Aristotle on the Unity of Action

In the context of his ethics and action theory, Aristotle often uses various Greek phrases which we are very comfortable translating with the English ‘for the sake of’: he seems to speak, just as we do, about wanting or doing one thing for the sake of another thing. To use ‘for the sake of’ to mean something like ‘with the intention of achieving or bringing about’ is to talk like a contemporary philosopher of action. In the context of his natural philosophy, however, Aristotle often uses the same expressions in ways the contemporary reader will find perplexing, or, at the very least, antiquated. Aristotle applies the concept of ‘for the sake of’ where the concept of action is inapplicable: the stars move for the sake of the prime mover (Meta. L 7-81072b1-10; 1073a30-1073b1); all movements must be for the sake of the stars (Meta. L 8 1074a27); teeth keep growing throughout life in order to compensate for the fact that they are worn away (GA 745a19-32); the matter of an organism, or the embryo, or the child, exists for the sake of the adult organism (passim).

I suggest that in these cases we see Aristotle as asking the question “Why is there movement, as opposed to there not ever having been any such thing as movement?” or “What is movement for?” It makes sense that any answer other than “no reason,” will have to mention a purpose or point or good to which the existence of the thing whose existence is in question contributes. But my suggestion might serve to reinforce the suspicion that Aristotle invokes the “for the sake of” relation in such contexts in order to answer a question contemporary philosophy no longer really knows how to ask. Divorced from the context of intention, we’re not sure what it means to ask why or for what a thing exists.

The question to which this paper is directed is whether, if we cannot make sense of what Aristotle means when he says that movement and embryos and brains exist for a reason, we can take ourselves to make sense of what he means when he says that we act for reasons.

0. Preliminary Discussion

A. Chance

When Aristotle says that A is for the sake of B we can also say that B is A’s final cause, or, B causes A. Aristotle distinguishes between two ways in which causes cause: they cause kath hauto (essentially) or kata sumbebêkos (accidentally).

Some of Aristotle’s examples of accidental causation: the builder accidentally produces health, since he happens to (also) be a doctor (Meta. E 1026b37); the pale or musical man accidentally builds a house, since he happens to be a builder (Phys. 196b25-27); the confectioner accidentally makes a healthy thing, since his tasty product happens to be healthy (Meta. E 1027a2-4); the gardener accidentally digs up treasure (Meta. Δ 1025a15-17); the sailor accidentally sails to Aegina, carried there by shipwreck or pirates (Meta. Δ 1025a 26-29).

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1 charin, heneka, di’ heteron, di’allo, allou, or some phrase invoking ergon or telos or to apobainon (e.g. NE 1097b3, 1150a20-21) or to chrēsimon. [more Refs]
It is *doctoring* that is really for the sake of health; it is *tastiness* that pastry-cooking is really for; it is a *planting* that gardening is directed at; it is *somewhere else* that the sailor was trying to go. In these cases, one of the two accidental causal relata is a 'causal orphan'—there may be nothing that it really, that it essentially is causally related to. Thus accidental causation has to be understood in terms of essential causation—the latter is the more basic relation.

To distinguish between accidental and essential causation we must first distinguish between accidental and essential ways of *being* something: some of the ways in which we describe something are ‘essential’ to it, or contained in its definition/form, others are not. So, for instance, being rational and human are essential properties of Socrates, being white or snubnosed or musical are not. I will use the notation ‘X*' to indicate something that is accidentally X. We can then define accidental causation as follows: A accidentally causes B if either A* essentially causes B or A essentially causes B*. Thus, every accidental cause is parasitic on an ‘underlying’ essential cause.

We can say A accidentally causes B *in virtue of* A*'s essentially causing B, or A’s essentially causing B*: It is natural to think of such cases in terms of the more basic causal story being told, which is the essential causal story of A essentially causing B* or A* essentially causing B. We might think that Aristotle should say that in these cases the orphan is not strictly speaking part of the causal chain; that the story of A accidentally causing B is just a funny and less accurate way of telling the story of A* essentially causing B or A essentially causing B*. Speaking metaphorically, in these cases we ‘blame’ the causal orphan for being a bad, that is accidental, description of what is really going on. We might divide our cases of accidental causation into two kinds, using as our criterion which side the orphan is located on:

(α) A is accidentally for the sake of B because A* is essentially for the sake of B
-- builder *accidentally* produces health, since he happens to (also) be a doctor [Builder = A]; [Doctor = A*]; [Health = B]
-- the pale or musical man *accidentally* builds a house, since he happens to be a builder. [Pale or Musical = A*]; [Builder = A]; [House = B]

(β) A is accidentally for the sake of B because A is essentially for the sake of B*
-- the confectioner *accidentally* makes a healthy thing, since his tasty product happens to be healthy. [Confectioner = A]; [Tasty thing = B]; [Healthy thing = B*] (*Meta. E 1027a2-4*)
-- the gardener *accidentally* digs up treasure. [Gardener = A]; [Digging a hole for a plant = B]; [Digging up treasure = B*] (*Meta. A 1025a15-17*)
-- the sailor *accidentally* sails to Aegina (carried there by shipwreck or pirates) [Sailor = A]; [Sailing = B]; [Sailing to Aegina = B*] (*Meta. A 1025a 26-29*)

We might think that the causal orphan ‘should be replaced’ by its superior starred counterpart so that we can have a proper causal relation on our hands; we might think that the side with the orphan on it is ‘to be blamed’ for the defective status of the causal relation between A and B. But according to Aristotle this is not quite right.

Aristotle thinks that sometimes when there is a case of A accidentally causing B, where there is an underlying essential causal relation between A and B*, we will want to say not that B is
the merely accidental effect of A, but that A is an accidental cause of B. That is, it is A that is the accident. In such a case, we do not 'blame' B, but rather A—we blame A for not being the thing which would have been the essential cause of B, if B had had an essential cause. We don't blame B for not being B*; we blame A for not being the (absent) A* that would've been essentially connected with B. What is it that would get us to 'hold B fixed' in this way—rather than holding the real, that is, actually present, causal relations between A and B fixed? The answer is: if B is good, or in some way purposive (heneka tou 196b17, 19, 197a35, b19 etc.). In this way Aristotle generates a special subclass of accidental causes: there is a case where when we say A causes B we are neither speaking essentially, describing the essential causal relation between A qua A and B qua B, nor just speaking accidentally, describing the presence of an essential causal relation that holds between A-or-some-A* and B-or-some-B*. Rather, we are describing the absence of an essential causal relation between anything at all and B qua B. In these special cases, the accidentality cannot be undone by redescription; what we have is not merely an accidental description of a causal connection, but a kind of defective causal connection. That is because the A* in question is not present.

Aristotle's cases of not merely descriptive—what we might call 'deep'—accidentality are luck and chance.

Any case of luck or chance can be 'read' as an ordinary case of accidental causation: all one needs to do is 'take the weight off of B' and we can see the accidental relation between A and B as mediated by the essential relation between A and B*. But to describe the case as a case of luck or chance is to see there as being something (B) which, so described, is not in an essential causal relationship. For Aristotle, the salient fact about cases of luck is not the presence of an essential causal relationship at another level, but the absence of the essential causal relationship at the level in question. He identifies this absence by identifying something (B) which ought to play the role of final cause, but doesn’t. The case of luck/chance is the case where final cause 'goes missing'.

But Aristotle notes that we can, of course, still speak of cause (196a6, 196a13-14) here—though there is no final cause to be found, we can still 'explain' B’s coming about so long as we are willing to set aside B’s goodness or purposiveness. Aristotle says that luck and chance are cases of efficient causation. Our explanation, in such cases, will advert to A (as well as to the indefinitely many other things that might be essential causes of things that are accidentally the same as B). So: to say that “chance/luck is the efficient cause of B” is to say that there are final causes of any number of B*s, but there is no final cause of B, and B is the kind of thing which should have a final cause.

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2 Charlton (Aristotle’s Physics Books I and II, Clarendon Aristotle Series 1970, p.108) would like to revise this strangeness in Aristotle “It would be more correct, then, to say that a thing due to chance is a concurrent outcome, than to say that chance is a concurrent cause.” For discussion of why Aristotle’s way of putting it is in fact more correct, see the epilogue.

3 Phys. 198a3. There is a worry here: why does efficient cause at the level of A and B* translate to efficient cause at the level of A and B (luck and chance are the efficient causes of B), whereas final cause at the level of A and A* does not translate to final cause at the level of A and B? I have not done anything yet to explain this asymmetry, and thus have not really explained why luck and chance are efficient (as opposed to final) causes. For the answer, see the epilogue.

4 This is why luck is indeterminate (aoriston) efficient causation.
Aristotle offers the example of the creditor who comes to the market place and happens to meet his debtor there, while the latter is flush with cash from collecting contributions. Had the creditor known that his debtor would be there, he would have come for this reason—but as things were, his coming there was a piece of luck, an accident. We can say that his coming to the market (and his debtor’s being there, and his debtor’s having collected money that day, and the fact that the creditor was on his way to the theater, etc. etc.) “caused” the creditor to get back his money—in that they efficiently caused him to get back his money, as a matter of luck. But there is nothing in this story which was for the sake of his getting back his money. For that, we would have needed the creditor to choose to come to the market in order to get his money back.

In the case of luck and chance, by contrast with other cases of accidental causation, something is missing: the A* which would turn B into a final cause. There are two kinds of A*s which can be missing, and they are nature and choice—and this difference between nature and choice is, in turn, the basis of the distinction between luck and chance.

The distinction between nature and choice as A*s is a happy moment for the contemporary, that is, anti-metaphysical reader of Aristotle. Such a reader thinks to herself: I don't understand what Aristotle is saying when he says that X is ‘for’ something, in a way that allows, in principle, for anything to be plugged in as “X”. But I understand how an action can be ‘for something’—action is what is purposive, it is goal-oriented, it is done for reasons. Perhaps the key disagreement between Aristotle and myself is that he thought ‘nature’ had the special teleological power that I think only choice has. If that is so, I can prune away the ‘nature’ branch of the teleology tree but save Aristotelian teleology in the sphere of action.

Aristotle says “A is for the sake of B”—but we are now faced with two cases of this, namely, where A is for the sake of B by nature, and where A is for the sake of B by choice. It looks as though the case of chance or luck gives us a recipe for reducing final causal relations to efficient causal relations plus something else. The anti-metaphysical reader claims that she does not understand A’s being simply for the sake of B, or its being naturally for the sake of B—but she does understand its being for the sake of B by choice. The project is then to build up the one side of Aristotle’s teleology without making reference either to unanalyzed for the sake of relations or to nature as a final cause.

B. The Reductive Project: A Three Headed Beast

And this might look to be the project of those who take seriously Wittgenstein’s question about the difference between an arm-raising and a mere armrising. Arm-rasings are the kinds of events that can be ‘for the sake of’ something: we raise our arms in order to ask questions, reach for the stars, touch a spot on the wall, etc. By contrast, we might describe a mere-arm rising as ‘teleologically inert’—if my arm shoots up by reflex or due to a strong wind, it didn’t go up for the sake of anything. Whatever it is that differentiates arm raisings from arm-risings should, thinks the anti-metaphysical reader, be the key to the analysis of the action-theoretic ‘for the sake of.’ So what is it? Let’s assume that there is an answer to the question, that is, that there is something distinguishing arm-rasings from arm-risings. (Which is to say, let’s not be behaviorists.) It is difficult to disagree with Aristotle’s claim that a thought or choice somehow makes up the difference. But how do we add in the choice? There are three popular answers to this question.
The first answer that might come to mind is that arm raisings have something to do with the brain, or with certain parts of the brain and central nervous system—they involve a kind of matter which is unnecessary to a mere arm raising. After all, I can lift up a disembodied arm, or the arm of a corpse, or of someone who is sleeping, or a person whose motor strip I am stimulating—and some kind of full body scan would, presumably, detect differences in the state of such a person’s brain/nervous system as compared with that of the person who raises her arm. These material differences are what make the difference between the arm raising and the arm raising. Materialists think that there is a be a brain/nervous system state which corresponds to—that is, is identical to—the thought, and when that is added to the matter of the arm itself as it rises, we get an arm raising. Materialists think that it is characteristic of the kind of matter they add (brain/neuronal matter), that it behaves in certain ways, one of which is to make an arm rise under the right circumstances. They think that how such matter behaves (what it does), is a question of the kind of stuff it is. So materialists think that we add the thought as (a) material cause.

