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THE BLACKWELL GUIDE TO
ARISTOTLE'S
Nicomachean Ethics

EDITED BY RICHARD KRAUT
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Aristotle on Moral Virtue and the Fine

Gabriel Richardson Lear

As we will see below, there is truth in this assumption. What makes actions fine is also (in part) what makes them worth choosing for their own sakes. That is to say, goodness and likeness in action are in large part constituted by the same property (no anticipation: being well ordered by the human good). For this reason, we can learn a great deal about what Aristotle considers intrinsically valuable in the various virtues by examining his remarks on the specific ways in which they are fine. Indeed, “fine” is an apt translation of kalos precisely because being kalos connotes being good (although not necessarily morally good). Nevertheless, according to Aristotle the concept of the kalos is not the same as the concept of the good, the agathon. Like our word “noble,” it has connotations of being grand and open to public view. And, like our word “beauty,” it promises pleasure. Thus we do not exhaust Aristotle’s meaning when we interpret his phrases as kalos vouvou and heta kalos, literally “for the sake of the fine” or “because of the fine,” as “for the sake of whatever makes an action worth choosing for its own sake.”

I will argue that once we understand Aristotle’s notion of the fine, we may be shocked anew by the degree to which he develops his moral theory from the point of view of showing its contribution to the agent’s well-being. For instance, in NE 1.10 he argues that the virtuous person can never become wretched (although he may lose his blessedness) since the fonnness of his actions will always “shine through” even in the worse circumstances (1100b30–33). Once we appreciate the pleasantness and visibility of the fine in Aristotle’s account, we realize that he is suggesting (among other things) that the fineness of virtue works as a sort of balm to the unlucky person’s broken spirit. He can never become wretched because the brilliance of virtuous deeds will always give him satisfaction. (Or so I will argue.) If I am right about the way in which the notion of the fine works in this and other arguments, then there is at least some reason to suppose that when he repeats that the courageous or temperate or generous person acts for the sake of the kalos, he has in mind, at least in part, the peculiar felicity of virtuous action.

But we must be careful to identify exactly what sort of pleasure this is. Part of the challenge of interpreting Aristotle’s ethics is understanding how enjoyment and pursuit of the fine is essential to genuine virtuous activity as he conceives it and is not just an “added bonus” to being good. For, as Aristotle says, the delight the virtuous person enjoys in the fine is not “a mere ornament,” but is proper to and integral to virtuous activity itself (1.8.1099a15–16). Since he conceives of virtuous action as the excellent realization of our nature as rational animals, we should expect pleasure to be in some way proper to rational activity.

In what follows, I will argue that there are three central elements of the fine or beautiful as Aristotle conceives it: effective teleological order, visibility, and pleasantness. Once this conception of the fine is in place, I will argue that he has good reason to make beauty central to his account of virtue. The experience of one’s actions as beautiful is, we might say, the mode of the virtuous person’s apprehension of their goodness. This awareness gratiﬁes his spirited desire to be...
admirable, but more important, since virtuous action is the activity of reason, it also brings the actualization of his rational soul to its fullest completion.

I will try, insofar as possible, to make this argument without presupposing a specific account of aristotelian *eudaimonia*. The meaning of this term, its relation to the happy life, its place in practical reasoning, not to mention Aristotle's substantive account of the good it names, are all difficult issues that cannot be fully addressed in a chapter of this scope. But since, in my view, *to kalon* is a teleological notion, and since the *telos* relevant to human action is happiness, it makes no sense to make my argument without some assumption of a fixed account of happiness. I trust it will not be controversial in a discussion of Aristotle's ethics to treat *eudaimonia* as the excellent activity of reason. At any rate. I believe the interpretation I give of the fine can be adjusted in its details to suit a variety of readings of the *NE* without substantially altering it.

To *Kalon* as Effective Teleological Order

Aristotle never explains in the *NE* what *to kalon* is.² But it is a notion he invokes in other works of practical philosophy, such as the *Politics*, *Poetics*, and *Rhetoric*, and in his discussions of biology, cosmology, and mathematics. In fact, in *Metaphysics* XIII.8 he offers what looks like a quite general account of the fine: the most important form of the *kalon* are order (στοιχεια, *symmateria*), and definiteness or boundlessness (ακθεραιομαθον) (1078a6-61; cf. EE1.8.1218a21-3).² This may not seem a promising starting point for understanding what, in particular, constitutes the beauty of virtuous actions. How exactly is keeping a promise symmetrical? And (more urgent) why should its symmetry matter from the point of view of virtue? But before trying to find these properties in human action, we should first examine more closely what they amount to in other things Aristotle calls fine.

He is explicit that in the changeable world of nature, order is the arrangement of parts with reference to, or for the sake of, a common end or good. (I'll leave aside the question of how order, symmetry, and boundlessness are instantiated in unchanging things.) So, for example, the whole of nature contains the good because all its parts are ordered by reference to (προς) the same thing, the Prime Mover, which Aristotle likens to the general of an army or the head of a household (Met. 1081a10-13). What it seems to have in mind is that as all of these spheres, things are ordered (and thus good) when and to the extent that they contribute to the proper goal or activity of their *νας*.* The important point for us is that not only do things manifest a good order when arranged for the sake of some common good; Aristotle seems to think, given the definition of the *kalon* in *Metaphysics* XIII.3, that this arrangement makes things beautiful as well. Beauty and order is not a mere formal property, then, a relation of parts to each other. It

is (or inheres in) as effective teleological arrangement (that is, it aims at and succeeds in so aiming).

