



# Open Research Online

---

The Open University's repository of research publications and other research outputs

## 'The good man is the measure of all things': objectivity without world-centredness in Aristotle's moral epistemology

### Book Section

#### How to cite:

Chappell, Timothy (2005). 'The good man is the measure of all things': objectivity without world-centredness in Aristotle's moral epistemology. In: Gill, Christopher ed. *Virtue, norms, and objectivity: issues in ancient and modern ethics*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, pp. 233–255.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

© [not recorded]

Version: [not recorded]

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

<http://www.oup.com/uk/catalogue/?ci=9780199264384>

---

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online's data [policy](#) on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.

---

[oro.open.ac.uk](http://oro.open.ac.uk)

**‘The Good Man is the Measure of All Things’:  
Objectivity without World-Centredness in Aristotle’s Moral  
Epistemology**

TIMOTHY CHAPPELL

Outline

I begin by contrasting Aristotle’s ‘world-centred’ general epistemology, and his ‘mind-centred’ (more exactly, ‘*agathos*-centred’) moral epistemology. I argue that Aristotle takes this approach, not because he doubts the objectivity of ethics, nor because he is an ‘ethical particularist’ (whatever one of those is), but because of the reflexive nature of ethics as a study. I further argue that, by taking the notion that ‘the good man <sup>1</sup> is the measure of all things’ as central to Aristotle’s ethics, we can see how to unify coherently the rather embarrassingly diverse ethical resources that Aristotle offers us.

I. ‘World-Centred’ and ‘Mind-Centred’ Forms of Knowledge

The usual Aristotelian picture is that the standard (*kanôn*) for knowledge is, simply, the way things are. <sup>2</sup> ‘We may speak of knowledge or perception as a measure of things, but the reason in both cases is the same: that we are informed by them, because they are *measured* rather than *measures*’ (*Metaphysics* 1053a31). Your mind knows just insofar as it is conformed accurately to its object. (Here the word ‘con-formed’ may be taken very literally indeed: *de Anima* 429a16.) In any area, the object of your knowledge, and that object’s innate structure and organisation, is the *measure* (*metron*) of your knowledge in that area, and of how your knowledge should be structured and organised. As we might

---

<sup>1</sup> People who want to retain the old-fashioned use of the word ‘man’ that applies to a human of either sex sometimes say that this application is part of the normal meaning of ‘man’ in English. However that may be, it is certainly not what Aristotle’s use of the Greek masculine gender means. Like any other classical Greek, Aristotle uses *anthrôpos* to refer primarily to male humans, and only secondarily to female humans. Indeed, as G. E. L. Owen saw, Aristotle himself invented just the distinction to rationalize this usage: Aristotle would say that ‘male human’ is the ‘focal meaning’ of *anthrôpos*, ‘female human’ only its secondary meaning. Hence, it would be anachronistic and distorting for me to replace Aristotle’s sexist vocabulary with non-sexist terms. Apologies for this should be sought, not from me, but from Aristotle.

<sup>2</sup> See e.g. *de Anima* 417a18, 429a17; *Nicomachean Ethics* 1139a27-29. Cf. *Categories* 4a8-10, on ‘the way things are’ as the standard for truth.

say, Aristotle's usual view of knowledge inverts Protagoras' view: it is that 'All things 3 are the measure of man'.

Aristotle's robust—or naïve—realism might be called a *world-centred* conception of knowledge. (The contrast is with *mind-centred* conceptions, such as Descartes's or Hume's or—more subtly, but also more radically—Kant's.)

When Aristotle comes to consider knowledge in ethics, 4 he seems to tone this world-centredness right down. Perhaps, indeed, he abandons it altogether:

The good man (*ho spoudaios*) judges each of these questions correctly, and what *appears* (*phainetai*) true to him in each of these cases *is* true. For each sort of character there is a particular (*idion*) account of what is noble, and of what is pleasant. It is, perhaps, the greatest mark of the good man to see (*horân*) the truth about each of these things. He is, as it were, the standard (*kanôn*) and the measure (*metron*) of them. 5

This remark is not an isolated one. Elsewhere in the *Nicomachean Ethics* we find, for instance, that 'the end and the best... appears (*phainetai*) to no one if not to the good man (*tô(i) agathô(i)*); wickedness distorts other people, and causes them to be deceived about the first principles of action' (1144a33-5). We read that what is pleasant to those with bad characters (*kakôs diakeimenois*) is not necessarily pleasant as such (1173b23). We see that 'in all cases [to do with pleasure], what appears to the good man *is*' (*einai to phainomenon tô(i) spoudaiô(i)*, 1176a16). Perhaps there is even a deliberate echo of Protagoras DK B1, when Aristotle claims that 'virtue (*aretê*) 6 and the good man (*ho spoudaios*) are the measure (*metron*) of each thing' (1166a13, cf. 1176a17).

---

<sup>3</sup> Since 'all things' are possible objects of knowledge: *de Anima* 429a18. Protagoras' claim was that 'Man is the measure of all things' (DK B1).

<sup>4</sup> 'If someone professes to be expounding Aristotle and talks in a modern fashion about 'moral' such-and-such, he must be very imperceptive if he doesn't constantly feel like someone whose jaws have somehow got out of alignment: the teeth don't come together in a proper bite' (Anscombe 1958: 26). Aristotle knows nothing of the modern sense of 'moral' that makes moral reasons a special sort of reasons, apparently unconnected to other sorts; he treats the study of the practical as essentially unitary. I think he is right about this. My use of 'ethical' and 'moral' does not imply a denial of this point. A second modern distinction that Aristotle rejects is that between ethics and politics (see e.g. *Nicomachean Ethics* 1095a15-16). On this too I think his view is basically correct, though I shall not pursue the point here.

<sup>5</sup> *Nicomachean Ethics* 1113a30-4; the context is a discussion of *boulêsis*, wanting or wishing. (Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.)

<sup>6</sup> The best way to translate *aretê* has been much debated. Nowadays, the importance of this debate is conveniently undercut by the fact that everyone is aware of it. I shall say nothing about it here.

To say that ‘the way things are’ is the measure of knowledge in general, but that ‘virtue and the good man’ are the measure of *ethical* knowledge, is, obviously, to make a special case, and perhaps a specially problematic case, of ethics. After all, as Aristotle himself observes at 1138b22-32, the parallel remark about *medical* knowledge, or knowledge of any special science, would be true—but a truism. Is the truth about medicine ‘whatever medical science dictates, and what someone possessing this science’ would say? Of course. But ‘this, while true, is hardly revealing’ (*alêthes men, outhen de saphes*, 1138b26). What is revealing is an account of medical knowledge that explains what right reason (*orthos logos*) is in medicine, and how it is defined (*tis horos*, 1138b34). This will be a *scientific* account of medicine. <sup>7</sup> And as before, it will be an account that is properly world-centred, not centred on the human mind.

Aristotle does not think that he himself has anything like a full scientific account of medicine, any more than he thinks this about any other special science except perhaps logic. Nonetheless, he clearly thinks that such full accounts of the special sciences are both feasible and desirable. At times—1138b26 is one of them—he seems to think that an equally full and scientific account of ethics ought to be developed. But his more usual view, especially in the rest of *Nicomachean Ethics* Book 6, is that nothing of the sort is even a remote possibility. Political knowledge (*epistêmê*) is inexact (1094b12-28, 1098a30), practical wisdom (*phronêsis*) is concerned with particulars (1141b15), the practical is a subcategory of ‘what admits of holding otherwise’ (1140b1), and ‘about some things there can *be* no correct universal statement’ (1137b15), because ‘that is what the matter of actions is like’ (1137b20). Most notably of all, not only is practical wisdom or political knowledge not the best (*spoudaiotatên*, 1141a22) form of knowledge (*epistêmê*); if we take the word *epistêmê* in its strict sense, <sup>8</sup> neither practical wisdom (1140b2) nor goodness in deliberation (*euboulia*) is knowledge at all. Correctness (*orthotês*, 1142b9) may be possible for goodness in deliberation; and there may be such a thing as ‘practical truth’ (*hê alêtheia praktikê*, 1139a27). <sup>9</sup> But, apparently, Aristotle’s considered view is that, strictly speaking, there is no such thing as *the science of the practical*—no moral or ethical science.

