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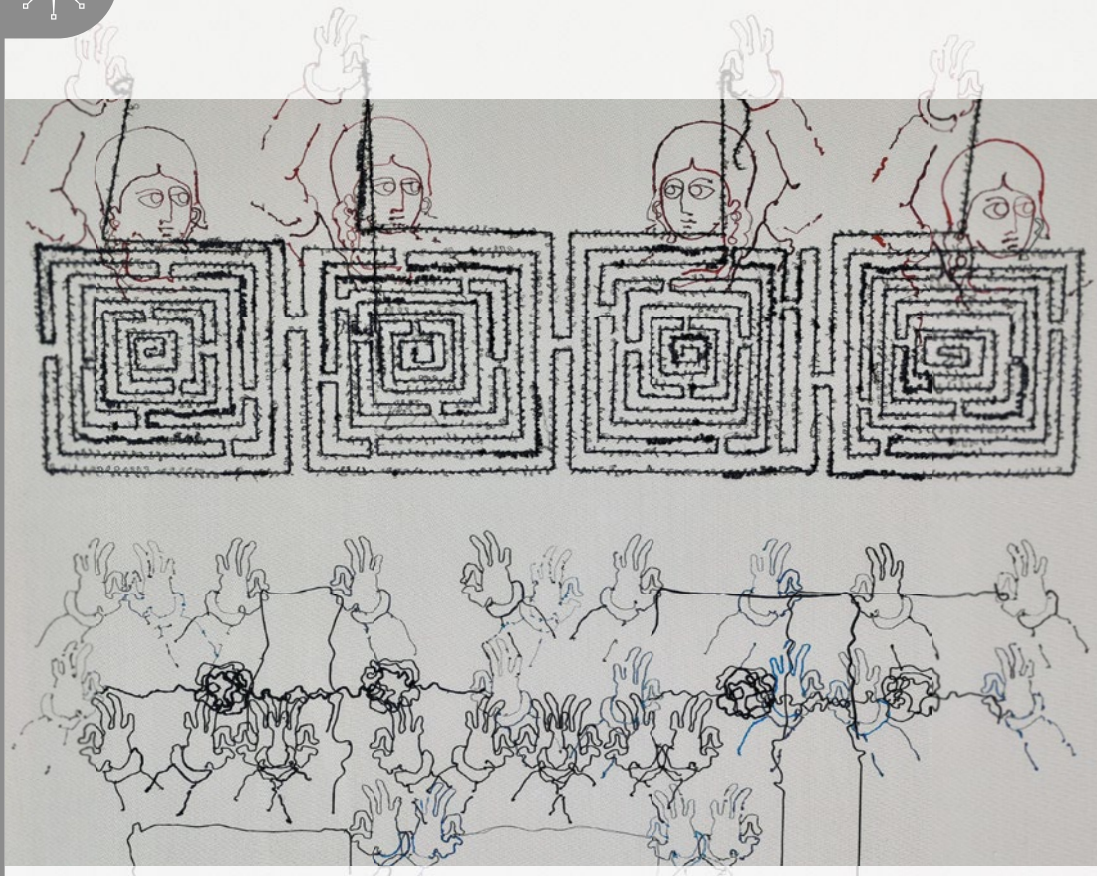

Introduction to Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*

Pavlos Kontos

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ISSN 2947-9339 ISSN 2947-9347 (electronic)
Palgrave Philosophy Today
ISBN 978-3-031-41984-3 ISBN 978-3-031-41985-0 (eBook)
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-41985-0

Cover illustration: Elli Barmpagianni, *Play on the edge* I (185cm x 125cm, embroidery on tulle, calico, and acrylics), 2001.

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Switzerland AG.
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Translated from the Greek by Konstantinos Pattakos and Pavlos Kontos

Original Title: Τα δύο ευ της ευτυχίας. Εισαγωγή στα Ηθικά Νικομάχεια του Αριστοτέλη. *Crete University Press. Athens/ Herakleion: 2018.*

This research is funded in the context of the project "Support of Actions for the Internationalization of the University of Patras" under the call for proposals "Support of Actions for the Internationalization of Higher Education." The project is co-financed by Greece and the European Union (European Social Fund—ESF) by the Operational Programme Human Resources Development, Education and Lifelong Learning 2014–2020.