This interpretation is confirmed by several other passages.³ For instance, in the *Parts of Animals*, Aristotle says that even the humblest living things reveal something beautiful, and effic in us in the pleasure felt in the presence of the beautiful, because they are all organized for the sake of an end (Arist. *An. Am. 1.5.66b21-6*).

And in the *Politics* (VI.4.1326a38ff) he says that a beautiful city is one whose size is limited by its proper order. It is clear that the order Aristotle has in mind is the one realized in the city's fulfilling its function (i.e. the happiness of its citizens; see *Kraut 1997* nos. ad 1326a25-26). So one way things are beautiful is by being ordered with reference to their proper end or good.

The *kalon* as symmetry must also be understood in terms of teleological structure. According to *Politics* III.13.1284b8-22, something displays symmetry or proportion (*symmateria*) when the size of its parts conduce to its beauty. A sculpture may create a foot that is, taken by itself, beautiful. He may model it perfectly, with instep neither too high nor too low, to be the image of a foot that could be set upon. But it is proportionally larger than all the other parts of the body he has sculpted, he will reject it on the grounds that it has no place in this particular sculpture. Likewise, if certain citizens acquire too much power, they should be ostracized from the city. But what determines proportionality? It is the well functioning or goodness of the whole. Thus, Aristotle says that a city can be well proportioned even if it has a king, provided that his extraordinary power works to the benefit of the community (Pol. III.13.1286b13-15; cf. VI.4.1326a37-38).

(Concentration of power in the hands of a tyrant, on the other hand, would be disproportionate since it is exercised arbitrarily and for his own advantage alone; IV.10.1295a19-22.) Symmetry, then, is very much like order. In both cases, a thing possesses it when its parts are determined in a certain way with reference to the end of the whole. But while order is concerned with the arrangement of all the parts taken together, symmetry is a matter of the relation of those parts to each other. (So, we say that a thing is asymmetrical because one of its elements is out of proportion but that it is disorder because of the entire structure. When each part of a thing is shaped and sized so that it can function in harmony with the other parts for their common good, then the thing as a whole has symmetry.

There is reason to think, too, that definability or boundlessness is a teleological notion. In *Parts of Animals* I.1.646b16-18, Aristotle argues that the presence of order and boundlessness in celestial bodies betrays the fact that they do not exist by chance. But since for Aristotle a chance even is one that appears so to be, it is in fact not, for a genuine *telos* (βραχ. II.5.196b17-24), we can infer that the boundedness of the celestial bodies reveals that they have a final cause. The idea seems to be that when things have a boundary or limit that is a true *hors*, they are limited at just that point for the sake of fulfilling their function. So, in the *Politics* (VI.4.1326a38ff, cited in part above), Aristotle is concerned not just that
the city be properly ordered, but that in magnitude should not exceed a certain limit in either direction (i.e., neither too large nor too small). If it is too large or too small, it will not be able to function in such a manner as to secure the citizens’ happiness. Once again, this limit on magnitude is determined by the city’s end: the good.

We have seen that in Metaphysics XII.3 Aristotle defines beauty in terms of order, symmetry, and roundness. Study of his biological and political writings shows that these terms usually refer to some aspect of effective teleological order. The question now is where we can apply this analysis of the fine to virtuous action. As I said earlier, the fine does not become central to Aristotle’s account of virtue until his detailed discussions of the individual traits of character. (He mentions that virtue is fine only twice in NE II [3.11.1046b9-11, 9.1109a29-30] and otherwise does not mention it at all, except to say that it is an object of choice about which the good person goes right and the bad person goes wrong [3.11.1046b30-1105a14]). But once we appreciate that the beauty of a thing depends upon its order, symmetry, and boundlessness, it becomes clear that these formal properties of beauty are at the very heart of Aristotle’s understanding of virtue in NE II:6. As is well known, he defines moral virtue as a state “efficient at hitting upon what is intermediate” relative to us and falling between excess and defect (1106b38). Just like a skilled craftsman, the virtuous person takes neither too much nor too little (1106b8-14). Thus, virtuous actions display symmetry; these parts are scaled to each other proportionately to the task at hand. When a just person allocates honors, for example, he balances the rewards in his gift against the merit of the citizen. Or when a good-tempered person reacts to mistreatment, he gets angry in proportion to the severity of the offense, the intention of the offender, and his own sense of dignity.

Virtuous states and, presumably, their actualizations, have the property of boundlessness, too, when we think of them as intermediate. At the beginning of NE VI Aristotle writes:

In all the states we have discussed [i.e., the moral virtues], just as in all the other states too, there is a certain target [stip] to which the person who has reason looks when he takes and relaxes, and there is a certain boundary [foss] of the intermediate states which we say are between excess and deficiency, since they are in accordance with right reason. (VI.11.1138b21-5)

Whereas no amount of consumption counts as too much to be gluttonous, nor if any gift too small to be stingy, virtuous action has determinate boundaries beyond which consumption or giving is either too much or too little. As he says in Book II, “there are many ways of missing the mark (for, as the Pythagoreans used to represent it, the bad belongs to the unlimited [tou aperon], but the good belongs to the limited [parrasmeon]), but there is only one way of getting it right” (II.6.1106d28-31).