A Davidsonian might complain about materialists that they ‘reduce mental efficient causes to material causes.’ Davidson’s thought is that the thought we add to the arm raising must have a certain efficacy, qua mental, and this efficacy cannot be understood as logically posterior to its being identical to a certain kind of matter. This is why, though he held that mental states and physical states are identical, he restricted the identity to token mental and physical states: we cannot account for the mental activity of a mental state by pointing to its material properties, since there are no laws that connect matter and its properties with the efficient causality of thought (what thought does). Davidson wants to allow that the thought or choice, qua thought (and not qua matter) is what makes the arm rise—he is not content for thought to be (as he feels it is for the materialist) an epiphenomenon. He thinks that the difference between the arm raising and the arm raising is thought (b) as an efficient cause. Again, the materialists do not deny that the thought is an efficient cause—the difference is that Davidsonians think that thought’s being an efficient cause is something over and above its being a material cause, whereas the materialists think that thought’s efficient causality is reducible to (ultimately explainable in terms of) the properties of its matter.

But just as materialists look naive to Davidsonians, Davidsonians look naive to Anscombeans. Anscombeans feel that it misses the point to insist that the thought, qua thought, does work ‘pushing’ or ‘propelling.’ We want to know what transforms the arm raising, what turns it into an arm raising, and that can’t just be a matter of some events (mental or otherwise) predated the arm raising. What’s wrong with Davidson (say Anscombeans) is that he thinks the arm raising’s being an arm raising, its having that form, is reducible to its having that efficient cause. The relevant thought, that is, the thought that we “add” to the arm raising to make it an arm raising, must be in the action, it must, in a way, be the form of the action. Referring to the ‘addition’ of a mental state is nothing other than a way of bringing out that arm raisings have a different form from arm raisings—arm raisings are a different kind of thing, their moments unified into a whole which is an intentional action, and it is this unity which must be ‘added.’ We need, in short, to add thought (c) as a formal cause. Once more, we need to be clear that Anscombeans need not deny that the

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5 For an excellent formulation and defense of this Anscombean line, see Anton Ford, “Action and Generality” forthcoming in Essays on Anscombe’s Intention ed. Ford, Hornsby and Stoutland. But I do want to register a
thought efficiently causes the action, any more than Davidsonians need deny that the brain matter materially causes it. What Anscombean want to insist on is that the thought’s being the formal cause of the action is not explained by, but rather explains, its being the efficient cause of the action.

If any one of these routes worked as a way of reading Aristotle—that is, if material, or efficient, or formal⁶ cause could be A*, if any of the three could underwrite one thing’s being for the sake of another, then we would be able to construct Aristotelian teleology from non-teleological materials. But, though they see one another as miles apart, materialists like Smart, Place and Armstrong⁷, efficient causal theorists such as Davidson and his followers⁸, and formalists working in the tradition of Elizabeth Anscombe are, from Aristotle’s point of view, all laboring under the same mistake: they don’t notice that what you have to add is to an arm raising to get an arm raising is (d) the thought as final cause.

Consider Aristotle’s scornful observation made in the course of the discussion of luck in the Physics: “if someone said that he performed his ablutions in vain⁹ because the sun did not go into eclipse, this would be ridiculous. Solar eclipses are not what washing is for.” Someone who says that he washes “in order to bring about an eclipse” does not thereby make washing be for the sake of an eclipse. I think Aristotle means to say that he cannot do this even if he believes he has the power to bring about the eclipse, and even if the eclipse (by chance) follows his washing. In fact, though nothing in this passage dictates this, I venture to say

complaint that Ford, like all Anscombeans, has made the view unnecessarily opaque by embracing Anscombe’s “nothing added” slogan as the answer to Wittgenstein’s question. (Quite likely, this answer was the one Wittgenstein would have given as well.) “Nothing added,” is not a helpful way to describe their own view; one can see why it would get them confused with behaviorists. Each of the three alternatives to behaviorism can say that in a certain sense, relative to the theory just ‘below,’ nothing is added: materialists because nothing is added to the arm itself; Davidsonians because they don’t add any matter; and Anscomians because they don’t add efficient cause. But of course Anscomians do add something, which is form. They might respond ‘form is not something that can be added, like an ingredient.’ True. The form of a thing is its definition, and it is a bit odd to speak of the definition of X as what you need to add to Y to get X. My response is, first, that if this is their worry then the thought would be better expressed by the slogan that there is nothing that what is added is added to— that is, ‘everything added.’ But even this is not quite right: we need to remember that X and the definition of X are in a way the same, but in a way not the same. The form and the composite are (rightly) called by the same name, but to refer to the former is to consider the latter in abstraction from its matter. So to get the action-as-composite (the arm raising) we do need to add the action-as-form to something (the matter, that is, the arm raising).

⁶ Provided that these items themselves can be understood independently of the thought that they might be ‘for something’—as the proponents of the views in question would insist on, though Aristotle would not (I think) allow this.

⁷ Or, for that matter, Descartes. It does not matter whether the ‘material’ in question is physical stuff such as brain matter or, as on the Cartesian view, the special stuff of mental substance. We might see the distinction between Cartesian materialism and anti-Cartesian materialism as analogous to the distinction between cognitivism and noncognitivism among efficient causal theorists. (See next footnote)

⁸ Among whom, for the purposes of this classification, I would include both philosophers such as Michael Bratman and Richard Holton, and philosophers such as Kieran Setiya and David Velleman— that is, both the noncognitive and the cognitive strand of championship of the efficient cause.

⁹ Aristotle’s very brief discussion of ‘in vain’ (197b22-32) suggests that there is a parallel case to luck/choice: whereas in the latter cases, we have A accidentally causes B, and A essentially causes B*, but insist on holding B fixed; in the case of ‘in vain’ we have A accidentally causes B and A* essentially causes B but we insist on holding A fixed. If this is right then there is a broader genre of cases where final cause goes ‘missing’— and Aristotle does seem to be drawing this connection with his ‘etymology’ of automaton/matên—but I will have to leave this issue unexplored for present purposes. But see below, p.27 for more discussion of ‘in vain.’
that his washing would not be for the sake of the eclipse even if on a particular occasion it (somehow) did efficiently cause it, and, further, the agent knew that it would. His washing was not ‘for the sake of’ the eclipse, because Solar eclipses are not what washing is for (ou gar ēn toutou ekeinou heneka). For Aristotle, it really is that simple.

If Aristotle starts with claims of the form X is for the sake of Y; if he sees the latter as a basic or irreducible relation; if he understands ethical (as well as natural) teleology in terms of that basic relation—then his teleology is inescapably and mind-independently realist. If this is right, it would follow that to take (paleo-) Aristotelian Ethics seriously is to take seriously the thought that one thing can, quite simply, exist for the sake of another thing. This is the reading of Aristotle for which I wish to argue.

Let me introduce some terminology that will help us keep track of the debate: on the one side, we have the reductive view of that swath of Aristotle’s readership wishing to save him from his own teleology. This is the view that what it is for A to be for the sake of B by thought or choice is for teleology to be generated from nonteleological ingredients. But in order not to beg the question against myself, I will not call what is thereby generated teleology. I will call it “agent-dependent teleology”. It remains to be seen whether an agent-dependent teleological relation is, for Aristotle, a form of teleology. Materialists, Davidsonians and Anscombians all articulate ways in which A can purport to be for the sake of B by thought or choice that would count as what I am calling “agent-dependent teleology.” I will say that A is agentially dependent on B iff an agent does A because he represents A as the (non-final) cause of B.

In the most common kind of case, the agent represents A as being the efficient cause of B—this is what we mean when we say that A is the means to B or A is instrumentally valuable; but he also might represent A as necessary material for B, e.g. if I want to be healthy in order to be able to live happily; or to have the iron in order to make the statue; or he might represent the relationship in terms of formal cause, e.g. if I want to see a movie because that would make for a pleasant evening. The only kind of causal relationship the reductivist cannot advert to between A and B is final cause, that is, he can’t say that the agent represents A as being for the sake of B because, recall, the whole point of the concept of agent-dependence is generate a final causal relation out of thought or choice without recourse to irreducibly teleological language. He cannot, without arguing in a circle, insert an irreducibly teleological relation into the content of the thought that is supposed to secure the presence of a reducible teleological relation.

On the other side, we have the nonreductive view, which is much simpler: it asserts that sometimes A just is for the sake of B, or, as I will put it, A is telically dependent on B. On this view, when we say ‘A is for the sake of B by thought/choice/or nature’ thought, choice and nature secure the teleological relation between A and B only by being, themselves, for

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10 I take it that this is Aristotle’s ‘atemporal imperfect’ as in to ti ên einai. Refs needed, and lookup the proper term for this.

11 This “because” is the word that distinguishes Ancombeans (who read it formally), Davidsonians (who read it efficiently), and Materialists (who read it materially). But these differences will not concern us here.

12 So called ‘constitutive means’ are just these cases, where the relation is formal rather than efficient.
something, that is, irreducibly teleological. Telic dependence relations are teleological ‘all the way down’. The nonreductive theorist, that is, the one who uses the phrase ‘telic dependence,’ takes the teleologicality of A’s being for the sake of B by choice to be logically prior to its agentiality.

My own view is that there is both agent-dependence and telic-dependence in Aristotle—so I am an antireductivist reader of Aristotle. I think that, according to Aristotle, A’s being agent-dependent on B is incompatible with A’s being anything more than degenerately for the sake of B. Agent dependence is not a kind of ‘for the sake of’—it rather, like the case of luck or chance, indicates the absence of a for the sake of relation. When A is agent-dependent on B then neither A itself, nor any A*, is kath’ hauto for the sake of B; rather, the coming about of B is a case of good luck—or, if B is bad, bad luck. And if Aristotle is right, and quasi- or degenerate cases of telic dependence such as accidentality and chance presuppose (that is, are parasitic on) actual telic-dependence, then the concept of agent-dependence cannot stand alone; and consequently cannot be the lynchpin of the reductive project.

I won’t be able so much to argue for the antireductive view as to illustrate it, by focusing on the interpretative benefits of the nonreductive approach in three case studies.

1. Case Study #1: “For its own sake”

Aristotle says that we want or pursue or choose virtuous actions ‘for their own sakes.’ This language does not frighten the reductive reader of Aristotle—he does not see it as threatening to drag him out of his comfort zone. He thinks he can make sense, within the realm of agent-dependence, which is to say without reference to telic-dependence, of the class of things that are ‘for their own sakes.’ How does he do this?

I think the best way for the reductivist to make sense of what it means to choose a virtuous action ‘for its own sake’ is to take “cause” in

A is for the sake of B = an agent chooses A as the cause of B

as efficient cause. This is not to say he cannot also understand “cause,” in other contexts, as formal or material—it is just to say that, for the purpose of understanding “for its own sake,” efficient cause supplies the most promising reading. I want first to show that matter and form are nonstarters in this context, and then I will lay out the efficient causal reading.

Matter: There are two ways we might translate Aristotle’s phrase “ek hou”: that out of which and that of which14. (I believe that both of these notions of matter are operative in Aristotle, and that the latter is prior. For my purposes here, the only important point is that neither will serve as a way of understanding “‘for its own sake.’”) The matter out of which, say, a statue is made is a shapeless lump of bronze, before it is melted down; the matter of which a statue is

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13 This is, arguably, the point of the discussion of luck and chance in the Physics. See, in particular, the summary at 198a5-13 which makes clear that the argument was directed at establishing to automaton and tuche as ‘posterior’ (husteron) causes. I spell this out a bit more in the epilogue on chance.

14 I think people often use ‘matter from which’ for what I call “matter of which”; I find my way of expressing the contrast to be more perspicuous.
made is some bronze in the shape of a statue. We might call the first, ‘matter as material’, and the second, ‘matter as constituent.’

Matter in the sense of material might also be described as a merely necessary condition. If I need a hammer in order to build a house, then the hammer is a material condition on the house’s coming to be. For our purposes, matter in the sense of material can be reduced to a relation of efficient causation: If I perform an action because I represent something as a material condition on B, that must be because I see my satisfying the material condition as a way of bringing about (that is, efficiently causing) B. So, for instance, if I thought that getting a hammer was a material cause of building a house, but knew that there was no way to get wood, or that I did not know how to build a house, I would not bother procuring a hammer—and this would be because I would not be able to represent my procuring of the hammer as efficiently causing my building of the house. The representation of A as material cause of B only grounds action insofar as it can also be reformulated as an efficient causal relationship between (procuring/ performing/ achieving/ doing/ bringing about) A and (efficient- causally) bringing about B.

