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### Aristotle on virtue: a response to Thomas Hurka

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# ARISTOTLE ON VIRTUE : A RESPONSE TO HURKA

A. W. Price

Thomas Hurka's essay is a splendid antidote to deferential treatments of Aristotle. If there are any Aristotelians who will read it without finding their understanding challenged and clarified, the present writer is not one of them. Hurka's indictment comes ostensibly under seven heads. Yet, in fact, all but one of these (and that I shall neglect) relate to the same issue: the motivations that are proper to virtuous action. It is not simple to identify Aristotle's view of these; it is hardly simpler to decide – as I shall not – what view to take of them ourselves.

## I

We may start by distinguishing *external* and *internal* goals characteristic of virtuous action. Let me take as an example an anecdote about Socrates' courage told by Alcibiades in Plato's *Symposium* :

People were already scattered, and he was withdrawing, Laches with him ... He was making his way along there just as he does here at home ..., observing people on our own side and on the enemy's in the same calm way, and making it plain to anyone, even if they were some distance away, that if anyone laid a hand on him, they'd meet with some pretty stiff resistance. That's why he actually got away safely, along with his companion (221a2-b7, tr. Rowe).

Socrates well instances Aristotle's brave man who, in the presence of great danger, is only 'gently' or 'mildly' afraid (*ērema*, *Eudemian Ethics* [EE] III.1 1228b29, 38); though not without apprehension (which is why he keeps looking around), he is free of disturbance (he is *atarachos*, *Nicomachean Ethics* [NE] III.8 1117a19, III.9 1117a31). Like the *megalopsychos* or man of proper pride, he maintains an even step and a level voice (IV.3 1125a12-16). And all this not idly, but in order to save his own life, and (as Alcibiades' narrative emphasizes) that of his companion, Laches. A different agent might risk danger gratuitously in order to display his *sang-froid*; Socrates is a sensible man, and not a swashbuckler. The danger is inescapable, and he faces it with composure in order to save two lives.

*That* is his external goal. (In a happier situation, this would have been victory.) He may also have an internal goal: to show himself brave, and thereby – as Aristotle would have it – to achieve the fine or noble (*to kalon*).

Practical deliberation starts, as I read Aristotle, from a concrete goal that an agent adopts in context. In the *EE*, the general statement 'Those who have no target before them are not in a position to deliberate' (II.10 1226b29-30) comes immediately after a specific example: 'The carrying of goods is a cause of walking if it is for the sake of that that a man walks' (b28-9). Socrates' goal was to save his own life and that of Laches. Had his goal been different, say to kill a Bœotian, he would have behaved differently.

However, saying this cannot suffice to show his action to be brave. For deliberation that is simply oriented towards achieving a certain concrete goal succeeds through a mere ‘cleverness’ (*deinotēs*) that ‘is such as to be able to do the things that tend towards the mark we have set before ourselves, and to hit it’ (*NE* VI.12 1144a24-6, tr. Ross). For courage as a virtue, closely linked to practical wisdom, the agent needs two further capacities; his initial selection of an end must manifest a good character sensitive to context; and in thinking through *how* to achieve that end he must exercise a good judgement about what is worth pursuing or enduring for the sake of what. (This may lead him to discard his initial end in favour of another.) Aristotle pairs these two when he writes, ‘Virtue makes the end right, practical wisdom the things towards this’ (1144a7-9). This somewhat cryptic remark is best understood by reference to *EE* II.11, where we read: ‘Does virtue make the goal or the things towards the goal? We say that it is the goal, for of this there is neither reasoning nor a *logos*’ (1227b23-5). The agent’s character reveals itself in what occurs to him as an external goal worth achieving in the situation in which he finds himself. He then calculates how he may achieve this, or – if there are alternative ways or means – *best* achieve this (*NE* III.3 1112b15-17).