Notice that, in the passage from Book VI that I just quoted, the virtuous person determines the right boundary and proportion for his action by looking to a target. It is an echo of the first image in the NE, where Aristotle asks whether we would not be like archers with a target in view if only we had an adequate account of our human good (II.2.1094a22-4); only now, instead of an arrow, the virtuous agent is imagined as a musician stringing his lyre (Droude and Rowe 2002, not ad VI.1138b23), thereby bringing to the fore the proportion and harmony characteristic of right action. But the presence of a target in both images suggests that in virtuous action, order is determined by reference to the agent’s good end.

The Book VI passage also recalls Aristotle’s suggestion in NE II.6 that we think of the virtuous intermediate as analogous to the craftsman’s intermediate, for there he draws our attention to the fact that the craftsman shapes his action by looking to a goal. “Every skilled person avoids excess and deficiency, but seeks the intermediate and chooses this . . . and every skill [poïeme] completes its function well in this way, by looking to the intermediate and bringing its works to this point” (II.6.1106b1-9). Aristotle’s point here may not be immediately apparent since the simile may remind us of the poignant duality between craft and virtue. In the case of the crafts, the intermediate goal is a result independent of the productive activity (poïeme, VI.5.1140b6-7). Thus, it helps the craftsman to hold in mind since he can reason backwards from it to the means that will bring it into being. So, for instance, it is plausible that it helps a cobbler decide exactly how to proceed to keep in mind what he is making in a shoe. Because it is a shoe, and not a purse, that he is making, he will cut the leather to conform to the shoe, will make it studier on the bottom, and so on. But since the goal at which the virtuous person’s action (poïeme) aims is the action itself, it is hard to see how looking to it could help determine how to bring it about. Once he sees his target—the virtuous action clearly, he no longer needs the sort of practical aid focusing on a target was meant to give.

But let us think about the craft side of Aristotle’s analogy a moment more. What is the intermediate that guides the craftsman’s actions? Presumably in the medical art is health, or rather the health of the particular patient (I.6.1097a11-13). In the cobler’s art it is a shoe of a certain sort for a particular customer. In the sculptor’s art it is a statue of (let us say) a goddess for use in the agora. These goals are specific, but they are not particular. That is to say, in every case the craftsman looks not to a mental image of the particular healthy condition, shoe, or statue that he will bring about by his deliberations and actions. Rather, he looks to what we may call the form of health, shoe, or statue of a goddess. His understanding of the form guides his efforts to embody it in some particular matter. Thus, by likening virtue to craft as he does, Aristotle suggests that the "craftman of the fitting" (TV.2.1122a34-5) keeps his inner eye fixed on his understanding of what magnificent, brave, and just actions are like, not on the particular "magnificent, brave, or just action that will be the outcome of his deliberation."
But notice that in the case of the crafts, a person grasps the relevant forms by knowing what the object in question is for (Phes. II. 2 194a34-bb). A cobbler who knows only what is needed and looks to the outside, and does not know that they must be useful for walking, will not be good at making the intermediate. The good cobbler determines what counts as too much or too little by keeping in mind what a good shoe is in a way that includes knowing its proper size or end. So, too, it seems to me likely that when Aristotle describes the virtuous agent as looking to the intermediate in the way that craftsmen do, he means that his behavior is guided by his grasp of what brave or just or temperate actions are like in a sense that includes knowing their good or goal. This target may not be anything external to the virtuous action, paraephesia, itself (Although it is worth remembering the conclusions of the Eudemian Ethics; truly good people [kaloi ypagentes] make the contemplation of god the target [topos] of all their practical choices. VIII.3 1249b16-25). Even if the good of virtuous action is internal, we need not conceive of it as merely the act itself in all its specificity. It might instead be some property exemplified by the action, such as respectableness of other persons, the tendency to promote the common good, or, as I believe to be Aristotle’s actual view, toothiness and moral excellence.

We can leave aside the question of what precisely the good is that guides the virtuous agent. My point for now is this: insofar as they are intermediate, virtuous actions display the sort of effective teleological order that constitutes fineness in everything. A beautiful or fine thing is one arranged and determined for the sake of its good. Thus, when Aristotle talks of the courageous or temperate or generous person as acting for the sake of the fine, he is not introducing something entirely new. For it is by being intermediate that they are fine in the way proper to human action.

The Visibility of the Fine

Defining the fine as effective teleological order does not yet distinguish it from the good, however. For anything that is well ordered by its proper good or function is, according to Aristotle, good of its kind. If we examine other of his remarks about to kalon, we find that visibility or “showiness” is essential to its conception as well. At Poetics 7.145b23-4, he says that “to be beautiful an animal and every thing made up of parts must not only be ordered but must also be of a non-arbitrary size.” It turns out that the proper size depends on what can be seen or in some analogous way comprehended. If something is too large, its unity and wholesomeness will be lost on the people contemplating it; if it is minuscule, they will not be able to see it at all (Phes. 7.145a38-145b13). But even when the eye is literally capable of seeing an object, it may still be too small to be beautiful (NE IV.3.1123b8). For it may be difficult to distinguish in different parts, and thus to discern their relationship to each other and to their common good (Lucas 1968).

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not ad Post. 7.146b38-9. It seems, then, that in order to be beautiful or fine, a thing must not only be ordered with reference to its good, but this arrangement must also be manifest or apparent. The length of a plot, for instance, is fine “the longer it is, consistently with its being comprehensible as a whole [swedidol]” (145b4-11). Something is kalon, then, not simply when its arrangement is determined by its good. Its orientation to the good must be, in some relevant sense, visible.