Matter in the sense of constituent is also reducible, this time to formal cause. That is, if A is the constitutive cause of B, then B, or B’s form (typically also called “B”) is the formal cause of A. Matter in the sense of constituent is matter in the sense of that which is disposed in a certain way, where the form specifies the way in which the matter is disposed. If the representation of A as the constitutive cause of B were a way of understanding ‘for its own sake,’ then form would be a way of understanding ‘for its own sake.’ And, for Aristotle, there are relations of priority here: a thing’s matter is only the cause of the composite in virtue of the thing’s form being the prior cause. If A is what it takes to realize B, then that in turn is explained by B being A’s formal cause.

So we are left with two causal relations as potential means for elucidating ‘for its own sake’: formal and efficient.

Let’s turn to the formal cause, which looks promising at first. When someone decides to see a movie because that will make for a pleasant evening, this is a case where we can naturally describe what she is doing as seeing a movie ‘for its own sake.’ The pleasant evening is what movie-watching is, for this agent. She chooses movie-watching as being-a-pleasant-evening. It is intuitive to think of an action’s being done for its own sake as that action’s being done for the sake of the form that constitutes it as just the action that it is. Even if the action is (ultimately) done for the sake of happiness, that too is part of its form: she chooses movie-watching as having-a-pleasant-evening and she chooses having-a-pleasant-evening as living a happy life. It looks as though form, as cause, is suitably ‘internal’ to what it causes to serve as a way of being ‘for its own sake.’ The problem is that it is too internal. If something is done “for its own sake” when it is done for the sake of its form, then every action will qualify as being done for its own sake. It is a trivial truth that every action is formally caused by its own form, if what is meant by this is that the action is (formally) caused by the representation of it as being just that action. On the formal causal reading, if I am killing thousands of people because I think that will help consolidate my power over the masses then I am doing that “for its own sake”. Which is to say, killing-thousands-in-order-to-
secure-my-dominion is exactly what it is that I’m doing. If I am breaking eggs in order to make an omelet for breakfast, then that is exactly what I’m doing. I’m doing it “for its own sake,” that is, my doing of it is caused by its having just that form. But Aristotle does not think that either of these actions are done for their own sakes. Every action has a formal cause that makes it just the action that it is, but not every action is done for its own sake.

So let us turn to efficient cause—since that is what we typically do, when we try to understand what Aristotle is doing in specifying a subset of actions that are done for their own sakes. Like Aristotle, the reductivist has words for talking about the difference between items which fall to the left of the efficient causal “for the sake of” operator, and those which fall to the right of it—we call As “means” or “instruments” or “tools” and we call Bs “ends” or “goals” or “results” or “purposes.”

The reductivist cannot equate ‘being for its own sake’ with being an end, that is with occupying the B-position, since there are nonfinal ends. Consider the end of buying a piano, in the chain: I want to earn money in order to buy a piano, and I want to buy a piano in order to play music. ‘Being for its own sake’ must be a specially final way of occupying the B-position. But he does not want to cash this out by saying that that specially final way entails not also occupying the A-position. For I might value playing music for its own sake, but also, independently, value it because it makes you happy. Piling on an instrumental value doesn’t vitiate the in-itself value of music-playing. We are going to need to distinguish between the various ‘chains’ of agent-dependence in which a thing may be located. When we say ‘A is for the sake of B and A is for the sake of C’ we might mean either: (1) A is for the sake of B just insofar as B is for the sake of C OR (2) A is for the sake of B, and, in addition, A is for the sake of C. In the second case, we can say the value of B is overdetermined; in the first case, we might say A’s dependence on B is itself something dependent. If something is agent-dependently for the sake of itself, then it must occupy the B-position in a way other than way (1) above.

I have been sketching an account of a special way of occupying the right hand side of the agent-dependent for the sake of relation. In order for this account to be complete, the reductive reader of Aristotle would have to make precise the relevant sense of ‘overdetermination’ and clarify what it means for an agent-dependence relation itself to depend on another agent-dependence relation. Let’s assume this can be done, and can be done without recourse to the realm of telic-dependence. And let’s call the specially final way of occupying the B-position, agent-superdependence. So we can say, in my example above, that playing music is agentially-superdependent but neither buying the piano nor earning money is. By construing ‘for its own sake’ as agent-superdependence, one can resist

15 My discussion of mixed-voluntary actions below is also meant to bring out why formal cause cannot work here: form as cause cannot distinguish throwing-cargo-overboard-to-save-ones-life and running-up-the-hill-to-relieve-the-garrison. Or rather, it cannot distinguish between these things if we try to understand formal cause independently from (prior to) final cause.

16 For the purposes of argument I am granting this to the metaphysically neutral (reductivist) reader, though I would like to register my suspicion about whether he can make the relevant notions (overdetermination & meta-dependence) precise within the realm of agent-dependence. That is, all I am concerned to show here is that such a theory is not Aristotle’s, but at some point I hope to argue for the stronger claim that such a theory is not possible.
any tendency to move outside the realm of agent-dependence. Agent-superdependence is the proposal on the table for a reductively respectable interpretation of “for its own sake.”

I think that Aristotle may sometimes mean something like agent-superdependence when he says that someone wants something ‘for its own sake’. But if it is what he always means there is a real problem with his account of virtuous action. I think this issue lies at the heart of J.L. Ackrill’s essay “Aristotle on Action.” To my mind, the problem Ackrill raises in that paper for Aristotle (or, if I’m right, for our current understanding of Aristotle), is powerful and as yet, unsolved—so I will spend some time laying it out.

A. Ackrill’s Challenge

Ackrill thinks he finds a set of “serious inconsistencies” in Aristotle’s discussion of choice and action. He writes,

(a) Aristotle holds that when we choose to do something, we always choose with a view to some end, for the sake of something; but he also insists that a man who does a virtuous act is not doing it virtuously—is not displaying virtue—unless he has chosen it ‘for itself.’

(b) Actions are done for the sake of other things, and the things we can do are not themselves the ends with a view to which we do them; yet action (praxis) differs from production (poiesis), according to Aristotle, precisely because it is its own end.

(c) In recommending the theoretical life, Aristotle says that whereas contemplation aims at no end beyond himself fine actions do ‘aim at some end and are not desirable for their own sake’; but in recommending the life of action he says that doing noble and good deeds is a thing desirable for its own sake, and that ‘those activities are desirable in themselves from which nothing is sought beyond the activity.’ (p. 212 of “Aristotle on Action,” in his Essays on Plato and Aristotle)

The common problem behind (a)-(c) is the thought that the same action is valued for its own sake and for the sake of an end. Adherents of the reductive view might take exception to Ackrill’s eventual description of (a)-(c) as ‘contradictions’ (p.221). It is no contradiction, they assert, to say of an action “it is valued in itself” and to say, of the very same action, “it is valued for its consequences.” The agent-dependent conception of ‘for its own sake’ was careful to allow for the possibility of a “combined” case, where an action is chosen both for its own sake and for the sake of an independent end. But it would be very strange to think that all virtuous actions are like this—and it is this universal overdetermination picture that Aristotle would need be saddled with on this way of avoiding Ackrill’s charge. This, is, I think, the force of Ackrill’s point that “[c]ommentators on these passages often fail to face the real difficulty, that actions often or always are productions and productions often or always are actions….The brave man’s action is fighting uphill to relieve the garrison, and the just man is paying of his debt by mending his neighbor’s fence. How then is one to understand the thesis that paying off a debt is an action, but mending a fence a production?”

It looks as though the reductivist has to claim that the brave man’s uphill fight is “for the sake of an end” (a production) because it is for relieving the garrison, and, independently, “for its own sake” (an action) because it is brave. But these do not look to be independent features of what he is doing, in the way that the instrumental and final value of an overdetermined action are independent of one another.

17 Unfortunately, I don’t have time here to go into exactly what’s so wrong with this, or with David Charles’ solution, which is to individuate praxeis very finely a la Goldman...need to expand this note.
Let’s look more carefully at where Ackrill thinks Aristotle goes wrong. Ackrill thinks that on all the occasions where Aristotle makes these kinds of comments, he is thinking of an action under one description, and failing to realize that it can come under another description as well. So, for instance, if one thinks of ‘mending a fence’ as the description of what someone is doing, it will look like he does an action which is not valued for its own sake, something which is a means to an independent end. But if one thinks of ‘doing something just’ as the description of an action, that looks like an action that might be done for its own sake, for no independent end. Aristotle, on Ackrill’s view, failed to reconcile the various levels of description under which an action can properly come, and therefore contradicted himself in the ways that come out in (a), (b), and (c).

Ackrill does not think that Aristotle was fully innocent of the possibility of multiple descriptions of the same action. He does take Aristotle to wonder whether a given description of an action is really, or just incidentally, a description of that action: “Here [in V.8]...he raises a preliminary question, before asking whether someone did a just act ‘for itself’ (or for ulterior motives), we must ask whether he did a just act at all, properly speaking.” Aristotle’s answer is that an unjust action will be only incidentally unjust if the agent did not know it was unjust, and really unjust if he did know. Thus, on Ackrill’s view, Aristotle saw that there was a question, in virtue of what does A (really, not just incidentally) count as a description of X’s action, but missed the related question, in virtue of what can A and B both (really, not just incidentally) be descriptions of X’s action.

“... does he recognize that, since there are on any occasion a great number of facts about what he is doing, there will be a great number of different ways of characterizing what he is doing knowingly? Does he see that what is done may be subject to praise under one description and blame under another, or may constitute one offence under one description and a different one under another, or may invite moral appraisal under one description and technical appraisal under another?” (pp. 215-216)

One can almost hear the frustration behind these rhetorical questions, to which Ackrill’s (implied) answer is: no. Despite the fact that Ackrill does, in the end, offer a diagnosis of Aristotle’s errors, there is an air of incredulity hanging over the paper: How could Aristotle have been so confused on such a basic point?

I want to try to explain what is going on here. Recall the place where Ackrill sees Aristotle come tantalizingly close to considering the issue of action-descriptions: “Here [in V.8]...he raises a preliminary question, before asking whether someone did a just act ‘for itself’ (or for ulterior motives), we must ask whether he did a just act at all, properly speaking.” Let’s ignore the main clause of this sentence, and concentrate on the subordinate clause: “before asking whether someone did a just act ‘for itself’ (or for ulterior motives).” Ackrill is referring, in passing, to what he sees as the non-preliminary—that is, main—question towards which he takes the book V discussion to be heading, namely, the question of whether a man does a just act “‘for itself’ or for ulterior motives.” But this is a question that Aristotle neither asks nor answers, in book V or anywhere else. Aristotle is not Kant, and try as we might, we won’t find anything like Kant’s distinction between two kinds of honest shopkeepers in Aristotle. The question Aristotle is working his way towards in V.8 and V.9, the one Ackrill must be referring to, is the question of what it takes for someone to count as

18 i.e., failure to ask himself the question “what is an action”—more on this below, see p.29.
doing the just act \textit{in the right way}, that is, in the way that will be indicative of his justice.\textsuperscript{19} For us this could be a question about motive, but for Aristotle, it is not. We can see that from his answer, which is that “in the right way” means from a decision reflecting a \textit{fixed} character. Aristotle’s contrast case is someone who acts impulsively, not someone who acts (as Ackrill might, but Aristotle wouldn’t, describe it ‘instrumentally’. The distinction which interests Aristotle cuts across the one Ackrill attributes to him: an ulterior motive can be part of someone’s character, so that he has a fixed disposition to choose Xs as means or instrument to Ys, and contrariwise someone could do X ‘for its own sake’ (in our modern, metaphysically neutral sense) on a whim, or in the heat of the moment—such an action might be ‘out of character’ for the individual in question, and nevertheless be completely lacking in ‘ulterior motive.’ One way to see how different the two questions are, is to see that Aristotle is indifferent to asking his question about the just, or the unjust man, whereas it’s not an accident that Ackrill illustrates his only with the case of the just man. One can ask whether an unjust person is unjust as a one-off or from a fixed disposition to behave thus, but it doesn’t make a lot of sense to ask whether the unjust person did his unjust deed ‘for itself’ or from an ‘ulterior motive’—this question is at home only in the case of justice.\textsuperscript{20}

Why doesn’t Aristotle ask Ackrill’s question, about the difference between someone who acts justly ‘full stop’, and someone who acts justly from an ulterior motive? This kind of concern with the ulteriority of a motive is, I think, a peculiarly post-Aristotelian one. It comes from having nowhere to turn to establish final causal relations except relations of agent-dependence. If being represented as being for X (being agentially, that is, mind-dependent on X) is the only way of being for X, then the quest for the highest good will have to be understood in terms of a quest for what is \textit{represented as not being for anything further}, that is, what is agentially superdependent—and that is the question about ulterior motive.