Obstacles of various kinds may then obtrude. It may turn out simply impossible to achieve the goal in the context: ‘If we come to an impossibility, we give up the search, e.g. if we need money and this cannot be got’ (1112b24-6). A different impossibility is if the goal can be achieved, but only in a way that is ethically out of the question. Less dramatically, the cost of achieving this goal may be such that it is better to pursue another goal less desirable in itself, but cheaper to achieve in context. Estimating this requires reasoning that is not purely instrumental, and yet also falls within practical wisdom. We read in the *De Anima* [*DA*], ‘Whether one shall do this thing or do that thing it is the work of reasoning to decide. And such reason necessarily implies the power of measurement by a single standard; for what one pursues is the greater good’ (III.11 434a7-9). What Aristotle means here by ‘measurement by a single standard’ (*hēni metrein*) is not clear: it can hardly mean a universal standard that applies in every context; it might mean a single standard relevant to the present context, or (more realistically still) a single standard for each comparison that has to be made on the way towards a final arbitration.

Such complications lie, I believe, behind a sentence that has been much debated: ‘If it is characteristic of the practically wise to have deliberated well, excellence in deliberation will be correctness with regard to what conduces the end of which practical wisdom is the true supposition’ (VI.9 1142b31-3). On the face of it, this contradicts statements that the end is provided not by practical wisdom, but by virtue. It may then be suggesting that practical wisdom has two distinct spheres of operation: it identifies first the best end (either in general, or in context), and then the best means (certainly in context). However, we do better justice at once to the other evidence I have cited, and to the realities of the case, if we notice that the sentence places wisdom’s role in the selection of an end *within* deliberation, and not in advance of it. I take Aristotle’s thought to be that *truth* in the selection of an end is only reliably achieved when an exploration of possible ways and means has identified which goal is best practicable in context.

So understood, Aristotle is faithful to the familiar phenomenology of practical thinking. An agent doesn’t start his deliberations by (as it were) closing his eyes, and determining an a priori starting-point for deliberation. Nor does he achieve the feat, to be ruled as impossible by Hume, of inferring an ‘ought’ of decision from an ‘is’ of description. Rather, a reflective inspection of his situation prompts a selection of a provisional goal; this is followed by a thinking through of

possible ways and means that may discard or revise the goal, or confirm that, in context, it is achievable in a way that is acceptable.

Nowhere, here or elsewhere, is there is any indication of a general and effective decision procedure. (Anyone who reads *DA* III.11 in isolation as a gesture in the direction of one must find the gesture hollow.) Rather, there is a frequent emphasis upon the variability of circumstances and the absence of any universal rule (*NE* I.3 1094b11-27, V.10, IX.2 1164b27-1165a14). Aristotle envisages no superordinate end by reference to which subsidiary goals might be assessed. He displays no interest in innovation that could achieve neither theoretical truth (since it would not be a contribution to theory), nor practical truth (which would require its catching on and being realized in practice). To characterize what the agent is trying to achieve in general terms, we have to turn to *internal* goals. In a situation of danger, whatever other virtues may be operative the well-intentioned agent aims to act courageously, and thence *well*, and nobly or finely (*kalōs*). This demands attention to whatever considerations may be relevant to action in context: ‘The man who faces and who fears the right things and from the right motive, in the right way and at the right time, and who feels confidence under the corresponding conditions, is brave; for the brave man feels and acts according to the merits of the case and in whatever way the *logos* directs’ (III.6 1115a17-20). What he achieves by doing justice to the situational variables can be identified from case to case by reference to external goals, but in general terms only by reference to internal goals. Thus Aristotle links the exercise of overall judgement to the agent’s achievement of an ethical end: ‘The end of every activity is conformity the corresponding state of character. This is true, therefore, of the brave man as well as of others. But courage is noble. Therefore the end also is noble; for each thing is defined by its end. Therefore it is for a noble end that the brave man endures and acts as courage directs’ (III.7, 1115b20-4; cf. in general VI.5 1140a25-8).