Aristotle does not emphasize showiness or quasi-aesthetic appeal in his discussion of virtue as an intermediate in NE II. But even there it may not be altogether absent from his concerns. For instance, he makes a point in NE II.9 of how difficult striking the intermediate is. Anyone can get angry when provoked or give money to someone who asks, but not just anyone can do these things well. "Not at the same time, for which reason it is rare, praiseworthy, and fine [kalon]" (1109b29-30).

The difficulty of intermediate, virtuous actions makes them notable; it brings them into public view. The showiness of fine action may perhaps receive further confirmation in two other remarks: the great-souled person, who is the best and most worthy of public honor (IV.3.1123b28-32), acts on a grand scale specifically because beauty depends on size (IV.3.1123b6-9); similarly, actions of the polite and the valiant stand out in their magnificence and also in their beauty (X.7.1177b16-17).

Since, as we have seen, Aristotle makes grand size a requirement of the fine on the grounds that only then will it be visible to the appropriate audience, it is likely that he has something similar in mind when he links the finesse of magnanimous, statesman-like, and military acts to their size. Certainly, the magnificient person’s great and fine deeds are a wonder to behold (Deon. IV.2.1122b16-18). At any rate, we can be sure that on Aristotle’s account virtuous actions do have a public aspect. In NE II.8 he argues that the morally virtuous person needs external goods to make his virtuous intentions and character clear (dikai; rather than, as we might have expected, in order to bring his intended goals into being, 1178a28-34). The implication is that oikeion virtuous actions are visible or intelligible as virtuous, they will be in some sense incomplete. One of the important questions for the interpretation of Aristotle’s moral theory is whether the visibility of the fine is of any importance to the virtuous person. When the brave person risks his life for the sake of the kalon, does he choose his action because it is ordered by the human good, or does he choose it also for the visibility of that good order?

Pleasure and Praise

It is easy to interpret my question as asking whether the virtuous person wants his actions open to public view and thus as asking whether he chooses his actions for their praiseworthiness. But the visibility of the fine is also important as a condition of its causing (its proper) pleasure. Aristotle says that the decent person, "insofar as he is decent, delights in virtuous actions and is praised by bad ones just as a
musical person delights in fine and beautiful [kalos] songs and is obeyed by bad [phainoi] ones" (NE IX.91.1170ab-11). Here I think it is clear that the pleasure comes not so much from doing what is fine as from contemplating it. And, at any rate, it is consistent with the pleasure we take in other fine things, for example poetry or perfectly ordered biological specimens, that we experience the pleasure as an increase rather than a decrease in the fine thing (Part. Arr. 1.9.646a11-17). In conclusion, Aristotle seems to think of all pleasure as connected to acts of perceiving or contemplation (NE X.4.1174a14ff.) Thus, when I ask whether pleasure was for Aristotle for the visibility of good order, I have in mind visibility as a condition of public praiseworthy and as a condition of the pleasure the agent himself derives from beholding the fine. Aristotle actually defines the kalos in terms of pleasure and praise in the Rhetoric: "Whatever is praiseworthy, being chosen for its own sake, is kalos, or whatever, being good, is pleasant because it is good" (Rhet. 1.9.1366a3-4). A fine action is one that is pleasant (to whom)? Because it is good, Aristotle could mean one of two things. Either the goodness of a fine thing causes it to be pleasant; or a person takes pleasure in something fine because he is of the opinion that it is good. No doubt, Aristotle believes both. But I take it that he wants to emphasize here, in his lectures on rhetoric, that fine actions are pleasant because they seem to their agents and to those assessing them, to be good. We enjoy seeing fine actions, or witnessing them first hand precisely because they seem to us to be good. The fine in action is, we might say, the morally pleasant. This claim needs to be qualified in two ways. First, what strikes us as kalos need not actually be good. We can be wrong about what is really pleasant just as, in Aristotle's view, we can be wrong about what really is pleasant or good (NE II.3.1104b30-34). But here experience of the kalos seems more like the experience of something pleasant. The phenomenon of alentai seems shows us that just because we find something pleasant does not mean that we have found a reasoned judgment that it is desirable. Likewise, the shameless experience of admiring behavior even though it offenses against our reasoned principles shows that our sense of the kalos can be independent of our rational understanding of the good. This, I believe, is part of Aristotle's point in defining the fine as what is pleasant because it is good. In describing our reaction to the fine as a species of pleasure, Aristotle is saying that the appearance of goodness we react to need not be, primarily a matter of rational judgment. Thus, it would be more correct to say that the fine is what is pleasant because it seems good. Second, I do not mean to suggest that the fine is morally pleasant in too narrow a sense. What we find to praise in action will not be limited to applications of what we take to be general rules of virtue or even especially to acts that benefit others or the common good. So long as an action seems excellent in some relevant respect, it will seem fine. I mention this to mark a contrast between my view and that of Terence Irwin (1985). Referring in part on the chapter of the Rhetorik we have been discussing and or remarks there and in the Nicomachean Ethics that...
general, Aristotle opposes the skill and the necessary (anaskaios). The necessary includes action that is coerced from the outside (such as by punishment, kg III.8.1116b2–3, X.5.1118a5–6), but it also includes any behavior (or in accounting pleasure) that is instrumentally valuable (X.6.1176b3–4). This includes: converting one's wealth to a form convenient for generous giving (IV.11.1212b1); eating when hungry (V.4.1147b24); and accepting favors from friends (VIII.11.1156a28–9, X.11.1171a24–6). Now there is nothing surprising in thinking of instrumentally valuable actions as necessary – obviously they are necessary for achieving the relevant end. Rather, the question is why, in his view, this being necessary in this sense precludes their being fine. After all, in our society industriousness and efficiency are regarded as especially admirable.

