unstable right opinion to the divine inspiration of soothsayers and prophets (99c). He sums up as follows:

virtue would be neither an inborn quality nor taught, but comes to those who possess it as a gift from the gods which is not accompanied by understanding, unless there is someone among our statesmen who can make another into a statesman. If there were one, he could be said to be among the living as Homer said Teiresias was among the dead, namely that “he alone retained his wits while the others flitted about like shadows.” In the same manner such a man would, as far as virtue is concerned, here also be the only true reality compared, as it were, with shadows. (99e-100a)

Socrates is here bringing the dialectic of the *Meno* back to its very beginning, and answering Meno’s opening question as to how virtue is acquired. And Plato’s results, which Aristotle gives us no reason to reject, are clear. Real virtue is constituted

by knowledge or wisdom (for Aristotle, *phronesis*). Those who do the right thing without that knowledge, on the basis of mere opinion, are guided by a kind of divine inspiration. Such people have virtue only in a very qualified sense, and though the phrase *politikê aretê* is not used in the *Meno* it is striking that the examples are statesmen such as Themistocles. Theirs is a mere shadowy appearance, a ghost compared to the reality of a virtue constituted by knowledge. As Socrates' very telling simile brings out, it is defective not just because it cannot be reliably transmitted, but because of the internal defectiveness that *causes* that instability.

As we can see from the *Meno*'s Teiresias simile, from the *Phaedo*'s reduction of civic virtue to insect sociability, and from Broadie's very illuminating reading of the Myth of Er, the afterlife in Plato is *this* life, seen clearly for the first time. As Broadie notes, the particular focus of the Myth is on the perils of context-free choice (the dark side, we might say, of the "choice of lives" trope); it is, as she very acutely observes, the mirror image of the ring of Gyges story in Book II (112, n. 25). The moral of both tales is just the same: take a decent person, virtuous by the standards of ordinary society, grant him the magical power to fulfill his fantasies, and the result will be a tragedy—or perhaps a horror movie. The ring of Gyges story reads as folk-tale, the Myth as eschatology, but this life does present such situations. The Greeks would think of the aspiring tyrant; we might think of the decent businessman or honorable soldier transplanted to the Belgian Congo:

You can't understand. How could you?—with solid pavement under your feet, surrounded by kind neighbors ready to cheer you or to fall on you, stepping delicately between the butcher and the policeman, in the holy terror of scandal and gallows and lunatic asylums—how can you imagine what particular region of the first ages a man's untrammelled feet may take him into by the way of solitude—utter solitude without a policeman—by the way of silence—utter silence, where no warning voice of a kind neighbor can be heard whispering of public opinion? These little things make all the great difference. When they are gone you must fall back upon your own innate strength, upon your own capacity for faithfulness.<sup>5</sup>

Conrad's response to the problem is resolutely anti-intellectual and thus anti-Platonic: staying the course depends on "your strength ... the faith in your ability for the digging of unostentatious holes to bury the stuff in—your power of devotion, not to yourself, but to an obscure, backbreaking business" (*Heart of Darkness*, 59). The two disagree radically on the (in principle surely empirical) question of what—if anything—provides a reliable brake against the immense moral



temptations that come with context-free impunity, for which “darkness” in Conrad and ‘invisibility’ in the ring of Gyges story provide precisely equivalent metaphors. Plato’s answer is that our salvation lies in understanding, without which no trait of moral character can be resilient. And we can see why he should be fairly confident of this: for he takes human beings to be above all and by nature rational creatures (cf. e.g., *Rep.* X, 611b-2a). For us to be virtuous in the absence of good reasons to be so is to be in standing violation of our nature—a more unnatural condition, perhaps, than not to be virtuous at all.

Now *Eudemian Ethics* VIII is (as I hope to show elsewhere, cf. n. 3) in large part structured as a meditation on the *Meno*, and in particular on its opening *topos*: whether virtue comes from teaching (i.e., whether it is knowledge), practice, nature or in some other way (70a). Aristotle appropriates this question for the opening of the *Eudemian Ethics*, applying it instead to happiness and expanding the list of candidates—no doubt on the basis of the *end* of the *Meno*—to include luck or good fortune [*tuchê, eutuchia*] and divine inspiration [*epipnoia daimoniou tinos*] (1214a15-25). In *Eudemian Ethics* VIII he then returns, in a kind of ring-composition, to this opening problem. Chapter 1 considers and resolves difficulties with the view that virtue is knowledge (the correct view so long as we are careful to understand it as *phronesis* and not *epistêmê*); Chapter 2 then considers whether good fortune, another of the I.1 candidates, could serve as a substitute. This prospect in turn summons up two of the other candidates, since this fortunate person would seem to be fortunate by nature (1247a9-31) and/or to have a kind of divine touchstone or guidance (1248a26-b7)—though what Aristotle actually has to say about these options is, in the text as we have it, thoroughly garbled.