On an Aristotelian view, one can \textit{value $X$ for its own sake} and still represent it as subordinate—and likewise, \textit{not value it} as such but represent it as independent. This is because there is a difference between \textit{kinds of subordination} that is more important to him than the difference between whether something is subordinate or independent. The distinction between telic dependence and agent-dependence takes the pressure off the distinction between agent-dependence and agent-superdependence, because it renders the question of whether someone aims at $X$ ultimately or proximately not equivalent to the question of whether he \textit{really} pursues $X$.

\textbf{B. The Solution to Ackrill’s Challenge}

My own view, for which I am about to argue, is that when Aristotle says that virtuous actions must be chosen ‘for their own sake’ he is saying that the virtuous actions are not agentially dependent—it is not kata sumbebêkos that they are for the sake of something.

\textsuperscript{19} “When a person inflicts harm knowingly but without prior deliberation, it is an unjust act, e.g. things done through temper and other affections that are inevitable or natural for human beings, since those who inflict harm and go wrong in this way are doing what is unjust, and theirs are unjust acts, yet this does not in itself mean that they themselves are unjust, or bad characters.” (1135b19-24); “But being a coward and acting unjustly do not consist in doing (poiein) these things, except through being in a certain state.” (1137a22-23).

\textsuperscript{20} But see fn. 30.
They do not depend by being ‘mere means’ in the way that money, flutes and tools do (I.7, 1097a27). They are really, that is, unmediately, “for something.” When he says that virtuous actions are ‘for the sake of something else, the end,’ he is saying that they telically depend on something. Virtuous actions are not mere means or instruments that efficiently cause their end, they are (noninstrumentally, immediately, essentially) for their end. To say that virtuous actions are for the sake of an end and to say that they are for their own sake are two ways of saying exactly the same thing. To put my point schematically, To be ‘for its own sake’ is not a way of being on the B side of an agential dependence relation, it is a way of being on the A side of a telic-dependence relation.

Let’s start by making good on a central Aristotelian distinction that Ackrill calls into question: the distinction between action (praxis) and production (poiēsis). Ackrill is wrong to equate being for the sake of an independent end with being a production. A production is something done as a mere means to a certain result. While I agree with Ackrill (p.213) that not all productions are technical, there is a reason why Aristotle takes craft-productions as paradigmatic. Cutting, which the doctor uses to heal, could be used (on other occasions) to harm. The doctor is using cutting to heal but cutting is not (by nature) for healing—so the doctor’s cutting is agentially dependent on his aim of producing health, which is to say that it is “for health” in virtue of the doctor’s representing a [merely] efficient causal relation between cutting and health. The doctor’s cutting brings about health, and it does so in virtue of his representing it, but it is not really, that is, nonaccidentally, for health.

Virtuous actions are, like productions, done for the sake of an independent end. My action of fighting uphill is virtuous because I see fighting uphill as something that will result in my relieving the garrison. That is, I fight uphill in order to relieve the garrison. If I didn’t think that I could relieve the garrison, I wouldn’t be risking my life fighting uphill. A soldier who fights uphill without regard for what is thereby to be achieved, a kind of automaton soldier, is not for that reason more brave. The brave fight not for fighting’s sake, but for a cause that makes fighting worthwhile. So what is the difference between virtuous action and production? Virtuous actions are telically dependent on their ends. That is, a virtuous action is for its end: it has a telos rather than a mere use; it is related to its end kath hauto and not just kata sumbebêkos.

But how is the virtuous action different from the doctor’s cutting? It is clear that fighting uphill is not by nature for relieving the garrison—on other occasions, fighting uphill might be for all sorts of other things. (What is by nature must be so always or for the most part, as Aristotle often tells us.) It looks for all the world as though fighting up the hill is agentially dependent on, that is, merely useful or efficient-causally connected to, relieving the garrison. But this cannot, I claim, be the case if fighting uphill is to be brave activity.

What we have here is the problem to which prohairesis is the solution. My prohairesis, when I decide to fight uphill in order to relieve the garrison, makes my fighting uphill be telically dependent on, and not merely useful for, relieving the garrison. Prohairesis transforms a mere action-type, which is not by nature such as to be for anything, into something of telic-dependence. In effect, it inserts an event into the order of nature. But this bit of prohairesetic magic is not ex nihilo for Aristotle—he does not think I have a divine power to create nature by fiat, to make something be a certain way just by thinking it so.
(He does not even think God has this power!) Prohairesis can transubstantiate the agentially dependent into the telically dependent because it is a product of my character, that is, my fixed disposition to behave in the way in question, a disposition which is something like a second nature. This is why the fixity of the disposition from which virtuous prohaireses ensue is so important to Aristotle—recall that the question of whether a just action proceeds from a fixed disposition is the one Ackrill brushed aside to supplant it with his own question, about the ulteriority of motive. Fighting uphill is not by nature for anything—but if I decide (proairesthai) to fight uphill in order to relieve the garrison, and if I decide to do this from a firm disposition, we might say it is now for something by second nature. The virtuous action can count as a natural movement—or rather, a second-natural movement—insofar as it is rooted in the soil of the agent’s virtuous disposition.

An objection arises: how can it be that, when joined by the thought of the virtuous agent, A and B are telically related, and when not so conjoined, they are not? If A’s telic dependence on B is an irreducible fact about A’s relation to B, how can it be that sometimes A is so related to B and sometimes it isn’t? The answer rests on the distinction between universals (or types) and particulars (or tokens). Fighting uphill and relieving a garrison, considered as types, haven’t been brought any closer together by the agent’s choice. But two tokens of those types have, because in this case the agent’s fighting uphill is a fighting uphill which aims at garrison relief, and his garrison relief is a garrison relief which is to be achieved by fighting uphill. This difference between type-and token telic dependence relations is at the bottom of the difference between what is ‘for the sake of’ by nature, and what is so by choice. Natural telic dependencies are at the level of generalities: brains are for the sake of blood-cooling; frogs are for the sake of good froggy lives. (This sheds new light on the phrase that what is by nature is so always or for the most part: we can now hear Aristotle, among other things, as contrasting the structure of nature’s teleology with that of choice.) When it is a question of final cause in nature, a relation between particulars is not a full or complete or unmediated ‘for the sake of’—to invoke the particulars is to invoke some amount of accidentality. In the case of choice, it is only the particulars which enter into the telic dependence relation—the action types are at best accidentally connected to one another, in virtue of the genuine telic connection amongst the particulars.

We are in a position to see why Aristotle says in so many places that the sphere of action is the sphere of particulars. My decision cannot make fighting uphill in general be ‘for’ anything. It cannot even make all my fightings uphill be ‘for’ anything, since my courageous disposition will be a matter of doing different things under different circumstances (e.g. sometimes it will be a matter of my not fighting uphill). The telic dependence of the action on its goal is secured by a perception that can secure only it—our actions are transfigured only one at a time.

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21 Does Aristotle ever say actually that hexis is second nature? Not that I have been able to find—though I wish he did! He does, I think, imply it at EE 1224b35-6, when he says that both the continent and the incontinent act against nature, but not the same nature (ou tēn autēn [phusin]). See also the passage preceding this line, in which Aristotle distinguishes two ways of being by nature: what is there from the start, and what comes to pass if things are allowed to proceed straightforwardly (euthuporein), e.g. gray hair and aging. In the NE, the closest I can find is the claim that virtue is more akin to nature than to techne (1106b15: hē aretē pasē technē akribestera kai ameinōn estin hōsper kai hē phusis).

22 Hmm...need to reconcile this with Phys. 195b25-27: eti de ta men genē tôn genōn, ta de kath’ hekastōn to kath’ hekaston (hoion andriantopoios men andriantos, hodi de toudi.)
So, fighting uphill can only be for relieving the garrison if it is the result of (a) a disposition (hexis) to behave thus, and (b) a decision about a particular (prohairesis). There is a third piece to the puzzle, which is that the disposition in question must be (c) a virtuous one—I hope to bring out some of what this entails, and why it holds, in the next section. But I hasten to point out that this tripartite division is more a division into the ways in which something can fail to be for the sake of something (that is, conditions that can fail to be met) than it is a division into the elements from which ‘for the sake of’ is ‘composed’. None of these elements can be understood except in terms of the prior concept of something’s being for the sake of something else. That is, the concept of telic dependence, or final cause, comes first.

I have been telling a story about how virtue, hexis, and prohairesis come together to form a picture of how an action’s being for its own sake is not so much a matter of its agent superdependence as its telic dependence. Working out the details of the story, let alone arguing for it, would require forays into (at least) Aristotle’s psychology and action theory (to explain the quasi-syllogistic relationship between desire, perception, and animal motion), his metaphysics and physics (to explain the connection between nature, form, substance and second nature), and his theory of responsibility (to explain how merely voluntary actions, despite lacking the unity characteristic of virtuous actions, can be proper subjects of praise and blame). My aims here have been more limited. I want to show in a quite general way that where Ackrill’s reductivism forces him to see Aristotle the fumbler, the nonreductive approach unveils Aristotle the innovator: by pulling together strands of his thought from other areas, by crowning them with a new concept, prohairesis, Aristotle develops a theory of what it is to live as a source of genuine purposiveness in an independently purposive world.

2. Case Study #2: The Moneymaker Paradox

At the end of *Ethics* I.5 Aristotle distinguishes the moneymaking life from the lives devoted to honor, pleasure and intelligence—only to dismiss it as, by contrast to the other three, not even a candidate for the best life.

“The life of the moneymaker is of a sort that is chosen under compulsion of need (biaios), and wealth is clearly not the good we are looking for, since it is useful23 (chresimon), and for the sake of something else (allou charin). Hence one might be more inclined to take as ends the things mentioned before, because they are valued (agapatai) for themselves.” (1096a5-9)

Aristotle is saying that money can’t be the highest good because money is, by its very nature, something you use as a mere instrument or efficient cause of getting other things. The value of money is a place where the reductivist’s favored concept of agent-dependence comes in handy. What gets the reductivist in trouble is that he takes agent-dependence to be the only kind of ‘for the sake of’ there is, and this leaves him without an appropriate contrast.

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23 Notice that Aristotle says that money cannot be the good we’re looking for “since it is useful”. He does not say “since it is merely useful.” He seems to regard money’s usefulness as a strike against it, and this is an indication that we should take care in interpreting his ‘X is useful’ to mean, ‘X is a means’ in our sense of the word.
to moneymaking. I will put the problem in terms of a dilemma. The reductivist must say one of two things:

(I) The moneymaker values money agent-superdependently? But (as we'll see) it looks as though this is impossible.
(II) The moneymaker values money agent-dependently? But we all do that.

Success at moneymaking, i.e. trade, usury, etc. involves intimate acquaintance with the use of money: someone who refuses to trade in his old francs and marks for euros is not a moneymaker but a some kind of a numismatist. The fact that money is something you use cannot be news to the moneymaker. But if it is not news, and the moneymaker recognizes wealth as instrumentally valuable in the service of (say) pleasure, or honor, or virtue, or happiness generally, then it seems that (a) there is nothing wrong with being a moneymaker, because wealth is valuable insofar as it serves all those ends and (b) the moneymaker's life collapses into the other lives. It just looks impossible to be a moneymaker in any distinctive and problematic sense. But Aristotle clearly does think that the lover of money has a peculiar, and peculiarly bad, form of life.

Aristotle clearly does not think that the moneymaker has to value money agent-superdependently. This is why he contrasts wealth with honor, pleasure, intelligence and virtue, in that the latter are loved (di' ha ta agapatai 1096a8-9). Even the moneymaker is no money lover. One can’t be a money lover, because the value of money is such that it always has to be seen to be subordinate to some further end. But then what distinguishes the moneymaker’s objectionable attitude towards money from the attitude everyone has? There is an extended discussion in the Politics (I.8-11) of exactly this question, the conclusion of which is the distinction between the “unnatural” (1258b2, et al.) kind of moneymaking and the correct and limited pursuit of money in the service of household management. The goal of having unlimited amounts of money characterizes those in the moneymaking professions. He takes these professions, and the people who practice them (moneymakers) as perverting of the art of getting wealth, which belongs properly, in its limited form, to the household management that everyone must practice.