But Aristotle thinks a life dominated by instrumental activity or profit-seeking is "forced" (I.5.1096a6–9), even when it is chosen by someone of his own volition. His point, I take it, is that since instrumental activity is worth choosing only for the sake of the product it creates, there is a sense in which it is overwise. The agent functions as a sort of "tooling" in the service of his needs and works "for the sake of another" – not for another person, as a slave does, but for a condition of relative leisure and self-sufficiency that is not, at the moment, his own (X.6.1176b3–6; instrumental activities are not self-sufficient). On the other hand, people who act freely behave in a way that presupposes that they are free (enough) of the burden of meeting external demands or their own basic needs. Thus their fine action expresses their success, since, in Aristotle’s considered view, leisure and self-sufficiency are necessary features of human flourishing (NE I.7.1097b4–6, X.7.1177b4–6).

So let us return to generosity, singled out by Aristotle as especially fine. It is clear that generosity is fine in part because it benefits others. But profligate spending, no matter how many people it benefits, is not admirable. Instead, the core of the generous personality seems to be an understanding that wealth is a useful thing, and thus that it has no value except insofar as it is put to work in promoting some good end. Unlike the profligate person, the generous person understands that giving to some people is a misuse of wealth (IV.11.1212b4–7). And unlike the stingy person, he understands that he has no need for wealth beyond a certain modest amount. (This is why it is characteristic of him not to look to his own needs when giving, IV.11.1210b.) In fact, it is here we may find his freedom’s deeper (Quite literally, generosity = anaskaios – it is the virtue of behaving as befits a free – eladakos – man.) For he is free of the fear of future need that drives at least some stingy people to hoard their wealth (IV.11.1212b24–31). Thus, his actions are fine not only because they benefit others, but also because they are shaped by his understanding of the value of money and the things it can buy. In all these ways they are morally good.

This advances our understanding of the fine in action in two ways. First, it clarifies the remark I made before about the skill being the morally pleasant.

Aristotle on Moral Virtue and the Fine

4.1171a24–6. Now there is nothing surprising in thinking of instrumentally valuable actions as necessary – obviously they are necessary for achieving the relevant end. Rather, the question is why, in his view, this being necessary in this sense precludes their being fine. After all, in our society industriousness and efficiency are regarded as especially admirable.

But Aristotle thinks a life dominated by instrumental activity or profit-seeking is "forced" (I.5.1096a6–9), even when it is chosen by someone of his own volition. His point, I take it, is that since instrumental activity is worth choosing only for the sake of the product it creates, there is a sense in which it is overwise. The agent functions as a sort of "tooling" in the service of his needs and works "for the sake of another" – not for another person, as a slave does, but for a condition of relative leisure and self-sufficiency that is not, at the moment, his own (X.6.1176b3–6; instrumental activities are not self-sufficient). On the other hand, people who act freely behave in a way that presupposes that they are free (enough) of the burden of meeting external demands or their own basic needs. Thus their fine action expresses their success, since, in Aristotle’s considered view, leisure and self-sufficiency are necessary features of human flourishing (NE I.7.1097b4–6, X.7.1177b4–6).

So let us return to generosity, singled out by Aristotle as especially fine. It is clear that generosity is fine in part because it benefits others. But profligate spending, no matter how many people it benefits, is not admirable. Instead, the core of the generous personality seems to be an understanding that wealth is a useful thing, and thus that it has no value except insofar as it is put to work in promoting some good end. Unlike the profligate person, the generous person understands that giving to some people is a misuse of wealth (IV.11.1212b4–7). And unlike the stingy person, he understands that he has no need for wealth beyond a certain modest amount. (This is why it is characteristic of him not to look to his own needs when giving, IV.11.1210b.) In fact, it is here we may find his freedom’s deeper (Quite literally, generosity = anaskaios – it is the virtue of behaving as befits a free – eladakos – man.) For he is free of the fear of future need that drives at least some stingy people to hoard their wealth (IV.11.1212b24–31). Thus, his actions are fine not only because they benefit others, but also because they are shaped by his understanding of the value of money and the things it can buy. In all these ways they are morally good.

This advances our understanding of the fine in action in two ways. First, it clarifies the remark I made before about the skill being the morally pleasant.

The Value of the Fine

Let me summarize where we have come so far. We have seen that, in general, fine things exhibit the usual properties of end-directed order, symmetry, and bound-

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The image contains a page from a text that appears to be discussing moral virtue and the fine. The text is not fully visible, but it discusses the concept of virtue and how it relates to the fine. The page is numbered 128, and the text includes a reference to Aristotle on moral virtue and the fine. The page also includes a note about the fine and virtue, discussing the fine as a measure of virtuous behavior. The text mentions the importance of virtue in distinguishing good from evil and the role of the fine in assessing the quality of actions. The text also references Aristotle's ideas on the fine and virtue, emphasizing the importance of these concepts in moral philosophy.
that the virtuous person cherishes (agathon, IX.8.1168b38) his true self more when he chooses to perform virtuous actions (IX.8.1168b24-34, 1169a17-18).