Operational Programme
Human Resources Development,
Education and Lifelong Learning

Co-financed by Greece and the European Union

Prelude: A Human, All Too Human, Story

Imagine you're young Nicomachus, Aristotle's son. Like many others, you admire Philip of Macedon's son, Alexander, whose reputation, when he succeeds to the throne, spreads throughout the world. And, naturally, you want to be like him. You know your father was in Philip's court (that's what everyone says, even though your father never talks about it). Let's suppose you realize that there will never be another Alexander and that, nonetheless, you're dreaming of acquiring political power and introducing political changes that will be somewhat close to that of Alexander's. You want to be a politician; you want to rule. You read your father's *Politics* and you talk through the details together. With a little more guidance and a lot of luck, you may succeed. If not in Athens, maybe in Asia Minor.

Your father disagrees. He wrote the *Nicomachean Ethics* to prove to you that your dreams are leading you up the wrong path. To make his point, he explains that the ultimate goal in life is happiness, and that political life (regardless of whether it is based on virtue, enjoys favorable circumstances, and brings enormous glory) is not the only, let alone the best, way to happiness. "You know, Nicomachus, it's highly likely Alexander is unhappy," Aristotle would repeat to you. Only exercising theoretical knowledge, like astronomy or mathematics, completely ensures happiness. And happiness can be obtained anywhere: in Stagira, in Athens, in Assos. Politicians lose their power or have a bad ending ("You don't want to end up like your grandad Hermias, right?")—Hermias succeeded the tyrant Eubulus in Atarneus, Asia Minor; due to his alliance with Philipp, he was crucified by the Persians in 345 BC—, cities lose their shine, but theoretical knowledge stays untainted. With a bit of luck, those who possess it will remain untainted too. He does not get through to you.

Like almost every young person in Athens, you insist that, based on all that's happening around you, the most prominent people are the ones who determine the fate of whole cities (states or nations, in today's terms), it's the politicians and the orators (even though your father has written another book, the *Rhetoric*, to show you that orators are not trustworthy and you—convinced—don't want to become one). For you, the greatest feat is to become a man of substantial political power and action.

The *Nicomachean Ethics* ends with a compromise between father and son. Both of them think that professional politicians aren't actually knowledgeable. The father accepts that it's reasonable for the son to believe that contemplative life seems overly distant ("alien" is the word we hear him use) and the son understands that the father has good reasons to suppose that political life is too insecure and too busy ("a unleisured life," his father calls it). There is, however, a role that can fuse the son's dreams with the father's opinions, and that is the role of the legislator.

We'll never know if, in the end, it's the father, Aristotle himself, who concludes the *Nicomachean Ethics* writing: "Son, don't you listen to what Isocrates says, you be a legislator when you grow up," or if the son Nicomachus himself (assuming he was the text's publisher) wanted to add this conclusion. What we do know is that Nicomachus never became a legislator. He most likely died in battle at a very young age. No busts, statues, or other representations of his face survive. Nonetheless, his name is immortalized in the title of the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

Contents

Abbreviations

DA *De Anima* (*On the Soul*)
EE *Eudemian Ethics*
Met. *Metaphysics*
Pol. *Politics*
Rhet. *Rhetoric*

Unless otherwise noted, references are to the *Nicomachean Ethics*. I use Reeve's revised translations, as they are to appear in C.D.C Reeve & P. Kontos (eds.), *Aristotle Complete Works* (Indianapolis: Hackett). The Byzantine Commentaries of the *Nicomachean Ethics* are cited according to G. Heylbut's edition in *Commentaria in Aristotelem Graeca* (*CAG*).

The classic commentaries on Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* include:

Burnet, J. 1990. *The Ethics of Aristotle.* London: Methuen.
Dirlmeier, F. 1956. *Aristoteles*. Nikomachische Ethik. *Übersetzung und Kommentar*. Berlin: Akademie Verlag.
Gauthier, R.A. & Jolif, J. Y. 1970. L'Éthique à Nicomaque. *Introduction, Traduction et Commentaire*. Louvain : Publications Universitaires.
Greenwood, L. H. G. 1909. *Aristotle* Nicomachean Ethics *Book Six with Essays, Notes, and Translation.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Stewart, J. A. 1882. *Notes on the* Nicomachean Ethics. Oxford: Thoemmes Press.

List of Pictures

List of Diagrams

Introduction: What Does "Aristotle's Ethics" Mean?