## II. Ethics and Other Types of Knowledge

---

<sup>7</sup> Strictly speaking, Aristotle’s remarks at 1138b22-32 are about medical practice rather than medical theory. I doubt that this fact essentially alters my point. The implied noun after *iatrikê* at 1138b32 is clearly *epistêmê*, not *technê*; as it also is at 1143a2. (This, incidentally, puts a large question-mark by David Bostock’s recent claim (2000: 77-8) that Aristotle’s conception of *epistêmê*, absurdly, implies that ‘theory is never relevant to practice’.)

<sup>8</sup> The strict sense is not always what Aristotle has in mind: ‘Aristotle is... employing perfectly ordinary Greek words, but twisting them into his own special and technical meaning’ (Bostock 2000: 76).

<sup>9</sup> See Anscombe’s famous essay ‘Thought and Action in Aristotle: What is “Practical Truth”?’ in Anscombe 1981, 66-80.

This may help us to see why Aristotle thinks that the idea that ‘The good man is the standard’ is not the uninteresting truism in ethics that it would be in any science. What it does not help us to see, yet, is how Aristotle thinks truism (even interesting truism) can be avoided. We learn next to nothing about medicine, or geometry, by being told that the truth in these areas is what the expert medic or geometrician tells us it is. <sup>10</sup> How do we learn any more from the parallel claim for ethics?

But in fact examples and authority can have their uses even in science. A crucial ingredient of a modern medical student’s training is her development of ‘clinical skills’, which she largely learns by shadowing and observing a consultant at work. (No one who has watched medical students being put through this experience will be left in any doubt about the place of authority in modern medicine, either.) A modern scientific training is usually imparted in a similar way, by putting junior scientists, at doctoral or post-doctoral level, into research teams supervised by senior and more expert scientists. This sort of team-work obviously teaches the junior doctor or scientist more than how to do a convincing impression of his seniors. It teaches him all sorts of inarticulate lessons about judgement, experience, and knack. So even if the only way to learn in ethics (or in science for that matter) was by example, it would not follow that ethical (or scientific) learning was no more than what Plato’s *Gorgias* (465a) calls an *empeiria*, a knack or an imitative aptitude.

In a typical modern university, this phenomenon of teamwork is one of the most striking differences between the research cultures of the sciences and the humanities, where things are generally much more individualistic. Aristotle might have expected it to be the other way round (at least for Ethics and Politics departments). <sup>11</sup> While there is plenty to be learned simply by watching and trying to copy the experts in the special sciences (he might have said), there is even more to be learned from that practice in the case of ethics: ‘it is obvious that, in all things, we need to imitate the superior man’ (*ton beltio*, 1171b12). And at least part of the reason *why* there is more to be learned by imitation in the case of ethics is that there is so much less else to go on there than in the special sciences.

I say there is ‘less else to go on’, because three distinctions that are material (or extensional) for any special science are, in Aristotle’s view, only formal (or intensional)

---

<sup>10</sup> Another qualification: ‘Learning that the truth in medicine is what the expert medic tells us it is, *is* informative. It tells us that medicine is a very different business from, e.g., love or immortality, where what the “experts” tell us is hogwash.’ The mere fact that *anything* counts as expertise in a given area of inquiry already privileges that area above those where no rational inquiry at all is possible. (Thanks to Adam Morton for this comment and others.) For the worry that there is no expertise in virtue cf. Plato, *Apology* 21b-23b, *Meno* 89e, *Protagoras* 361a-c.

<sup>11</sup> As one reader has pointed out to me, there does seem to be at least one humanistic discipline where inquiry is certainly not individualistic. This is the law. The point is especially clear if you take a Dworkinian view of how legal decisions are made.

distinctions for ethics. In the sciences these distinctions pick out different classes of things; in ethics they pick out the very same things, but under different descriptions.

One is the distinction between skill in studying the subject, and excellence as a human being. Medical research skills are such things as the ability to design useful experiments, or the deft writing of grant applications; skill in geometry is (for instance) a matter of knowing which equation to use when. Having these skills does not require you to be a good person; nor does it, directly, make you a good person. Skill in ethics, by contrast, *is* being a good person, and the true name of the study of ethics is not ‘moral science’ but ‘practical wisdom’ (1103b26-9): ‘The point of our present business (*pragmateia*) is not contemplation (*theôria*), as with our other works; we are not inquiring to find out the definition of virtue, but *so as to become good people*’.<sup>12</sup> The ethicist’s research skills *are* his virtues; for ethics, the distinction between research skills and excellence as a human being can only be made as a distinction between two different ways of talking about the same thing.<sup>13</sup>

The second distinction I have in mind is that between the *subject matter* that the scientist studies and the *researcher* or *student* who does this studying. The medical researcher studies medicine, drugs, therapies, and pathologies—a subject matter quite distinct from himself;<sup>14</sup> the geometrician studies magnitudes (1143a2), which are also things quite other than he is. But the ethicist—insofar as he is a *good* ethicist—studies *himself*, or at any rate, lives and practices just like his own. ‘Practical wisdom is about what things are just and noble and good for humans—but these are the very things that it is a good man’s part to do’ (1143b22). Further, practical wisdom and the moral virtues can only be acquired together (1144a30). Hence, anyone is a good ethicist just insofar as he is a good man. The distinction between what it takes to be a good student of ethics and what it takes to be a good person can indeed be made. Obviously, there is more to ‘real life’ than moral philosophy seminars. (One is tempted to add that there is more to moral philosophy seminars than ‘real life’, too.) But the distinction is only formal or intensional: it is a distinction between two different ways of talking about the same thing.<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Plato, *Republic* 578c: ‘Our inquiry is about the greatest question there is: about the good life and the bad’.

<sup>13</sup> This goes some way towards justifying Aristotle’s notorious remark that the young are not suitable students of *politikê technê* (1095a2)—especially when we note what he immediately adds, that the kind of immaturity he has in mind is immaturity in character, not in mere years (1095a7; cf. 1143a27, b8, 12-16).

<sup>14</sup> His area of study is, therefore, not simply the human body, still less exclusively his own body.

<sup>15</sup> One obvious objection that *we* want to make here is this: being a good person and studying ethics cannot be as closely associated as I have made out, because you have to be intelligent to study ethics, and you do not have to be intelligent to be good. Aristotle simply dismisses this objection. He thinks that, to count as a fully virtuous person, you *do* have to be intelligent. If the kind of intelligence that a philosophy seminar seems to require is sometimes different from the kind of intelligence that virtue requires, Aristotle

To see the third distinction, consider Aristotle's claims that ethics is the study of the most final ends or goals of human action (1094a21), that *politikê technê* is 'architectonic', a master-builder's craft (1094a28), and that what we seek, when trying to define the human good aimed at by ethics (in the Aristotelian sense that includes politics), is 'the end of all ends' (*teleiôtaton telos*, 1097a31). One of the points that these claims bring out is that the ends of the various special sciences are subordinate to the end of ethics. Certain aims or ends are internal to the 'practices'<sup>16</sup> of medicine or geometry; the aim or point of these practices themselves is something that it belongs to ethics to state. This is another crucial difference between ethics and the special sciences, and another place where a material distinction (between the external and the internal points of a practice) becomes merely formal.