Therefore true self-love requires that we help others. Now this argument might persuade us that genuine love of self does not require the greedy pursuit of external goods. But, so far at least, it does not show that self-love is expressed in friendship for others. Even if we grant that the good person's reason judges that he ought to help his friends, the question still remains whether in acting this way he does something good for himself, even for his true, rational self. What does reason get out of the action it orders one to do?

Aristotle has already argued (in NE I.7) that virtuous action in accordance with reason is the greatest human good, so in a sense the answer is obvious: "If everyone exercised himself to do the finest things... each individual would have the greatest good, since [the greatest good is] virtue" (IX.8.1169a8-11). But interpreting the argument solely in terms of the goodness of virtue fails to do justice to the heavy emphasis in this passage on the fine things of virtue. The vocabulary makes it clear that the fine is imagined not just as something reason chooses or does, but as a reward or benefit it assigns (apostemnei) itself (IX.8.1168b29), on analogy with the money, honors, and pleasure that bad people assign (apostemnountai) themselves (1168b15-21). The good person is extraordinarily eager for the fine (phainontas, 1168b25, 1169a27), talks it (kataleitontai, 1169a26, 1169a32), and keeps it for himself (periptontai, 1168b17, 1169a21); he competes for it (kataleitontai, 1169a9-9) and exerts himself to do the finest things (eleiston eidos, 1169a9).

The reward appears to cause some sort of pleasure (1168b19), and talk of competing for the fine suggests that, for the virtuous person, fine actions grantly his spiritual love of victory. But the overall tenor of the passage makes it clear that the fine is chosen as a gift for its elicitation in particular. So we should ask why the fact that virtuous actions are fine makes it especially plausible that they manifest love of the rational self? 11

Aristotle remarks several times that in assigning the fine to himself, the virtuous person's reason is "insidious" and "gratified." In a remarkable passage, he even suggests that the pleasure and benefit of fine action so far surpass the pleasure of keeping external goods for oneself that the virtuous person will be willing to risk death for its sake:

He will freely give up both money and honors... while keeping the fine for himself, for he would prefer to feel pleasure intensely for a short time than to have mild pleasure for a long time, to live in a fine way for a year rather than to live many years in any chance way, and to live fine as a great scale rather than many small ones. (IX.8.1169a20-28)

This reminds us of an earlier passage in which Aristotle leans heavily on the fineness of courageous actions to explain how it is that they are pleasant and voluntarily chosen. Even though the brave person suffers great physical pain and dread when he acts for the sake of the fine, to the extent that he achieves it, he achieves something pleasant (II.9.1174a35-86).

It seems to me likely that here, too, the point of emphasizing the beauty of virtue is to show the sense in which it is delightful in itself. But now, since Aristotle has emphasized that it gratifies reason in particular, we can more narrowly identify it as an intellectual pleasure. Unlike the objects of appetite that are a pleasure to taste or to feel or to hear, fine actions are a delight for reason to contemplate or understand. We are now in a position to explain why, in general, as we have discovered, something is fine when its goodness can be seen or otherwise comprehended. Then, it presents no impediment to reason's activity of understanding it. And practical good is, in particular, the sort of good practical reason seeks to understand. Thus the delight the decent person feels in fine action is reason's joy in its successful gratification of practical.

From the point of view of self-love, it is most important for the virtuous person to appreciate the fineness of his actions than we may at first recognize. On any given occasion, practical reason deliberates about how exactly to realize the practical good in the current situation, how exactly to balance each aspect of our behavior in light of our commitment to a certain conception of human flourishing. Assuming that this activity is well ordered by practical wisdom, it culminates in an excellent choice and action. That is to say, it achieves whatever particular end the circumstances require and it constitutes success in living rationally. In the press of practical life, however, where a person must think himself, engage in business with others, and perhaps even fight battles, the virtuous agent will not have time to reflect on and delight in the excellent reasoning he knows to be the source of his happiness. Practical reason aims to get something done; so when the appropriate time arrives for action, the virtuous person must go ahead and act, and then go on to the next problem. But if practical reasoning is by nature ever sensitive to external circumstances and focused on future action, there is a risk of not fully registering in consciousness that one has already achieved the ultimate practical good: virtuous rational activity itself. And since we rational animals only fully possess the good when we know that we do, there is a danger that the perpetual orientation of practical reason will impede our ability ever to have the human good in the fullest sense.

This is why it matters to reason that actions be fine as well as good. For when our actions are fine, their perfection is easily intelligible. In fact, the finer and more beautiful they are, the more easily we know their goodness. In every intelligible instance, they make plain the proper ordering of our priorities and the excellence of the human good, that is to say, they display for us our character. In the fineness of action, reason can rest in the activity of knowing that what it has achieved is, in fact, the good it was seeking. 12 Pleasure appreciation of an action's goodness is not a dispensable moment of self-satisfaction; it completes the virtuous person's grip of the practicable good by completing the rational activity of knowing it.
Conclusion

I have argued that Aristotle conceives of virtuous actions as fine in order to emphasize the sense in which their goodness is easily intelligible and pleasant to contemplate. That is to say, in order to emphasize their value to the agent. Let us conclude by considering his discussion in NE 1.10 of the virtuous person’s resilience in the face of misfortune:

The happy person always, more than anyone else, does and reflects on [ethine] actions in accordance with virtue and bears his luck in the finest way possible [paidiō].