When we use the term "Aristotle's ethics," we primarily refer to the texts on ethics written by Aristotle himself. Of these, the most basic is the *Nicomachean Ethics*, as it is delivered to us in a number of manuscripts (here we'll use the Oxford Classical Texts [OCT] critical edition). The *Eudemian Ethics* and the *Magna Moralia* also have similar content, though there is serious doubt whether the latter is actually written by Aristotle's hand. Moreover, it's still debated whether the *Nicomachean* or the *Eudemian Ethics* was written first, and even more crucially, which one expresses the most mature view. For our purposes, we'll just accept that the *Nicomachean Ethics* gives us the best picture of Aristotle's ethics. Therefore, our Introduction to Aristotle's ethics is a reader's guide to the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

It is not enough, though, just to mention these texts or to assume that other texts, in particular, the *Politics*, can't be included in "Aristotle's ethics." For, as I'll explain later, there is no such thing as an Aristotelian ethics that is entirely independent from his political philosophy. But, roughly speaking, there is this difference: Aristotle's *political philosophy* answers the question "what happiness is," and for methodological as well as substantial reasons, it is divided into two parts: one part, what we today call "Aristotle's ethics," focuses on the happiness of individuals, and the other, the one we call "Aristotle's political philosophy," focuses on the happiness of the whole city and its citizens.

A final issue stems from the fact that Aristotle's texts are not stable things that keep their identity unaltered through the centuries. Not only do they go hand in hand with a long history of editions and textual corrections, but they are also part of the ongoing philosophical investigations. We don't read the *Nicomachean Ethics* the way people did a hundred or a thousand years ago. We pose different questions, and we get different answers. This doesn't mean that the work allows for any interpretation, as if there were no standard of validity. It does mean, however, that a final exposition of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, one that would manage to express its truth faithfully and definitely, is a chimera. Whoever claims that such an exposition exists is deluding himself, especially when they claim that they themselves are in possession of it, and that having completely gotten rid of their own philosophical prejudices, they are just bringing to the surface what the text itself means. The present

introduction has no such delusions; it promises only as much clarity as possible in its interpretative choices.

What's the purpose of adding yet another introduction to Aristotle's ethics to the long list of those already available worldwide? This introduction has the following features:

First, it is based on the analysis of extensive passages from the *Nicomachean Ethics*. By using this method, it hopes to accomplish multiple goals: (a) to bring out the beauty of the text itself, its literary nature, and the astonishing exactness and succinctness of its arguments; (b) to avoid the use of short passages that are cut off from their context and therefore prone to misinterpretation; (c) to present a way of reading and deciphering the texts themselves.

Second, its perspective is quite wide, in the sense that it considers both the questions that so-called "continental" philosophy is sensitive to and those that emerge within the context of analytic philosophy. It includes interpretations by representatives of phenomenology and hermeneutics—like Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Hannah Arendt, and Paul Ricœur—as well as representatives of virtue ethics—like Elizabeth Anscombe, Rosalind Hursthouse, Martha Nussbaum, and Alasdair McIntyre—and representatives of moral realism—like John McDowell and David Wiggins.

Third, it does not exhibit Aristotle's views in a historical and neutral way, but rather aims to *defend* them (and to identify those ideas that should be abandoned), and to defend them in philosophical terms as well as on the basis of our shared ethical experience.

Fourth, the main source of this book was a MOOC (http://mathesis.cup.gr, spring 2017), intended for people without prior experience in philosophy. The book does not require such experience either. This is why the footnotes are scarce, bibliography is gathered at the end of each chapter, the text preserves, up to a point, its oral style, the original text's translations follow the pace of a lesson (which means they are presented sentence by sentence), the text is full of references to what was and what will be said. The book is formed like a documentary: it follows the reader, registers questions and difficulties, the knowledge gradually acquired, the open-ended expectations, the disappointments or excitement, and it binds all this together in the form of a narrative.

The present introduction to Aristotle's ethics will be deemed successful if it manages to defend clearly and convincingly the principles of Aristotle's ethics, if it guides inexperienced readers step by step through the decoding of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, as well as if it encourages them to turn to the text itself (or, at least, if it makes them feel that, if they don't turn to the text itself, they'll be missing something important). Because philosophy is, among other things, the art of reading texts.