In Aristotle’s view, therefore, virtues are not to be construed instrumentally as dispositions that measurably maximize the good effects of action. Rather, they are dispositions to act well in ways that can be roughly classified within spheres of action or feeling (as courage involves responses to danger involving two passions, fear and confidence), but which all involve a sensitivity to whatever considerations merit attention (whence the unity of the virtues). The core of what the agent is choosing and doing (which is a ‘this’ for the sake of ‘that’, viz. a way or means for the sake of an end, *EE* II.10 1226a11-13) is specified by a piece of reasoning that Aristotle takes to be syllogistic in form (cf. *NE* VI.12 1144a31-2, *De Motu Animalium* [*DMA*] 7). Yet this is the tip of an iceberg of perceiving and thinking that involves the whole situation, and has as its target nothing less than acting as, in context, is good and best. The agent thus displays a complex practical orientation that is all of a piece: it is only by pursuing the best external goal in context, with attention to other relevant costs and benefits, that he can aspire to realize his standing aspiration to live and act well.

## II

Action in Aristotle thus possesses a double teleology: for instance, *A* risks his own life in order to save *B*’s life – and all this (means and end taken together) for the sake of acting bravely, finely, and well. Here risking his own life is instrumental towards saving *B*’s; without any such worthwhile goal it would not be brave, but rash. And it is only if he risks his own life for another’s that we have a paradigm of acting finely. Aristotle finds it characteristic of the decent

agent that ‘he does many things for his friends and country, and if necessary dies for them’ (*NE* IX.8 1169a18-20).<sup>1</sup>

We have to bring together two general claims. *eudaimonia* is always the final end of action (or more precisely, as becomes clear later, deliberate action): ‘It is a first principle; for it is for the sake of this that we all do all that we do’ (I.12 1102a2-3). Equally, acting virtuously involves choosing to do what is virtuous for its own sake (II.4 1105a28-32). Any apparent tension between these two statements can be allayed by noting that it is *by* and *in* doing what he does (say, risking his life in the right context for a good goal) that the agent succeeds in being *eudaimōn* in the sense of acting well. Within the agent’s motivation we can distinguish these two elements: *instrumentally*, he risks his life as a means to achieving an external goal; *constitutively*, he does all that as a way – and perhaps the *only* way open to him in context – of acting well.

Aristotle at once confirms this, and apparently confuses it, when he is arguing in X.7 in support of his own opinion that even better than ethical action is the contemplation of scientific truth. One may half regret this chapter as piece of higher salesmanship. Taken on its own (and in separation from X.8), it might be interpreted as taking back the *NE*’s valuation of ethical action as a great good in itself, and replacing that by an eccentric claim that only intellectual contemplation is *itself* a way of being *eudaimōn*. In the course of pursuing his argument, Aristotle says the following:

If among actions in accordance with the virtues political and military actions are distinguished by nobility and greatness, and these are unpleasurable and aim at an end and are not desirable for their own sake, but the activity of reason, which is contemplative, seems both to be superior in serious worth and to aim at no end beyond itself ... it follows that this will be perfect human *eudaimonia* (1177b16-25).

On the face of it, this is not only inconsistent, but incoherent: if (e.g.) military action can itself achieve nobility, how can it fail to be desirable for its own sake? (The *kalon* is not an instrumental value.) However, coherence can be restored if we recall the exact wording of II.4: there it was said that acts that are in accordance with (*kata*) the virtues may fail to be done virtuously. For example, if I risk my life in battle in a way that might well benefit my comrades, but without the right motivations (I may not intend their benefit, or, even if I do, I find no intrinsic value in acting so, but view it as a fatal chore), I fail to act virtuously in the full sense, and hence to act well. What accords with the virtues, but fails *in itself* to achieve an intrinsic value, is just what I do concretely (which I have been describing vaguely as ‘risking my life’). *That* has no value that is independent of its instrumental role. This differentiates it from contemplating, whose value is only intrinsic, and which can be appreciated as being incommensurable in value just so long as it is permissible in context. The evaluation of virtuous action is therefore more complex than that of contemplation: risking one’s life, taken as such, is only instrumentally valuable, i.e. in serving a good external end; if it *does* pursue that extrinsic value in context, we have a more complex act – risking one’s life for a good end – that may well (in the absence of any overriding counter-consideration) possess the intrinsic value of acting well. We could put Aristotle’s point as follows: *contemplating truth*, taken as such, is closer to

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<sup>1</sup> If man endures death in order to escape greater pains, this is not courage (*EE* III.1 1229b12-14). Of course, different goals are appropriate to different virtues. The health that is a goal of temperance (*NE* III.11 1119a16) is doubtless the agent’s own; by contrast, the liberal are loved for being useful (IV.1 1120a22), evidently to others.

