Having the Capacity for Theoretical Reason

Aristotle, in the *Nicomachean Ethics* examines what human virtue (*arête*, excellence) is, how one becomes virtuous, and how being-in-activity virtuously is related to achieving the good that can be realized in action (1096b33), "that for the sake of which everything else is done" (1097a18-19).[1] Aristotle chooses to ground his approach to this question in the "function" (*ergon*) of human being, which is the kind of work that is distinctive of the human being (I.7, 1097b23 ff.). He identifies three kinds of activities (*energeiai*) of which human beings are capable, which he then associates with three parts of soul: nutrition and growth (*threptike … kai auxetike*), perception/sensation (*aesthesis*), and what he calls "rational action" or the "being-in-action of the part that has reason" ("*praktike tis tou logon echontos*") (1098a1-4). His thought seems to be: human being has a certain constitution or structure, as do all beings; if one wishes to know what is the best work or activity human being can achieve, one should start by understanding what work or activity is distinctive of the human being, and then proceed to discover what the greatest excellence or perfection of that might be. Stipulating that putting a capacity into activity (*energeia*) is better than merely possessing it (1098a6), and assuming that, since only human beings, among natural beings have reason, Aristotle concludes, "Thus the proper work [*ergon*] of a human being must be the being-at-work [*energeia*] of soul in accordance with reason [*kata logon*], or at least not without reason" (1098a7-8).

Since Aristotle grounds his exploration and account of virtue in the functional structure of the human soul, the *Nicomachean Ethics*, as it explores what virtue is and how human beings may attain it, offers a compelling account of the capacities the human being has to be-at-work and to be-in-activity. For today, the particular question I wish to explore is what Aristotle means by the phrase "with reason" (*kata logon*), in particular with regard to his discussion and account of ethical virtue (*ethike*), and what his investigation of ethical virtue tells us about the capacities of human being to achieve the good.

In chapter 13 of Book I, preparatory to launching his investigation of virtue, Aristotle redraws his outline of the soul. He replaces "perception" with "desire" (*epithumetikon kai*

[11] Most passages from Aristotle's text follow Martin Ostwald, *Aristotle: Nicomachean Ethics* (Prentice Hall, 1962). When I borrow from other translations, I will note that. Occasionally, I will amend Ostwald's translation, striving for a more literal rendition.

holos orektikon) (1102a32 ff.; 1102b30), because perception per se does not move us to act, whereas desire does (see VI.2, 1139a19). He also characterizes both the nutritive part and the newly recast desiring part as irrational (1102a28). The third part remains, for the moment, simply rational. He then drops the nutritive part, as it plays no role in action.

Aristotle explains why he characterizes desire as irrational (*alogon*), saying that the desiring part "fights against and resists the guidance of reason" (1102b17), and it "opposes and reacts against reason" (1102b24). Yet he also says of the desiring part that it "participates [*metechei*] in reason somewhat [*pos*]" (1102b30-31) because it is capable of "complying with reason and accepting its leadership" (1102b32), and it can "listen to reason as [a child] would to a father" (1103a3). He then turns to explore how the desiring part of the soul—which he will identify with our disposition or character (*hexis*)—can become or be made excellent.

Someone who has an excellent character or disposition desires what is truly good. Human beings are born with the capacity (*dunamis*) for this excellence, but the capacity has to be developed. It is developed, claims Aristotle at the beginning of Book II, by the person engaging in habitually doing good actions for, he says, "ethical virtue (*ethike*) develops out of habit (*ethos*)" (1103a17). This means that we become just (i.e., come to have a just character, a disposition that desires what is just) by habitually—repeatedly and consistently—doing just actions, and self-controlled by habitually practicing self-control. "For from similar *energeiai* come-to-be [similar] dispositions (*hexeis*)" (1103b21-22). At this point, Aristotle is emphasizing the irrational, or, perhaps better stated, the childlike nature of desire. Character is molded or trained, not intellectually taught, and this seems in keeping with his saying earlier that desire has the capacity to listen to and follow reason as a child listens to a parent.[2] In light of this, it seems perfectly fitting for Aristotle to say that the goal in ethical training and education is "not in order to know what virtue is, but in order to become good" (1103b28).

