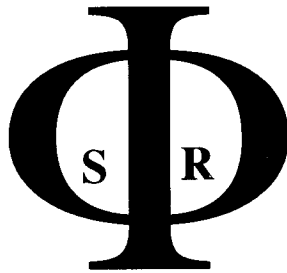


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# Teaching Nature: Natural Virtue and Practical Wisdom in the *Nicomachean Ethics*

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Aristotle's account of virtue in the *Nicomachean Ethics* faces two related dangers: the account appears circular, and if the account is not circular, then it seems to suggest that virtue is relative.<sup>1</sup> Habituation, Aristotle writes, brings the completion of the virtues (1103a14-26). Virtue "makes the aim right" (1144a7-9)<sup>2</sup> by determining the ends from which practical wisdom (*phronêsis*) deliberates. Thus, habituation enables one to possess the virtue needed for practical wisdom. Practical wisdom depends upon virtue. Virtue, though, also seems dependent upon practical wisdom: without practical wisdom, one cannot discern or perform "what is towards the end" (*ta pros to telos*) (1145a5-6), and so cannot possess 'real virtue' (*aretê kuria*) (1144b-1145a). Virtue and practical wisdom each appear to depend upon each other—Aristotle's account appears circular. Further, the virtue upon which practical wisdom depends must come from somewhere, and habituation is the source cited by Aristotle. Thus, virtue finally appears to depend solely upon the training one receives; virtue here may not be circular, but it looks like a cultural construct.

The concept of 'natural virtue' offers an escape from this pair of difficulties. If Aristotle holds that a natural tendency toward virtue exists, then virtue and practical wisdom, though related, do not seem related by a vicious circle. Further, this 'natural virtue' should guarantee that Aristotle's conception of virtue cannot appear relativistic. After examining these challenges to Aristotle's theory, I shall argue that the concept of natural virtue does rescue Aristotle from the charges of circularity and relativism.

## 1 Circular and/or relativistic?

In an attempt to examine the charge that Aristotle's account of virtue is either circular or relativistic, I shall explore his concepts of practical wisdom, virtue, and habituation. Looking at the relation of practical wisdom to good deliberation makes clear the need for virtue to differentiate the two: practical wisdom is good deliberation accompanied by an apprehension of the proper end. Practical wisdom's reliance on virtue becomes problematic when paired with

virtue's reliance on practical wisdom—I take up this problem in the second part of this section. Finally, I shall examine the concept of habituation, since Aristotle sees virtue as arising through habituation. The difficulty with habituating people to a virtue not conditioned by practical wisdom (as it is required for practical wisdom) is that this virtue appears relative to those guiding the habituation—this section concludes with this charge of relativism.

### 1.1 On practical wisdom

Aristotle defines virtue as “a state involving rational choice, consisting in a mean relative to us and determined by reason—the reason, that is, by reference to which the practically wise person would determine it” (1106b-1107a).<sup>3</sup> Understanding the ‘reason by which the practically wise person determines’ thus becomes crucial for understanding virtue. To understand the practically wise person’s reason, though, is to understand practical wisdom—just as one cannot be virtuous without practical wisdom, without an understanding of *phronêsis*, one cannot understand virtue. Practical wisdom, for Aristotle, consists of good deliberation accompanied by a “true apprehension” of the proper end.

Deliberation (*bouleusis*) directs one’s choices. The object of this choice, however, cannot be a final end, according to Aristotle, but is rather a particular action which should secure that end. “We deliberate not about ends, but about things that are conducive to ends” (1112b33-35). As it is “characteristic of practically wise people to have deliberated well” (1142b31-32) practical wisdom involves not only the ability successfully to deliberate, but also to have deliberated well. Deliberation may fail to reach a certain end, or may fail to aim at the correct end; good deliberation succeeds at both. Thus, Aristotle distinguishes good deliberation from cleverness (*deinotês*):

This is such as to be able to do the actions that tend toward the aim we have set before ourselves, and to achieve it. If the aim is noble, then the cleverness is praiseworthy; if it is bad, then it is villainy (1144a24-26).

Successful deliberation is identified with cleverness; cleverness becomes good deliberation when accompanied by a noble aim.

Good deliberation, though, is not sufficient for practical wisdom: one must also possess an apprehension of the end. Aristotle writes that if it is characteristic of practically wise people to have deliberated well, good deliberation will be correctness with regard to what is useful toward that end of which practical wisdom is the true apprehension (*hou hê phronêsis alêthês hypolêpsis estin*) (1142b31-35).<sup>4</sup>

Thus, Aristotle distinguishes between good deliberation and practical wisdom by adding the further requirement that practical wisdom involve a true apprehension of the proper end.<sup>5</sup> Good deliberation is correct deliberation with an aim that is noble—an aim at the end, therefore, that practical wisdom apprehends as proper. One might deliberate successfully in order to achieve the correct end without actually understanding the correctness of the end. I might reason out a good strategy for keeping fit—surely a proper end—but do so out of vanity, rather than out of understanding the value of health. Practical wisdom, then, is good deliberation plus an apprehension of the end.

