PARTICULARISM IN ARISTOTLE'S *NICOMACHEAN ETHICS* [*]

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Abstract: In this essay I offer a new particularist reading of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. I argue that the interpretation I present not only helps us to resolve some puzzles about Aristotle's goals and methods, but it also gives rise to a novel account of morality—an account that is both interesting and plausible in its own right. The goal of this paper is, in part, exegetical—that is, to figure out how to best understand the text of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. But this paper also aims to contribute to the current exciting and controversial debate over particularism. By taking the first steps towards a comprehensive particularist reading of Aristotle's *Ethics* I hope to demonstrate that some of the mistrust of particularism is misplaced and that what is, perhaps, the most influential moral theory in the history of philosophy is, arguably, a particularist moral theory.

1. INTRODUCTION

One striking feature of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (henceforth *NE*) is that unlike many modern moral treatises, Aristotle's ethical work is *not* concerned with finding and formulating exceptionless moral principles. Aristotle seems perfectly comfortable discussing generalizations that are true "for the most part," or hedged generalizations—i.e., generalizations that are true "in the right times, with reference to the right objects, towards the right people, with the right motive, and in the right way" (II.6:1106b21-22). In fact, Aristotle emphasizes right from the outset that the kind of generalizations we can reasonably expect to find in ethics will "hold good only as a general rule, but not always."[1]

Throughout *NE* Aristotle reminds us that an account of morality must be given "in outline and not precisely."[2] And at least in this respect, Aristotle's approach to the study of morality is in stark contrast with the typical style of modern ethical theorizing. Consider, for example, the debate over utilitarianism. According to utilitarianism an act, *A*, is morally right iff *A* maximizes utility.

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[1] I.3:1094b13-23. All quotations from the *NE* are from Ostwald's translation unless otherwise noted.

[2] See I.7:1098a25-30, I.13:1102a23-26, II.2:1103b35-1104a9, V.10:1137b13-32, and IX.2:1165a12-14.

Opponents of utilitarianism try to demonstrate that utilitarianism is false by presenting

counterexamples to the principle of utility: acts that maximize utility but are not morally right or

acts that are right but that do not maximize utility. Proponents of utilitarianism either accept the

implications of their theory with respect to the cases described or modify the theory in order to

circumvent the unwanted implications. One response that we do *not* find in the literature is that

these alleged counterexample demonstrate that the principle of utility is "true for the most part," or

that it is true only "in the right times, with reference to the right objects, towards the right people,

with the right motive, and in the right way."

   This noticeable difference between Aristotle's approach to moral theorizing and the standard

contemporary method is thought provoking. Why didn't Aristotle try to find and formulate

exceptionless moral principles? Sarah Broadie suggests that Aristotle's goals are quite different

from those of modern moral theorists; while modern ethicists try to develop a systematic ground-

level normative ethics, Aristotle, says Broadie, attempted no such thing. She writes:

> That Aristotle provides no ground-level normative ethics, and is apparently quite untroubled by any
> lack of a system here, gives us food for thought. He so blatantly fails to produce the kind of position
> that it is a modern tradition to expect as a main deliverance of philosophical ethics – and he is not
> wringing his hands! (2006:353)

   In this essay I argue that although, as Broadie observes, Aristotle's approach to the study of

morality is different from that of many modern ethicists, he is, *pace* Broadie, offering a systematic

ground-level normative ethics—that is, he is presenting a theory that purports to *explain* the

virtuousness, or rightness, of individual actions. Aristotle, I submit, did not search for exceptionless

moral principles because he did not think that such principles were necessary in order to provide an

adequate (systematic) account of morality. In other words, I argue that we can interpret Aristotle's

ethics as a particularist moral theory. Moreover, I argue that a particularist reading of the *NE* not

only helps us to resolve several puzzles about Aristotle's goals and methods, but it also gives rise to a novel account of morality—an account that is both interesting and plausible in its own right.

The aim of this paper, then, is twofold: first, I hope to present a novel interpretation of the *NE*. In this respect I hope to contribute to the efforts of various scholars in figuring out how to best understand the text of the *NE*. Second, I hope to contribute to the current exciting and controversial debate over particularism. Almost all Particularists find inspiration in Aristotle's work. Nevertheless, to the best of my knowledge no one has yet offered a comprehensive particularist interpretation of the *NE*,[3] and many philosophers remain suspicious of the possibility of constructing a particularist *moral theory*. By taking the first steps towards a comprehensive particularist reading of Aristotle's *NE* I hope to demonstrate that some of the mistrust of particularism is misplaced, and indeed, that what is, perhaps, the most influential moral theory in the history of philosophy is, arguably, a particularist moral theory.[4]

I proceed as follows: first, I briefly explain what particularism is, and what particularists and generalists disagree about. This will enable us to understand why Broadie and others believe that Aristotle fails to produce a systematic ground-level normative ethics, and why they might be mistaken about this (§2). Next, I argue that Aristotle is not trying to help us to identify which of the range of actions available to us is (or are) morally right, but rather, that his theory is meant to teach us how to *explain* why those acts that we already know are right are, in fact, right. What Aristotle is giving us, I argue, is an *explanatory schema* that we can use in order to explain the rightness of particular actions. This interpretation of Aristotle's project, I show, fits well with his comments on

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[3] McDowell (1979) provides what is, perhaps, the most particularist-friendly interpretation of Aristotle's NE to date.

[4] Irwin (2000) argues that Aristotle was *not* a particularist. Irwin's arguments for this conclusion are extremely interesting and they deserve careful examination. However, since Irwin's formulation of the particularism-generalism debate (as a debate about *normative priority*) is different from my own formulation of this debate, then Irwin's conclusion that Aristotle was not a "particularist" is consistent with my own conclusion that he was. Therefore, in order to keep this essay at a manageable length I will not address Irwin's arguments here. For my formulation of the particularism-generalism debate see §2 below and my (2009a).

the utmost importance of having the correct starting points for a successful ethical inquiry, his

repeated remarks about the required background a student of ethics must have in order to benefit

from his lectures, and the seriousness with which he addresses the doctrine of the mean (§3).

In II.2 Aristotle famously asserts that "we are not conducting this inquiry in order to know what

virtue is, but in order to become good" (1103b27). In §4, I discuss Aristotle's practical ambitions

for his ethical work, and I explain how these practical goals are consistent with the interpretation I

proposed in §3.

2. THE PARTICULARISM-GENERALISM DEBATE

Particularism has received a lot of attention in recent years.[5] One immediately noticeable feature

of the current debate over particularism is that there is no consensus on what particularism is, or

what exactly particularists are committed to. So I want to begin by stating briefly what I think

particularism is, and what I mean when I say that Aristotle is offering a particularist account of

morality. Identifying the particularism-generalism debate as I do will help us to recognize the

source of some of the difficulties that commentators have had in interpreting Aristotle's work.