If indeed habituation is what shapes our character, that suggests that we are products of our upbringing, shaped and molded by our parents and our teachers from a very early age—before we are able to think for ourselves. By the time we come to be thinking beings, our characters will have been largely determined. It also implies that a good upbringing is key:

[2] One is reminded here of Socrates' education of the guardians in the city in speech in the *Republic* (esp. Book III).

commands to do good actions, consistently and repeatedly offered, supplemented with either reward or punishment, will shape our character into something good (see 1106b10-12). What remains then to do is to acquire experience and understanding of the world in order to be able to exercise or express our good character by doing truly good actions. To be sure, Aristotle later in Book II raises several questions about whether habituation is sufficient to makes us be truly virtuous persons and agents, wondering "if they perform just actions and exercise self-control, [must they not already be] just and self-controlled" (II.4, 1105a18-20). And yet, almost immediately he appears to dismiss the difficulty saying that, "without performing [just and self-controlled acts], nobody could even be on the way to becoming good" (1105b10-12).

Given that desire is for some end, and the shape of our desires constitutes our character, our character is what determines the ends toward which we direct our choices and our actions. For action begins with some target—a desired or wished-for end. If we have a good character, our desired target will be good, for virtue "makes us aim at the right target" (VI.12, 1144a8).

The way Aristotle has been developing his account, it presents us with a grave difficulty, which he leads up to by first discussing whether human beings are voluntary or involuntary agents, or, in other words, are we justly held responsible for our choices and our actions. What Aristotle wants to claim is that we are, indeed, voluntary agents, in virtually all circumstances. Considering the commonly offered extenuating excuses of force and ignorance, Aristotle concludes that only in the most extreme case—where the agent contributes nothing—may one say one was forced and acted involuntarily (III.1, 1110b15-17). With regard to ignorance, Aristotle allows that we may be ignorant of certain particulars, but we are never excusably ignorant of the universal, which is, presumably, the good (1110b30-1111a1). That seems to mean that we are responsible for knowing that we should be aiming for the good and—at least on some general level—we are responsible for knowing what that good is. Applying his recurring example of medicine and health, this is analogous to saying that, though not everyone is a doctor, and therefore not everyone has the science or knowledge of medicine and its mastery of particulars, nevertheless everyone should know that the aim of the doctor is health (the good), and one should also know, at least in a general way, what health is.

The difficulty, which seems to stem directly from Aristotle's claim that ethical virtue, and therefore good character, comes to be by habituation, is that that appears to make us mere products of our upbringing rather than responsible, self-ruling or independent, agents. Aristotle highlights this difficulty when he says,

But someone might say that all human beings pursue what appears good to them [*tou phainomenou agathou*], but they are not in control of [*ou kurioi*] how things appear; depending on the kind of person each man is, that is how the good appears to him [*hopoios poth' ekastos esti, toiouto kai to telos phainetai auto*] (III.5, 1114a31-1114b1).

If, as the objection suggests, we are merely products of our nature and our upbringing, with no control over how the good appears to us, then it cannot be the case that we are truly voluntary agents. For since the end guides and thereby to a great extent determines the means, we should be pitied and pardoned for our choices and our acts, but not held responsible, or blamed or punished (see III.1, 1111a1-2; cf. 1110a17-18). On the other hand, if Aristotle is correct in his claim that we truly have the capacity, and therefore the responsibility, most particularly to know what we are doing and to know that it is good (1110b30-1111a1), then it seems that something more than habituation—even if it is good habituation and good upbringing (see 1105b10-12)—is needed in order for us truly to achieve ethical virtue and to become truly good. [3] In short, the question the objector raises is whether or not, and to what extent and how, human beings truly do have the capacity to alter or overcome either their upbringing or their nature, such that they may justly be held responsible for knowing the good. For Aristotle to uphold his argument and defend it against the objector, he must show that how