Many great pieces of good fortune will make his life more blessed (for these naturally help adorn it, and the use of them is fine [agad] and decent). But if they happen the opposite way, they crush and mar happiness, since they bring pains and impede moral activities. But nevertheless even in these circumstances the fine [kóros] shines through [diakria].

We think the truly good and sensible person bears all chances gracefully [eudaimon] and always makes the finest things possible [πλέον] from his circumstances, just as a cobbler makes the finest [paidiō] shoe from the skins he is given. (1.10.1108β19-1101α5)

The virtuous person is musical; he is able to act with good order and grace no matter the circumstances. So even in misfortune, something of value remains in his life. But Aristotle suggests that what mitigates the misfortune of his position is not simply that his actions are as well ordered as they could possibly be given the situation, but that the beauty of these actions “shines through.” To whom must this beauty be visible if it is to be of relevance in asseming the extent of his unhappiness? Other people may gaze on it, of course, but Aristotle says that it is the virtuous person, more than anyone else, who does and reflects on the fine. This suggests that he is making a point about the virtuous person’s own state of consciousness: because he is a reliable craftsman of the fitting (IV.2.1122a34-5), something of beauty will always shine through and, given the sort of person he is, he will gaze on it. He is saved from weariness because the fineness of his actions ensures that he can appreciate the measure of success that is present in his life and thus that he can, in some meaningful sense, have it as his own.

This is not enough to make him blessed (or even happy), however, and it is a puzzle why not. One possibility is that scarcity of external goods makes it exceedingly difficult to do something fine (1.8.1099a2-3). Thus most of the unfortunate person’s time will be spent wondering whether his actions, however modest, will be successful (cf. 1.8.1177a24-b3). And even if he does realize some practicable good, his enjoyment of its fine good order will only be temporary, disrupted as it will be by the demands of his body. Since misfortune is likely to distract one from whatever pleasure is present in life (imagine trying to keep in mind that the meal you have scraped together actually tastes good when it is not enough to quell your hunger), it impedes, in the sense of interrupting, the virtuous person’s awareness of the good order of his actions. Perhaps this sort of possession of the good is too incomplete to count as happiness, as if what must be lies in a complete time is not just the doing of virtuous action but also the appreciation of that activity as pervasive and characteristic of life as a whole (cf. VII.13.1151b16-21). Be that as it may, one thing is clear: just as in the discussion of self love, Aristotle appeals to the fineness of action here not to highlight its social utility, but to show its benefit to the virtuous agent himself. Of course, to repeat, he also thinks that fine actions tend to benefit others, but this is not his particular concern when he emphasizes that they are fine.

As I said at the beginning, the connection between the line and the agent’s well-being may surprise us. But its connection to intelligible order may surprise us in another way, as well, for it reminds us that, in the first instance, Aristotle thinks of morally virtuous action as an activity of reason (or what participates in reason) and thus as a sort of excellent knowing (or obedience to knowledge). The practically wise person uses his reason to figure out what useful calibration of behavior to circumstances will be well ordered in light of his understanding of the human good. When he succeeds, his action is fine and he can, we might say, feel the success of his effort to know. Now even if we agree that moral virtue is a perfection of reason, we might have hoped Aristotle would value all virtuous actions, and not only the activities of friendship, as modes of loving. But that seems to be the part of another sort of excellent human knowing: the activity of theoretical wisdom that contemplates a greater beauty than any to be found in human life.

Acknowledgments

I thank Sarah Bradic, Martha Nussbaum, and Richard Knut for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this chapter.

Notes

1 See An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding, c.132; Treatise of Human Nature, II.1.8, III.3.1.

2 "Beauty" has been the connotation of appearing to be good, at least in certain philosophical contexts.

3 This section and the next two constitute a somewhat altered version of material from Lear (2004: ch. 6). Some arguments have been added, others have been condensed or omitted altogether to suit the different purpose of this chapter. But the basic interpretation of sections is the same.

4 Allas (1971: 69) and Cooper (1999b: 273) pointed me to this connection.

5 Fuentes 7 supports this point (Lucas 1968: 113 not. ad 1408b37; Hallward 1980: 98).

6 Also, at Met. 1.5.1161b7-14, he claims that physical beauty varies with time of day.
In youth, it is the body of an athlete, in the prime of manhood, the body of a warrior; in old age, a body capable of enduring necessary toils and otherwise free from pain. The idea seems to be that, since what counts as a well-functioning body varies with what a body is expected to do at different stages of a person’s life, beauty will vary. Beauty is, again, construed by suitability to the end.

6 I follow Cooper (1999b) in making this distinction.

7 A possible exception is the case of the generous person’s accumulation of wealth for the purpose of having the means to act generously (V.I.11.120a34-12).

8 As Broadie explains, this need not imply that “a person cannot act from virtue unless he sees himself as acting from virtue” (1991: 94) (although I am not sure how “determinate” this view would be). Since Aristotle thinks of the virtues as highly complex specifics—courage is expressed on the battlefield (III.6.1115a29-31), temerity with respect to the pleasures of touch and taste (III.10.1), and so on—it will be sufficient for the virtuous person to recognize the sort of circumstances he is in and aim to hit the sort of goals that are virtuous in such circumstances.

9 The Greek word is usubia, which can mean “looking at” or “contemplation.” In the biological examples here, usubia literally means to see. But he must be making a point about an extended sense of usubia, since he intends its remarks to apply to the magnitudes of a plot. The right size for a plot is one whose unity can be easily grasped by memory (Phr. 7.145a3-6).