The particularism-generalism debate, I propose, is a debate over the nature of moral

explanation.[6] Moral philosophers, I take it, are (among other things) in the business of constructing

moral theories. And moral theories are (among other things) supposed to explain moral phenomena,

including the rightness and wrongness of actions. Traditionally, philosophers have thought that in

order to explain the rightness and wrongness of actions we must find and formulate exceptionless

moral principles—principles that identify features that all and only morally right actions have in

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[5] Jonathan Dancy has written extensively on particularism. E.g., Dancy (1983, 1993, 2004). Collections of essays on particularism include Hooker and Little (2000) and Lance, Potrc, and Strahovnik (2008). See, also, McNaughton (1988), Louden (1991), Shafer-Landau (1997), Sinnott-Armstrong (1999), Little (2001), Cullity (2002), Holton (2002), Lance and Little (2004, 2006a, 2006b, 2007), Väyrynen (2004, 2006a, 2006b, 2009), McKeever and Ridge (2006), Raz (2006), Crisp (2007), Stangl (2008, 2010), and Leibowitz (2009a, 2009b, forthcoming).
[6] See Leibowitz (2009a).

common. Utilitarianism is a paradigmatic example of such attempts. Yet despite the continuing efforts of many of the most able philosophers in the past few centuries, such comprehensive exceptionless moral principles have not yet been found.[7]

The persistent failure to find and formulate exceptionless moral principles that provide an adequate account of morality invites us to examine the presumption that such principles are essential to moral theorizing—a presumption that has been widely endorsed but rarely, if ever, argued for.[8] As I see it, those who are willing to give up this presumption are particularists, while those who retain it are generalists. Particularism, in my view, is best understood as a *research program*; it is not a single moral theory, but rather a meta-theoretical commitment to the possibility of explaining moral phenomena (including the rightness and wrongness of actions) without appealing to exceptionless moral principles. Particularism ought to be contrasted with Generalism— a meta-theoretical commitment to the view that in order to explain moral phenomena we must find and formulate exceptionless moral principles—and not with any individual moral theory.

Since generalists are committed to the view that in order to explain the rightness and wrongness of actions one must find and formulate exceptionless moral principles, a generalist who wants to interpret Aristotle's *NE* is faced with an interpretative decision: either Aristotle is not trying to explain moral phenomena, or, appearances notwithstanding, Aristotle is (or at least, should be) committed to some exceptionless moral principle. And indeed both strategies are well represented in the literature. Some philosophers argue that Aristotle wanted to provide a regimen for a good moral life and that his ethical work was focused on questions about good character or the concepts of virtue, happiness, and justice rather than rightness.[9] Indeed, Richard Taylor maintains that

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[7] Or at least, all principles that have been proposed thus far are contentious.

[8] Recently, several philosophers have argued for the essentiality of principles to moral theorizing in the context of the particularism-generalism debate. See Jackson, Pettit, and Smith (2000) and McKeever and Ridge (2006).

[9] See, e.g., Pincoffs (1971) and Taylor (1988).

Aristotle simply "did not think of ethics as having to do with moral right and wrong" (1988:54). On these views, then, Aristotle did not try to find and formulate exceptionless moral principles because he was not interested in explaining the rightness of actions at all.

Other philosophers propose a virtue-based criterion of moral rightness of the following form:

(VE) An act is right iff a fully virtuous agent might perform it in the circumstances.[10]

One problem with this approach is that there is very little evidence that Aristotle thought of a principle like (VE) as a criterion of moral rightness. Thus, insofar as we are trying to figure out what Aristotle's moral theory is, we may be able to do better than to attribute (VE) to him.[11] Moreover, (VE) seems to get the order of explanation wrong. It seems reasonable to think that a virtuous person chooses to perform an action *because* it is right. So although (VE) might be a true (exceptionless) generalization it seems to be explanatorily vacuous; if we wish to *explain* why a certain act is right we ought not to appeal to the fact that a virtuous person might perform it, but rather, we should cite the features of the action (and the situation) in virtue of which a virtuous person might choose to perform it.

Broadie recognizes that Aristotle did not offer a criterion of moral rightness. This is why she claims that Aristotle fails to produce the kind of position that it is a modern tradition to expect. But why does Broadie think that Aristotle provides no ground-level normative ethics? I suspect that the answer lies in Broadie's implicit commitment to the generalist research program: in order to provide a systematic ground-level normative ethics one must find and formulate exceptionless moral principles. And since Aristotle did not present any exceptionless moral principles he did not offer a

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[10] See, e.g., Zagzebski (1996), Oakley (1996), Hursthouse (1999), and Swanton (2001).

[11] Indeed, proponents of (VE) often present (VE) as a neo-Aristotelian theory and not as an interpretation of *NE*. Nevertheless, some proponents of a virtue-criterion of right action do find textual support for it in *NE*. A discussion of these interpretations, and why I think they are implausible, will take us too far afield. While those who find these interpretations plausible may not find the considerations I offer above as considerations that favor a particularist interpretation of Aristotle, they may, nevertheless, assess the interpretation I propose in §3 on its own terms.

systematic ground-level normative ethics. However, with the particularist research program in mind, a new interpretative strategy becomes available. Aristotle may be offering a systematic ground-level normative ethics *without* appealing to exceptionless moral principles. In the following section I will argue that this is, in fact, what Aristotle is doing in the *NE*.

3. Aristotle's Explanatory Schema

A natural place for us to begin our discussion of Aristotle's account of morality is the passage in I.4 in which Aristotle addresses issues concerning philosophical methodology and states what he takes to be the starting points for moral theorizing:

> [1] Nor must we overlook the fact that arguments which proceed from fundamental principles are different from arguments that lead up to them …[2] Now, we must start with the known. But this term has two connotations: "what is known to us" and "what is known" pure and simple. Therefore, we should start perhaps with what is known to us. [3] For that reason, to be a competent student of what is right and just, and of politics generally, one must first have received a proper upbringing in moral conduct. [4] The acceptance of a fact as fact is the starting point, and if this is sufficiently clear, there will be no further need to ask why it is so. [5] A man with this kind of background has or can easily acquire the foundations from which he must start. [6] But if he neither has nor can acquire them, let him lend an ear to Hesiod's words:
> > That man is all-best who himself works out every problem…
> > That man, too, is admirable who follows one who speaks well.
> > He who cannot see the truth for himself, nor, hearing it from others,
> > Store it away in his mind, that man is utterly useless. (1095a31-1095b12)[12]

Following Burnyeat (1980), I understand Aristotle here as engaged in a dialectical inquiry towards first principles [1]. This inquiry towards first principles, Aristotle argues, must begin with what is known to us [2]. Our starting points, I suggest, are the normative statuses of particular actions. As Burnyeat observes, "the ancient commentators are agreed that Aristotle has in mind knowledge about actions in accordance with the virtues; these actions are the things familiar to us from which we must start, and what we know about them is that they are noble or just" (1980:71-72). In other words, we must start our moral theorizing from our judgments about particular actions.