But if the bad kind of moneymaker, like the good kind of moneymaker, wants money because it is useful in obtaining non-financial ends (pleasure, honor, virtue, etc.), then why doesn’t the bad kind of moneymaking collapse into the good kind? What is the bad moneymaker’s distinctive mistake?

Consider this description of some who engage in an ‘unnatural’ form of the art of moneymaking:

“For, as their enjoyment is in excess, they seek an art which produces the excess of enjoyment; and if they are not able to supply their pleasures by the art of getting wealth, they try other causes, using in turn every faculty in a manner contrary to nature (ou kató phusin). The quality of courage, for example, is not intended to make wealth, but to inspire confidence (andreas gar ou chrémata poiein estin alla tharsos); neither is this the aim of the general’s or the physician’s art; but the one aims at victory, the other health. Nevertheless, some men turn every quality or art into a means of getting wealth (hoi dé pasas poiousi
chrēmatitikas); this they conceive to be the end (hōs touto telos on), and to the promotion of the end they think all things must contribute (pros de to telos hapanta deon apantan).”

What does Aristotle mean when he says that these people conceive money to be the end? Does he mean that they see money as agentially-superdependent rather than merely useful? He cannot mean this, because he tells us at the start that he is talking about people who are trying to satisfy their excessive desires via money. Is he, then, saying that, for these people, money is a means to another end, instrumentally valuable for satisfying desires? But they would be getting nothing wrong if they thought this, because money is instrumentally valuable for satisfying desires. Are we, once again, forced to choose between a moneymaker who, insanely, takes money to be a final good and one who, banally, takes money to be an instrumental good?

Here is what I take Aristotle to be saying: the moneymaker gets things wrong because he misunderstands relationships of telic dependence. He thinks, or acts as though money is the telos of courage and generalship and doctoring. That is, he treats doctoring as though it were for making money. Whereas the truth is that doctoring can efficiently make you money, but it is not for making money. What the passage shows is that the moneymaker is not someone who wants only money—he can pursue all the same things that the people in the other lives pursue, i.e. courage, and pleasure, and the knowledge that goes with generalship and doctoring—but he pursues them all in the wrong way, in a way which is insensitive to the actual relations of telic dependence between these ends.

In the translation I quoted above, “pros de to telos hapanta deon apantan” is read as governed by “hōs” from the previous clause, which makes it a belief Aristotle attributes to these moneymakers. But Aristotle himself believes that all things must contribute to the end—why would he distance himself from the moneymakers on this point? On my interpretation of the passage, “deon” could be (as it so often is) an absolute accusative, governing an independent thought Aristotle is appending in his own name: literally, since all things ought (deon) to meet/approach (apantan) their purpose (telos). ‘All things’ (hapanta) includes both the moneymakers themselves and any goods/ends they may possess: Moneymakers don’t “face” (apantaō) the right direction, and in their souls, neither does courage.

We shouldn’t think that this is the whole story of what’s wrong with moneymaking, however. The character we have been describing—let me call him the “pleasure-mercenary”—is only one kind of bad moneymaker. The fact that there are two kinds of bad moneymakers is obscured by Jowett’s translation of the passage immediately prior to the one we have been discussing. He translates:

“Hence some persons are led to believe that getting wealth is the object of household management, and the whole idea of their lives is that they ought either to increase their money without limit, or at any rate, not lose it. The origin of this disposition in men is that they are intent upon living only, and not upon living well; and as their desires are unlimited, they also desire that the means of gratifying them should be without limit. Those who do aim at a good life seek the means of obtaining bodily pleasures; and, since the enjoyment of
these appears to depend upon property, they are absorbed in getting wealth; so there arises
the second species of wealth-getting. For, as their enjoyment is in excess…”

Since Aristotle has already distinguished the first (correct) species of wealth getting as the
proper use of household management, in Jowett’s translation (and this passage is unchanged
Barnes’ revised version) all the people described in this passage belong to the “second
species of wealth getting.” But I think it is undeniable that Aristotle is here distinguishing
two ways one can get it wrong about money, namely, the way that those who are intent only
upon living get it wrong, and the way that those who want to live well get it wrong. The
crucial sentence is ‘eis apeiron oun ̃ekeines tēs epithumias ouσēs, kai tōn poiētikōn apeirōn
epithumousin,’ which Jowett translates “as their desires are unlimited, they also desire that
the means of gratifying them should be without limit.” This translation must be an attempt
to make possible the assimilation of the subject of this sentence together with the upcoming
pleasure-mercenaries, so as to generate only one class of bad moneymakers. However, it is
inaccurate. “ekeines tēs epithumias” ought, rather, to be translated “the latter desire,”
namely, the desire for immortality alluded to in the previous clause (the desire to live only).
This is the desire that is specifically infinite (eis apeiron) as opposed to the merely excessive
(en huperbolē) desires of the subsequent group, whom Aristotle is careful to describe as
seeking bodily enjoyment (‘tas apolauseis tas sōmatikas’), in order to distinguish their more
standard brand of epithumia from the epithumia-for-immortality of the first kind of bad
moneymaker.

I think the challenge of interpreting the moneymaker’s mistake is to make good sense of why
there might be two kinds of bad moneymakers, and why Aristotle should introduce the
second kind of bad moneymaker, i.e. the third kind of moneymaker, so dramatically,
“heteron eidos tēs chrēmatistikēs elēluthen” “a new species of moneymaking has arisen.” I
take Aristotle to be arguing that a life that looks pleasure-centered can best be understood as
a (disguised) form of moneymaking. I think this gives us a clue about what is wrong with
the more standard kind of moneymaker, the first kind of bad moneymaker, whom I’ll call
the money hoarder. I will first put forward my account of the money hoarder’s mistake, and
then argue for it. My theory is that in contrast to the pleasure-mercenary, who pursues the
satisfaction of bodily desire at any cost, and thereby treats courage in the way it is
appropriate to treat money, the money hoarder treats money in the way it is appropriate to
treat courage. That is, he sees money as something that is telically dependent on his
happiness—as courage in fact is. In the larger scheme of things, the pleasure-mercenary and
the money hoarder make the same mistake, a distinctively axiological mistake: they take A to
be for B when it isn’t, or fail to take A to be for B when it is.

Wealth-amassing moneymakers pursue money for the sake of an end, but that end is one
that they see as internally, rather than externally, connected to it. They see money as a
source of pleasure, or honor, or virtue, or simply, happiness. They see it not as a mere
requirement (material cause) for obtaining pleasure, or being honored, or acting virtuously, or
being happy; rather, they take pleasure in the very having of it (ktēsis, Pol. 1257b30, 37).
They see the having of money itself as what life is all about—as final cause of all their activity,
and finally caused by happiness. This is not incompatible with seeing money as cause in all
the other ways: perhaps they think having it makes (efficient cause) others think well of
them, or that wealth is, e.g., constitutive (formal cause) of megalopsuchia (great-souledness).
They might even see wealth as a sign of (formal cause) intelligence—taking the only real use of the mind as shrewdness in acquiring profit. Indeed, it is striking that the one who takes pleasure in money looks so much like the one who pursues money as a source of honor, or because wealth is a way of being excellent, or because it makes him happy, or because it shows how smart he is. We, unlike Aristotle, have a ready phrase for this phenomenon: seeing money as power. To those for whom money is power, it even smells good. Such people cannot be blind to the fact that money is useful. Indeed, if it could no longer be used to buy things, they would stop taking pleasure in it, and likewise stop seeing the having of it as greatness or the being seen to have it as honor or the acquiring of it as intelligence. Moneymakers value the having, or the being seen to have, or the acquiring of money (for the sake of pleasure, honor, greatness, intelligence) only insofar as they see money itself as an efficient and formal and material cause (and thus they do not value money superdependently). Their problem is that they do not see it as a merely efficient cause—they also see it as being for the sake of happiness.

In NE I.7 Aristotle makes a tripartite distinction among goods: there are goods such as (1) money, flutes and tools; (2) honor, pleasure, virtue and intelligence; and (3) eudaimonia. We can turn this into a bipartite distinction of relations in which objects of value (telê) can stand to ultimate human purpose: there is the relation in which money, flutes, and tools stand to happiness, and the relation in which honor, pleasure, intelligence and virtue stand to happiness. Happiness is the telos of honor, pleasure, intelligence and virtue—these are things which are meant to be, or supposed to be, or are by nature such as to be, for happiness. Money, flutes and tools, on the other hand, are not such as to be for happiness, but such as to contribute to the coming into being of happiness when represented in the right way. They are, at best, agentially dependent on, that is, accidental causes of, happiness. We can now say, the moneymaker as such is characterized by confusing telic and agential dependence relations. If that’s right, then one really needs to be a nonreductivist to understand what’s wrong with the moneymaker.

I don’t think that this analysis is in tension with Aristotle’s observation that the cause (aition, Pol.1257b40) of the disposition (diathesis, Pol.1257b41) towards wealth-amassing moneymaking is the infinite desire to live. No one would say that he desires money in order to be immortal, as he might say that he desires money for the sake of pleasure, or honor, or virtue. Aristotle’s diagnosis is a bit of psycho-analysis: he is saying that the only reason someone would see money as a source of power (pleasure, honor, virtue) is if there were some underlying thing wrong with his faculty of desire, if it were misdirected somehow. And, while I would hesitate to insist that it must always be so, it certainly looks as though common sense tells us that money-hoarding can be the result of too close an acquaintance with the exigencies of life. One has only to think of the recent news story of the homeless holocaust survivor who was found, at her death, to have amassed an estimated $300,00025, to

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24 Nor does Aristotle say anything to this effect. In fact, he strongly implies that money hoarding is also (1) an occupational hazard of being a member of one of the moneymaking professions (trade, usury) (2) a result of getting carried away with the good kind of moneymaking.

25 It is perhaps unfair to use this woman as an example of anything, since we know so little about her. The facts are that she did donate $100,000 to Hebrew University in Jerusalem (which has not released even her name), had no known relations, lived out of a shopping cart, and died at age 92 two years ago. My confidence in this point is partly derived from having known a number of holocaust survivors (all four of my grandparents, and all their friends), and seeing this particular malady firsthand.
feel the plausibility of marking a causal connection between spending an extended amount of time (especially during one’s formative years) fighting to stay alive, and the failure to learn to aim at living well. It is as though the battle to stay alive, to accumulate the means for survival (ta pros to telos 1257b27) is the only war such a person knows how to wage. And therefore the means to survival (money) becomes the only thing which such a person can enjoy, take pride in, see as excellent, find happiness in. The pleasure-mercenary is an altogether different sort—he is someone who suffered the opposite fate, of having been over-indulged. Because he never learned the limit (peras) to the pursuit of pleasure in the form of the category of shameful pleasures, he never learned what courage is really for (honor).

So the two bad kinds of moneymaker are dysfunctional valuers—what about the good kind, the virtuous agent who makes a limited pursuit of money in the service of household management? He will represent money as agentially (non-telically) dependent on his happiness. Which seems to me to imply that moneymaking, even when done properly, is never virtuous—it is never for its end. In fact, it seems plausible the good kind of moneymaking, insofar as whatever is done for the sake of the money is not particularly pleasant or noble, will consist in mixed-voluntary actions. Let me turn to a discussion of those actions, which will bring out just how much it takes for an action to be ‘for its own sake.’ We will come to see that that locution does not even cover all of what the virtuous man does.

3. Case Study #3: Mixed Voluntary Actions

At III.1 (1110a4-26) Aristotle isolates a category of actions that he distinguishes both from fully voluntary and from fully involuntary actions. He gives two examples: throwing cargo overboard in a storm to save one’s own life (as well as the remaining cargo), and doing shameful things that a tyrant orders one to do, because the lives of family members depend on it. These are things which, Aristotle comments, no one would do for their own sakes (oudeis gar an heloito kath’ hauto tōn toιoutōn ouden 19). They are chosen, and appropriately so (haireta 12), but they are not desired—they are chosen through gritted teeth, let us say.