[3] In a lot of contemporary debates, the discussion is presented as an opposition between nature and nurture. Aristotle is presenting something quite different. Whether our dispositions are molded by nurture or (pre)determined by nature, both possibilities would seem to align with the "opponent" Aristotle is citing. For, while he focuses largely on habituation and training, he also acknowledges in a few passages that different individuals have different innate dispositions or characteristics, and that these may cause them to approach and to see the world differently. For example, some by nature seem to be more timid, whereas others seem to be more daring; some perhaps might be more angry whereas others might be more pacific. (See, for example, Aristotle's discussion about how the mean appears differently to different people, II.7, 1107b27-1108a1; 1108a32-35; 1108b4-6.) In the end, both those who have been habituated and those who are predisposed are determined in their view of the end, and it is this that Aristotle wishes to challenge and, ultimately, reject.

the end appears to an individual depends (to some extent at least), and is within the control of, the individual himself. And though he does say in Book III that we must be [held] responsible because we are in some way [*pos*] co-causes [*sunaitioi*] of our disposition or character (1114b22-23), he does not explain there how this is so. That task he appears to leave to Book VI.

Aristotle begins Book VI stating that he has completed his discussion of the ethical virtues and that it is now time to discuss the other virtues, by which he means the virtues of the thinking or rational part of the soul (*dianoia*; *peri tou logou echontos*) (1138b35-1139a3; 1139a5). The reader is inclined to think at this point that Aristotle has completed his discussion of virtuous character (*hexis*) and is now turning to examine the intellectual virtue (*dianoetike*) that he had mentioned at the beginning of Book II (II.1, 1103a14), in keeping with the apparent sharp divide he had drawn earlier between the desiring part of the soul and the rational part, and the distinct functions and corresponding virtues of each. What Aristotle actually does, however, is rather different. While he does indeed examine the rational part of the human soul (the part having reason: *to logon echon*), he claims from the beginning that the choice necessary for truly virtuous action requires that the desire be correct (*orexin orthen*) and the reasoning true (*logon alethe*) 1139a25), that "what reason affirms, desire must pursue"[4] ("*ta auta ton men [i.e., logos] phanai, ten de [i.e., orexis] diokein,*" 1139a25-26), and that "the good state for the [part] that thinks and acts is for truth to be in agreement [*homologos echousa*] with correct appetite" (1139a29-31). And, when he arrives at the end of Book VI, Aristotle announces: "We must consider virtue yet one more time (*palin*)" (1144b1). He then proceeds to distinguish between what he calls "natural virtue [*phusike arête*]" and "virtue in the strict sense [*kuria arête*]."[5] Natural virtue, Aristotle says, is in us since our birth, manifest in us since childhood (1144b4-5, 8).[6] And yet, he says, "we seek (*zetoumen*) something more, the good in

[4] Here I follow W.D. Ross's translation, from *"The Basic Works of Aristotle*," ed. by Richard McKeon (Random House, 1941).

[5] Ross's translation. Ostwald translates "*kuria*" as true, but Ross's translation seems closer to the sense of "authoritative" implied by the Greek.

[6] Whether Aristotle means that each of us has all of these inclinations—for justice, moderation, etc.—in us already from birth, or whether some of us have some and some, others (accounting for the different natural dispositions or temperaments he seems to be referencing at the end of Book II. See II.7, 1107a28-1108a8; II.8, 1109a13-14;

the strict sense [*kurios*], and to possess these qualities in a different way" (1144b6-8). In order to achieve virtue "in the strict sense" and to come to possess a virtuous character (the virtuous characteristics) "in another way," according to Aristotle, we need the addition of *nous* (intelligence or mind) (1144b9).