Chapter 1
Happiness Is What All Seek

1.1 A Life Full of Action

The *Nicomachean Ethics* is a work of *practical* philosophy. This means, for reasons that I will explain later, that it promises to answer the question of how human life can be happy. And the first thing our mind jumps to is that in order to explain how human life can be happy, we have to know what happiness (*eudaimonia*) consists in. If we accept as true, for now, Aristotle's position that our properly human life consists in our purposeful activities, we will understand why the *Nicomachean Ethics* starts, at I 1,[1] by asking what the kinds of activities we are involved in are.

A question as general and vague as this may sound awkward. To get started, let's first divide the acts we do into two major categories. Let's call the first *productions* (*poiêsis*). The simplest example is building a house: as long as I'm building the house, the house does not exist yet; when its construction is complete, it is meaningless to go on building it. If we use the technical term "work" (*ergon*) to denote the action's result, then it follows that for as long as the process of production is taking place, its work does not exist yet; from the moment the work starts existing, the activity has already stopped. These processes then are, in a way, suicidal: in order for their work to be materialized, they have to cease.

Our lives are full of such acts: we construct buildings, write poems, make lyres, cure patients, etc. Some are associated with one another; others are parts of hierarchies. For example, we make bricks, we build houses, we plan residential areas and

[1] The *Nicomachean Ethics* is divided into ten chapters, as we would call them today, but they are conventionally referred to as books. Each of these books is divided into sections or chapters. To further navigate ourselves we need to know exactly which part of the text we're referring to. In Bekker's *Aristotelis Opera*, the standard edition of Aristotle's corpus, the *Nicomachean Ethics* starts at page 1094. Each page has 2 columns, and each column has about 35 lines. We use a and b to indicate which column we're talking about. In total, each reference to the text has to include the book's number (in Latin numerals), the chapter, page, column, and line. For example: I 1 1094^{a}4.

P. Kontos, *Introduction to Aristotle's* Nicomachean Ethics, Palgrave Philosophy Today, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-41985-0_1

cities. Here, the first process is servicing the other two and the second is servicing the third, in that we make bricks to satisfy the needs of housebuilders, and so on. Aristotle calls the last of such activities *architectonic*, since it imposes various specifications to the previous ones, even if it can't substitute for them; for instance, the city planner does not need to be a builder. What's important here is the scale of values: the architectonic activity is higher in value, since it defines the shape and value of the ones that serve it and of their works. Indeed, if we ask ourselves why we make bricks, the answer is that making them has value because bricks have value. And they have value because the builder needs them, and so on.

It follows that productive processes don't have intrinsic value. Their value is determined by something external, which is the value of their product, which in turn draws its value from the architectonic process for which it is useful. But even the architectonic process in our example is a production: city planners know how to construct cities; however, it's someone else who should explain to them why people should live in cities or what the political and social desiderata of a city's plan are. And if an even more architectonic *productive* process were itself helping produce further work, we would have an infinite series. We wouldn't be able to say why these things are intrinsically worthwhile.

Another hurdle standing in our way is that in many cases their value relationship is two-way. Let's consider the relation between the work of a doctor and that of a general: sometimes the doctor will demand that the general protects the hospital from the enemy, other times the general will command the doctor to poison the enemy. So here it's not clear which craft is servicing and which is architectonic. In other cases, productive processes are impossible to correlate. Between the productive process of teaching at the university and tending my garden there doesn't seem to be any kind of evaluative comparison in effect that can be derived from the processes themselves.

So, if our lives were only made up of productions, they would have no internal consistency and no intrinsic value.

Lucky for us, there is a second type of thing we do that Aristotle calls *action* or *activity* (*praxis* or *energeia*).[2] Activities, unlike productions, get their value from themselves and not from their products. Let's take an example: a courageous action

[2] One of the difficulties we encounter when we read Aristotle's works is that he often uses the same term with two different meanings, a broad and a narrow one. For instance, while he distinguishes human doings in productions or processes (*kinêsis*) and actions or activities (*energeia*), sometimes he calls *all* human doings "activities" or "processes." What is important for the present purposes is to know how Aristotle defines the two basic concepts of potentiality/capacity (*dunamis*) and activity (*energeia*). In *Met.* IX 8, he argues that activity has priority "both in account and in substance, whereas in time it is prior in one way and in another not." *In account*: to explain what it means to be capable-of-building, we need to know what actively building consists in. *In substance*: in order for something potentially human to be actively so, that is, to be born, there must be an actively human being, a father; or, in order to acquire the capacity to play the lyre, there must be an actual lyre player to teach us and we should engage in lyre-playing. *In time*: though, in a sense, without the prior capacity of building we could never actively build, there must be an active builder to teach us or the active existence of the craft of building.