*eudaimonia* than is *risking one's life*, taken as such; we have more to add in the second case than in the first if we are to identify a case of acting well and achieving *eudaimonia*. How far this justifies placing contemplation *above* virtuous action is debatable; yet, so read, it is intelligible – and confirms my understanding of Aristotle.

The ethical structure that I have identified has two further features that we should note. First, it is not implied that *A* values *B's life* less than he values his own acting well (as if, in a different situation, he would rather that *B* died than that he should, on a single occasion, fail to act well). It is *saving B's life* that he pursues for the sake of acting well. Part, though not all, of the content of this is that, if the situation were such that saving *B's life* would not be acting well, he would not pursue it (or only in error). Secondly, a question whether *A* acts well in order to save *B's life* does not arise. Adding that *A* not only risks his life, but acts well, for *B's* sake would reiterate the same motivation with nothing gained except confusion. If *A* were so motivated even in acting well, it should follow that he not only acts well, but also acts *better than well*, since he is acting well out of a noble, because altruistic, motive. But then even acting better than well should be enhanced if *it also* is generously motivated – which would yield an infinite sequence of bootstrapping achievements. A safer rule is that motivation cannot thus be reduplicated one level up: the altruistic motive attaches to the act of risking his life *whereby* the brave man acts well, but not to acting well itself. Acting well is not the sort of thing to be enhanced in this way. It itself *cannot* be other-interested – which should absolve it of the charge of being self-interested.

This already gives us an understanding of Aristotle's claim in I.7 that, while many things are worth pursuing for their own sake, only *eudaimonia* is fully final or perfect (*teleios*) in being pursued for its own sake, and never for the sake of anything else (1097a33-4). Yet it becomes evident that, so read, this evaluation of *eudaimonia* is restricted: that its value is final in this sense does not do much to show that its value is great. Compare a connected concept: *acting commendably*. It is doubtless better to act commendably than to act otherwise; and acting commendably is a thing achieved by having the right motivations, and not a thing that becomes valuable, or even *more* valuable, by being well motivated itself. And yet, as a value, it seems minor even if it is not epiphenomenal: meriting commendation is not a mere side-effect (as perspiration may be of physical motion in battle), and may well be a goal of the agent; and yet it is a hardly a *salient* goal, and one without which his attitude to his action would be significantly different.

What makes it *important* that, by risking his life for a good cause, the brave man is thereby *acting well*? This must be some feature of his action that connects with another formal feature of *eudaimonia*, which is its *self-sufficiency*: 'The self-sufficient we now define as that which when isolated makes life desirable and lacking in nothing; and such we think *eudaimonia* to be' (I.7 1097b14-16).<sup>2</sup> This should not be read as implying that, when an agent consciously acts well, he must suppose that, within the context of his present action, nothing could have gone better. *That* can't be what Aristotle means when he later remarks that the good man 'has nothing to regret' (he is *ametamelētos*, IX.4 1166a29). There he may merely mean that the good man has never to regret *how he acted*, wishing that, even with the information he then possessed, he had decided and acted otherwise. I.7 must be claiming more than this, but not that nothing could have enhanced his life at the time. (Very trivially, his immediate experience might be better still either without a pang of toothache, or with a praline in his mouth.) Exactly what more Aristotle has in mind must connect with his idea that the agent who acts well may also be acting *finely* or

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<sup>2</sup> I do not here discuss the debated lines that follow (1097b16-20); on them, see Price (2011: 52-3).