10 Virtue suggests a different reason for the Spartans’ admiration of long hair: it was braided and adorned before battle in the manner of Homeric warriors and so was a symbol of heroic youth and beauty (2001: 330-33). Since the Spartans seem to have thought of military prowess as the pinnacle of human excellence, my point here would be the same. They consider long hair (when it is worn in the right way) beautiful because it expresses their conception of human flourishing.

11 See Rogers (1999) for a more detailed response to Lewis’s argument.

12 “If it appears that there are many ways for the [end] to come into being, [expert deliberators] look to see through which it will happen most easily and most fairly [katalepsa]” (III.3.1110c14-17). Unfortunately, katalepsa is usually translated here as “best.”

13 I thank Elizabeth Ansnes for this suggestion.

14 For a full defense of this interpretation of the Republic, see my Plato on Learning to Love Beauty (Lear 2006).

15 However, Cooper makes the good point that NE III-V, where most of the references to usubia are to be found, describe the excellence of the irational part of the soul. On the other hand, he says, where Aristotle describes rational excellence he does so in relation to the good (1990: 276-77). Although this last point is true of NE VI, which Cooper refers to here, it is not true of every passage of the NE, as I explain below.

16 Since Aristotle so emphatically uses language that suggests that reason is the beneficiary of the action it organizes, we should think at least to try to avoid interpreting him as going in the opposite direction as we would a modern essay on psychological theories: that every action is an expression of self-love since it is my desire that motivates it. Furthermore, this interpretation goes to rule out the concept of the force. Bolock notes this but adds, oddly, that this may go to show that the concept of the force is “a mere red herring” (2000: 179).

17 Much recent work on this chapter has asked whether, if virtuous actions are expressions of self-love, the self can be expressions of genuine concern or others (Annas 1988; Erasg 1989: 115-25; Panahik 1998: 200-202). This question is certainly important from one point of view, but notice that Aristotle takes for granted here that virtuous actions are expressions of friendship for others (IX.8.1168a33-35). His question is how actions so construed can still be expressions of self-love. It is a fair question that the dialogue is refusing.

18 Notice that in Z.E.4 Aristotle describes pleasure as an experience that completes the activity either of sensory or intellectual perception. This happens when the sensory or intellectual capacity is in the best condition and its object is the most fine in the relevant domain (1774a14-16).

19 Cf. Problem 17. Although Aristotle seems to mean that more goodness and kalaideia iner in the same behavior, but differ in the agent’s understanding of his action. Whereas the former chooses or chooses for the sake of the natural goods, the latter chooses his virtues for their own sake (NE VII.I.1148b34-40). The fine and good person’s more correct understanding transforms a merely good action and the good things he chooses into things that are fine (Z.E.3.1219b49-51).

20 This differs from Pakaluk’s interpretation (1998, not to ad II.B.11.169b25-169a6). He suggests that since virtuous actions are intelligible, they are good for reason by being apt or appropriate to it; I suggest they are good by being a good being. Furthermore, I argue that this view plays an important role in the argument of II.B.8 because beauty is in the way in which virtuous actions are “intelligently intelligible.”

21 This, I suggest, is why the full exercise of virtue occurs in “primary and preferred circumstances” (Cooper 1999b: 303); these are the circumstances in which the agent most clearly understands his activity as the expression of an excellent character and as the realization of the good. Notice that my emphasis on the way terrible luck impedes our understanding of, and delights us, virtuous action does not mean distinguishing eudaimonia and virtuous action, on the one hand, from our subjective impression of such activity, on the other. (So, for somewhat different reasons, I agree with Nussbaum 2001: 327-36 that bad luck impedes activity in accordance with virtue itself.)

References


Aristotle on the Voluntary

The Significance of Voluntariness

Aristotle denotes a significant portion of the Nicomachean Ethics and the Eudemian Ethics to the topic of virtue of character (chêirê moralê). In each work he paces his detailed treatment of the particular virtues of character (courage, temperance, liberality, and so on) with a general account of ethical virtue (NE II-III; EE II); cf. MM I.5–19. The general account concludes, in both cases, with an extended discussion of voluntariness (in action) and related notions (NE III.6–8; EE II.6–11; cf. MM I.9–19). In order to understand Aristotle's views on voluntariness, we must first understand why he thinks that an account of the voluntary belongs in a treatise on virtue of character.

In the NE, Aristotle gives two reasons for introducing the topic of voluntariness: “Since virtue concerns feelings and actions, and since praise and blame are for what is voluntary, while forgiveness and sometimes every ploy are for what is involuntary, those who inquire into virtue should define the voluntary and the involuntary. This is also useful for those who legislate about fines and punishments” (NE III.1.1109b30–25). The second reason given here is the less important. It is elaborated on in NE III.5. Legal sanctions are aimed at influencing behavior, and hence they are pointless if they are directed at actions that are not voluntary (1118b21–30). More important is the first reason Aristotle articulates that voluntariness is a necessary condition of praise-worthiness and blame-worthiness. The EE concerns in invoking praise and blame in order to explain why a discussion of voluntariness is in order in the account of character.

Since virtue and vice and their products are praise-worthy and blame-worthy, for one it is blamed and praised . . . because of those things for which we are ourselves responsible; it is clear that virtue and vice concern those actions for which one is oneself responsible [mise] and the origin [armos]. So we must identify the sorts of actions for which a person is himself responsible and the origin. Now we all agree that he is...