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[12] One of the difficulties in interpreting this passage concerns the use of the word *archē* and its cognates. Different translators choose different renderings of the various occurrences of this word, and their choices give rise to alternative readings of this passage. The interpretation I am about to propose is based on Ostwald's translation of this passage but it is also compatible with the translations by Ross, Irwin, and Burnyeat.

However, we need not know why those actions have the normative status we identify them as having [4]; one can engage in moral theorizing even if one does not know why right acts are right, as long as one can identify *that* they are right, or as long as one is willing to accept the judgments of "one who speaks well" as one's starting points [6]. This is one reason why Aristotle insists that a competent student is one who has had a good moral upbringing [3]. A person who is brought up well should be able to tell apart noble acts from ignoble ones; he is expected to be able to identify courageous acts, or just acts, and he is expected to be able to tell them apart from those acts that are cowardly or unjust. One of Aristotle's goals in the *NE*, I propose, is to teach his students *why* those acts they identify as right are right.

But how could one identify particular actions as right if one doesn't know *why* these acts are right? A native speaker of a language can often tell whether a sentence is grammatical even in cases in which she does not know why it is so. Naturally, only native speakers who have been "brought up well" with respect to language are able to do this correctly and reliably. Aristotle thinks that with a proper moral upbringing one can form habits that would enable one to distinguish right actions from wrong ones [5]. This is one reason why in I.3 Aristotle insists that young men are not the target audience for his lectures: "for they are inexperienced in the actions that constitute life, and what is said will start from these and will be about these" (1095a3-4, Rowe trans.). Our discussion, Aristotle tells us, concerns the rightness of actions but it also starts with correct judgments about which particular actions are right. The ability to identify right acts as right is acquired by habituation and the habits we form depend on the kind of moral upbringing we get. Having correct starting points is vital to a successful dialectical inquiry; if our initial judgments about the normative

status of actions are incorrect, then the first principles we discover by way of a dialectical inquiry

from these judgments are likely to be false.[13]

In I.7 Aristotle reminds us that the appropriate degree of precision for each investigation

depends on the nature of the subject matter being explored (1098a26-28). He then goes on to say

this:

> [7] One should not demand to know the reason *why*, either, in the same way in all matters: in some cases, it will suffice if *that* something is so has been well shown, [8] as indeed is true of starting points; some are grasped by induction, some by perception, some by a sort of habituation, and others in other ways: [9] one must try to get hold of each sort in the appropriate way, and take care that they are well marked out, [10] since they have great importance in relation to what comes later. For the start of something seems to be more than half of the whole, and through it many of the things being looked for seem to become evident. (1098a33-1098b7, Rowe trans.)[14]

In this passage Aristotle tells us that inquiries can differ not only with respect to their

appropriate degree of precision [7], but also in the way in which their starting points are obtained

[8].[15] Moreover, Aristotle insists that it is important to obtain the starting points for each inquiry in

the appropriate way [9]. Finally, Aristotle stresses again the importance of having the correct

starting points [10].

Aristotle's goal, as I have mentioned above, is to help us understand *why* those acts that we

identify as right—our starting points—are, in fact, right. But he warns us that the kind of

explanation we ought to seek should be appropriate to the subject matter we are investigating [7]. In

geometry we can give demonstrative explanation. But we "should not demand to know the reason

why in the same way in all matters." Explanations of the rightness of actions will take a different

form. "Pure science involves demonstration," Aristotle tells us, "while things whose starting points

or first causes can be other than they are do not admit of demonstrations" (VI.5:1140a34).

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[13] See II.1:1103b23-24

[14] In this passage Rowe translates *archē* as "starting point," as does Burnyeat. In contrast, Ross, Irwin, and Ostwald opt for "first principle," "principle," and "fundamental principle" respectively.

[15] Aristotle again emphasizes here that in the case of starting points we need not know *why* they are so, but it is sufficient to know *that* they are so [7]. See also, III.3:1113a1-3.

After reminding us in II.2 that the subject matter of ethics lacks fixity and hence that our account will not be very precise,[16] Aristotle goes on to say this: "But though our present account is of this nature we must give what help we can" (1104a10, Ross trans.). What immediately follows, are Aristotle's observations about the harmful effects of excess and deficiency, and the positive effects of the proportionate amount, or the mean. These observations, Aristotle tells us, hold true for health and strength as well as for characteristics like temperance, courage, and other virtues. To act in accordance with the mean is not only the way to acquire virtuous characteristics, but is also the mark of virtuous actions.

Aristotle seems to think that his comments on the mean are helpful. But what kind of help does he think these comments provide? Broadie (1991) proposes the following hypothesis:

> [Aristotle] could be deceived into thinking the doctrine of the mean useful in ways in which in fact it is not. This may be what happens in NE II.2, where he bewails the impossibility of giving exact rules for correct particular *responses* (1104a5-9); then says that he must give what help he can (1104a10-11); and then goes on to discuss, not *responses*, but *dispositions*." (101-2)

If Aristotle had thought that his comments on the mean can help us to identify the right response in various situations, then, like Broadie, I think he was mistaken about their usefulness. However, I doubt that this is what Aristotle had in mind. Indeed, in VI.1 Aristotle explicitly tells us that he does *not* think that his remarks on the mean can help us to identify what we ought to do:

> We stated earlier that we must choose the median, and not excess or deficiency, and that the median is what right reason dictates…but this statement, true though it is, lacks clarity. In all other fields of endeavor in which scientific knowledge is possible, it is indeed true to say that we must exert ourselves or relax neither too much nor too little, but to an intermediate extent and as right reason demands. But if this is the only thing a person knows, he will be none the wiser: he will, for example, not know what kind of medicines to apply to his body, if he is merely told to apply whatever medical science prescribes and in a manner in which a medical expert applies them." (VI.1:1138b19-35)

So what kind of help are these comments on the mean supposed to provide? I propose that these remarks are meant to help us to *explain* why those acts that we *already know* are virtuous are virtuous. If we can tell—as we must be able to in order to obtain starting points for our ethical

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[16] 1103b35-1104a9.

inquiry—that a particular act is courageous, for instance, we now know that this action lies in the mean. So we can explain its rightness by pointing out that this act is neither excessive nor deficient. This, of course, is a rudimentary sketch of an explanatory schema but we can now already identify the basic structure of the explanation: if an act is right, then we should be able to identify a scale on which it is neither excessive nor deficient.

Aristotle recognizes that what he has given us so far is extremely undeveloped and he goes on to expound on this explanatory model in several phases. First, after presenting the bare bones of his explanatory schema, Aristotle discusses some general features of the virtues: he tells us that a mark of an action performed virtuously is that the agent of the action takes pleasure in performing the action (II.3); he distinguishes between a virtuous action and an action performed virtuously (II.4); and he identifies the genus and differentia of virtue (II.5-6). By the end of II.6 we get Aristotle's definition of virtue: "We may thus conclude that virtue or excellence is a characteristic involving choice, and that it consists in observing the mean relative to us, a mean which is defined by a rational principle, such as a man of practical wisdom would use to determine it" (1106b35-1107a1). We now know a bit more about the proper explanation of the virtuousness of a particular action. Consider: "Why is this action of standing one's ground in battle courageous?" The proper answer will take the following form: "This action is courageous because the agent chose to perform it, and it is located in the mean (relative to the agent)[17] of some relevant scale."