### 1.2 Practical wisdom's relation to virtue

Practical wisdom apprehends the end, but that end must be provided by virtue. Aristotle writes that “virtue preserves the first principle” (1151a15-17). First principles cannot be acquired through deliberation (1112b33-35). These ends, though, must be present in the practically wise—they must, then, come from virtue. Virtue provides the end; the apprehension of that end turns good deliberation into practical wisdom. Aristotle asserts that “this [first principle] is evident to the good person alone” (1144a33-34). Only the practically wise possess ‘real virtue,’ as only they possess not only an inclination toward proper ends but also the apprehension of those ends and the ability to see what is conducive toward those ends (1144b-1145a). “It is clear from what we have said, then, that we cannot be really good without practical wisdom, or practically wise without virtue of character” (1144b30-33). Virtue and practical wisdom seem to depend upon and to implicate one another: without virtue, practical wisdom becomes mere cleverness; without practical wisdom, virtue loses the ability to respond appropriately in different situations and so cannot be ‘real virtue.’

This interdependent relation leads to difficulty: if each is needed for the other, how does one account for their arrival? This apparent circularity of Aristotle's account has led critics, including Bostock, to conclude that Aristotle's position is “profoundly unsatisfying.”<sup>6</sup> If virtue depends upon deliberating with apprehension of first principles, and first principles arise out of one's training in virtue, then one's virtue appears dependent upon one's trainers' conception of virtue. Aristotle's account of virtue, then, seems to rely on a circular explanation of virtue and practical wisdom that explains each only by way of the other without any independent account of either. Further, the only account that appears available for explaining the presence of virtue—one focused on habituation—suggests that virtue is relative. Both

of these consequences are indeed ‘profoundly unsatisfying.’

### 1.3 On habituation

In order to better understand the second of the two problems—the fact that the concept of habituation makes virtue appear relative—one must examine Aristotle’s discussion of habituation. Aristotle writes that some “first principles we see by induction, some by perception, some by a kind of habituation, and others in other ways” (1098b). Some readers—notably M. F. Burnyeat—see this list as exclusive: learning by habituation is distinct from learning by either perception or induction. Habituation involves not only the repeated performance of certain actions that accord with a first principle, but also the sort of training that results in the apprehension that the first principle is indeed a proper end.<sup>7</sup> Habituation provides the experience of virtuous action: that experience enables one to realize the virtue of virtuous action.

In order for this process to result in such an apprehension, one must come to view the ends recommended by one’s training as desirable ends. One way that a person might come to desire such ends would be for that person to find some enjoyment in acting in accordance with those ends. Induction from some group of instances cannot result in such a discovery of enjoyment—only habituation can operate in this way. Burnyeat argues that there “is such a thing as learning to enjoy something . . . , and it is not sharply distinct from learning that the thing in question is enjoyable.”<sup>8</sup> The learner discovers how to enjoy the actions, and in so doing she begins to understand that the actions are enjoyable. Thus, on this model of learning, one discovers one’s taste for certain activities after repeated performance of such activities.

For Aristotle, habituation in virtue involves coming to see the pleasant nature of virtue. Indeed, virtuous actions, according to Aristotle, are naturally pleasant: “Actions in accordance with virtue are like this [pleasant by nature], so that they are pleasant to [people fond of noble things] as well as in themselves” (1099a). Habituation provides first principles for practical reason by encouraging enjoyment of virtuous action. The right upbringing renders one open to moral education, open to acquiring the first principles necessary for practical wisdom as well as for virtue. With the right upbringing, one comes to enjoy virtuous action, and so is in a good position for apprehending the rightness of such action.

This process of habituation, however, cannot on its own justify Aristotle’s claim that virtue is naturally pleasant: perhaps tastes might vary, and

children might be raised to enjoy different and mutually exclusive ‘virtues’ depending upon where and when they are raised. Habituation serves as a source for first principles that is independent of both practical wisdom and virtue, and so helps Aristotle avoid the charge of circularity in his discussion. The reliance upon a training in virtue that conditions people to enjoy virtuous action, however, remains open to the charge of relativism, since the training may be relative to different cultures.