The fact that these three distinctions are only formal in ethics, and not material as they are in the special sciences, leaves us with less to go on than we have in the special sciences. For any science or field of study, ethics included, we can raise the questions 'Who counts as an expert in this field?', 'What is the subject matter of this study?', and 'What is the objective of this study?'. Usually, when we ask these questions about a given field of study, we get answers that give us plentiful, and fairly uncontroversial, information about that field. With medicine, for example, the answers are, respectively, 'The qualified doctor', 'Disease and its treatment', and 'Health'. Of course, these answers do raise *some* difficulties: nonetheless, they still give us plenty of straightforward information about what medicine is like and how to practise it well. But, in the case of ethics, we might say that Aristotle's answers to these three questions are, respectively, 'The good man', 'The good man', and 'The good man'. And to recognize the good man is neither straightforward, nor unproblematic, nor—even if you can manage it—uncontroversial.

### III. The Good Man and Practical Truth

Ethics for Aristotle is not only non-scientific because it is too untidy to count as knowledge (*epistêmê*). It is untidy; but it is also non-scientific for a much deeper reason. This deeper reason is visible at 1103b26-9. Ethics is not a science because, if it were, expertise in ethics would have to be shown in (for example) the ability to state, in a form that could be written down, explicit and watertight definitions, not only of the particular virtues, but also of what expressing these virtues involves for particular people in particular cases. Aristotle does offer us schematic definitions both of virtue overall and of some of the particular virtues. Nonetheless, it is clear that he believes that the ideal for ethical knowledge is not the derivation of a series of abstract definitions, or the finding of a set of abstract universals which will serve as the first principles from which everything else may be deduced, as in a typical Aristotelian science (*Posterior Analytics* 75b21-

---

is at least open to the possibility of retorting 'So much the worse for the philosophy seminar'. He will not be content, as we too often are, to leave these kinds of intelligence simply disconnected.

<sup>16</sup> I am using the word in MacIntyre's sense, (1981), ch. 14.

76a37). Still less (as we see in *Nicomachean Ethics* 1.6) is Aristotle's ideal for ethics the kind of abstract Ideal that Plato talks about. Aristotle's ethical ideal is not some capitalized The-Good-Itself (*to auto to agathon*). It is not even a list of definitions or properties, such as the virtues. His ethical ideal is no sort of abstract or universal entity, but something particular and incarnate—the good man himself. Correspondingly, Aristotle's 'practical truth' is not something that is understood most clearly by reading a book. You come to understand it by actualizing the disposition of *phronêsis* that Aristotle dares to define as a *true* disposition (*hexin alêthê*, 1140b7), and by doing the particular actions (1107a29-32) that are themselves the conclusions of good practical reasoning (1139a21-32, b5-6; *de Motu Animalium* 701a14-15) 17. This is why I began by saying that Aristotle's view of ethical knowledge is that the good man is the measure of all things. 18

Even if ethics were what (to say it again) it most certainly is not, as tidily universal a science as geometry, it would still be a self-reflexive science, a study whose study is itself. 19 This is why, as we saw above, we have to give the same answer, in the case of ethics, to questions that normally have quite different answers: 'What is it to excel?' and 'What is it to excel *in this study*?'; 'What is this study a study of?' and 'Who is studying it?'; 'What is the *telos* of this study?' and 'What is the *telos*?'. No wonder, then, that it should seem peculiarly difficult, in ethics, for the novice to find his way into the circle. 20 Some of the crucial distinctions, that would normally help her to get at least her initial bearings when beginning any *other* study, seem to be no help at all in the case of ethics. 'Seem to be no help': in fact, of course, to grasp these identities is already to grasp something crucial about what doing ethics is like. What is shown by the collapse of these distinctions for ethics is that the role of expertise in ethics is quite different from its role

---

17 For further discussion of whether the practical syllogism concludes in an action, see Charles (1984), ch. 4, and Chappell (1995), 83-4. See also Price, Ch. OO below.

18 Hence Aristotle's stress on the value of examples in ethics: cf. the tag of 1171b12, already quoted: 'clearly, the better man should be imitated in every way'. See also McDowell (1988), 93, n. 7: 'The content of [Aristotle's] general conception [of what doing well is] cannot be definitively written down, in a shape suitable for the deduction of particular practical conclusions. No doubt it can be gestured at... by listing virtues and giving character sketches of their possessors, as Aristotle of course does in Books III-IV.'

19 Hegel, in his own tortuous way, says something similar: 'It is Spirit that knows itself in the shape of Spirit' (Hegel 1977: 485).

20 And no wonder, either, given the famously self-reflexive nature of Aristotle's God ('Mind (*nous*) thinking itself', 1072b20), that Aristotle should give us an ethics that leads us in the end to the pleasures of the truest part of ourselves (1178a3), the divine life of the mind. Cf. Aristotle's view that the good man is 'the self-lover *par excellence*' (*philautos malista*, 1169a3). This view often puzzles commentators, or is taken to be a sign that Aristotle is an egoist. If my reading of the *Ethics* is correct there is no puzzle here, and no egoism either.



in science. It is merely *true* of scientific understanding that the expert is the standard there; but it is *constitutive* of ethical understanding that the expert is the standard. This is why, in ethics as opposed to science, the claim that ‘The good man is the standard’ is not just an uninteresting truism.

#### IV. Three Unsolved Problems

Maybe it is not uninteresting, then; but it is still a truism, apparently. The reader might reasonably complain that I have still not shown how Aristotle’s appeal to the good man as the standard in ethics can be *informative*. Nor have I done much to solve a second problem, not yet addressed, about how, if at all, I propose to reconcile the emphasis on the good man in Aristotle’s moral epistemology with other emphases that are equally patent: for example, Aristotle’s naturalism. A third worry is the one I began with: whether this admittedly ‘mind-centred’ (or at least ‘*agathos*-centred’) approach to ethics can vindicate its objectivity when ethics is contrasted with what Aristotle apparently admits are more robustly ‘world-centred’ inquiries.

Part of the reason why the third of these worries is so difficult to address is, of course, to do with the deep problem of translating from our way of talking about ethical objectivity into Aristotle’s. Aristotle does not even have a word for ‘objectivity’ that takes us beyond the simple notion of truth in ethics. So it is hard, and possibly anachronistic, even to pose the question whether or not Aristotle believes in the objectivity in ethics.

One possible way forward would be simply to ignore this problem. Maybe we should just forget about the anachronisms and incommensurabilities involved, and baldly ask—what is anyway an interesting question—whether Aristotle’s approach to ethics counts as a form of objectivism when measured against present-day tests of objectivity. So we might ask, for instance, whether ethics, as Aristotle understands it, would pass all of the four tests for realism proposed in the work of Crispin Wright.<sup>21</sup> Wright’s tests are as follows (and I add my own brief suggestions about how well, if at all, Aristotelian ethical objectivity passes them):

(1) *Cognitive command*: a discourse passes this test ‘just in case it is *a priori* that differences of opinion arising within it can be satisfactorily explained only in terms of... a cognitive shortcoming in one or other of the disagreed parties.’

The objectivity of Aristotelian ethics pretty clearly does pass this test: see, for instance, 1176a16-19 (‘What is *really* enjoyable is what *the good man* enjoys’).

(2) *The Euthyphro test*: a discourse passes this test if its best judgements are true ‘because they match up with independently constituted facts’, facts which are ‘more than a reflection of [those] best judgements’.