What we have so far is a sketch of an explanatory schema and we must now learn how to properly fill in this schema in order to provide satisfactory explanations of the rightness of individual actions. Aristotle turns to this in II.7:

> However, this general statement is not enough; we must also show that it fits particular instances. For in a discussion of moral actions, although the general statements have a wider range of application,

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[17] See II.6:1106a30-b4.

> statements on particular points have more truth in them: actions are concerned with particulars and our statements must harmonize with them." (1107a28-33)

We already know that in order to explain why a particular act is virtuous we must locate this action in the mean of some relevant scale—this statement has a wide range of application—but in order to appreciate its truth, we must see how it applies to particular virtuous actions, since we are, most fundamentally, concerned with the rightness of individual actions. Aristotle, then, wants to show us that by applying his schema properly we can generate adequate explanation of the rightness of particular actions.

In the remainder of II.7 Aristotle lists the various scales that are relevant to each virtue. And whenever possible he introduces the relevant vocabulary we should use in our explanation. For example, if we want to explain why an act is courageous, we should locate the agent's emotional state while performing the action as a mean on a scale (or scales)[18] of fear and confidence; the agent might be *reckless* if he exceeds in confidence, or *cowardly* if he is deficient in confidence. If we want to explain why an action is *generous* we should locate the action as a mean on a scale ranging from *stinginess* to *extravagance*.

Aristotle goes on to list relevant scales for other virtues. Yet he is well aware that even now we have only been given a sketch—"For our present purposes, we must rest content with an outline and a summary, but we shall later define these qualities more precisely" (II.7:1107b15). By the end of II.7, if we are asked, for example, why Ms. Smith's act of donating $100,000 to cancer research is generous, we could say that she chose to perform this action, and that given her economic and social situation, donating $100,000 to this cause was neither stingy nor extravagant. Moreover, we know that if she did not take pleasure in her generous donation, then she did not act generously.

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[18] The feelings of fear and confidence may well be two distinct types of emotions rather than extremes of one type of emotion (see Pears (1980)). My proposed interpretation of Aristotle is neutral on this issue.

This explanatory schema does not generate deductive explanations. From the fact that Ms. Smith's action was neither stingy nor extravagant it does *not* follow that her action was right or virtuous; there may have been other, more urgent, causes to which to donate, or there could have been good reasons not to donate to the particular organization that she had chosen. So explanations produced by applying Aristotle's explanatory schema do not guarantee the truth of the explanandum.[19] But as we have seen, Aristotle insists that we "should not demand to know the reason why in the same way in all matters," and that explanations in ethics "do not admit of demonstrations." This is why it is important for Aristotle that we already know *that* the action is right before we explain *why* it is right; that the act is right is part of the data we have at our disposal when we explain its rightness.

The reading of Aristotle I propose helps us to make sense of several features of Aristotle's work that commentators have found perplexing. First, it helps us to understand the importance of the doctrine of the mean for Aristotle's project. Some readers of the *NE* are puzzled by the seriousness with which Aristotle approaches the doctrine of the mean. As Broadie (1991) puts it:

> Aristotle regards [the doctrine of the mean] as an important contribution, to judge by the solemnity
> with which he introduces it and the many pages where he strains over the details of its application.
> Yet the doctrine often gets a disappointed reception. It seems at first to offer special illumination, but
> in the end, according to its critics, it only deals with truisms together with a questionable taxonomy of
> virtues and vices. (95)

On my reading the doctrine of the mean plays an important explanatory role which lies at the heart of Aristotle's project. Although the doctrine of the mean doesn't identify for us the features that make right actions right, it does tell us what a proper explanation of the rightness of a particular action should look like. We obtain a satisfactory explanation *only* when we replace the truisms about the harmful effects of excess and deficiency and the positive effects of the proportionate amount with the specific features of the action/situation; i.e., we must identify the relevant scale on

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[19] See Leibowitz (forthcoming) for a discussion of various requirements for a satisfactory moral explanation.

which the action lies in the mean, and we have to identify the mean relative to the agent of the action and the situation in which the act is performed. This is why Aristotle methodically lists not only those virtues and vices that have names, but also those that do not have names, and this is why he identifies those qualities that resemble virtues but are not quite virtues.

The proper explanation of the rightness of each individual action depends on the specific features of the particular act in question. "What sort of things are to be chosen and in return for what, it is not easy to state; for there are many differences in the particular cases" (III.1:1110b8, Ross trans.). There is no algorithm that we can use to generate adequate explanations, as Aristotle emphasizes again in III.4: "What is good and pleasant differs with different characteristics and conditions, and perhaps the chief distinction of a man of high moral standards is his ability to see the truth in each particular moral question, since he is, as it were, the standard and measure for such questions" (1113a31-34). This is why Aristotle gives us many examples of how to generate explanations by substituting the truisms in the generic explanatory schema with particular features of actions.

In his discussion of courage Aristotle specifies different possible objects of fear (e.g., death, poverty, disease), and various contexts in which one could exemplify courage (e.g., in battle, at sea, in illness). "He is courageous," we are told,

> who endures and fears the right things, for the right motive, in the right manner, and at the right time, and who displays confidence in similar ways. For a courageous man feels and acts according to the merits of each case and as reason guides him." (III.7:1115b19-20)

When we explain the rightness of a particular courageous action, we must replace the hedges ("the right things," "in the right manner," etc.) with specific features of the action in question; for example, his action was courageous because he left his family in order to join the army and he risked his life in order to protect his country when no non-military option was available to resolve the conflict.

We also get examples of types of excess and deficiency (III.7:1115b25-1116a3), and a list of characteristics similar to courage that are not quite courage (III.8), including some famous examples of cases in which these qualities were displayed (III.8:1116a20-25). With these finer distinctions we should be able to explain why certain actions that may appear courageous are not genuinely courageous. For instance, an act may seem courageous if the agent acts as a result of excessive optimism, or if she performs an action in ignorance of the dangers she is facing, but such acts only "resemble courage" (III.8:1117a10-27). The more examples we get of the application of the general schema with respect to different virtues, and the more examples we get of various states that are similar to virtue but are not genuine virtues, the more confident we will be about the appropriateness of our generic schema, and the better prepared we will be to apply it in new situations.

Rosalind Hursthouse expresses another difficulty that my proposed interpretation helps to resolve. In her essay 'A False Doctrine of the Mean' she argues that Urmson's (1973) interpretation of the doctrine of the mean is false.[20] "What I want to illustrate," she writes, "is that *right object* and *right occasion*…cannot be specified as means, and that, more generally, some vices that correspond to the virtues of temperance, courage, and what is usually translated as 'patience' or 'gentleness'— the right disposition with respect to anger—cannot be understood as dispositions to exhibit or feel an emotion (a *pathos*) too much or too little" (1980:61-2).