is an activity whose value lies in that Athenian soldiers, judging that the battle they are fighting is just, manage to conquer fear and find confidence. They are not judged by whether they'll win the battle or not, that is, by the outcome of their actions; for, in that case, we would see them as producers of victory. They are judged by the reasons they had to act and the way they acted, as these are manifested in the action itself.

However, even if we accept that there are activities that have value within themselves, it is still not clear how this leads to their scalar relationships. We have two obvious difficulties at once. First, we have not shown why courage is a value in the first place. Cowardly soldiers also perform an activity of the same kind: they are evaluated by whether they manage to conquer their fears. Why is a cowardly action bad? Second, in Aristotle's examples of such activities one does not find only moral actions but also such things as seeing. That is, the value of seeing lies within the activity itself: while we see, we're continuously doing the same thing (whereas, when we build a house, we can define stages as we get closer to the final product) and we do not produce a result outside the action itself, something that will remain when the activity stops. We may progressively see better, from closer up, from many perspectives, our vision may be more or less blurry. But while we continue performing this activity, we always do the same thing: seeing. It seems strange, however, to use the same scale of value for an action of courage and for the activity of seeing.

Then, while we split human doings into two categories, and while it seems reasonable that those defined as actions are more suited to answering the question of the value of human life, we don't yet know which activities are really valuable. The *Nicomachean Ethics* starts off with this fundamental question.

1.2 Happiness and Political Science (I 2)

Human doings seek some *end* (*telos*) in two ways: either internally like moral actions and seeing, or externally like building. Every end is a good and represents that which we act for. Builders build houses because houses are perceived as a good, thieves steal because they perceive the loot as a good, etc. And, according to our findings so far, if we are to investigate what gives human life value or goodness, it is the activities that have intrinsic value—those that are *actions*—that we should explore.

However, because many doings take the form of actions, so that there are many internal ends, we still have the question of what is the *best* or *highest good*, the yardstick that we use to evaluate and prioritize our activities. Let's call this highest good "happiness" and accept, for now, that this term refers to an activity that is fully or perfectly virtuous, and so it can be the standard by which we can estimate the value of our activities (and therefore the value of our life), which ones are more

desirable than others. However, before we answer what happiness is, Aristotle insists, we have to specify which science is more suitable for handling the question:

I 2 1094[a]18–1094[b]7

(1) If, then, there is some end of things doable in action that we wish[3] for because of itself, and the others because of it, and we do not choose everything because of something else […], it is clear that this will be the good—that is, the best good. […]
(2) If so, one must try to grasp in outline (*typôi*),[4] at least, what the good is and to which of the sciences or capacities[5] it properly belongs.
(3) It would seem to be the one with the most control and the most architectonic one. And politics (*politikê*) appears to be such;
(4) for it is the one that prescribes which of the sciences need to exist in cities and which ones each group in cities should learn and up to what point. […] And, since it uses the other practical sciences and, further, legislates about what must be done and what avoided, its end would circumscribe those of the others, so that it will be the human good.

Let's try and break down this programmatic claim based on what we know so far. Aristotle says, "there is some end of things doable in action": if human life has some kind of value, it will come out of the things we do—it will take form through human actions. It will not be a gift from god or something that comes from nature, or even from good luck. And, according to (1), what gives value to human life will be an activity we choose for the sake of itself and not another; that is, it will be something of the action kind and not the production kind. But now we're looking into something vaguer: Is there a best or highest good for which it's impossible to conceive any higher justification, any higher value that would ground it or explain it? We called this good "happiness" before. We haven't shown, however, that such a good even exists, or why it's one thing and not many.

And as (2) goes on to say, if there really is such a highest good, then it will be an object of scientific scrutiny. It won't be a matter of inspiration nor a matter of productive knowledge. If then we want to define what value or goodness serves as a basis for all other values and goods regarding human life, we need to know what science to go to. And that science is, according to (3), political science. This is the fully architectonic science, which all other sciences serve. We found, remember, that no productive activity and knowledge could by nature have such a role. In contrast, political science is a practical science since it studies and classifies human activities and actions. And because it is in a position to organize our actions, it is also in a position to organize what we do as producers.

