

Practical Judgment Grounding Virtue in the Nicomachean Ethics

Grant Kettering
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Aristotle's *Ethics* develops in fits and starts. Not infrequently does he treat some issue repeatedly, embellishing each revolution. The first word on an issue may be very different from the last. The arguments and reasons given at one point may be temporary. So Aristotle's 'final word' has to be pieced together from selected elements.

In ch. 7 of bk. 1, happiness, already identified as the final good of man, is equated with the ἔργον of man. This equation is effected by an analogy with flute playing and sculpting: their goods likewise "seem to be in the work" (1097b27). The ἔργον of man is defined as the "being-at-work of the soul and actions that go along with reason" (1098a15). The essential task of understanding happiness therefore devolves into understanding the ἐνεργεία of the soul.

The Aristotelian soul is complex. And it turns out that its functioning admits of several kinds of deficiency. But happiness is concerned with the soul's proper functioning, proper ἐνεργεία. Much of the work of piecing together the proper functioning of the soul consists, as we will see, in figuring out an arrangement of its elements and functions in a delicate balance. But that a certain arrangement can be favored over others—viz. that deficiencies can exist—is established already in ch. 7 of bk. 1. Aristotle draws out of a taxonomy of man (among the animals) what is unique to him (not nutrition or perception, but articulate speech) and then identifies this unique trait as essential to the ἔργον of man. Thus is established the somewhat preliminary but thereby no

Key passages for this essay:

bk. 1	ch. 7
1	13
2	1
2	4-6
3	2-4
6	1-2
6	5
6	11-1
	3

less important point that the proper functioning of man must take account of, if not consist in, the functioning what is most proper = most unique to him. The formulation is: a “life that puts into action that in us that has articulate speech” (1098a4). What is subtle here already and what will occupy us at length is this “putting into action”. Man may be differentiated taxonomically from the animals by his possession of λόγος, but, at least for the sake of εὐδαιμονία, viz. in the context of ἔργον, the putting of it into action is the tricky point. It is put into action in the context of his soul.

πρακτική τις τοῦ λόγου ἔχοντος

In bk. 7 Aristotle discusses vice, unrestraint, and bestiality, in other words deficiency from proper function. The causes of deficiency considered are several. For example, one may act through ignorance or with unrestraint. But a certain number of deficiencies are described specifically in terms of the deficient interaction of the components of the soul. The case of self-restraint is described as the thinking part of the soul somehow gaining the upper hand over and above an antagonistic desiring part, and therefore desire submitting in the face of ruling reason. Self-restraint is differentiated from temperance. The thinking part of the temperate man's soul does not fight with the desiring part, because unlike the self-restrained man, his desiring part has no excessive and base desires. However, though the terms with which this taxonomy of vice is carried out no doubt suit that purpose, they seem misleading to the extent they suggest any certain mechanics of the soul. In particular, they might be understood as describing soul's parts as interacting in competition with one other while maintaining their own autonomous function. “If it is in having strong and base desires that someone is a self-restrained person, a temperate person will not be self-restrained nor a self-restrained person temperate, since it does not belong to a temperate person to desire too much or to have base desires” (1146a11). One might get the idea from this that the parts of the soul are autonomous because the taxonomy is generated by holding one (the rational part) fixed while the other (appetitive part) is allowed to vary.

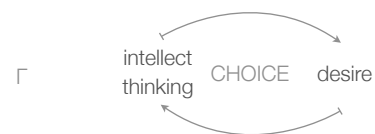
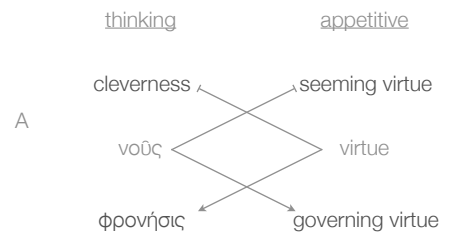
οὔτε γὰρ τὸ ἄγαν σώφρωνος οὔτε τὸ φαύλας ἔχειν.

It is precisely the opposite idea that is the key to Aristotle's understanding of ἐνεργεία. The first hint of the genuine inter action of the parts of the soul comes already in bk. 1. It is

stated in ch. 13 that the appetitive part of the soul “does share in [reason] in some way, insofar as it listens to and can obey reason”. And then it is stated that in the best sort of person “all parts of the soul are in harmony with reason” (1102b29). But the real development takes place near the end of bk. 6. This is really where our investigation starts.