Hursthouse provides several examples of vicious acts that cannot be described as excessive or deficient, and concludes that "Some of the wrong objects which the greedy and wicked person enjoy would still be wrong simply in so far as they were contrary to what is honorable; if they were

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[20] In more recent work, Hursthouse (2006) argues the Doctrine of the Mean is a mistake, and that it would be prudent for us not to take this doctrine too seriously when we try to understand Aristotle's ethics because Aristotle imports this thesis from his "scientific" work and so we should feel comfortable discarding it in much the same way that we feel comfortable discarding Aristotle's scientific claims as "pre-scientific nonsense." (111) Even if there are good reasons to forgo charity in this case, we may nevertheless favor an interpretation—like the one I am proposing—that enables us to take seriously Aristotle's formulation of the Doctrine of the Mean in terms of excess and deficiency.

cases of excess this would be accidental" (64). Similarly, with respect to courage she argues that

there are some objects that are not appropriate objects of fear, and these objects cannot be described

as 'too much of …' or 'too little of…' These observations, Hursthouse claims, raise the following

questions:

> Why does Aristotle talk in terms of excess and deficiency, too… and too… at all? Why should he not
> rest content with saying that men may go wrong in *countless* ways, but hit the target and achieve
> excellence in only one (1106b30ff) rather than even suggesting that, for each virtue, there are just two
> opposed ways of going wrong? (68)[21]

The answer to Hursthouse's questions, I maintain, is this: Aristotle's identification of the

virtuous act as lying in the mean between excess and deficiency is the essence of the explanatory

schema he develops. It is true that actions can go wrong in countless ways, but this statement

doesn't help us to explain why right acts are right, which is what Aristotle's schema is supposed to

help us to do.

The explanation of the rightness of an action involves finding the relevant scale on which the

action (or emotion) is in the mean. But even though the rightness of every right action ought to be

explained by locating some scale on which this action is in the mean (relative to the agent and/or the

situation), it does not follow that the wrongness of every wrong action ought to be explained by

identifying a scale on which it is excessive or deficient. As I see it, being in the mean on the

relevant scale is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for the rightness of an action. If there is no

relevant scale on which to locate an action then this act cannot be right. Furthermore, an adequate

explanation of the rightness of an action will also substitute the "hedges" of the generic schema

(i.e., the right time, the right object, etc.) with the specific details of the case at hand.

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[21] Hursthouse's answer to this question is this: "The explanation is—that's just the way we happen to be; we just do
wrong in these two ways. Similarly, the explanation of why the two vices should be opposed, as excess to deficiency
is—that's just the way things happen to turn out; fear works that way with us." (69). I find this solution unsatisfying.
There are instances in which Aristotle asserts that one of the extremes is uncommon and yet even in those cases he
insists on identifying the relevant virtues as a means between two extremes, which are vices.

Following Hursthouse's lead, Broadie (1991) also questions the generality of the doctrine of the mean:

> Although some wrong responses are wrong because they are too high or too low on some scale or other, not all wrong responses can be faulted in such a way, unless metaphorically. What does a person do too much or too little when he agrees to sell secrets to a foreign power? (100)

The answer to Broadie's question will depend, of course, on the particular details of the act we are evaluating. If in this particular situation selling secrets to a foreign power is the right thing to do, the agent's act might be wrong because the agent was too greedy, or because he wasn't fearful enough, or too fearful. However, perhaps paradigmatic acts of treason are not instances of right actions. If there are no good reasons to sell secrets to a foreign power, for example, then the action might be wrong not in virtue of being excessive or deficient, but in virtue of not being in the mean of *any* relevant scale. When one performs a wrong act one cannot be too fearful or not fearful enough simply because there is no such thing as the appropriate degree of fearfulness for that action. In II.6 Aristotle is quite explicit about this point:

> Not every action nor every emotion admits of a mean. There are some actions and emotions whose very names connote baseness, e.g., spite, shamelessness, envy; and among actions, adultery, theft, and murder. These and similar emotions and actions imply by their very names that they are bad; it is not their excess nor their deficiency which is called bad. It is, therefore, impossible ever to do right in performing them: to perform them is always to do wrong. In cases of this sort, let us say adultery, rightness and wrongness do not depend on committing it with the right woman at the right time and in the right manner, but the mere fact of committing such actions at all is to do wrong. It would be just as absurd to suppose that there is a mean, an excess, and a deficiency in an unjust or a cowardly or a self-indulgent act. (1107a9-19)

Some emotions and actions, we are told, are wrong not in virtue of being excessive or deficient. A typical case of murder is simply wrong even though it would be absurd to describe it as 'too much …' or 'too little…' The absurdity is due to the fact that the expressions 'too much' and 'too little' presuppose that there is an appropriate amount. But for some wrong actions there is no such thing. Contrary to some commentators who read this paragraph as an indication that Aristotle—his repeated comments on the lack of fixity in ethics notwithstanding—believes that morality can be

codified (e.g., murder is always morally wrong),[22] I maintain that this passage demonstrates that for

Aristotle there is an asymmetry between the explanation of the rightness of right acts and the

explanation of the wrongness of wrong ones. In order to explain the rightness of a right action we

must identify a scale on which the action is in the mean and we must discharge the "hedges" (in the

right time, with the right object, etc.) properly. However, the wrongness of wrong acts can be

explained in a number of ways. One way is to show that the act (or emotion) in question is

excessive or deficient on the relevant scale, or that in the context in which the act was performed the

"hedges" cannot be discharged properly. Indeed, Aristotle's discussion of vicious acts focuses on

acts of this kind. I think there are two reasons for this. First, a discussion of the vices involved in

excess and deficiency helps us to understand the relevant virtues better; it shows us how the

explanation of the rightness of actions would work in cases where one performs a right action in

which the same scale is involved. Second, wrong acts that are wrong in virtue of being excessive or

deficient on a certain scale and those that are wrong on account of the "hedges" may seem similar,

in many respects, to those acts that are in fact right. Perhaps Aristotle expects that his students may

be perplexed by the difference in moral status of actions that seem otherwise similar and so he

focuses his discussion on wrong actions of this kind.