[3] The notion of wish (*boulêsis*) will be explained in Sect. 2.4. It is a technical term: we learn what it means by understanding how it's defined and used within Aristotle's texts.

[4] The term "in outline" will be explained in Sect. 2.7.

[5] Why science is a capacity will be explained in Sect. 2.5.

This answer, though, is far from self-evident, since there are plenty of sciences contesting political science's claim, both in ancient Greek philosophy and in contemporary moral philosophy. Aristotle will argue against a number of such competitors: (a) against Plato's view that the knowledge of what good is would be a matter of knowing the (eternal) Idea of Good, because the latter has no direct or specific applicability to human affairs (I 6); (b) against the idea that what has primordial value is the knowledge of how to produce infinite wealth (*Pol.* I 9); (c) against the Spartan glorification of the craft of war (*Pol.* II 9); (d) against the sophists' claim that they possess political science (X 9); (e) against the idea that the knowledge of human psychology and biology, as knowledge of what human nature is and how the human soul works, are those sciences that will teach us what the highest good is (I 7 and VII 11). Against all these, Aristotle explicitly states that the question of the highest good or happiness *is* a matter of political science, without, however, negating the desideratum for the political scientist to have some knowledge of psychology and biology, of what we now call economics, or even of astronomy and theology.

Political science's primacy mirrors the fact that it is "the one with the most control." The nature of this control is explained in (4): it's because it is the one that decides and orders, by making laws about what sciences we need and to what extent, which ones we must learn and up to what point. At first glance such wording may disturb the contemporary reader, as it seems to imply that scientific fields and scientists are not autonomous but are controlled by political science, which is using them in a certain way. Moreover, there doesn't seem to be any activity in human life that is not subordinate to whatever political science decides—there doesn't seem to be any space for our private life. But let's not be too quick. Aristotle's argument is up to now purely hypothetical: *if* there is a science that knows what the highest good is or what happiness consists in, then it is foolish to think that some aspect of our private life is to be excluded from the realm of happiness. This notion of a realm is implied by the verb "circumscribe": the highest good that political science holds is not a tank or a sum of specific goods, an authority that makes rules or dictates lists of specific activities and kinds of knowledge; the highest good circumscribes the individual goods like a frame. We don't know whether such a political science exists. If it exists, though, then a science exists that knows what happiness is.

Digression: Starting-Points (archai)
The relationship between political science and happiness does not merely teach us something about happiness itself; it also ensures the scientific character of political science. For, according to Aristotle's epistemology, if political science is to be a science at all, it must have its own starting-points, with which it can prove or extract further truths (*Prior Analytics*, I 30 46^{a}17–28). A very important passage makes the following distinction:

I 1 1095^{a}30–32

[…] We must not forget, however, that arguments leading from starting-points (*archai*) and arguments leading to starting-points are different.

The second ones, the arguments leading to starting-points, are the ones given in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Politics* as treatises of political philosophy. They are not demonstrated, but they are shown. The first arguments, those leading from starting-points, are the conclusions that we prove based on the former ones. Such arguments also appear in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Politics*, but not just there. As we'll see later, they will be made by citizens in general but also by politicians and legislators. So these people, too, must somehow know the starting-points of political science in order to use them in their life. Given that there are starting-points for political science, our goal is to discover them. For now, it's enough to know that "[happiness] is a starting-point" (I 12 1102^{a}3). Happiness' *definition* is a starting-point and, as such, is not subject to alterations or revisions but only to clarifications.

1.3 Looking into People's Lives (I 5)

We don't yet know what happiness really is. And since we're just starting to wonder how much we can approach it scientifically, we need a first *empirical* plate to give us food for theoretical thought. We are required to locate the field of those phenomena that are related to the theoretical question of human happiness, and that field is human life.