---

<sup>21</sup> Wright’s tests are most fully laid out in Wright (1992). For a helpful survey see Hale (1997), 295-7, from which the quotations in the main text are drawn.

This is less clear. On the realist side see, for example, 1139a27, for Aristotle's preparedness to talk of practical *truth*. However, it is also easy to see how Aristotle's use of the *agathos* as a standard for ethics—and for pleasure, as just cited under test (1)—could be used, in the context of this test, as evidence on the non-realist side. This casts doubt on whether Aristotle passes test (2). Given the close connection between the idea that the good man is a standard for ethics, and the idea that 'What is *really* enjoyable is what *the good man* enjoys', it also casts retrospective doubt on whether Aristotelian ethical objectivity does pass test (1) after all.

(3) Wright's third test for realism requires the facts stated in a discourse's best judgements to have a *wide cosmological role*. They have this 'if they have a role to play in explanations' of facts stated in the best judgements of at least some other discourses.

It looks as if Aristotle's ethical objectivity passes this test fairly easily: consider his evident belief that the notion of human flourishing has both zoological and ethical import. See also David Charles's comment (1995: 161): 'In Aristotle's view, to secure the objectivity of discourse about a particular natural kind is to establish that it does in fact fit with other kinds in a type of appropriate explanation... In this we come to know that we are in touch with genuine kinds and relations.'

(4) A discourse is *evidence-transcendent* if and only if there is a real distinction to be made, for that discourse, between *what we would be justified in believing under epistemologically ideal conditions* (= what is 'superassertible') and *what is true*.

Whether Aristotelian objectivity satisfies this fourth test is contentious again. See, for instance, 1172b36-a2 ('What seems good to everyone, we say that this *is* good'), with my discussion of it below. This is a passage that can be read, as I read it, as evidence that Aristotle believes in human convergence on objective ethical truth. But it can also be read as an endorsement of truth-by-consensus, that is, of a view of ethical truth that is at best intersubjectivist.

It looks as if Aristotle's ethical theory definitely passes tests (1) and (3) for objectivity; but it is unclear whether it also passes tests (2) and (4). Moreover, the main evidence against the idea that Aristotle's ethical theory definitely passes test (2) tells against that idea in such a way as to cast doubt on our initial decision about test (1) as well. In short, when we try to apply modern tests for realism directly to Aristotelian texts, we get a split verdict.

So perhaps we need to look in another direction to make progress with our problem: what sort of an objectivist Aristotle is, if any. Perhaps a *direct* solution is unavailable; Aristotle himself shows, as we have seen, little sign of wanting to address the problem head-on. He is, for instance, notably unexercised by the sort of problems of relativism and subjectivity that had obsessed Plato. (See 1094b16 for a characteristically relaxed mention of the common opinion (*doxa*) that 'what is honourable and what is just' (*ta te kala kai ta dikaia*) is merely conventional (*nomō(i)*) and not natural (*phusei*.) I now want to suggest that the reason for this apparent nonchalance is not that Aristotle is uninterested in relativism. It is rather that, when he explains, for example, how actions

can issue in practical truth, or how the mean can be correctly located, he takes himself to be doing precisely what is needed to explain how ethical truth, and so ethical objectivity, is possible. <sup>22</sup> Aristotle addresses these issues mainly when he is addressing the first two of our worries; so let us now move on to consider those. (I will come back very briefly to the question of objectivity at the end of this discussion.)

Take the worry about reconciliation first. Alongside the idea that the good man is the standard for ethics, we find a striking variety of other ideas in Aristotle's moral epistemology. Apparently, Aristotle not only thinks that the good man plays the role of touchstone of ethical truth; he also thinks that this role is played by the mean (1106b15), by pleasure (1104b9; cf. *Physics* 247a9), by the human *ergon* <sup>23</sup> (1097b25), and by a proper conception of human life's aim or aims (*telos* or *telê*, 1096b21).

What, it might be asked, are we to make of this profusion of resources? We might take it simply as evidence of confusion. Or we might take hold of one of these different ideas, and try to run it as the main story of what Aristotle's ethics 'is really about', while ignoring or downplaying the other resources. Neither alternative is satisfactory. But I might myself be accused of taking the second alternative, since I have developed the idea that Aristotle takes an 'agathos-centred' approach to ethics, and so—it could be alleged—I have ignored or downplayed the things in his ethics that do not fit into my picture.

The answer is that these other resources do fit into my picture. My thesis that Aristotle takes an *agathos*-centred approach to ethics is perfectly compatible with the idea that Aristotle also treats a variety of other resources as genuine ways to access ethical truth. What Aristotle says about pleasure is clearly meant to be compatible with his *agathos*-centred approach:

It seems that in all cases, what appears to the good man *is*. And if this remark is well said, as it seems to be, and if virtue and the good man as such (*hê(i) toioutos*) are the measure of each thing, then pleasures too will be the pleasures that appear to him (*hai toutô(i) phainomenai*), and what is enjoyable (*hêdea*) will be what *he* enjoys. (1176a16-19)

What Aristotle says about the mean is also clearly compatible with the *agathos*-centred approach:

Virtue, therefore, is a disposition to choose (*hexis proairetikê*), lying in a mean relative to us, this mean being determined <sup>24</sup> by reason and as the man of practical wisdom (*phronimos*) would determine it. (1106b36-1107a2)

---

<sup>22</sup> See again Price, **00** below.

<sup>23</sup> The usual translation of *ergon* ('function') is seriously misleading, and, I think, still causes confusions (contrast the point made about *aretê* in n. 6 above). But there is no succinct and satisfactory alternative, so I shall leave the word untranslated.

<sup>24</sup> Reading *hôrismenê(i)* with Alexander of Aphrodisias, and Bywater's Oxford Classical Text. The alternative reading, *hôrismenê*, makes it *virtue*, not *the mean*, that is 'determined by reason'.

Considerations about pleasure and the doctrine of the mean constitute independent tests of ethical truth, which we can use to gain a more substantive understanding of ethical truth than can be provided by the appeal to the *agathos* alone. Often the deployment of these tests will be fairly unproblematic. But, in difficult cases, the question will come up: *How*, exactly, are we to deploy these tests? As my last two quotations show, Aristotle's answer is: 'As the man of virtue would deploy them.'

The idea that the *agathos* is the standard for ethical knowledge is not supposed to preclude the possibility of any other standard for ethical knowledge, as if all we had to go on was the deliverances of a mysterious faculty of moral intuition. The *agathos* finds indispensable a number of different informative tests or criteria for ethical truth. But there is such a thing as using these tests well or badly; and what counts as the good use of them is definitively settled by the good man's use of them. To put it another way, if there is 'ethical perception' in Aristotle, that perception is never simply and nakedly a perception of *what is right*, as sometimes seems to be in Ross, for instance. <sup>25</sup> Rather, the perception is of a rich variety of informative moral criteria— and, crucially, of *how to apply* those criteria. Certainly, these criteria are neither universally nor algorithmically applicable. But that does not mean that they are no use at all. As anyone who has tried to use them will know, the criteria that do the work in science are often not much more universally nor algorithmically applicable. At least in practice, the novice physicist's question, which equation to use where, often seems to be best settled by simply asking what the expert physicist does.

## V. Ethical Perception and Particularism

I say '*if* there is 'ethical perception' in Aristotle', because I suspect there is at least a difference of emphasis between Aristotle himself and those of his interpreters (the particularists, as I shall call them) who want to stress the allegedly Aristotelian idea of ethical perception. This point may be worth a little discussion.