In bk. 6 three more or less general statements characterizing the interaction of the thinking and appetitive parts of the soul are made. Because of terminological and other differences, however, they do not appear, at first glance at least, to be wholly consistent with one another. Each of them has a tremendous amount packed into them. Each takes one back into the heart of the previous chapters. Each needs unpacking. I’d like to get all three on the table first, but then work through them to make sense of each. Chs. 12 and 13 contain the most complex of these (“A”). Together the chapters articulate a formal interaction between the two parts of the soul: essentially, the perfection of each requires the other. On the one hand, for the thinking part of the soul, cleverness requires virtue to yield φρονήσις. On the other hand, in the desiring part, the active condition of seeming virtue is perfected by νοῦς to yield virtue in the governing sense. Second (“B”), back in ch. 12 we find: “The work of the human being is accomplished as a result of practical judgement and of virtue of character, since virtue makes the end on which one sets one’s sights right and practical judgement makes the things related to it right”. Here, the sense of their interaction is much less prominent, and it rather looks like they are just working in parallel to supply the right means and right end—hence, together, the right action. Third (“Γ”), in ch. 2 we find: “choice is either intellect fused with desire or desire fused with thinking, and such a source is a human being.” Here, in terms of mechanics, we get nothing but this vague bi-directional fusion, but that this fusion “is a human being” is important indeed.

B gives us the most direct route down into the complexities of the soul, so we shall start with it. At this point, φρονήσις is not so hard to deal with. As a truth-disclosing power of the soul, it is something like savvy or the capacity for effective practical calculation. When it works well (and it does not work in isolation of the other truth-disclosing powers) it provides the means that can accomplish a given end. We



will have to speak at length, later when we consider A, about the conditions under which φρονήσις operates, but for now it suffices to note that, under B, it provides the thinking part of the soul's contribution to action by providing the means to the end.

Interestingly, it is the appetitive part of the soul that is concerned with the end itself (it gives good ends). It is worthwhile to stop for a moment and consider how strange this is. In the terminological regime of bk. 7 that we have already glanced at, we remember the temperate man being differentiated from the self-restrained because while the reasoning element is constant in both, the appetitive part coöperates in the former while in the later it is antagonistic. Did we not somewhat expect that it would be the rational part of the soul, the one most proper to man, that would provide the ends of his actions if they were to be proper? That it is the appetitive part that at worst that leads us astray, and at best goes along with what reason commands? Again, we will have to wait until we consider A to see the extent to which this really is true. But for now there is plenty still left to deal with in the appetitive part of the soul. The question we have to answer is: how can and in what way does the appetitive part of the soul supply ends?

First, a preliminary. We must move from the appetitive part of the soul to virtue of character, because it is in terms of the latter that ἔξις is discussed. Virtue, in general, seems to be something of an auxiliary to something else. "Each thing is accomplished well as a result of the virtue [or virtues] appropriate to it" (1098a16). Thus, a part of the soul will operate well just when the virtues appropriate to it are present. On the one hand, this seems like a pedantic move, giving some general class-name to the excellences of something that causes something to be excellent. On the other hand, it is a rhetorically effective move insofar as it allows one to talk about these excellences themselves and in aggregate, as if they were (and maybe they are) freestanding things with their own natures. Thus it is that Aristotle is able to generalize about something like the causes of the virtues in the case of virtues of character and then again in the case of virtues of thinking. It is very significant (ch.1 bk. 2) that the former result from habit while the latter result from teaching. These are two very different

modes of acquisition and we will see presently how especially the former has deep implications about the nature of the soul and ultimately ἐνεργεία.

The immediate utility of ch. 4 bk. 2 is to provide a structure which explains this claim about the acquisition of virtues of characters through habit. The essential problem is how to explain how someone can do something once but not really be said to do it in the right way, even if done correctly, but only if he does it habitually. The example of orthography is good enough: one will not have acquired the title of literate by spelling a word correctly once, but by being able to do so repeatedly. The idea seems to be that the source of the action or ability, if the action is to be fully legitimate, must come from a certain removed place, so to say, and manifest itself in a certain way. The other piece of virtue, however, in ch. 5, explains how it is not *just* a habit either, though it may be acquired through habit. The appertaining notion is ἔξις. The idea is that there is some sense in which a virtue is always actively chosen. It is not simply a habit or predisposition to which we happen to be subject. It expresses some level of intentionality. But, since virtue is acquired through habit, it cannot be something like a present choice, since our present choice is not governed by habit. It is rather the (active) movement from an accumulation of choices, the ἔξις, to the action in each particular instance. The choices determine the action actively, but not directly and at once.