But since being in the mean on the relevant scale is a necessary condition for the rightness of

actions, then another way to explain the wrongness of an action is to show that there is no scale on

which this act is in the mean. As Aristotle writes "Not every action nor every emotion admits of a

mean" and since those actions and emotions that do not admit of a mean are wrong, then their

wrongness may be explained by the fact that they do not admit of a mean. Moreover, Aristotle may

well have thought that the wrongness of *some* wrong actions is simply obvious and so requires no

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[22] See Irwin (2000). See n. 4 above for an explanation of why I do not address Irwin's arguments at length.

explanation.[23] For example, the wrongness of a standard case of treason, to return to Broadie's

example, is not a phenomenon that (typically) requires an explanation. When one knows full well

the details of a (paradigmatic) act of treason the question: "Why was it wrong for Mr. Smith to

betray his fellow citizens?" is rarely, if ever, asked. It seems natural to expect that anyone who asks

this question is missing some important fact about the case at hand.[24] And while it is common in

modern moral ethical works to ask questions like "Why is torturing babies for fun wrong?," we do

not find these kinds of questions in Aristotle.[25] A person who is genuinely puzzled by the

wrongness of some remarkably egregious acts would probably not qualify as a proper student for

Aristotle's lectures.[26]

4. The Practical Goal of Aristotle's *NE*

So far I have claimed that Aristotle's goal is to teach us how to explain the rightness of those

acts that we already know are right. One might object to this interpretation because it may seem as

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[23] One might worry that if according to Aristotle the wrongness of some wrong actions requires no explanation then Aristotle is committed not to particularism, but to anti-theory. (My thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing me on this issue.) Unfortunately, it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the differences and similarities between particularism and anti-theory. As I explain in §2, I understand particularism as the meta-theoretical view according to which moral phenomena can be explained without relying on exceptionless moral principles. The goal of the paper is to show that Aristotle offers an explanatory schema that allows us to explain moral phenomena without exceptionless principles. So even though some moral phenomena might not require an explanation, the fact that Aristotle provides a model according to which we can explain the rightness of right actions and the wrongness of many wrong actions without appealing to exceptionless moral principles is sufficient to place Aristotle in the particularist camp.

[24] For a fascinating discussion of the oddity of being genuinely puzzled by the wrongness of some acts, see Gass (1957). For example, Gass writes: "[some cases] are cases I call clear. They have the characteristic of moral transparency, and they comprise the core of our moral experience. When we try to explain why they are instances of good or bad, of right or wrong, we sound comic, as anyone does who gives elaborate reasons for the obvious, especially when these reasons are so shamefaced before reality, so miserably beside the point. What we must explain is not why these cases have the moral nature they have, for that needs no explaining, but *why they are so clear*" (198).

[25] The closest Aristotle comes to discussing cases like "torturing babies for fun" is in VII.5, where he mentions "the female who, they say, rips open pregnant women and devours the infants," (1148b20-23) and "the man who sacrificed and ate his mother, or with the slave who ate the liver of his fellow" (1148b25-6, Ross trans.). All that Aristotle has to say about these cases is that these acts are brutish, and that brutishness is beyond the limits of vice.

[26] My point is not that all acts that do not admit of a mean are necessary worse than all other wrong acts—some acts of excess or deficiency may be much worse than, e.g., a standard case of adultery which may be wrong because it doesn't admit of a mean. Instead my point is that the explanation of the wrongness of wrong acts may take a different form from the explanation of the rightness of right acts and that some especially egregious acts are such that their wrongness might not require an explanation at all.

though it does not do justice to Aristotle's proclaimed practical ambitions. In I.3 Aristotle tells us

that "the end of this kind of study [the study of political science and ethics] is not knowledge but

action" (1095a6). And in II.2 he says: "The purpose of the present study is not, as it is in other

inquiries, the attainment of theoretical knowledge: we are not conducting this inquiry in order to

know what virtue is, but in order to become good, else there would be no advantage in studying it"

(1103b26-29).[27] On the reading I proposed, the objector might argue, Aristotle's project is entirely

theoretical; Aristotle's theory does not help us to identify morally right actions, but it provides us

only with theoretical knowledge about why right acts are right. But since it is implausible that

Aristotle so radically missed the practical target he had set for his inquiry we must reject the

particularist reading of the *NE* presented in the previous section.

   That Aristotle expects the *NE* to be practically useful may seem puzzling regardless of whether

we interpret him as a particularist. According to Joachim (1951), for instance, Aristotle's practical

goal suggests that Aristotle is uninterested in theoretical knowledge concerning human conduct.

> The reasoning about human conduct and character, [Aristotle] insists, is only with a view to influencing action. His object is not understanding—merely to understand, apparently, even if possible, is valueless—but to guide and improve life." (15)

Having identified Aristotle's goal as he does, Joachim is, perhaps unsurprisingly, disappointed

with the kind of practical advice Aristotle has to offer and the conspicuous dissonance between

Aristotle's description of his project and what he actually achieves. Joachim highlights the fact that

Aristotle's ethical work is distinctively theoretical in nature and that Aristotle's lasting contribution

to moral philosophy consists in the sophisticated and insightful *theoretical* framework he

constructed. So what should we make of Aristotle's repeated remarks regarding the practical goals

of his inquiry?

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[27] See also I.2: 1094a22-4 and X.9: 1179a35-b4

In order to answer this question and in order to evaluate the abovementioned objection to the particularist reading of the *NE*, let us first consider the following questions: What would it take for an ethical treatise to be practical?

One way for an ethical treatise to help us "to become good" is by putting forward a (correct) practicable decision procedure—an algorithm that takes as its input information available to the agent and gives as its output an action that the agent ought to perform.[28] However, one would search in vain through the pages of the *NE* for anything that resembles a practicable decision procedure. Consequently, one who thought that Aristotle's goal is to help us to identify the action we ought to perform is bound to find Aristotle's account wanting.

Instead, Aristotle's practical ambition, I propose, is to help his students to perform those actions that they already know are right in a virtuous manner. As we have seen, Aristotle distinguished between performing a virtuous action and performing an action virtuously (II.4). A *eudaimon* life, according to Aristotle, is a life of a person who performs virtuous acts virtuously. As we shall see, Aristotle does not think that one learns how to act virtuously merely by gaining theoretical knowledge. Nevertheless, he does believe that theoretical knowledge is necessary (or at least helpful) for acting virtuously. By understanding why right acts are right and what it takes to perform those acts virtuously, we can identify the ways in which we miss our mark when we do. Consequently, we may be able to modify our actions in order to habituate the proper emotional responses that would enable us to hit the mark in future actions.

Early in the *NE* Aristotle argues that there is one chief good which is the end of all our actions and he indicates that the goal of his inquiry is practical. "If, then, there is some end of the things we do, which we desire for its own sake," Aristotle writes,

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[28] The output must be given under a helpful description if the decision procedure is to be practicable.

clearly this must be the good and the chief good. Will not the knowledge of it, then, have a great influence on life? Shall we not, like archers who have a mark to aim at, be more likely to hit upon what is right?" (I.2:1094a18-24, Ross trans.)

Our purpose is to identify the chief good. *Knowledge* of this good is supposed to be useful in the same way in which identifying a target is useful to an archer. In the remainder of Book I we learn more about the chief good; we find out that different kinds of things have different functions, and that what is good for each kind of thing is to perform its function well. Thus we learn that "the good of man is an activity of the soul in conformity with excellence or virtue" (I.7: 1098a15). In book II, as we have seen in the previous section, we get an account of the nature of virtue and virtuous activity.[29] Knowledge of the chief good, which includes knowledge of particular virtues and the doctrine of the mean, is useful because it provides us with a target at which to aim.