## 2 Natural virtue

Aristotle’s concept of natural virtue suggests a possible response to the charge that his account portrays conceptions of virtue as relative to different cultures. Natural virtue could explain why certain habits are both acceptable to students and virtuous. Natural virtue explains people’s amenability to certain first principles and explains the virtuousness of certain dispositions in a way that is not arbitrary or culturally relative, but that rather locates the virtue of such dispositions in humans’ natural tendencies. Just as Aristotle famously based his conception of the good for humans—happiness (*eudaimonia*)—in humans’ function or characteristic activity (*ergon*) (1097b22-1098a20), perhaps one might see the particular human virtues as based upon particular activities or tendencies of humans. Natural virtue, then, might provide an account for people’s acceptance of certain principles; this account, further, would show that people’s conception of virtue is not relativistic.

### 2.1 Natural virtue and right opinion

As promising as the idea of natural virtue appears, a significant problem arises once Aristotle remarks that virtue does not arise naturally:

... it is clear that none of the virtues of character arises in us by nature. For nothing natural can be made to behave differently by habituation. . . . So virtues arise in us neither by nature nor contrary to nature, but nature gives us the capacity to acquire them, and completion comes through habituation (1103a16-26).

Since people can be made more or less virtuous by training, and one cannot retrain nature, the virtue must not be natural. Thus, in this passage Aristotle appears certain that virtue—and, therefore, one’s view of proper ends—must come from habituation rather than from nature.

If virtue cannot be natural, then it seems natural to be surprised when Aristotle brings up natural virtue. After distinguishing practical wisdom—which virtue accompanies—from cleverness,—which has no connection

to proper ends (1143a-b)—Aristotle points to a similar distinction between natural virtue and full virtue.

. . . just as a strongly built person, if he is deprived of sight, is apt to stumble heavily when he moves around, because he cannot see, so too with virtue. But if the agent acquires intellect (*nous*), then his action is quite different; his state, while similar to what it was, will then be real virtue (1144b10-14).

Natural virtue needs intellect to become ‘real virtue.’ Aristotle discusses natural virtue again later, saying that “it is virtue, either natural or habituated, that enables us to think correctly about the first principle” (1151a18-19). Virtue provides the first principle that changes one’s cleverness into practical wisdom. If natural virtue, though, is real virtue without intellect, then is natural virtue another term for one’s capacity for acquiring virtue? Also, if natural virtue ‘enables us to think correctly about the first principle,’ and thinking correctly about the first principle involves practical wisdom, what separates real and natural virtue?

Natural virtue, in the eyes of some readers, falls short of real virtue due to its lack of intellect; if ‘intellect’ involves apprehension of the first principle, then natural virtue would lack the apprehension of the end that distinguishes practical wisdom from good deliberation.<sup>9</sup> Thus, natural virtue predisposes one to act virtuously, but provides no ‘true apprehension’ of the first principle in the way that real virtue does. Yet how can this work with Aristotle’s claim that virtue—natural or habituated—enables one to ‘think correctly about the first principle’? Can natural virtue ‘enable’ one to ‘think correctly’ about the first principle without providing awareness of that principle?

Perhaps natural virtue provides ‘right opinions’ about the first principle, but not a true apprehension of the principle’s priority.<sup>10</sup> One’s actions, on this view, are aimed right, but one cannot explain the reason for aiming as one does.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, one might read Aristotle as saying that natural virtue provides a person with desires for the right actions, rather than the right ends.<sup>12</sup> On this reading, natural virtue orients a person toward certain natural goods, like food or shelter. Possessing natural virtue, a person would generally act well. Real virtue on the other hand, would orient one toward the first principle: real virtue involves a value for the action itself, as valuable in itself.<sup>13</sup> This difference in orientation leads to the fallibility of natural virtue—it is not always right to desire certain things, even if those things are usually rightly desired.<sup>14</sup> Habituation into real virtue, therefore, appears on this view as an adaptation of these natural tendencies toward the correct ends.<sup>15</sup>

This interpretation, however, remains vulnerable to the relativism objection: since the ‘correct ends’ toward which one is reoriented are not set by nature, they might still on this reading vary among various cultures. If a tendency toward goods comes through nature and habituation orients that tendency toward a certain end which is not by nature, then only the original tendency and not the orientation toward the first principle appears natural; and Aristotle continues to appear relativistic.