At first glance, it appears that *nous* should play no role in ethical virtue. For just as Aristotle had initially drawn a sharp divide between (irrational) desire and reason (I.13 ff.; see also 1139a3-5), so too at the beginning of Book VI he draws a sharp divide between practical reason and theoretical reason: practical reason is concerned with things that "may be otherwise"; theoretical reason, with "things whose first principles do not admit of being otherwise" (1139a6-8). Action takes place within the sphere that is the concern of practical reason; good choice and virtuous action require both ethical virtue and *phronesis*. *Nous*, on the other hand, is knowledge of unchanging first principles (see 1140b34-45), and is thus an excellence of theoretical reason.

And yet without including theoretical reason in virtue, we would remain forever either as children (1144b8), or at the mercy of the chance effects of our nature and our upbringing (III.5, ca. 1114b1). In fact, although Aristotle opens Book VI with the ostensible purpose of defining virtuous practical reason (*phronesis*) in part by distinguishing it from other kinds of intellectual excellences, by the end of Book VI he is articulating the necessary role that theoretical reason has to play in *phronesis* and for human beings to become truly good and to act truly virtuously. And it is as he arrives at this conclusion that Aristotle truly answers the objection from Book III. For the objection implicitly denied that human beings have the capacity for theoretical reflection on and investigation of the good, insisting instead that we are slaves either to our upbringing or to our natures, or both.

Even more importantly, however, it is especially fitting—and telling, in order to refute the objection from Book III—that Aristotle assigns *nous* as the kind of thinking and knowledge that we need to transform our natural dispositions into true ethical virtue. For *nous* is knowledge of the truth of ultimate first principles (we find Aristotle attributing to *nous* knowledge of "*to eschaton*" as well as of *"archai*"; see, e.g., VI.6, 1141a8; VI.11, 1143a29). In

---

II.9, 1109b2-28), he does not make clear. The point, however, is that the natural inclination or disposition alone does not constitute the "*orexin orthen*" necessary for ethical virtue and truly virtuous action.

the case of a universally acknowledged topic of theoretical reason, such as geometry or mathematics (see VI.8, 1142a13), *nous* would know the first principles (as opposed to science, *episteme*, which must simply presuppose them: *NE* 1139b30; *Meta* IV, 1005a12-14); science would know and be able to show apodeictically what follows from those first principles; and one would have *sophia* when one had both *nous* and *episteme* together (see VI.7, 1141a17-18: "it is necessary for the wise man to know not only what follows from first principles, but also that he have the truth concerning the first principles").

But what kind of knowledge is "*nous*"? Aristotle says that it is knowledge (or, many wish to claim, intuition or insight) into "*ta eschata*"—"ultimate particulars," which may mean either ultimate facts (a particular in all of its idiosyncratic particularity) or first principles. *Nous* is the knowledge of both (1143a35-36). It is not, however, as science is, apodeictic. For many interpreters, what this leaves is that it is a kind of intuition, as Aristotle speaks of "the eye of the soul" which "sees" the end, which is the guiding principle (*arche*) of the truly phronimos decision and virtuous action (1144a28-1144b1). To understand this "eye of the soul" as [mere] intuition, however, seems to fit more with the way Aristotle spoke in Book III than with the account he is developing in Book VI. For in Book III, when Aristotle was giving voice to the skeptical objection about whether we could ever know the true (now called "*kurios*") good, or whether we were confined to only the seeming good, he did his best to develop and support the objector's contention as much as possible. Thus, we hear him saying there that "the aiming at the end is not self-chosen [*authairetos*], one must be born, as it were [*hosper*], having the vision [*opsin*] by which to judge beautifully and to choose what is truly good; and he is well-endowed by nature in whom this grows beautifully" (1114b6-8). Here in Book VI, however, the keen "vision of the soul" is not a gift of nature, but an achievement of theoretical reason (*nous*). To understand this, we need to recognize, and Aristotle does draw our attention to this, that deductive thinking or demonstration is not the only kind of thinking that is possible; there is also inductive thinking (*epagoge*): "induction is the principle (*arche*) of [knowledge of] the universal; whereas demonstration proceeds from universals" (1139b28-29).[7] One is reminded here of Socrates' description, when he is discussing the divided line in *Republic* Book VI, of how