The particularists' idea is that Aristotelian 'perception of particulars' (1143b5) is, typically, perception of what is morally salient: of facts about the world which will strike the morally sensitive observer as important. <sup>26</sup> Few particularists nowadays mean by this that perception of particulars is *literally* sensory or quasi-sensory (and Aristotle himself explicitly tells us at 1142a26-7 that the perception of particulars is 'not like one of the special senses such as hearing or taste'). The idea is, rather, that perception of particulars is 'seeing' things in the metaphorical sense in which we 'see' plain truths or bare facts: 'it

---

<sup>25</sup> Ross (1939: 168-71): 'When I reflect on my own attitude to particular acts, I seem to find that it is not by deduction but by direct insight that I see them to be right, or wrong.' To the assessment of this sort of intuitionism, Bernard Williams's 'appropriately suspicious rule of method' seems apt (Altham and Harrison 1995: 204): 'Never explain the ethical in terms of something special to ethics if you can explain it in terms that apply to the non-ethical as well.'

<sup>26</sup> See McDowell (1979: 70); Wiggins (1987: 227); Dancy (1993), ch. 7.

is perception in the sense in which, for example, we perceive the analytical priority of the triangle in geometry' (1142a28-30).

The particularists think that there is, in Aristotle's view, some class of distinctively *ethical* plain truths or bare facts that are 'seen' in this way. If they are right, then Aristotelian perception of particulars must be a distinctively ethical sort of perception. But, on Aristotle's account, the perception of particulars seems more down-to-earth than this. <sup>27</sup> Aristotle tells us (1143b3-4) that the 'perception of particulars' is a grasping of the 'ultimate and contingent', and of 'the other premiss' (*tês heteras protaseôs*), i.e. of the premiss in the practical syllogism that corresponds to the minor premiss of a theoretical syllogism. But this 'other premiss' is the *factual* premiss, not the moral premiss, of practical reasoning. This is clear from the examples of such premisses given at 1147a25 and 1141b20. 'This thing is sweet' and 'This is light meat' are obviously not the moral (or rather normative) premisses in the practical syllogisms in which they appear. The normative premisses in these syllogisms are, respectively 'Everything sweet should be tasted' and 'Light meat is healthy to eat'. Moreover, the faculty that grasps this 'other premiss' is not the highly morally-relevant intellectual virtue of *phronêsis*, as the particularist argument seems to require, but the much less obviously morally-relevant intellectual virtue of *nous*. <sup>28</sup>

The particularists think that the perception of particulars is exemplified by the second conjunct in the sentence 'Courage is a virtue, and *this* is a case for its exercise'; but Aristotle thinks the perception of particulars is exemplified by the second conjunct in the sentence 'It would be kind to buy my wife some chocolates, and *these* are some chocolates.' Certainly this rather down-to-earth sort of perception of particulars is normatively loaded too. But it is so only in the rather thin sense that the facts so perceived need to be practically relevant, which is something that *phronêsis* will have to provide for. The evidence that Aristotle ever means the perception of particulars to be *more* normatively loaded than this, or that Aristotle is in fact a particularist at all, seems very exiguous indeed.

To see this, consider two frequently-cited passages that allegedly provide evidence for the particularist reading. One is Aristotle's remark that 'One needs to be born with an *eye* for it, so to speak' (*phunai dei hôsper opsin echonta*, 1114b7). This remark is irrelevant for particularist purposes, as are Aristotle's comments about 'the eye of experience' (*ek tês empeirias omma*) at 1144a30, 1143b14, 1179a18. In all these cases, the 'eye' that one needs to be 'born with' is an eye 'for the true good'; and that means the perception of truths 'about the universal', not particular ones.

---

<sup>27</sup> For the claim that Aristotelian perception of particulars is less exciting than particularists think, see also Irwin (2000: 127-9), citing 1112b34: 'We must be able to make some judgements without deliberation, if our deliberation is to be a feasible task. Some of these are what we call ordinary perceptual judgements—in this case, something that anyone can notice [namely: that 'it's a loaf'], whether or not they know how to bake bread. Others are judgements that have to be perceptual, but which refer to features that we have to be trained to notice—in this case, the signs that a loaf is baked.'

<sup>28</sup> Broadie (1991: 247): 'an intelligent grasp of particulars' is a '*factual* awareness'.

The other passage I have in mind is the evidence that Ross (1939), 168-171, takes to be decisive for his influential reading of Aristotle. It is this remark: ‘The crucial judgment lies in the particulars (*tois kath’ hekasta*) and in perception’ (*tê(i) aisthêsei*, 1126b4). This may appear to support a particularist reading; but it needs to be placed in its context. The phrase is not a particularist slogan, but an answer to the question, ‘How much deviation from the mean, and of what sorts, is blameworthy?’ (1164b3). In other words, it is an explanation of how to apply a *non*-particularist criterion of rightness.

So far as I can see, outside EN 6, there is little or no other evidence for the particularist reading of Aristotle. But anyway it is none too clear what would be achieved by classifying Aristotle as a ‘particularist’ rather than (to use the usual contrast-term) a ‘generalist’. Aristotle is a generalist, if it is generalism to address ethical questions using criteria such as the doctrine of the mean, pleasure, nature and the *ergon* argument. Aristotle is a particularist, if it is particularism to say that you need to use these criteria with judgement and discernment—that they cannot be, as particularists usually put it, ‘mechanically’ applied. <sup>29</sup> By these tests, then, Aristotle is both a particularist and a generalist—and so is almost everyone else. No one would think of doing ethics without appeal to *any* moral criteria, and no one would think of denying that you need to be discerning to apply moral criteria well. This just shows how tenuous the alleged distinction between particularism and generalism really is. (If the difference between them is supposed to depend on what is sometimes called ‘an order of explanatory priority’, things get murkier still.) <sup>30</sup>

If all of this is right, then ‘ethical perception’ is not the name of another resource for Aristotle’s moral epistemology, to go alongside the doctrine of the mean, considerations about pleasure, the appeal to nature, and the listing of the ends of man. Of course, we can, if we like, use ‘ethical perception’ as a general description of the phenomenology of the *agathos* who is putting these various resources to work. But there is little reason to insist that this is an Aristotelian description.

## VI. The *agathos*, Nature, and the Ends of Life

What about the other resources that—I said—*do* go alongside the doctrine of the mean and considerations about pleasure, as providing criteria that the *agathos* can deploy to attain ethical knowledge? The two I mentioned were the appeal to nature, and the consideration of the ends of human life. Is it plausible to suggest that these too are criteria that the *agathos* puts to work in roughly the same way as he puts to work the concepts of the mean, and of pleasure?

At first sight, this part of my proposal might seem more problematic. For one thing, the textual evidence looks less promising. Aristotle explicitly says that pleasure and the mean are what the *agathos* says they are; he does not say explicitly that the human *ergon*, or the human end, is what the *agathos* says it is. For another thing, we are perhaps used by now

---

<sup>29</sup> Here the particularists are attacking a straw man; I have yet to find even one generalist who thinks that rules *can* be mechanically applied, still less that they *ought* to be.

<sup>30</sup> See Chappell (forthcoming: n. 19).

to a strong and exclusive contrast between readings of Aristotle as a ‘world-centred’ naturalistic ethicist, and readings of Aristotle as a ‘mind-centred’, ‘*agathos*-centred’, or ‘perceptualist’ ethicist. <sup>31</sup> In fact, I think, this contrast cannot be sustained. Even if he does not say so explicitly, it *is* Aristotle’s view that the human *ergon* and the human end are what the good man says they are. So the distinction between the Aristotle who refers everything to the judgement of the good man, and the Aristotle who refers everything to the ‘facts of human nature’, is an unreal one. What the facts of human nature *are* is itself a question for the judgement of the good man.