## 2.2 Natural virtue and practical wisdom

A different interpretation of natural virtue, however, would render that concept capable of providing means for a response to the charge of relativism. If natural virtue did involve an apprehension of the proper ends, then those ends would not come from one’s training, and so could not be relative. Carlo Natali suggests that one might locate that deficiency in a lack of practical wisdom. Examining the passage in which Aristotle distinguishes between natural and real virtue, Natali addresses the absence of ‘intellect’ in natural virtue: “in our opinion, this may be interpreted only in the sense that the possession of [practical wisdom] makes those who already possess natural virtue able to find the means and ways needed to actualize their good tendencies.”<sup>16</sup>

This reading, which views natural virtue as providing the end—rather than tendencies toward virtuous action—gains support from two features of Aristotle’s thought. First, since virtue provides the end from which practical wisdom deliberates, naming natural virtue ‘virtue’ implies that it does provide an apprehension of the first principle. Natali writes that “whoever has natural virtue tends toward a good end (and if things were not like this, one would not even be able to speak of virtue, since it is the task of virtue to make the end good), and when he has [practical wisdom], he is able to find out how to act in practice, and thus his [virtue] is [real].”<sup>17</sup> Second, this understanding of natural virtue also works well with Aristotle’s assertion that natural virtue (along with habituated virtue) enables one to think correctly about the first principle (1151a18-19). Natural virtue seems closer to real virtue than it first appeared, since all that’s missing appears to be cleverness. Natali’s reading helps Aristotle avoid the charge of relativism, as the orientation toward the proper end would be provided by natural virtue.

Except, in Natali’s reading, it’s practical wisdom that’s missing, not cleverness. Apparently, natural virtue along with cleverness together make

good deliberation (“correctness with regard to what is useful towards the end” (1142b32-34)), but not quite practical wisdom—and, thus, not real virtue. Absent from merely good deliberation is ‘true apprehension’ of the end.<sup>18</sup>

Habituation fits well here: it serves to move one from having a right opinion about the first principle, along with good deliberative skills, to having practical wisdom. Combining Burnyeat’s notion of habituation as ‘learning to enjoy’ with a consideration of natural virtue results in a view of habituated virtue immune to the charge of relativism. If my habituation is the discovery through repetition that I enjoy virtuous acts; and if an orientation toward the ends of those acts comes naturally, then my view of the end is not arbitrary. Thus, natural virtue does provide the end, and habituation looks more like refinement of a present orientation than like the introduction of new behavior.

The habituation succeeds because one comes to realize that virtuous activities are indeed “pleasant by nature” (1099a12-14)—pleasant, that is, with reference to human nature. I ought to come to see that I’m happiest acting in accordance with virtue,—come to see, therefore, that this conception of happiness is the first principle because it is my nature to do so. If our conception of this first principle, necessary for virtue, comes by nature, then Aristotle’s account of virtue cannot be relativistic.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> In much of what follows, I shall make use of David Bostock’s account of practical wisdom, from chapter four of his *Aristotle’s Ethics*, as he provides a well-reasoned statement of this set of objections to Aristotle.

<sup>2</sup> I shall rely on Roger Crisp’s translation of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, noting any changes.

<sup>3</sup> Alternately, the sentence might conclude “determined by reason—that is, as the practically wise person would determine it”;—the ambiguity, however, should not affect my argument, and so I preserve Crisp’s translation.

<sup>4</sup> Crisp translates the final phrase as “. . . what is useful towards the end, about which practical wisdom is true supposition.” Crisp’s translation does preserve the ambiguity of the reference for *hou*—Aristotle may be suggesting that practical wisdom is apprehension of what is useful toward the end, rather than the end itself. As Bostock argues, though, “[g]rammar would permit this [alternate sense], but it is not the natural reading, nor that which is expected in the context” (Bostock, 85n. 21). The word “apprehension,” however, is an odd translation of *hypolêpsis*, which normally means something more like “assumption” or “supposition.” I retain Bostock’s reading, though, as I intend to present a view based largely on his own: my paper should, finally, show that, even if one grants Bostock this slightly

odd translation, his view remains untenable.

<sup>5</sup> Bostock makes this argument (see especially p. 85).

<sup>6</sup> Bostock, 97.

<sup>7</sup> Burnyeat explains the process as follows: "In order to 'gain' a first principle, one must gain a recognition that the principle is true. You need a good upbringing not simply in order that you may have someone around to tell you what is noble and just—you do need that . . .—but you need also to be guided in your conduct so that by doing things you are told are noble and just you will discover that what you have been told is *true* (Burnyeat, 74).

<sup>8</sup> Burnyeat, 76.

<sup>9</sup> Hayden Ramsay reads natural virtue in the way described in this sentence (Ramsay, 343).

<sup>10</sup> The interpretation considered in this paragraph draws on White's reading of natural virtue.

<sup>11</sup> White, 146.

<sup>12</sup> White, 164.

<sup>13</sup> White, 164-5.

<sup>14</sup> "Natural virtue depends on wanting good *kinds* of things in what are *usually* the right ways, so its impulses are right in most cases. But it is not always right" (White, 159—original italics).

<sup>15</sup> See especially White p. 159.

<sup>16</sup> Natali, 53.

<sup>17</sup> Natali, 53.

<sup>18</sup> Bostock, 85.

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