When we recall that we are talking about that part of the soul which participates with reason only by being able to listen to it, we see in another way how this habituation must work. Speaking in this manner, this part of the soul expresses an appetite (which does not necessarily determine action, as it may be subordinated to reason), which appetite, not being able to avail itself of things like calculation or rapid intentional change, cannot help but express itself. Like a bench-made shoe, its character is subject to modification over time, but nothing can break it in (for better or worse) but wearing it for a time.

With this the notion expressed above in B can perhaps come into a measure of focus: virtue of character supplies ends by their expression of their accumulated desire. It

supplies good ends or bad depending on the particular accumulation.

Of course, one may still wonder what ends are the good ends. This is a complicated question that can be addressed only later, but we must note in passing here that it is in ch. 6 that the form of the ends is explicated: they are (often enough) a mean condition between two vices. Let us now move unto A.

Let us start with this concept of cleverness (ch. 12). It is essentially the raw ability to bring about ends. But it is not quite φρονήσις. That “eye of the soul does not develop its active condition without virtue...for demonstrative reasoning about thing to be done has a starting point...and this does not show itself except to a good person; for vice warps someone and makes one be wrong about the sources that govern action” (1144a29). In other words, φρονήσις, a truth-disclosing power of the thinking part of the soul, must be directed towards the right thing to be realized out of cleverness. Why? At first blush: because “demonstrative reasoning about a thing to be done...does not show itself except to a good person”. But this reason isn't quite satisfactory. Is there really any substantial difference between cleverness and φρονήσις? In particular, when the end is a good end, does the reasoning that clever calculation provide change? Is it better? Or do we just call it something different? And if it does have something to do with demonstrative reasoning only showing itself to the good, then why is that the case? Isn't this just saying the same thing? Let it stand. Move unto the other side of A (ch. 13).

“If one gains intelligence, it carries over into action, and the active condition that resembles a virtue will then be a virtue in the governing sense...[this] does not come about without practical judgement” (1144b12). In other words, virtue is only wholly complete (it is only in the governing sense) when νοῦς is present. The idea on this side of the coin seems to be more substantial: right virtue (seeming virtue), being an end, might be carried out, in the absence of φρονήσις, in a dangerous way, since the means will not have in that case been prudently provided, only the end. So Aristotle reserves the term virtue in the governing sense for virtue carried about under the guidance of νοῦς, and φρονήσις.

But, then, putting the two sides of A together, we see that the thinking and appetitive parts of the soul are inextricable from one another (in their complete state) and must simultaneously be operative for the action to be elevated to the best kind. This inextricability is in some sense the prize of this essay. And it is no small claim, on the face of it, that proper human ἐνεργεία requires this specific coöperation of the thinking and appetitive parts of the soul. We have, in particular, moved far from preparatory claim from the end of bk. 1 that identified human good with his unique = proper function. The contribution of Γ to all this is the identification of this coupling with “the source of man”; it reinforces its foundational status.

However, we have seen that questions about the precise mechanics of this all remain outstanding. And the real (root) source of the ends of action are not yet clear. On the one hand, we have seen how the two parts of the soul, having different natures, must have been well-prepared and carefully balanced to couple to produce right action: ἔξις accumulating choices to provide the right end and φρονήσις the means, together, reciprocally. But on the other, that this is how it works tells us nothing (much) about the actual resulting action. This seems to be the obvious worry. But I wonder whether, before initiating a thorough investigation of the mechanics of νοῦς one might just heed the hint of reciprocal action inside of νοῦς: between changeless first terms and variable ultimate particulars, which concludes (ch. 11 bk. 6) with Aristotle suggesting, it seems, that this content we are looking for is ultimately to be found progressively in life: “So one ought to pay attention to the undemonstrated statements and opinions of people who are experienced or old, or of people with practical judgement, no less than to the thing they demonstrate, for by having an eye sharpened by experience, they see rightly.” (1143b10ff)