In sum, the first two chapters of *Eudemian Ethics* VIII look like Aristotle’s final, result-confirming review of his position that *phronesis*, alone of the Book I candidates, is the source of virtue and happiness. None of this dictates that the Spartans could not count as virtuous, since Aristotle might (and on Broadie’s reading presumably does) allow that they possess *phronesis*. Still, we should expect Aristotle to be especially uneasy here at the prospect of a virtue that, like Spartan decency, is actually dependent on irrationality. The Spartan is, as Broadie grants, rationally defective in his practice of virtue, insofar as he practices virtue for the sake of the natural goods *even when virtue requires sacrificing the natural goods*. The Spartan evidently believes (1) the greatest goods for a human being, the possession of which is constitutive of happiness, are the natural goods; and (2) the practice of the virtues is valuable because it is invariably the best strategy for acquiring the natural goods.<sup>6</sup> And not only is (1) false as a matter of moral theory; (2) is (thanks to the “invariably”) demonstrably false as

a matter of empirical fact. Broadie notes the empirical vulnerability of the Spartan's beliefs and has very interesting things to say about the implications—"His virtue is a set of habits which, where it really exists, operates independently of his ideology" (108)—and about the stratagems by which the clash between his theory and practice might be reconciled. But she takes the problem to be significant only for the transmission of virtue over the generations: the Spartan's son will see that his father is in the grip of optimistic illusions and reject his principles. There is no reason, however, to assume that the adult Spartan himself will be immune to a similar moment of truth. Indeed the Spartan who *never* realizes that his moral framework is at odds with both his practice and his experience is either ignorant and lucky (in his lack of representative experience) or irrational. And for Aristotle as for Plato it would be an intolerable paradox to claim that *virtue* might be secured by ignorance or irrationality. It only makes matters worse if we suppose that the Spartan's moral decency sets up barriers to his recognition of the problem: we would then have to say that he is virtuous through intemperance, since the virtuous lower part of his soul refuses to register the implications of his intellectual attachment to the natural goods.

It is surely no coincidence that this possibility too is passed under review in *Eudemian Ethics* VIII. In chapter 1, Aristotle considers the paradoxical case in which there is virtue in the irrational part of the soul but ignorance in the rational part (1246b12-32). This recurs in a slightly different guise in chapter 2: what are we to say about the man who desires rightly and acts well "contrary to knowledge" or without correct reasoning? (1247b18-8a16). Such a person is here (if I understand this very confusing passage) discussed as lucky, and anyone consistently lucky in this way is presumably divinely inspired (cf. again *Meno* 99b-100a). In VIII.3, the Spartan's *politikê hexis* is, I suspect, Aristotle's third stab at the characterization of this paradox-generating combination of practical decency and rational inadequacy. If so, the Spartans have at best a non-rational "civic" quasi-virtue, like the statesmen of the *Meno*.

So I doubt that either Plato or Aristotle could allow that Spartan decency, or the "habitual" virtue of the man in the Myth of Er, is the same thing as virtue. The tendency of the Spartans to practice virtue for the wrong reasons is not even virtue of an incomplete sort; from the standpoint of philosophers deeply committed to the sovereignty of reason, it can only look like the wrong kind of disposition altogether. According to Diogenes Laertius, Diogenes the Cynic was once asked where in Greece he had seen good men: "Good men nowhere," he answered, "but good boys at Sparta" (VI.27). And for both Plato and Aristotle, virtue is a grown-up business.

Notes

<sup>1</sup> Translations from Plato are from the various hands in J. M. Cooper (ed.), *Plato: Complete Works* (Hackett, 1997), sometimes with revisions.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. e.g., C. Bobonich, *Plato's Utopia Recast* (Oxford, 2002); R. Kamtekar, "Imperfect Virtue," *Ancient Philosophy* 18 (1998): 315–39.

<sup>3</sup> Part of my comments at the Spindel conference, largely omitted here (but cf. 123–4), discussed the organization and argument of *Eudemian Ethics* VIII. My starting point was the worry that Broadie's treatment of the Spartans makes it difficult to see why Aristotle has so little to say about them, and why what he says focuses so obsessively on the single claim that while good things are good for them, they are not also *fine*, as they are for the person of philosophical virtue (1248b39-9a17). I hope to discuss these and other puzzles presented by this text in a separate paper; my current sense is that a fuller understanding of Aristotle's purposes in VIII.3 in fact poses no problems for Broadie's reading.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. also *Laches* 197a-c on what ordinary people call courage and *Meno* 86e-100b, discussed below, on the virtue of statesmen.

<sup>5</sup> Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (New York, 1960), 58–9 (first published 1902).

<sup>6</sup> I am here being guided by Broadie's admission that the theory of the Spartans is liable to conflict with their experience, which implies that their theory incorporates the false premise (2). The Spartans might more plausibly hold instead a weaker (2a) virtue is *for the most part and in the long run* the best strategy for obtaining the natural goods, and with it (2b) virtue cannot be adopted selectively: precisely because it is a disposition formed and sustained by inculcation and habit, we do not really have the choice of dispensing with it on the particular occasions on which to do so *would* pay. This is not far from (on some interpretations) Plato's answer to the charge that prospective Guardians are required to violate their own self-interest by the "return to the cave" in *Republic* VII. And (2a) is not so obviously falsifiable as (2). But both (2a) and (2b) are still empirical propositions that, it seems to me, many a Spartan is likely to doubt. And if a decent Spartan *can* doubt (2b), as seems very likely, and can *act* on that doubt, then it follows that it cannot be true. Why *not* cheat just this once—take bribes while abroad as the Spartans notoriously did, or exploit the natives on your colonial posting—and afterwards return safely to life as a decent person? It seems empirically a very far-fetched claim that to do so is *impossible*. Of course we feel an impulse to stipulate that the "decent" person who behaves in this way is not really decent, let alone virtuous; indeed this is entailed by the initial conception of the decent person as one who *always* obeys the dictates of virtue. But then (2b) becomes a matter of stipulation rather than a robust, in principle empirical claim about human psychology, and (2a) becomes indistinguishable from the stronger and less plausible (2).