I think mixed voluntary actions are meant to contrast with virtuous actions precisely in respect of not being desired for their own sakes. This comes out even more clearly in the EE passage which corresponds to NE III.1’s discussion of the mixed voluntary. Aristotle describes as mixed case as one in which the agent “does not choose the very thing which he does, but the thing for the sake of which he does it” (Woods trans. of 1225a12-13: ouk auto touto proaireitai ho prattei, all hou heneka.). Some agents, Aristotle is saying, do A because of B, where they do not really desire or choose A but see it as a mere means of getting B. This seems exactly what is going on with the man who throws cargo overboard in a storm, or accedes to the shameful request of the tyrant in order to save his family. These agents are rightly thought of as moved voluntarily—saving one’s own life, or saving one’s family, is a natural motivation. They choose the results, but they do not choose the actions by which those results are achieved. The very thing they do is something they see as a mere means, actions they don’t want to perform but see as necessary for the results they do want. This explains Aristotle’s awkward description of such an agent’s control over his action: “the origin of his moving the instrumental parts is in himself.” (hē archē tou kinein ta organika
The “instrumental parts” (τα organika merē) recalls the lowest level of τέλος from I.7, organa (tools). The phrase refers either to the agent’s limbs, or to the objects he moves around to accomplish his goals—I think the ambiguity is telling. It is as though Aristotle is telling us that in such a situation, the agent is no more than an instrument, something like a slave to his own ends (slaves being “animate instruments” VIII.11) his body a machine for the production of a result. The nonreductive theorist has a good way of understanding what is going on here: the agent sees himself, and the action he performs, as a merely efficient cause, a producer, of the desired result. He sees his action as agentially dependent on, and (therefore) not telically dependent on, its end.

But we might wonder what will distinguish such “merely instrumental” mixed-voluntary actions from ones in which the action is desired precisely because it is a ‘means’. If prohairesis is a form of ὀρέξεις, then I can (proaisthically) desire an action because it is the means to an end—in this case I will do the action ‘for its own sake’ but it will also be ‘for an end.’ Why doesn’t this happen to throwing the cargo overboard, or doing the shameful thing to save my family?

A. Is Pain the Problem?

One thought might be that it is because the ‘means’ in these cases have negative valence. It is unpleasant to knowingly deprive oneself of goods, or do something shameful, and so these cannot be objects of desire as such. Aristotle points out that agents of mixed actions are sometimes lauded because they succeed in swallowing the pain or shame of their mixed action—they can demonstrate a praiseworthy endurance. (ὅταν αἰσχρόν τί έλπισον ἡπομένωσιν. 1110a20-21) But there’s a problem with this line of thought: if every action which is an unpleasant means to a noble or important end is mixed, then all brave actions will be mixed.

Consider the following description of courage at III.9:

…while death and wounds will be painful to the brave person, and counter-voluntary, he will withstand (ἠπομενεῖ) them because doing so is fine or because not doing so is shameful. And the greater the extent to which he possesses excellence in its entirety, and the happier he is, the more he will be pained at the prospect of death; for to such a person, most of all, is living worthwhile, and this person will knowingly be depriving himself of goods of the greatest kind, which is something to be pained at. But he is no less courageous because of that, and perhaps even more courageous, because he chooses what is fine in war in place of those other goods. (ἐν τῷ πολεμῷ καλὸν ἀντ’ εκείνον χαίρεται) So not all the excellences give rise to pleasant activity, except to the extent that pleasant activity touches on the end itself. (οὐ δὲ εἰς ἀρεταῖς ταῖς αρεταῖς τοῦ ἰθέδεσ ἐνέγειν ἡπομενεῖ, πλὴν εἴπ’ ἡσοῦν τοῦ τέλους ἐφαπτέται) (1117b7-16)

We seem to be back in an Ackrillian bind: are virtuous actions desired and done for their own sakes, or do they, like mixed actions, involve accepting a painful means to a desirable end? I think we can say: both. Pain is an ineliminable part of at least some virtues, and perhaps there are even occasions on which virtue requires one to do something (mildly) shameful: consider someone who holds back from performing a virtuous action in order to allow his friend the chance (1169a33-b1). But even in these cases, the painful and shameful things are not what one does or what one chooses in performing the virtuous actions in question. They are what one endures or undergoes (ἠπομενεῖ). And if we read the
description of the praise of mixed actions carefully, we will see that it is not the actions, but the agents that are praised. (Here I must depart from Rowe’s translation of επί ταῖς πράξεις δε ταῖς τοιαύταις εἰνότε καὶ επιανωνται at 1109b31 as “And for actions of this sort people are sometimes even praised.” I translate “επί ταῖς πράξεις δε ταῖς τοιαύταις” differently, as “in the case of actions of this sort” or “in response to actions of this sort.” Note that Aristotle does not elsewhere use επαινεσθαι + επί to mean being praised for something, nor is this a usage listed in LSJ.26 Note, also, that Rowe himself translates this same construction my way when it occurs earlier (1109b31, twice). Aristotle points out (1110a29-31) that while praise can be appropriate in mixed cases, the praise must be directed at either the calculative skill (because it might have been difficult to figure out what to exchange for what) or the endurance (in withstanding painful or shameful things) of the agent—as if to say that it isn’t strictly speaking the action itself that elicits praise in the mixed cases.

Virtue is not only a disposition to action but also to pathos—to undergo things in a certain way. The brave soldier bravely charges up the hill, and he bravely endures risking his life. And in his case, these two braveries, the bravery of his action and the bravery of his endurance, are tied closely together. He could not perform his brave action were it not for his brave endurance—indeed, brave endurance is a constitutive part of brave action. But it is only a part. There might be circumstances where there is no opportunity for brave action, because there is nothing brave to do or achieve, but one’s brave character (the character that would, under circumstances which did call for it, give rise to brave action) allows one to bravely endure harsh circumstances. Risking death and wounds to save one’s family, or even enduring great pain and difficulty to save one’s own life, can be a case of brave endurance, and can be praiseworthy. But in the case of self-preservation is not what he does that (might) elicit praise, but only how he endures. Aristotle says at the end of the passage about courage above that engaging (to energein) in the virtues is not always pleasant, except insofar as it touches the end (πλὴν επ’ ἡσον του τελους εφαπται). It is virtuous action, and not (mere) virtuous endurance, that touches the end—it can harness its power in advance. This is why the brave action, telically dependent on its end, is desirable in itself, whereas the self-preservative action, for all that it may manifest brave endurance, is not. This is why virtuous actions can be proper objects of praise.

Someone who suffers great evils to save his children behaves admirably; someone like Odysseus may be likewise admirable for his resourcefulness in staying alive. But what we admire in such cases is not the action itself, but the property of fortitude or resourcefulness, a property which, we might say, fails to become embedded in the action itself due to the absence of the conditions for such embedding. The action is not an appropriate object for praise or blame even if the agent is one. But why can’t the fortitude or resourcefulness become embedded in the action? That is, if the painfulness or difficulty of the action is not what makes an action mixed (since virtuous actions can also be painful and difficult) then we have not yet characterized what’s distinctive about mixed actions. Why can’t the mixed action be ‘for’ its end, as the virtuous action is?

26 With the possible exception of one place where they are suggesting epi be read and one late (2nd C) reference—and it’s unclear whether even this is an exception because the citation is incomplete and I have yet to track it down. I need to do more, I know, if I actually want to say that Rowe is wrong to translate as he does. (I think he is—but the TLG searches for epainō + epi produce monstrous yields...
B. No, Nature is the Problem.

It is instructive to contrast the mixed cases, not only with the cases of unmixedly voluntary actions (such as virtuous actions), but, on the other end, with Aristotle’s two examples of unmixedly involuntary actions (1110a1-4). Indeed, the mixed cases look like variants of the latter: being carried by a strong wind or by men who have one in their power. I think we are meant to contrast the role of the wind in making one move, and the role of the storm in ‘making one’ throw out cargo; or, likewise, the role of the men who have the power to pick one up with the role of the man who has the power to command (kurios at a6 echoes kurioi at a3). The contrast makes it clear that in the mixed cases, it is not the storm, or the tyrant, who ‘makes’ one move—it is one’s own animal nature. It is wrong to say that the mixed agents are ‘forced’ or ‘compelled’ to save their own and their family’s lives. “Force,” for Aristotle, is opposed to nature, and is external (exōthen a1). The tyrant extortioneer is not ‘moved from the outside’ in the way that the man who is carried by stronger men is ‘moved from the outside.’

For living creatures, the goods of self-preservation and the preservation of offspring supply the paradigmatic ‘internal sources of change and rest’. I take the crucial similarity between the extortionee and the jettisser to be that their goal comes from nature, that is, from first nature. Why would this matter? A thing’s (first) nature does establish telic dependence relationships, but not the kind of telic dependence relationship we are interested in here. This is because something’s (first) nature is the nature of that kind of thing (human, dog, etc.). (First-) Natural telic dependence relationships hold for all creatures of a kind, all creatures who have that nature. But we are interested in telic dependence relations that hold between a token action and a token human (this cargo-jettisoning, done by this man). The fact that he is human is just not the kind of fact that can make survival the telos of cargo-jettisoning for him, now—because it would have to thereby make survival the telos of every human cargo-jettisoning.

Now one might grant this point about the impossibility of first nature’s giving rise to new (that is, token) telic dependence relationships, and still resist the conclusion that self-preservation actions cannot be telically dependent. Couldn’t survival be something we seek by first nature and by second nature? Culture certainly plays a role in human self-preservation: children overcome their initial helplessness by being taught, and therefore habituated, to fend for themselves. Throwing cargo overboard is a good example of a human self-preservation action that is far from instinctive or reflexive—it reveals a wealth of experience in dealing with danger. Aristotle would not deny that we develop sophisticated mechanisms of life preservation through habituation. But he would deny that these sophisticated mechanisms are part of what I am calling ‘second nature,’ for the simple reason

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27 Could this be a reference to the beginning of the Republic (327d) in which Plato makes a contrast between Socrates and Glaucon being forcibly prevented from going back into town as they’d planned, since they are outnumbered, and their being persuaded to stay, and doing so voluntarily? In any case Aristotle is opening up a third possibility, between physical force and persuasion: extortion.

28 But what about parents? Aristotle says goneōn kai teknōn (a6)—maybe I need to say something about how the peculiarity of human nature explains that natural affective ties extend from children to parents and not only v.v.? Or should I press another thought: he does not say goneōn ë teknōn? Or, alternately, perhaps reproduction takes a (really) long time in humans, so that someone may still be being generated by his parents even as he begins to raise his own children?

29 This claim rests on the connection between the nature of a thing and what it is to be that thing—exploration of it would take us far afield, so I will simply have to take it for granted.
that there is no virtue for them to aim at. “Second nature,” we can now see, is not just a matter of patterns of behavior resulting from acculturation. Not every learned repetitive response is such that it can ground the prohairetic transformation of an action into telic dependence on its end. It is a part of Aristotle’s ethical theory that there is no such virtue as resourcefulness or self-preservation or being a provider for one’s family. The closest he comes to naming a virtue of this kind is deinotês (VI.12), the skill of getting the job done. But it isn’t a virtue at all—being deinos can make one worse, if the job in question is a bad one. The virtues that are associated with money (eleutheriotês, megaloprepeia) all pertain to giving it away; there is no virtue connected to having or earning money, and which was why I suggested above that activities directed at these ends will never be ‘for’ anything. The only virtuous way to be in relation to money is imprudent.

I think we can say that Aristotle must deny that there can be prudential virtues, if there is to be a unity of virtue. Why? Why couldn’t it be virtuous to preserve one’s life, or the lives of one’s family members? (Hobbes thought this was the only virtue.) Why must virtue secure token telic dependence relations? Granted, telic dependence relations of actions that are life-preserving or family-preserving are already, independently secured at the level of type; since they are the two nutritive aims (staying alive and reproducing). Why would it follow that such action could not be virtuous?