Identifying a target is important not only in order to determine whether a shot is successful but also in order to determine where those shots that miss the bull's eye hit relative to it. Knowing the direction in which one missed the bull's eye is essential in order to calibrate the sights of one's weapon and in order to be able to hit the mark in future shots. A qualified student for Aristotle's lectures can already tell whether an act is virtuous—i.e., whether it hit the bull's eye—but without a target she would not know in what way she missed the mark when she did and what she needs to do in order to hit the mark in the future.

The archery metaphor is instructive in another way. Identifying a target is instrumental, but insufficient, for hitting the mark; we will not hit the bull's eye consistently unless we practice the art of archery. But that we must practice archery in addition to identifying a target does not undermine the practical significance of identifying a target, nor does it suggest that by learning to identify our target we are not learning something of great practical import.

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[29] For an illuminating discussion of the relationship between Aristotle's thoughts on *eudaimonia* in Book I and his theory of the moral virtues, see Broadie (2006).

Let us now examine Aristotle's comments on his practical ambitions more carefully, starting with his comment in I.3:

> [1] A young man is not equipped to be a student of politics; for he has no experience in the actions which life demands of him, and these actions form the basis and subject matter of the discussion. [2] Moreover, since he follows his emotions, his study will be pointless and unprofitable, for the end of this kind of study is not knowledge but action. [3] Whether he is young in years or immature in character makes no difference; for his deficiency is not a matter of time but of living and of pursuing all his interests under the influence of his emotions. [4] Knowledge brings no benefit to this kind of person, just as it brings none to the morally weak. [5] But those who regulate their desires and actions by a rational principle will greatly benefit from a knowledge of this subject." (I.3:1095a3-12)

One reason why young men are not Aristotle's preferred audience is their lack of experience [1] (as we noted earlier). But there is another reason: young men tend to follow their emotions. And *this* is why the study of ethics would not help them in action [2]. Our goal is not *merely* theoretical; in order to become *eudaimon* it is not enough to know that all our actions aim at *eudaimonia*, or that we ought to act virtuously, or even to know what virtue is. This knowledge will help us to become *eudaimon* only if we use it properly in much the same way that identifying a target will help an archer hit the bull's eye only if she properly applies the knowledge she gains by observing where her missed shots hit relative to the bull's eye. One who is guided by one's emotions, like the weak willed person, is not guided by the knowledge one gained. Consequently knowledge of why right actions are right or why some actions that resemble virtuous actions are not virtuous provides no practical benefits to those who act impulsively [4]. And this is no less true of adults who act impulsively than it is of young men [3].

The knowledge one gains from Aristotle's lectures has great instrumental value to those who guide their actions by reason [5]. Aristotle's practical goal, then, is to provide knowledge that, when properly used, can help his students to become good. But not everyone will benefit from his lectures:

> Argument and teaching, I am afraid, are not effective in all cases: the soul of the listener must first have been conditioned by habits to the right kind of likes and dislikes…for a man whose life is guided by emotion will not listen to an argument that dissuades him, nor will he understand it…And

> in general it seems that emotion does not yield to argument but only to force. Therefore, there must first be a character that somehow has an affinity for excellence or virtue, a character that loves what is noble and feels disgust at what is base. (X.9:1179b24-30)

Proper students for these lectures, then, must not only be able to identify virtuous actions, but they must also be the kind of persons who are motivated to become virtuous and can overcome their emotions and "regulate their desires and actions by a rational principle."

In II.2, Aristotle discusses the unique practical purpose of the study of ethics:

> [6] The purpose of the present study is not, as it is in other inquiries, the attainment of theoretical knowledge: [7] we are not conducting this inquiry in order to know what virtue is, but in order to become good, else there would be no advantage in studying it. [8] For that reason, it becomes necessary to examine the problem of action, and to ask how they are to be performed. [9] For, as we have said, the actions determine what kind of characteristics are developed. (1103b26-30)

Some inquiries are conducted solely for the sake of intellectual edification but this investigation has an additional goal [6]; in ethics and politics we are also concerned with *acting* well. Since a significant portion of the *NE* is devoted to elucidating what virtue is, it seems reasonable to understand Aristotle as claiming that we are not conducting this inquiry *merely* in order to know what virtue is. Aristotle's comments in X.9 provide further support for this interpretation:

> The aim of studies about action, as we say, is surely not to study and know about a given thing, but rather to act on our knowledge. Hence knowing about virtue is not enough, but we must also try to possess and exercise virtue, or become good in any other way. (1179b1-4, Irwin trans)

Our goal is to become *eudaimon* and knowledge of what virtue is, insofar as it is a means to this end, is advantageous [7]. But even though knowledge of these matters might well be intrinsically valuable, its contribution to good conduct is not automatic. In order to see how knowledge relates to action we must understand how actions are performed [8], and how actions relate to character and virtue [9].

In II.4 Aristotle turns to the question of *how* virtuous actions are performed when they are performed virtuously, and how such actions are related to the virtuous person's character:

> [10] But in the case of the virtues an act is not performed justly or with self-control if the act itself is of a certain kind, but only if in addition the agent has certain characteristics as he performs it: [11]

first of all, he must know what he is doing; [12] secondly, he must choose to act the way he does, and he must choose it for its own sake; [13] and in the third place, the act must spring from a firm and unchangeable character…[14] In other words, acts are called just and self-controlled when they are the kind of acts which a just and self-controlled man would perform; [15] but the just and self-controlled man is not he who performs these acts, but he who performs them in the way just and self-controlled men do. (1105a29-b9)

In this passage we learn that in order to become *eudaimon* it is not enough to perform virtuous actions, but we must perform these actions virtuously [10] and we are also told what it takes to perform actions virtuously [11-13]. Although we were expected to identify virtuous actions before we began reading Aristotle's work, we now know that there is more to acting virtuously than performing virtuous actions [14]; we must learn how to perform these actions in the way a virtuous person performs them [15]. And this is what Aristotle endeavors to teach us.