Here is one reason for saying this. On examination, Aristotle’s own positive account of the way in which the facts of human nature determine the facts about the human good and the human end is remarkably exiguous. On this, I am in complete agreement with McDowell (1998: 35-6):

To many commentators [the *ergon* argument] suggests that Aristotle envisages an external validation for his ethic, starting from the facts about human nature. [But] in fact there are only two substantive points on which Aristotle suggests that facts about human nature constrain the truth about the good human life, in a way that might be supposed to be independent of inculcated propensities to value this and despise that. First, a good human life must be an active life of that which has *logos* (1098a3-4)... Second, human beings are naturally social (1097b11, 1169b18-19)... Obviously these two points fall a long way short of purporting to afford a validation of Aristotle’s ethic in full. But it is the whole substance of his ethic, not just these two somewhat structural features of it, that he wants to represent as objectively correct.

No one who has ever seriously tried to bridge the conceptual gap between Aristotle’s *ergon* argument and Aristotle’s lists of virtues can possibly doubt that McDowell is right about this. The best version of the *ergon* argument gives us, at most, the conclusions that humans are beings with a capacity for reason as well as for sensation and vegetative functioning, and that *something* counts as their flourishing (see 1102a5-1103a10). Exactly how this rather small result is supposed to be the basis for claiming, for instance, that such very specific character-traits as greatness of soul (*megalopsuchia*), magnificence (*megaloprepeia*), or urbanity (*eutrapelia*) are moral virtues in humans, or that insight (*nous*) or practical wisdom (*phronêsis*) are intellectual virtues in humans, or again that honour and wisdom are natural ends of human life (1096b16-26), is something that Aristotle does not even try to explain. When he introduces his two lists of virtues, he shows little sign of wanting to justify their content. He just announces it:

It is necessary to do more than just make this general statement [of the doctrine of the mean]. We must apply it to the particular virtues... So let us take them in turn from our table of the virtues. (1107a28-33; cf. *EE* 1122b37)

Let us make a new start, and reconsider [the intellectual virtues]. Let there be five whereby the soul attains truth by assertion or denial... (1139b15-16)

---

<sup>31</sup> The perceptualist and mind-centred Aristotle is McDowell’s; the most sophisticated version of the naturalistic and world-centred Aristotle is Foot (2001).

As the italicized passages show, there is not a shred of argument here for Aristotle's particular conceptions of the moral and intellectual virtues. He just helps himself to those conceptions. <sup>32</sup> And there is hardly any further argument to be found anywhere else:

Virtue too is definitionally distinguished (*diorizetai*) in accordance with this distinction [between the 'vegetative', 'desiderative' and 'rational' parts of the soul: 1102a27-1103a3]. We call some of them *intellectual* (*dianoêtikas*), others ethical... (11034-6)

There cannot be a single wisdom concerning the good of all creatures, but there is a different wisdom for each [species of creature]. (1141a32)

Are these remarks supposed to be an *argument* for the derivation of Aristotle's particular lists of moral and intellectual virtues from the characteristics and the *ergon* of the human soul (hence, from human nature and the human *ergon*)? That seems an over-charitable reading. This is nothing like a full argument to establish the correctness of Aristotle's two lists. At most, it is a programmatic indication of how such an argument might be constructed. When we look elsewhere in *EN*, we find that Aristotle does hardly anything to fulfil this programme. <sup>33</sup> Hence, apparently, the gap between Aristotle's account of human nature and his list of virtues remains unclosed.

Or so it must seem to many moderns, whose most characteristic assumptions include the denial that the descriptive can ever imply the normative (the notorious 'is-ought gap'), and who will see the problem just described as no more than an instance of this gap. <sup>34</sup> Aristotle, I think, will put things rather differently. If he sees this problem—it is impossible to be sure whether or not he *does* see it—his view will be that the kind of arguments that are needed to close this gap are arguments that depend on a more fully

---

<sup>32</sup> As noted by Broadie (1991: 38-9): 'Not long after delivering his definition of the human end as 'the soul's activity according to excellence'... he starts to use the term 'excellence' to refer specifically to such qualities as justice or generosity (1099a18-20), without having argued in the interim or anywhere else that when we are talking about human beings as such, *these* qualities must count as virtues.' Broadie at once explains this by reference to commonly accepted opinions: 'Aristotle can do this, not because there is a logically immediate connection between the uninterpreted meaning of 'excellence' and this particular range of interpretations, but because he can take it for granted that his hearers have supplied the interpretations themselves.' (On the other hand, as Broadie has pointed out to me in correspondence, Aristotle does say something in *EN* 1.13 to justify his distinctions between the moral and intellectual virtues, and between *sophia* and *phronêsis*.)

<sup>33</sup> As McDowell says, the virtue that comes nearest to being an exception to this is friendship, which is 'most necessary for life' (1155a2) and natural for humans (1169b-1170a). But these are scattered and unsystematic remarks.

<sup>34</sup> The classic statement of the doctrine of the 'is-ought gap' is Hume (1969), 3.1.1. See also Hudson (1969).



spelled-out understanding of the facts of human nature. When we try to do this, and go beyond the bare and rather uninformative facts that Aristotle himself actually gives, we will quickly find—as believers in the ‘is-ought gap’ are always happy to tell us—that a fully spelled-out understanding of human nature is morally controversial. But this discovery need not be seen as implying an unbridgeable divide between the descriptive and the normative. It can also be seen as Aristotle might see it: as playing straight into the hands of the *agathos*-centred approach. For what the discovery tends to show is that the criterion of human nature to which the *ergon* argument appeals is yet another criterion that you need to be a good man to apply well. <sup>35</sup> Hence, Aristotle’s *ergon* argument, and his naturalism in general, is not merely, in McDowell’s phrase, ‘a rhetorical flourish, added to a conclusion already complete without it’ (1998: 19). It is one of a number of criteria, all of which Aristotle thinks have useful and informative work to do in ethics, provided they are applied well. <sup>36</sup>

Support for this reading can be found in the latter part of Aristotle’s definition of *phronêsis* (1140b6). This says that *phronêsis* is ‘a true practical disposition, accompanied by reason, *concerning things that are goods and evils for a human*’. This definition, and in particular the italicized clause, shows that *phronêsis* has essentially to do with what benefits or harms human nature as such: *phronêsis* is defined as having a naturalistic parameter. But, of course, it takes an *agathos* to display *phronêsis* (1145b25). It follows that someone who is perfectly *agathos* will have a perfect understanding of the facts about human nature that set this parameter. Conversely, a less than perfect understanding of those naturalistic facts is the sign of less than perfect virtue.

---

<sup>35</sup> Stephen Everson sees (I think) the same gap, but draws a different moral (Everson (1998: 103): ‘A theory according to which things are valuable just in so far as they contribute to *eudaimonia* and the nature of *eudaimonia* is determined by the nature of man ... can now be seen to get things the wrong way round: it is not that something is valuable because it contributes to happiness, rather it contributes to happiness because it is valuable.’ This point does not seem to me to undermine the usefulness of the *ergon* argument; it only means that the *ergon* argument finds out *what’s valuable* via *what’s natural*, rather than the other way round. I agree with Everson, of course, that the *ergon* argument is not the only resource that Aristotle offers us to find out how to live well.