Consider a potential conflict between courage and moderation: in order to do the brave thing, I must immoderately forswear a, or perhaps all, pleasure. I’m imagining a courageous act that demands asceticism, e.g. if I relieve the garrison, I will be living in the garrison for a while without any of the most basic life-comforts. Or, consider a courageous act that demands gluttony: I take on the project of eating immoderately large amounts of food in order to grow fat, as part of a statement to the world about prejudice against fat people. This is brave both in the sense of risking the censure of others, and because I am thereby jeopardizing my health. How does the Aristotelian resolve these conflicts? He will say they are only apparent conflicts: that if the garrison relief is really brave (and not reckless), then it is not really immoderate to forswear those pleasures; or, if I must really be gluttonous in order to execute it, my project can be neither brave nor good. Not every case of “eating a lot” will be immoderate; not every case of “risking one’s life” will be brave. This is just what Aristotle is saying when he says that the virtuous action is the one the good person would do—he is saying that a virtue is, in the modern sense of the word, a disposition. A disposition is a property which is logically posterior to its instances. If virtues are dispositions, they can always be steered out of the way of one another: a particular action cannot be ‘forced’, in virtue of a rule such as “everything with property X is brave,” to qualify as a virtuous.

But there is no getting around the fact that risking one’s life is imprudent. If we want to know what is prudent, we don’t need to ask ourselves ‘what would the prudent person do in this situation’—rather, it is the reverse: our knowledge of what prudence is (skill at self-preservation) tells us what the prudent person would do. I can tell you what prudence

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30 It does not follow that a prohairesis cannot be, say, unjust, but it does follow that unjust prohairetic actions are not made telically dependent on their ends by those prohaireseis. And since Aristotle also thinks that only prohairetically (and not appetitively or passionately) chosen injustice counts as having been done ‘from injustice’ (1134a5-10, 1135b20-25) we can say that, according to Aristotle, it is impossible to do a truly unjust action for its own sake. See below on the disunity of vice.
demands even if I neither am nor have ever met a prudent person. And so there is no getting around the fact that courage conflicts with prudence: courage is often going to require someone to risk his life, *and that just is imprudent*. We might say, if courage is going to be a virtue, prudence can’t be one. But it is not only courage that can be brought into conflict with prudence: true generosity is typically imprudent; moderation in pleasures only *typically* prudent. When the tyrant commands you to gorge yourself on fine dishes and avail yourself of his harem, it will be imprudent to say no—and it may well be immoderate to say yes. Prudence is carved right into nature—it is ‘for the sake of something’ by nature. And nature, again, is the way it is always or for the most part. For this reason, prudence cannot be part of virtue, if virtue is to be unified.

And we can also see why virtue must be unified: if an action could be brave, but immoderate, or generous, but unjust, then one and the same action would be both for the sake of the end and not for the sake of the end. On an agent-dependent understanding of ‘for the sake of,’ this looks like a possibility—an action could, represented one way, be for the sake of the end, and, represented another way, not be such. And the two representations could be ‘in’ the very same agent: “I intend to go to Paris. No, on second thought, I’d rather go to Rome.” But Aristotle thinks that there is a fact of the matter as to whether something we do, such as going to Paris, really is, or really is not, for the sake of the end. And therefore there can only be one such fact: virtues cannot conflict.

This is, in turn, connected to the third condition on telic dependence: virtue. One might have a fixed disposition to choose mixed-voluntary actions, or a fixed disposition to choose bad ones, but neither of these is sufficient to guarantee telic dependence. Telic dependence requires that one’s dispositions be on track. It would take work to show this, but I believe it can be shown that Aristotle thinks that only the good, that is, virtuous life is capable of the kind of unity that would allow for telic dependence relationships to not come into conflict with one another. The bad, unvirtuous life is *aoristos* (IX.9 1170a24), indeterminate, and virtue is the only source of unity. And since telic dependence relationships, if they are to be real, cannot come into conflict with one another, they must depend, one and all, on the agent’s real good, i.e. his happiness, i.e. virtuous activity.

Unlike pleasant or virtuous actions, mixed actions are not done for their own sakes. This is true even though they will sometimes be what the virtuous person *should* do. I want to end this discussion of mixed actions by considering a different (unmixed) case where the virtuous person does not do what is for its own sake.

### C. The **Final Cause of What it Understands?**

Let’s take a step back and return to our tripartite division of philosophers into materialists, efficient causal theorists, and formalists. I think everyone, or, at least, everyone who is not a behaviorist, should agree that practical knowledge is “the cause of what it understands”—the question is, *which kind of cause?* Each group adds another ‘cause’ to that of its

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31 I recognize that I need an account of what makes actions done from epithumia (or thumos?) ‘for their own sakes.’ I am tempted to think of this in terms of agent-superdependence—but I have not worked out this part of the view yet.

32 *Intention* §48
predecessors. Smart and Place and Armstrong (and Descartes) take practical knowledge to be the material cause of what it understands. The Davidsonians grant that the agent’s intention will typically give rise to a material difference between arm-raisings and arm-risings, but they think that that difference itself must be explained in terms of something prior, namely, the intention as efficient cause of action. The Anscombians grant that actions are often efficiently caused by such thoughts, but they say that this must itself be understood in terms of the fact that the agent’s intention is a formal cause of the action. And Aristotle, I assert, agrees with the Anscombians that the agent’s thought often gives the action its distinctive formal unity, but he thinks that it does this only if it qualifies as a genuine final cause.

What is it for practical knowledge to be the final cause of what it understands? Just as in the case of natural teleology, final causation is causation by form—it is the form that is the final cause of each thing. In the good case, the agent’s prohairesis gives us the form, that is, definition or essence of the action, which holds together all its accidents and unifies it into a whole. And the prohairesis also gives us the final cause of the action, that for whose sake the action exists: the action exists for, or, in order to realize, this form. But, to clarify the difference between Aristotle and Anscombe, we need to specify the priority relation here: X is the formal cause of Y because X is the final cause of Y, and not vice versa. Final cause, so to speak, comes first. There is such a thing as an action’s having the ‘wrong’ prohairesis, and in this case the action has no formal cause because it has no final cause: a blow to finality is (therefore, secondarily) a blow to formality. Form is formal cause only in the good case—only if nothing goes wrong with the articulation of the form from the end down to this action. And it is easy for something to go wrong.

We deliberate from the end (happiness, everyone’s starting point) down through (hopefully) a correct conception of happiness in terms of a virtuous life, down through (hopefully) a correct conception of what the virtues are, down through (hopefully) a correct conception of what virtues are particularly called for on such and such an occasion, down through (hopefully) a correct conception of how to realize those virtues here and now, down through (hopefully) a correct conception of how to bring about the things which will realize those virtues. At the very end of the chain we will have a (token) action that I immediately perform. The conclusion is the action itself, and it must be, because it would be hard to see how the tokenness of the token action could be grasped in thought independently of performance (which action? this action). Anywhere in this story I can go wrong, and if I do, then the action will fail to be telically dependent. It will fail to live out, to realize, to be for the sake of, its own form.

Such an agent will do what he does ‘in vain;’ he acts pointlessly, meaninglessly, endlessly. Vainness is another way that chance can rear its head: when something which is by nature such as to be for a certain end fails to attain that end, that is another species of ‘to automaton,’ says Aristotle. (see fn. 9 for ref.) And presumably, in the human case, that would be another species of tuchê, bad luck. So when the form does not in fact finally

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33 It is because ‘wrong’ or ‘bad’ prohairesis are still prohairesis that Aristotle is only willing to assert, of prohairesis in general, that it is efficient cause. [REF bk. VI]
34 I think the very fact that deliberation works ‘backwards,’ that is, starts at the end (the good), attests to the priority of the final to formal (and efficient) cause in understanding action.
cause that of which it is the form, that is, does not give rise to what it tells us is what ought to happen, we say that something happened ‘in vain.’

It is important to note that not all such breaks in the telic chain, that is, not all practical failures, are equally grave. The farther down the line—that is, the farther away from eudaimonia, the closer to my token action—the failure is, the less it indicates a failure in my moral character. To take the best case scenario of a telic break: I may see that eudaimonia is the human good, and that it is the final cause of virtuous activity, and that virtuous activity (here and now) means virtuous action and that virtuous action is a matter (given the way things are) of being brave, and the brave thing to do is to relieve the garrison, and that the way to relieve the garrison is to run up the hill—and I may be right about all that, but go wrong at the very last point. I may go wrong in thinking that what I should do in order to relieve the garrison is run up the hill right now, or that I should run up this side of the hill, or that I should run at this speed. And there may have been no way for me to know ahead of time that this is the wrong time, or side of the hill, or speed—my ‘error’ might just be bad luck. The telic-dependence relationships are secure (we can say “A is for the sake of B”) up until the break, wherever it is. But nothing that comes after the break is telically dependent anymore, and so, since the action always comes after the break, such action always fails to be telically dependent. Breaks are always a possibility in the practical case, which is precisely what distinguishes action from the highest kind of human activity, contemplation. (Contemplation doesn’t leave any room for chance to interfere with telic dependence—this makes it ‘for its own sake’ in a quite distinctive sense...) And so Aristotle does think that the courageous action which does not accomplish its end (the garrison doesn’t get relieved) happens in vain, and therefore, is not telically dependent. In that case, the uphill run does not count as an action done for its own sake, or for the sake of an end. It was not a brave, or virtuous, action.

Does it follow that the agent was not brave? Not quite. Unless we assume the agent was exercising his brave disposition, we are not able to specify what went wrong, that is, what it was that ought to have happened but didn’t (garrison relief). It was brave of him to aim at garrison relief—that was why he was running up the hill, but as it turns out the way to have relieved the garrison would have been (say) to run up the hill at nightfall, rather than during the daytime; or perhaps just 10 seconds later, when (though our soldier could not have known this) the sniper training his gun on that hill would have to stop to reload. Such an agent is brave, and praiseworthy for his bravery, but what we praise him for is his brave endurance, or his brave character, and not his brave action. For there is no single thing he does that is brave—there is no brave praxis on the scene here. (See the next section for a discussion of what does (or doesn’t!) unify the various descriptions of his ‘action’). Virtuous actions have to be for their own sakes, that is, for the sake of the end, and his was not. What this shows us is that the agent’s deliberation is a picture of what went wrong in the action only insofar as it is a picture of what went right in the deliberation. We must do some correct deliberating in order to count as deliberating at all (in the worst case scenario, the only thing we do right is aim at eudaimonia). To the extent that we go right, we succeed in spelling out what our final cause demands of us, here and now. To the extent that we

35 So, on my reading, Aristotle doesn’t think there is any such thing as desiring the bad, as such. This distinguishes him from Plato, who is, I think, trying to articulate just such a possibility in the Rep. IX discussion of the tyrant. But this claim requires an extended argument of its own.
deliberate correctly we get at least an inkling of what it would have been to have acted for the sake of the end.

But why do we need to see ‘what went wrong’ in terms of a deliberative breakdown—why not just say that what the agent does, in the sense of his voluntary movement, isn’t in accord with the standard for that movement set by his (human) form? The answer is that deliberation just is the way that human form sets a standard for human movement. Deliberation is the agent’s capacity to articulate his own form as the form of a special kind of thing out in the world (his action). If he does it right, the thing out in the world bears a telic relation to its own, and thereby his own, form. Such an action is ‘for its own sake’ and ‘for his (the agent’s) own sake.’ Human form simply does not already contain, in some encoded way, the answer to how human beings should live. There is no paradigm with reference to which we can determine what our telos requires of us in a specific situation, as there is for plants and other animals; this is why there is no substitute for rational activity, why rational activity is a form of creativity. Hence Aristotle can say nothing more satisfactory about what the virtuous action is than that it is what the phronimos would do.

We can invoke our distinction between type- and token- teleology once more. When form is final cause in the case of action, this is something very different than to say that form is final cause in the case of nature. In the latter case, it is the form of that type of thing that is its final cause. In the case of action, it is the form of that token action that is its final cause. It is a hotly debated question whether Aristotle thinks that there can be forms of particulars. The debate usually plays itself out in the arena of substance: is there a form of Socrates? I don’t think there is, but I do think there are forms of particulars: I think that forms of actions are forms of particular, that is token, actions. We could define deliberation as: the activity of generating token forms.