Learning to act virtuously is surely a practical goal. Yet in order to act virtuously one must know what one is doing [11]. Admittedly it is not completely clear what knowledge Aristotle has in mind here.[30] Perhaps the thought is that one must know *why* the action one is performing is right in order to act virtuously. Be that as it may, one must act from a stable character in order to act virtuously and one cannot acquire the proper characteristics simply by engaging in philosophical theorizing:

[16] Thus our assertion that a man becomes just by performing just acts and self-controlled by performing acts of self-control is correct; without performing them, nobody could ever be on the way to becoming good. [17] Yet most men do not perform such acts, but by taking refuge in argument they think that they are engaged in philosophy and that they will become good in this way. [18] In so doing, they act like sick men who listen attentively to what the doctor says, but fail to do any of the things he prescribes. [19] That kind of philosophical activity will not bring health to the soul any more than this sort of treatment will produce a healthy body. (II.4:1105b10-18)

In order to develop virtuous characteristics one must form certain habits. And in order to do this one must engage in the right kinds of activities. So in order to develop a virtuous character one must perform virtuous actions [16]. Philosophical theorizing is no substitute for genuine moral practice [17]. The failure of "those who take refuge in argument" is not that they seek theoretical

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[30] See Taylor (2006), esp. pp. 83-94.

knowledge, but that they wrongly believe that theoretical knowledge is all that is needed in order to become *eudaimon* [17]. But theoretical knowledge is important because it provides us with a target at which to aim. Aristotle's metaphor here is, again, illuminating: our theoretical study is analogous to the doctor's orders [19], and those who believe that theoretical knowledge is all that is required are akin to those who listen to the doctor but fail to follow the doctor's advice [18].

Students who are in a position to benefit from Aristotle's lectures will learn why those acts they already identify as right are right and they will understand why and how their actions that were not right missed their mark. This, in turn, may place them in a better position to hit the mark in the future. For example, while I might have known that my behavior in battle was not virtuous, I can now know that it wasn't virtuous because I felt too much fear. I now know that in order to act virtuously in similar situations in the future I need to be less fearful and more confident. So I can now choose to perform actions that might help me to become less fearful—maybe I should try sky-diving or bungee jumping. Likewise, I might have known that my act of donating £50 to charity was not virtuous, but I now know that it wasn't virtuous because given my financial situation I should have donated more.

"It is no easy task to be good," Aristotle tells us,

> for in everything it is no easy task to find the middle…so, too, anyone can get angry—that is easy—
> or give or spend money; but to do this to the right person, to the right extent, at the right time, with
> the right motive, and in the right way, that is not for everyone, nor is it easy. (II.9:1109a24-29, Ross
> trans.)

Although becoming good is undoubtedly difficult, recognizing how we go wrong when we do may enable us to correct for our mistakes in the future. In II.9 Aristotle offers some practical advice: "Hence he who aims at the intermediate must first depart from what is the more contrary to it" (1109a31, Ross trans.). Since we can tell whether particular acts are virtuous, and since we now know why virtuous acts are virtuous, we can tell that with respect to some virtues it is more

common to err towards one extreme rather than the other, e.g., with respect to courage, it is more

common to err in the direction of cowardice than it is to err in the direction of recklessness. It is

therefore reasonable to expect that we are prone to err in this direction as well.

Nevertheless, not all people are alike. So it is important to pay attention to our own inclinations:

"But we must consider the things towards which we ourselves also are easily carried away; for

some of us tend to one thing, some to another" (1109b2, Ross trans.). Since we can now identify

where our actions are located relative to virtuous actions, we can try to pull ourselves in the right

direction: "We must drag ourselves away to the contrary extreme; for we shall get into the

intermediate state by drawing well away from error, as people do in straightening sticks that are

bent" (1109b5, Ross trans.). We do not have direct control over our emotions so we cannot simply

decide to feel less angry, for example, if we recognize that we are angrier than we ought to be. But

we can choose not to act out of anger, and we can pay attention to our emotion and try, as best we

can, to calm down. "It is no easy task to be good," but presumably, if we understand the way in

which we err when we do err, and if we are willing to focus our attention on trying to become good,

it is not impossible to change our characteristics.[31] "It is by doing this," Aristotle summarizes at the

end of book II,

> that we shall best be able to hit the mean. But this is no doubt difficult, and especially in individual
> cases; for it is not easy to determine both how and with whom and on what provocation and how long
> one should be angry…such things depend on particular facts, and the decision rests with perception.
> So much, then, is plain, that the intermediate state is in all things to be praised, but that we must
> incline sometimes towards the excess, sometimes towards the deficiency; for so shall we most easily
> hit the mean and what is right. (1109b13-26, Ross trans.)

Aristotle's lectures equip us with theoretical knowledge that allows us to understand why right

acts are right, and ways in which actions can fail to be performed virtuously. With this knowledge

we can locate each action relative to the bull's eye—a virtuous action performed virtuously. Once

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[31] For an interesting critique of Aristotle's practical advice in II.9, see Cruzer (1996). I believe that my interpretation offers a way to get around Cruzer's criticisms but it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss Cruzer's arguments at length.

we locate an action relative to the bull's eye we can see the way in which we missed our mark and we can take measures to improve our chances of success in the future. Since we cannot change our emotional responses or our character by volitional fiat, we must take indirect measures to improve our chances of success in the future. But if we perform the kind of actions we need to perform in order to modify our emotional responses and our character in the right direction, we are more likely to hit the mark in the future. The theoretical knowledge we gain from Aristotle's lectures, therefore, is practically useful. Those who have had a decent upbringing should be able to tell right from wrong but they may not know in what ways their wrong actions are wrong, and what they need to do in order to make them right. If they are the kind of people who can "regulate their desires and actions by rational principle," then learning why right acts are right can help them to become good.

5. CONCLUSION

Aristotle is not trying to answer the moral skeptic. For Aristotle, our starting point for moral theorizing is our knowledge of the normative status of actions, in much the same way as our starting point for theorizing about motion is our knowledge of the way certain bodies move, and our starting point for theorizing about history is our knowledge of various historical events. When we try to explain past events—say, why a particular battle occurred when it did, and unfolded as it had—we are not trying to answer the question *whether* this battle actually took place; that the battle took place when it did is our starting point. Likewise, when we try to explain why a particular action is right, we are not asking whether it is right; that the act is right is part of our data. Aristotle's lectures are aimed towards students who can correctly identify right actions as right.

Although Aristotle's students can classify right and wrong actions correctly, Aristotle thinks that his lectures can help such students to become good. Given the data about right and wrong actions, Aristotle constructs a theory that enables his students to understand the ways in which actions can

"miss their mark." Thus, those who have had a proper moral upbringing—those who have formed the right habits, who can identify right acts when they see them, who can control their actions by rational principle, and who have the right likes and dislikes—can profit from Aristotle's lectures. They would learn what an explanation of the rightness of actions ought to look like, and they would learn how to correctly substitute the generic features of the explanatory schema with the relevant particular features of the actions they evaluate. Moreover, by recognizing the ways in which their own actions miss their marks when they do, they can choose to perform actions that will help them to acquire the right habits in order to hit the mark in the future.

Aristotle's explanation of the rightness of particular actions is not based on the availability of exceptionless moral principles. Aristotle believes that the moral landscape is extremely complex and that there is very little we could say about morality by way of exceptionless universally quantified statements. The only exceptionless generalizations we can discover are trivial truisms. Nevertheless, this does not mean that we cannot discuss moral phenomena intelligibly, or that we cannot construct explanatory moral theories, as Aristotle's *NE* so aptly illustrates. Thus, if my proposed interpretation of the *NE* is plausible, then what is perhaps the most influential moral theory in the history of philosophy is, arguably, a particularist theory.

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