<sup>36</sup> Bernard Williams (Altham and Harrison 1995: 201) praises Aristotle’s ethics for using ‘the kind of material that one needs to consider in arriving at any sensible view of the status of ethics, namely the richest account available of human powers and social arrangements’; but immediately adds that Aristotle’s own attempt to put such material to work failed, because of his false biology. (Cf. Smith 1991: 409.) This objection to Aristotle’s naturalism seems to me to miss the point. The falsehood of Aristotle’s biology is not the problem, because it is not the strictly *biological* part of Aristotle’s account of human nature that could be relevant to the derivation of a complete Aristotelian ethics anyway. It is, rather, the more contestable and less scientific part—perhaps the bit about ‘social arrangements’ that Williams mentions. (If Williams wants to add that Aristotle’s account of ‘social arrangements’ is *also* false, I agree.)

My suggestion is that Aristotle can fill the gap between his naturalism and his list of virtues, but only by so filling out his account of human nature that it becomes morally controversial, and thus, only available (in its correct and complete form) to the *agathos*. If this *is* his move, Aristotle certainly does not make it explicit in the case of naturalism. But compare the case of pleasure, where, as we have already seen, Aristotle offers exactly the same move. A hedonist such as Eudoxus (1101b27) wants us to start our ethical reflections from the very plausible thought that pleasure is a clear, simple, and uncontroversial notion. Certainly you can *start* from that thought, rejoins Aristotle; but you cannot get very far with it and nothing else. There are cases where we have to ask whether we should count something as pleasant—truly pleasant—at all, even though these are, patently, cases where someone is finding something pleasant. The best way to settle this issue, is by asking what the good man finds pleasant (1176a16-19). If we replace ‘pleasant’ with ‘natural’ in that last sentence, the resulting argument is, I suggest, no less Aristotelian, and no less plausible.

It is important to remember here that the notions of nature and pleasure are connected, for Aristotle, in two ways that they are not connected by typical modern accounts of pleasure, from Jeremy Bentham’s on. First, Aristotle does not, like the moderns, take pleasure to be, roughly speaking, any positively experienced sensation. <sup>37</sup> Instead, he defines ‘pleasure’ as the ‘unimpeded actualization of a disposition in accordance with nature’ (1153a14). If this is the right way to define pleasure, and if, as before, the *agathos* is the best person to say what really counts as pleasure, then the inference is obvious. For the *agathos* to make his judgements about what is pleasant *is* for him to make judgements about what is natural. <sup>38</sup>

---

<sup>37</sup> This is implicit in modern accounts; though it is striking that neither Bentham nor Mill offers any definition of ‘pleasure’. Bentham (1970), ch. 5, classifies pleasures as ‘interesting perceptions’. But then he classifies pains as interesting perceptions too. So what is the difference between these two sorts of interesting perceptions? If it is only that the pleasures are *pleasant* interesting perceptions, and the pains are *painful* interesting perceptions, then the circularity is obvious. The first person to recognize how difficult it is to define ‘pleasure’, and to attempt to address this difficulty, seems to be Henry Sidgwick, whose attempts are not very convincing. ‘Pleasure is a kind of feeling which stimulates the will to actions tending to sustain or produce it’ (Sidgwick 1874: 42); ‘I propose therefore to define Pleasure [strictly] as a feeling which, when experienced by intelligent beings, is at least implicitly apprehended as desirable or—in cases of comparison—preferable” (127). These proposals are not equivalent; and both face the obvious objection that we are often ‘stimulated’ to sustain, produce, desire, or prefer many sensations that are nothing like pleasure—many of which, indeed, are actually pains.

<sup>38</sup> Perhaps unwittingly, of course: someone might not realise that their correct judgement that *X* is pleasant (in the morally loaded sense) is also a correct judgement that *X* is natural (in the morally loaded sense); and *vice versa*. But presumably a *true agathos* will be aware of these identities.

Second, there is in Aristotle a crucial distinction, which looks at first sight like a distinction between natural and unnatural forms of pleasure (1148b15). In fact, of course, this cannot be quite the distinction Aristotle means. We have just seen the reason why not. If a pleasure is, by definition, the ‘unimpeded actualization of a natural disposition’, then, presumably, all genuine pleasures are by definition natural, and an unnatural pleasure is a contradiction in terms. We may however speak of false or illusory pleasures which are unnatural. Under this heading, there are ‘pleasures’ for which we acquire a taste by wickedness (*mochthêria*), by (bad) habits (*ethê*), by ‘impeded development’ (*perôseis*, 1153a14), by illness (*nosos*), by madness (*mania*), and by ‘beastliness’ (*thêriôdes*). As before, it will be a mark of *virtue* to pursue the natural and genuine pleasures and shun the unnatural and illusory ones. And as before, it will be the *agathos* who does this most adequately.

As for the sketchy lists of goods or ends of human life that Aristotle occasionally offers or hints at, for instance at 1094a1-16, 1096b16-26, 1174a6, these lists too can be used as a criterion for ethical thinking; but it takes an *agathos* to use them *well*.

This conclusion might seem to be blocked by Aristotle’s apparent belief that the human goods, or the ends of human life, are just those ends that *all* humans pursue or desire. So, for instance, Aristotle says (1136b8) that ‘nobody wishes for what he does not think to be good’; he thinks it an argument for hedonism to point out that pleasure is something that everyone desires (1175a17); and he seems to hint that existence and *energeia* are goods, precisely because all things desire them (1168a7). Most famously of all in this strain, Aristotle writes this (1172b36-a2):

Those who resist the idea that the good is what all creatures pursue <sup>39</sup> are completely mistaken (*mê outhen legousin*). For what seems [good] <sup>40</sup> to everyone, we say that this *is* [good] (*ha gar*

---

<sup>39</sup> Cf. 1094a3. In that passage, incidentally, Aristotle does not commit the fallacy of which he is standardly accused. He does *not* move from, ‘Every activity pursues some (perceived) good’, to, ‘There is some good that every activity pursues’. (If he did, it would be very odd of him to add immediately that ‘But there is an evident variety among the ends’, 1094a4.) Rather, he moves from, ‘Every activity pursues some good’, to ‘There is something that every activity is, namely *directed at the good*’. (Here ‘the good’ relates to different particular goods as determinable to determinates. Cf. the inference from ‘Every horse has some colour’, to ‘There is something that every horse is, namely *coloured*’.) This is no fallacy: the argument is sound. Cf. Oderberg (1998).

<sup>40</sup> The context justifies this reading. (I would call it an *interpolation*, but the meaning ‘seems good’ for *dokei* is, as Liddell and Scott observe, a perfectly standard one.) In the context, Aristotle is talking about the claim that what everyone pursues is (some) good. So, presumably, he is still talking about that in the passage I quote. Certainly, he has no reason to interject a sudden endorsement of consensus epistemology to go alongside his slogan *tithenai ta phainomena* (‘take the appearances as true’, 1145b1-2), as he is sometimes thought to (e.g. by Owen 1986: 243, n. 15).

*pasi dokei, taut' einai phamen*); the person who takes away *this* conviction, can have nothing more convincing to put in its place. 41

In line with his theory of the natural tendencies of things, Aristotle identifies what is good with what is universally desired. 42 It obviously does not follow that any particular instance of some kind of thing that is universally desired is itself something that should be desired or pursued in any particular case. No doubt, much can be learned about the good by examining those desires that are, as a matter of fact, universal among humans. All the same, it takes discernment to decide which desirable things should be desired or pursued right now. This discernment is, once more, proprietary to the *agathos*.