IV. Conclusion: Ackrill and Anscombe

This is my sketch of Aristotle. I want to end by saying something more about what moves Ackrill to miss the connection between Aristotle’s ‘for its own sake’ and telic dependence. Ackrill ends his paper by complaining that “Aristotle does not direct his gaze steadily upon the questions ‘What is an action?’ and ‘What is an action?’.” Ackrill sees as the source of the contradictions he details (in the passage I quoted on p.11) the fact that Aristotle does not reckon with the multiple-describability of an action. For example, given that “stealing some money” and “holding up the bank” and “securing his financial future” and “pointing this gun” and “moving his arm” are all descriptions of what the thief does, what pulls all these descriptions together and makes them one action? I think Ackrill is wrong—Aristotle has an answer to this question. His answer is: nothing. They are not “pulled together” into one thing, one event, one action. There are just a bunch of contingently related and numerically distinct “actions,” distinguished from others that happen at the same time and in the same vicinity (a silent alarm is triggered by his arm movement, the molecules in his arm move, a customer at the bank has a heart attack) by the fact that their cause is in him and he knew about them.
Aristotle just doesn’t think that there is anything that unifies (what we would call) various descriptions of the same action—unless what we have on our hands is a virtuous action. Because Aristotle’s story is completely different if the descriptions in question are “leaping forward,” “charging up the hill,” “risking my life,” “relieving the garrison,” fighting for my country,” “doing something brave.” Here is a place where Aristotle not only has an answer, but has a novel and brilliant answer to the question, what pulls the descriptions together? The answer is: they are held together by telic dependence relationships that are established by the prohairesis which is generated by the agent’s brave disposition. What unifies a virtuous action is that it is for the sake of the end, that is, for its own sake.

If this is right, it sheds light on something crucially un-Aristotelian about Neo-Aristotelianism. Intentional actions often have something like the following structure: the agent X-es in order to Y, and his reason for Y-ing is that it contributes to or makes possible another desirable action, Z. On such an occasion, when asked what he is doing, the agent can often truthfully answer “I am X-ing” or “I am Y-ing” or “I am Z-ing.” For instance, to take up an example of Michael Thompson’s, if he is cracking some eggs in order to make an omelet, and he is doing that to make breakfast, he can answer “I am cracking eggs” or “I am making an omelet” or “I am making breakfast.” It is hard to deny that something like this is usually going on when we act—though perhaps there are simple or basic actions for which another story must be told. So let’s call my story, ‘the story of nonbasic intentional action.’

It is, I believe universally, accepted among those working in the philosophy of action that we can paraphrase the story of nonbasic intentional action by saying that it is a story about one action which can be described in multiple ways, that is, that cracking the eggs is making the omelet, and making the omelet is making breakfast. Let’s call this ‘the unity thesis’; it says that the story of nonbasic intentional action is the story of a single action. The unity thesis is, as I said, uncritically accepted by everyone—but it’s worth pointing out that it comes in for especial emphasis by those who take themselves to be working in the Aristotelian tradition, such as Thompson, Anscombe, Foot etc.

Aristotle wants to tell us that the unity thesis is not just a paraphrase of the story of nonbasic intentional action, but involves, as the story does not, a strong metaphysical claim, the claim of identity. He thinks such a claim needs a metaphysical basis—an A* to link up

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36 Is this a problem for Aristotle’s theory of responsibility? This would be a topic for an essay all on its own, but I don’t think so: all Aristotle needs is a set of politically and ethically relevant action-descriptions, e.g. murdering someone, stealing their property, breaking a contract etc., and an answer to the question, in virtue of what they are applicable to an agent. (What I mean is: Aristotle doesn’t need to think that my murdering Jack is, metaphysically speaking, identical to, e.g., my stabbing him with a knife, in order to think that I am responsible for murdering Jack if (a) I knew (or should have known) that I was murdering him and (b) I was not forced to murder him.) I think might even grant this point—he does say that despite Aristotle’s failure to give us identity conditions for actions, he “has much to tell us about the responsibility for actions.”

37 There are differences between how the ‘unity condition’ is formulated, in that the Anscombean formulation places the identity conditions as instrumental connections between various descriptions of an action, whereas the Davidsonian version treats the action as an event, and makes use of instrumental connections only incidentally, as a kind of causal connection (See Julia Annas’ ‘Davidson and Anscombe on “the same action”’ REF). My criticism here abstracts from this difference between Anscombe and Davidson, since I am objecting to the thought that there is any one thing there (be it an action or an event). I do, however, take the Anscombean formulation as my primary target.
the various As and Bs in ‘for the sake of’ relations that constitute the multiple action-descriptions—and he offers us one in the case of virtuous action. But when that $A*$ is absent, that is, in the case of nonvirtuous or nonprohairetic action, Aristotle thinks we can’t buy unity at any price. What can be obscured by the talk of acting ‘under a description’ which Ackrill inherits from Anscombe is the implicit substantive claim that what stands under all those descriptions is one thing. Aristotle, by contrast, asks us to entertain the possibility that someone’s cracking of the egg is not his making of breakfast—that is, if he’s not virtuous.

Anscombe is the mother of contemporary action theory: she sounded the trumpet in *Modern Moral Philosophy*, claiming it as prerequisite for a moral theory no longer anchored in divine command; and she showed us how to do it, in *Intention*. And she saw doing action theory on the one hand and continuing the legacy of Aristotle’s practical philosophy on the other as, if I may, two descriptions of the same thing. There’s something right about this. It is right that at the very heart of Aristotle’s ethics lies a theory—I venture to say, both the most profound and the most sensible such theory yet devised—about what it takes to hold an action together. But Ackrill is also right to be frustrated. He was (I think) dutifully following Anscombe’s lead and couldn’t find what was supposed to be there. Because I think she pointed us to the wrong place in Aristotle—she failed to see just how much Aristotle thinks it takes to hold one’s act together. And this failure of hers is no accident. Action theory, as heralded in *Modern Moral Philosophy*, springs from the desire to ground morality in something utterly unlike divine command. Action theory is supposed to be the theory that allows actions to stand on their own two feet, without need of undergirding by metaphysical, teleological or religious doctrines we ‘moderns’ no longer believe in. To nominate Aristotle as the poster child for this movement is not only to encourage a deep misreading of Aristotle’s ethical theory; it is also to erase exactly those arguments in Aristotle which could be used to undermine the project of doing ethics without metaphysics. Understood properly, I think Aristotle can tell us what’s wrong with Modern Action Theory.

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38 There are moments in Anscombe where she seems to hesitate on the question of Aristotle’s helpfulness for those doing action theory, e.g. in *Modern Moral Philosophy* she says that we (i.e., we post-divine command philosophers) need “an account of what type of characteristic a virtue is—a problem, not of ethics, but of conceptual analysis—and how it relates to the actions in which it is instanced: a matter which I think Aristotle did not succeed in really making clear.” But Ackrill could be forgiven if such a sentence did not lead him to expect that Aristotle would be babbling incoherently on these matters!

39 I am, in effect, charging Anscombe with a *motivated* misinterpretation of Aristotle. The claim that the misinterpretation is motivated dissolves on the subversive reading of *Modern Moral Philosophy*, as being not an argument in favor of action theory but an argument in favor of return to divine command theory. Even on this reading, however, the point about her misreading of Aristotle stands: whichever side we see her as coming down on, I claim that she locates Aristotle on the wrong side of that divide. My point here has been that Anscombe’s interpretation of Aristotle’s practical philosophy, whether she took it to support her own views or not, is a pernicious philosophical legacy.
Epilogue: Chance Revisited

We say that the brave soldier who fails, through no fault of his own, to relieve the garrison is simply unlucky; but this claim should not, to reprise our initial discussion, be interpreted as meaning that all we need to do to understand the case where the garrison is relieved is to add some luck to the case of the unlucky brave soldier.

Luck here is what interferes with, or our name for a failure of, telic dependence. Final cause is something you start with, in understanding the good case, and (bad) luck is one way of talking about what can go wrong. Luck doesn’t ‘make up the difference’ between final cause and the defective case. We might say, in the language of the Anscombians, luck is not “something added.” It is something taken away.

In the light of where we end up, we can see that our original picture of luck and chance was distorted by the need to give initial encouragement to the reductivist, to supply her with a reductive formula in which all she had to do was fill in the variable:

Luck/chance + \(X\) = \(A\) is for the sake of \(B\)

\(X\) = nature was the unpromising, rejected branch of teleology. \(X\) = thought/choice was the road we tried out. We can now see that the source of the problem was the desire to understand luck or chance independently of what it is for \(A\) to be for the sake of \(B\). So I would like to end by setting the record straight on luck and chance, now that we are looking at them the right way around.

Here is a case of luck: \(B\), which is such as to be for something, occurs; qua \(B\), it is neither the final cause of, nor efficiently caused by, anything; qua \(B^*\), it is both the final cause of, and efficiently caused by, \(A\). So, to take up one of our examples, a confectioner accidentally makes a healthy thing, since his tasty product happens to be healthy. The confectioner=\(A\); the healthy thing=\(B\); the tasty thing=\(B^*\).

The question that should arise is this, why think that luck describes \(A\)’s efficient causal action as opposed to \(B\)’s final cause action? \(B\) qua \(B\) is neither final cause nor efficiently caused; \(B^*\) qua \(B^*\) is both. Now Aristotle will want to say that strictly speaking luck is not the efficient cause of health—or rather, it is not the essential efficient cause. It is the accidental efficient cause. That is, luck is a species of accidental causation \((\text{Phys.} 197a14)\). But bringing in accidentality does nothing to help us with the asymmetry: why isn’t luck just as much of a way of talking about \(B\) as (accidental) final cause as it is a way of talking about \(A\) as (accidental) efficient cause?

I think that Aristotle wants to come close to saying that \(B\) is the accidental final cause of \(A\) in such a case—but he would hold off from saying that, and say instead that \(B\) is the accidental “final” cause of \(A\) in such a case. I think that when he says that these are cases of ‘for something’ he is saying that we have a quasi or pseudo final cause on our hands. But, once again, why is the sense in which the accidental causal connection between \(A\) and \(B\) is final more etiolated than the sense in which the accidental causal connection between \(A\) and \(B\) is efficient?
Consider the essential case, where we have A is the essential efficient cause of B and B is the final cause of A (e.g. confectionary is an essential efficient cause of tastiness and tastiness is the essential final cause of confectionary). Which comes first? That is, is B an essential final cause because A is an essential efficient cause, or vice versa? The answer here is clear: vice versa. Insofar as we are talking about ‘essential’ efficient causes, we are referring (in a funny way) to what are in fact final causes. What ‘essentially’ efficiently causes B is what does not merely give rise to B but is such as to be for B. If essential efficient causes are really (or logically posterior to) essential final causes, it is not so surprising that accidental final causes should be really (or logically posterior to) accidental efficient causes.

Consider this chart of As and Bs:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>As</th>
<th>Bs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) accidental efficient cause</td>
<td>accidental “final cause”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(e.g., digging)</td>
<td>(e.g., discovering treasure)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) essential final cause</td>
<td>essential “efficient cause”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(e.g., happiness)</td>
<td>(e.g., virtuous choice)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As are explanatorily prior to Bs, that is, what’s on the B-side is the kind of cause it is only in an etiolated sense, in a sense which is derivative of the fact that what’s on the A-side is the kind of cause it is. But there is a further important fact, which is that the A-B pair making up (2) is explanatorily prior to the A-B pair making up (1).

Here is a chart making the same point for matter and form:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>As</th>
<th>Bs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) accidental matter</td>
<td>accidental “form”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(bits/arrangements of earth, air, fire, water)</td>
<td>(snubnosed, white, being 5 feet tall, )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) essential form</td>
<td>essential “matter”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(animal)</td>
<td>(living body)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It would be the task of another paper to show that this chart is constructed correctly—in particular, that the quotation marks around the word “matter” in B2 are justified textually and philosophically. (One could, likewise, construct similar charts stating the priority of final cause to formal; of formal to efficient; of efficient to material; of final to material.)

In all such charts, As explain Bs, but, more fundamentally, (2)s explain (1)s. If we only had line (1) of the two charts above we might be think that we could understand final cause in terms of efficient cause, or form in terms of matter. And there is a certain kind of final cause we can understand in terms of efficient cause; just as there is a certain kind of form we can understand in terms of matter. But this is only because, even in such cases, we understand the efficient or material cause (to which we’ve reduced a ‘final’ or ‘formal’ cause) themselves in terms of final and formal cause proper. The priority of A1s to B1s presupposes the priority of A2s to B2s. That is, A2s priority to B2 is itself prior to A1s priority to B1.
We can get an illusion, if we start by thinking about luck or chance, that we might build up final cause out of it: we are thinking of (1)s without the necessary backdrop of (2)s. Once we recall that backdrop, we see exactly why the reductive project was doomed from the start: final cause is prior to efficient cause. Luck just serves to paper over that fact.