*nobly*. This is evidently in part a hedonic concept. There is a pleasure to be found even in dying as a hoplite: ‘The end which courage sets before itself would seem to be pleasant, but to be concealed by the attending circumstances, as happens also in athletic contests’ (III.8 1117a35-b3). One may compare a hope in I.10 that, even in great misfortunes, nobility may ‘shine through’ (1110b30-1). A more transparent pleasure accompanies the life and death of a hero: ‘He would prefer a short period of intense pleasure to a long one of mild enjoyment, a twelvemonth of noble life to many years of humdrum existence’ (IX.8 1169a22-4). However, more needs to be said to explain what this unique value is that can provide so rare and rich an enjoyment.<sup>3</sup> Here, I feel, Aristotle rather lets us down: it remains unclear precisely what constitutes *to kalon*, and how it supervenes intelligibly upon the conditions for acting virtuously laid down in II.4 (cf. Price, 2011: 68).

There are thus at least two aspects to Aristotle’s conception of the agent who ultimately acts for the sake of acting well. In part, this requires that he is not putting on blinkers in pursuit of some limited goal, but trying to do justice to however many, and varied, considerations arise within the context of his action. Additionally, it finds a special and intrinsic value in action that achieves this goal. It is *within* action (and certain other activities), and not *in the results of* action, that the best of life is to be found. In Alcibiades’ anecdote, it is Socrates, and not Laches, who had the better day. We may or may not find this credible. Yet it is just what Aristotle committed himself to when he argued that the human good is nothing other than ‘activity of soul in accordance with virtue’ (I.7 1098a16-17).

### III

In one respect, the egocentricity of Aristotle’s ethical eudaimonism enables him to capture an essential feature of morality. Any ethical agent must be centrally concerned, as he or she acts, to be acting well and not badly. This is what it is to take responsibility for one’s own actions – a responsibility that one *cannot* have for the free actions of others. Such a concern was manifested by Socrates on a famous occasion that he narrated to the Athenian jurors as follows:

When the oligarchy was established, the Thirty summoned me to the Hall, along with four others, and ordered us to bring Leon from Salamis, so that he might be executed ... Then I showed again, not in words but in action, that ... death is something I couldn’t care less about, and that my whole concern is not to do anything unjust or impious. That government, powerful as it was, did not frighten me into any wrongdoing. When we left the Hall, the other four went to Salamis and brought in Leon, but I went home. I might have been put to death for this, had not the government fallen shortly afterwards (*Apology* 32c3-d8, tr. Grube).

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<sup>3</sup> It may appear a further element of egocentricity that this pleasure is taken *in one’s own activity*, and not, say, in the benefit to a recipient. However, this is inevitable, since the pleasure is a form of enjoyment, and *I* cannot enjoy *another’s* sense of relief in being saved from danger (though I might enjoy perceiving it). However, it would be wrong to infer that I lack the attitudes towards his well-being that one would expect of someone willing to risk his life on another’s behalf. Aristotle recognizes a sympathetic pleasure or pain (*sunchairein*, *sunalgein*, IX.4 1166a7-8, IX.10 1171a6-8, 29-30). He disparages men who resemble women in liking to receive sympathy (X.11 1171b10-11), but respects the attitude of a mother separated from her children for whom it is a sufficient consolation to see them flourish, even if she is unknown to them (VIII.8 1159a28-33).



He did *not* reason that, since in all likelihood an innocent man would die anyway (and why not then one rather than two?), he was free to save his own skin. Instead, he decided *to act justly*, where ‘acting justly’ denotes a way of acting open to him that he ranked incomparably above other ways. The thought that evil may come into the world, but *must not through me*, is not culpably egocentric. It places my agency, where it must be for each agent, at the centre of my life. What it precisely does *not* do, which would indeed be egocentric, is to displace that concern by another that is focused upon personal pleasure or advantage. To love one’s neighbour as oneself is not to be indifferent as to whether *I* do wrong, or *he* does. Such an attitude would be not impartial, but irresponsible. Yet to take responsibility for one’s action is not to suppose, insanely, that it matters more from some non-agential point of view (say God’s, or – less intelligibly – Sidgwick’s point of view *of the universe*) if I act badly, than if someone else does. *That* is not the reason why one kicks oneself if one has acted badly oneself, and not if another has acted badly – which rests rather upon the logic of *kicking oneself*. Personal responsibility is inescapable, and inescapably first-personal.