I 5 1095^{b}14–1096^{a}5

(1) People seem (which is not at all unreasonable) to get their suppositions about the good—that is, happiness—from their lives. Ordinary people, the most unrefined ones, suppose it to be pleasure. And that is why the life they like is the life of indulgence. For there are three lives that stand out: the one we just mentioned, the political and, third, the contemplative.
(2) Ordinary people do seem wholly slavish, because the life they deliberately choose is one that is characteristic of grazing cattle. […]
(3) Sophisticated people, on the other hand, and doers of action, deliberately choose honor, for it is pretty much the end of the political life. But it is apparently more superficial than what we are seeking;

(3a) for it seems to be in the hands of the honorers more than of the honorees. […]
(3b) Further, people seem to pursue honor in order to be convinced that they are good—at any rate, they seek to be honored by practically wise people, among people who know them, and for virtue. It is clear, then, that according to them, at least, virtue is better.
(3c) […] But even virtue is apparently too incomplete [as an end]; for it seems possible to have virtue even while sleeping or being inactive throughout life.
(3d) or while suffering evils and bad luck of the worst sort.

(4) The third life is the contemplative one, which we shall undertake to investigate in what follows.

An appropriate starting post to begin looking into the question of happiness, (1) claims, is human life. This is so for two reasons. First, we must dismiss the idea that a thorough theoretical analysis would ever be able to explain what happiness is, if it didn't factor in the way we actually live. It would be like a natural scientist who constructs theories without examining natural phenomena. Second, the danger exists that we focus our attention on individual activities or actions. On the contrary, the concept of life includes a reference to a sort of unity, as we shall see.

Human lives, if we try to categorize them roughly and widely enough that we include all the ways that people live, are of three kinds. The first one is the life of pleasure. It is based on the sort of pleasure that seems to make people slavish and unfree, able only to live an animal life and nothing more. So, it's not concerned with just any pleasure but only with animal or beast-like bodily pleasures. The characteristic feature of such pleasures is their direct connection to the now and their inability to grasp future ends. We understand, within a few lines, that this life includes a kind of self-contradiction: while it is a way in which people choose to live, those who choose it behave like animals—in Sect. 6.5 we'll learn a lot more about this kind of human corruption.

The second one is the political life, which consists of actions that we do in relation to others within organized political communities. We all have some experience of this life—at least, all of us who listen to or read the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Nonetheless, it is not at all obvious whether everyone can answer the question what the virtue of political life is.

The first possible answer to the question, in (3a), is that *honor*, meaning public recognition, is the fundamental value of political life. However, based on what we know so far, this answer can't be correct. Because happiness lies in activity, while public recognition does not, it is rather something others give us, while we just accept or receive it. Moreover, in order for recognition to have value, (3b), the person recognizing us must be virtuous, that is, worthy. If we add to the mix that we have to be worthy of this recognition, we see that recognition depends on a lot of factors. And, in the end, it is claimed that it depends on virtue. But once again this claim is in need of justification. And this is because virtue is a complex notion. After all, a successful thief, a person who steals successfully or well, also has a sort of

virtue—the sort that makes him a good thief. In (3c) Aristotle points out another ambiguity: virtue can be both a simple possession (just people can be just even when they are asleep) and a property of an activity (because people fully exhibit their virtue only when they are doing a just action). It's the same virtue in both cases, either when one is sleeping or when one is activating it. But, as I already explained (see footnote 2), the definition of virtue depends on the definition of the relevant activity. And this is something that those who either analyze or live the political life tend to forget, because they prefer to understand virtue as something that is permanently acquired and not as something that constantly needs solidification and confirmation through action. Also, as (3d) adds, they fail to see that the virtue of political life does not come from good luck but shows a way of handling it. That it is why people usually confuse living well and happiness (*eu-daimonia*) with good luck (*eu-tuchia*).

All these things are still a bit vague. We see, however, that political life unfolds on two levels: a first, simplistic level, which lures anyone who thinks that the epicenter of political life is honor, and a higher level, which attracts those who think that the epicenter is virtue (applying equally to the political life of the citizen and to the life of those who happen to possess political power). So, we can see differentiation within political life. And even if the idea of honor being the content of the highest good has to be excluded, the idea that virtue is its proper content has to be considered valid, at least for now.