[7] Following Ross's translation.

one proceeds in the highest part of the intelligible realm: beginning from hypotheses, one makes one's way to the unhypothetical *archen* (*Rep* VI.510b6-7). When one arrives at the end of *epagoge* (induction), one "sees" the principle (*arche*), which seems to mean, it is obvious, it can be nothing else. And this might be why Aristotle calls *nous* a perception (*aesthesis*) at one point (1143b5). As he explains, it is not perception literally, namely, the kind associated with our five senses. Rather, it is the kind of perceiving we do "when we perceive that the triangle is the ultimate [figure]" (1142a27-29).[8] To arrive at *nous* requires a process of thinking, a process of moving from particular to universal (see *Post.An.* II.19, esp. 100a14-100b3), "and this process does not cease until the indivisible concepts, the true universals, are established" (*Post.An.* 100b2). This is the kind of thinking, Aristotle seems to say by the end of Book VI, that is essential if one is to have the possibility of achieving true virtue, *kuria arête*, which involves knowledge of what is truly good. But investigation into what is truly good is precisely what Aristotle is engaged in in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, as he explores the question of what is the highest human good, the highest end of action. The *Ethics*, therefore, offers both an account and an example of what one must consider and how one's investigation must proceed if one truly wishes to come to know the first principles, or the *archai*, and it makes it clear that what we need to do is to investigate and examine our hypotheses (or opinions or experiences—whatever we have gathered) if we are to arrive at these first principles.

In the *Metaphysics* Aristotle calls the kind of thinking that investigates *archai* "philosophy" (1005b7). Many take this to be an exclusive category, available only to a few. And perhaps in the highest sense, philosophy is only available to a few. But beginning as he did in the *Nicomachean Ethics* with the function of human being, the work of which human being as human being is capable, Aristotle seems to be offering to us at the same time a more comprehensive account. For his argument suggests that human beings in general (that is, as a genus) have the capacity to wonder whether their understanding of the good is in fact correct (see 1144b6-7: though we are born with some natural virtue, nevertheless "we seek something more…"). We have this capacity because we have theoretical reason: this allows us to begin from particulars and arrive at universals; we desire and pursue particular goods, but are also

[8] Here, I follow Ostwald. See also his note 37 about this passage.

able to wonder about and inquire into "the good life." Theoretical reason makes it possible for us to seek to support and defend the views we already have, but it also makes it possible for us to envision and explore other possibilities. Any human being who wonders if his understanding of the good is correct has already broken out of the deterministic cave articulated by the objector in Book III. But this possibility, Aristotle seems to be saying, is within all of us, it is part of what a human being is.

However long the path toward *nous* may be, the tools for beginning on this path are already within us: they include the innate desire for the good, together with the capacity for thinking, both of particulars and of universals, both practically and theoretically. What we need in order to develop these tools, and our capacities is not more habituators. What we need are individuals who will prod and prompt us to question and investigate, and share with us the best examples they have experienced and learned so that we too may learn from them.

The journey from where he began at the end of Book I, to where he arrives by the end of Book VI, is a long one. And yet Aristotle encapsulates it in one word. Where originally he had said that "virtue is in accordance with [*kata*] correct reason," he now says that "our disposition is virtuous only if united with [*meta*] correct reason" (1144b26-27). "In accordance with" was consonant with his likening the desiring part of the soul to a child. "United with," on the other hand, suggests a joint purpose, a functioning-together of character and reason without which we cannot fulfill our *ergon* or achieve the good.

--Evanthia Speliotis
Bellarmine University
September 2014