In refusing to collaborate in arresting Leon, even at the likely cost of losing his own life, Socrates was acting in accordance with what is known as ‘Democritus’ Maxim’ (B 45), roughly ‘It is worse to do wrong than to be wronged.’ This is most familiar to us from early Plato (e.g., *Crito* 49b, *Gorgias* 469c), but is also explicit in Aristotle: ‘Acting unjustly is the worse [of acting unjustly and being unjustly treated], for it involves vice and is blameworthy’ (*NE* V.11 1138a31-2). The thought is not that, for each agent, it is impersonally worse that he should wrong anyone else than that anyone else should wrong him; rather that, morally speaking, it is better *for him*, or *from his point of view*, to be a victim than a villain (cf. Müller 1977).

Such an attitude respects the integrity of individual agency, and is central and essential to morality as we know it. However, it may root this thought deeper in human nature if we view it as the ethical transformation of a basic truth about human responses. Richard Wollheim (1984: 237) introduces the idea that self-concern is basic, and not derivative from other concerns, by imagining the following alternatives:

I am told something like the following: Someone whom I know will to-night meet a friend whom he loves and misses. Someone whom I know will tomorrow morning wake up blind. Then I learn that this someone, the someone whom I know and to whom this will happen, is me. There is a characteristic ... way in which I shall respond to such a lesson. This response I call ‘the tremor’.

The thought that will characteristically generate the tremor is just this: it is coming to *me*. It is a response that is spontaneous, involuntary, unmediated. It does not arise through the following steps: I foresee something good or bad for a future self; I side with that self; I feel the tremor. It is enough that I learn that it will be me, and am able to let that thought register and reverberate. The last thing it rests upon is some evaluation, from whatever reflective point of view, of my own welfare as a peculiarly proper object of my concern.

I suggest that we can place Democritus’ Maxim as a moralized derivative of the same basic human attitude: agents come to care, spontaneously and imperatively, about how they *act*. In order to act well, they have at the very least to avoid acting wrongly. Aristotle accepts some general restrictions: one is never to commit adultery, theft, or murder (II.6 1107a8-17); and no doubt very many other ways of acting, though not universally wrong, are excluded ‘for the most part’. One may compare the side-constraints that Robert Nozick (1974: 28-35) places upon how one may achieve one’s ends. Again, one needs to be careful in defining how this falls within Aristotle’s eudaimonism. It would be a distortion to include among the ends that one is not to

achieve impermissibly acting well itself – as if, among the ways in which one might act well, there are wrong ways. Rather, no agent can count as acting well if he infringes such constraints; he thereby rather achieves the opposite of *eudaimonia*, which is *kakodaimonia*. Let us return to the case of courage. An agent may risk his life for the sake of his friends, and all this for the sake of acting well. Here, as I argued, he needs to be pursuing a good concrete end if he is to count as acting well. Now we have a further condition: he must not pursue that end impermissibly (say by targeting not the enemy, but some innocents who happen to be in the way) if he is to be acting well.

The upshot is indeed a complexity of motivation. Is this an *implausible* complexity? It is hard to see that it is. Let me rehearse yet again the levels of justification: I pursue some concrete goal, aiming at the same time to respect other goals of mine, and all this in order that I can count as acting well all things considered; in so acting, since I have a special concern about my own agency, I take a special pleasure. We can well ask how much of this need be conscious, with an awareness of the danger of becoming *self-conscious*.<sup>4</sup> Here we may lack the evidence to pin Aristotle down. He certainly expects deliberation to be conscious, but he also admits that at least obvious elements need not actually be rehearsed (*DMA* 7 701a25-8); so when he makes *eudaimonia* the end of ends (e.g., I.12 1102a2-3), he need not be supposing that ‘How am I to act well?’ is always a question that the agent consciously puts to himself.

I am well aware that saying these things does not amount to a full rebuttal even of those of Hurka’s objections to which they are relevant. What I hope to have done is to provide a framework within some distinctive features of Aristotle’s conception of virtuous action can justly be assessed.

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- |           |   |
|-----------|---|
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### *Secondary*

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<sup>4</sup> The congratulatory self-awareness of the *megalopsychos* (IV.3) is not something that modern Aristotelians would wish to defend.