Aristotle's appeal to the *agathos* as the standard in ethics is not, then, uninformative (the 'first unsolved problem' of section IV). Aristotle gives us more than bare assertions about 'what the good man would do'. He does insist that the various criteria for ethical truth that he discusses can only be fully understood by understanding the good man's deployment of them, and that (since ethics cannot be a science) this understanding is more central to ethics than the parallel understanding would be to geometry, for instance. But to say this is not to leave us with no ethical resources beyond a series of edifying truisms. On the contrary, it is to shed a great deal of light on what resources an *agathos* might actually use in his decisions about ethical problems. So this point also settles the 'second unsolved problem' of Section IV, about how to reconcile the *agathos*-centred emphasis in Aristotle's moral epistemology with his other emphases. Finally, it also says something to address the 'third unsolved problem', about how an *agathos*-centred ethics can be objective. It does this by describing some of the ways in which Aristotle thinks ethical truth is attained within such an ethics.

## VII. Objectivity and Élitism

'But who says who counts as an *agathos*?'

Though Aristotle never explicitly answers this question, 43 the obvious and inevitable answer is that the best judge of who is an *agathos* is simply the *agathos* himself. After

---

41 Cf. Mill's famous argument: 'The only proof capable of being given that an object is visible, is that people actually see it. The only proof that a sound is audible, is that people hear it: and so of the other sources of our experience. In like manner, I apprehend, the sole evidence it is possible to produce that anything is desirable, is that people do actually desire it' (Mill 1962: 288).

42 Notice here the parallels between Aristotle's moral epistemology and his general theory of knowledge. Why is the *agathos* the standard of ethical truth? The answer is: Because, *qua agathos*, he is the *telos* of a naturalistic process; the *agathos* is the outcome of the full development of human flourishing. And why are *ta endoxa* generally reliable (1098b29, *Topics* 100b22)? The answer is: Because they are what *we humans* naturally believe—and we humans have a natural 'flair for the truth'. See Denyer (1991: 183-9).

43 Perhaps he comes close to simply rejecting the question at *Metaphysics* 1011a3.

all, the *agathos* is the best judge of all the other important ethical questions. So the more important this question is, the more inevitable it seems that he must be the best judge of this question, too.

That sounds élitist. When it is presented with the implicit assumption that *we ourselves* are *agathoi*, it is élitist. ('We must be right about what we say is good, because *we're* good; and we *must* be good, because we *say* we're good'—a truly Carrollian argument.)<sup>44</sup> Aristotle sometimes endorses this sort of moral élitism; but there is little reason why an Aristotelian has to. To avoid it, we need simply to have the humility to recognize our own fallibility and imperfection. 'From the inside', from the internal perspective, we are trying to be good people, and can of course have no knowledge of a better way of trying to do this than our own. 'From the outside', from the external perspective, the sceptical possibility that we in fact know nothing at all about what virtue really involves, and 'have all this while only been building a castle in the air',<sup>45</sup> can never be conclusively eliminated. The completely good person, the *teleios agathos*, we will perhaps understand either as a 'regulative ideal', or as an (impossible?) amalgam of the best points of the best people we have ever known; or as both.

The price of this understanding is to remove the (*teleios*) *agathos* from actual existence, which Aristotle will balk at both because he wants an *incarnate* ethical ideal (see **00** above) and because he holds the general belief that any genuinely natural tendency must be fully actualized somewhere. To avoid élitism, this price may be worth paying—unless we are prepared to accept the alternative proposal,<sup>46</sup> that there has been some actual human being,<sup>47</sup> other than ourselves, who *was teleios agathos*.<sup>48</sup>

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

---

<sup>44</sup> For other doubts about this argument see Louden (1997: 213) 'Within the context of a [small face-to-face community like] a *polis*, the strategy of pointing to a *phronimos* makes a certain sense. However, to divorce this strategy from its social and economic roots [*sic*] and then to apply it to a very different sort of community—one where people really do not know each other that well, and where there is wide disagreement on values—does not. And this, I fear, is what contemporary virtue ethicists have tried to do.'

<sup>45</sup> Locke (1975: 562).

<sup>46</sup> Aquinas accepts this proposal: *Summa Theologiae* 3a.15.3, 10.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. *Mark* 10:18: 'Why callest thou me good? There is none good but one, that is, God.'

<sup>48</sup> Thanks for helpful comments to Sarah Broadie, Christopher Gill, Adam Morton, and the members of my Spring 2003 graduate class on Aristotle's ethics at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver BC.

- Altham, J., and Harrison, R. (1995). *World, Mind, and Ethics: Essays on the Ethical Philosophy of Bernard Williams*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.
- Anscombe, G. E. M. (1958). 'Modern Moral Philosophy', *Philosophy*, 33: 1-19.
- Anscombe, G. E. M. (1981). *Collected Essays* Vol. 1. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1981.
- Bentham, J. (1780). *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, eds. J. H. Burns and H. L. A. Hart. London: The Athlone Press, 1970.
- Bostock, D. (2000). *Aristotle's Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Broadie, S. (1991). *Ethics with Aristotle*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991.
- Chappell, T. D. J. (1995). *Aristotle and Augustine on Freedom*. London: Macmillan, 1995.
- Chappell, T. D. J. (forthcoming). 'Absolutes and Particulars', in A. O'Hear, ed., *Modern Moral Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Charles, D. (1984). *Aristotle's Philosophy of Action*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984.
- Charles, D. (1995). 'Aristotle and Modern Realism', in R. Heinaman, ed., *Aristotle and Modern Realism*, London: UCL Press, 135-72.
- Dancy, J. (1993). *Moral Reasons*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Denyer, N. (1991). *Language, Thought and Falsehood in Ancient Greek Philosophy*. London: Routledge, 1991.
- Everson, S. (1998). 'Aristotle on Nature and Value', in S. Everson, *Companion to Ancient Thought: Ethics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, 77-106.
- Foot, P. (2001). *Natural Goodness*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hale, R. (1997). 'Realism and its Oppositions', in R. Hale and C. Wright, eds., *A Companion to the Philosophy of Language*. Oxford: Blackwell, 271-308.
- Hegel, G. W. F. (1977). *Phenomenology of Spirit*, tr. A. V. Miller. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hudson, W. D. (1969)(ed.). *The Is/Ought Question*. London: Macmillan.
- Hume, D. (1740). *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Ed. E.C. Mossner. London: Penguin.
- Irwin, T. (2000). 'Ethics as an Inexact Science', in B. Hooker and M. Little, eds., *Moral Particularism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 100-29.
- Locke, J. (1975). *Essay concerning Human Understanding*, ed. P.H. Niddich. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Louden (1997): Loudon, Robert, 'On Some Vices of Virtue Ethics', in M. Slote and R. Crisp, eds., *Virtue Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 201-216.
- McDowell, J. (1979). 'Virtue and Reason', *Monist* 62/3: 331-50.
- McDowell, J. (1988). 'Comments on "Some Rational Aspects of Incontinence"', *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 28, supp: 89-102.
- McDowell, J. (1998). *Mind, Value, and Reality*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- MacIntyre, A. (1981). *After Virtue*. London: Duckworth.
- Mill, J. S. (1861). *Utilitarianism*. M. Warnock, ed., *Utilitarianism*. London: Fontana, 1962.
- Oderberg, D. (1998). 'On an Alleged Fallacy in Aristotle', *Philosophical Papers* [vol and pages needed]
- Owen, G. E. L. (1986). *Logic, Science and Dialectic*. London: Duckworth.

- Ross, W. D. (1939). *The Foundations of Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sidgwick, H. (1874) *The Methods of Ethics*. London: Macmillan..
- Smith, M. (1991). 'Realism', in P.Singer, ed., *A Companion to Ethics*. Oxford: Blackwell, 227-36.
- Wiggins, D. (1987). *Needs, Values, Truth*. Oxford: Blackwell..
- Wright, C. (1992). *Truth and Objectivity*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.