Strangely however—and that "strangely" will be haunting us through to the end—political life, for Aristotle, is *not* the most perfect life a person can live. The most perfect one is the theoretical life, which culminates in *contemplation* (*theôria*), in the activity that consists in active theoretical thinking. The term *theôria* is used with many meanings. It may mean: (a) the activity of exercising knowledge of the starting-points of eternal and unchangeable beings, which are the subject matter of the strictly theoretical sciences of theology, astronomy, and mathematics; (b) exercising knowledge of natural sciences, like biology, that are theoretical even though they deal with beings subject to change; (c) exercising knowledge concerning productions and moral actions; or (d) any form of rational activity that contains some sort of knowledge and judgment, like the activity of a well-educated theatre spectator. In the present context, though, contemplative life, as opposed to political life, should be understood as (a) or (b): it means the life of those who devote their lives to the relevant kind of theoretical activity (whatever this devotion may entail).

In light of these clarifications, the scandalous nature of the contemplative life becomes instantly evident. The first puzzle comes from the fact that actively engaging in these theoretical sciences guarantees happiness, while these sciences themselves don't investigate human happiness; for they don't deal with human affairs at all. It's political science that does this, but it can't ensure—as we learn—happiness in its most perfect form. It seems that we achieve perfect happiness, then, only if we turn our gaze away from human affairs altogether.

The second puzzle is sharpened by a sentence in the *Politics*, where theoretical life is a life withdrawn or cut off from the political realm, "the life of an alien, detached from the political community" (*Pol.* VII 2 1324^{a}16–17). From this

perspective, contemplative life appears to conflict with the very human nature and its political character, forcing it to surpass itself.

The third puzzle has to do with the emerging conflict between contemplative and practical life. While the first one is considered the most perfect, we learned about the second one that it's considered to have more power, at least as far as the people possessing political science are concerned. So how do these two positions harmonize, how is it possible that those who have more power come to terms with the fact that someone else is superior to them? And if those possessing political power have only experienced the political life, how can they recognize the value or superiority of contemplative life?

These puzzles are fundamental, for us as well as for Aristotle himself. The *Nicomachean Ethics* aims to clarify them, finally offering a solution in Book X to the puzzle about happiness and the relation between the contemplative life and the political one.

A final note about the facts of human life: this empirical basis is expressed in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Politics* either by *hoti* (that) or *huparchonta* (that which actually happens) and is the verification field of political science: "[T]he truth in practical matters must be judged from the works and the life; for these are what have the controlling vote. When we examine what has been previously said, then, it must be judged by bringing it to bear on the works and the life, and if it is in harmony with them, we should accept it, but if it clashes, we should suppose it mere words" (X 8 1179^{a}18–22). The only way to verify the conclusions of political science is to examine whether they correspond to human life in total, because a single action can't always safely show us whether someone is happy or not. In the *Politics*, the empirical basis to be considered, the *hoti*, is wider: contemporary and older constitutions will be included, regimes known from our own experience or through historical references, regimes that are successful and unsuccessful, etc. (X 9 1181^{b}15–22).

1.4 When Getting Rich Becomes the Art of Life (*Pol.* I 8–9)

It's quite possible to get the impression that all these matters are still quite open. And rightly so. It would be best, however, not to underestimate what we have learned so far, namely, why we have to reject the life of indulgence as a candidate for happiness. This is a very important gain—especially if we consider that, in the same context (I 5), Aristotle rejects another answer to the question about happiness: that happiness is ensured by the life of the moneymaker, which is focused on the accumulation of wealth (I 5 1096^{a}5–7). He calls it "forced," correlating it with the serving of biological needs. He doesn't add much more here. But he does complete this picture in the *Politics*. And given that the relation between economics and politics is a very important issue affecting every citizen of the twenty-first century, Aristotle's views on the matter prove to be as relevant as ever. They are guided by the question: Can economics be a substitute for politics, are those who possess the

craft of producing wealth entitled to replace the political philosopher or scientist who has the practical knowledge of how we should live?

Aristotle refers to economics as the craft of wealth acquisition (*chrêmatistikê*). It is the technical knowledge of how to produce wealth. He breaks it down into good and bad wealth acquisition and calls the latter "the craft of commerce" (*kapêlikê*). This craft is not just concerned with acquiring wealth; it is concerned with acquiring wealth for the sake of wealth itself and with having currency as the main vehicle (whatever the production and use of goods it leads to). And the question is whether, based on what we know so far, we have any arguments against those who would claim that the craft of wealth acquisition can be a substitute for politics.

Pol. I 9 1257^{b}23–1258^{a}14

(1) And the wealth that derives from this sort of craft of wealth acquisition *is* unlimited.
(2) For just as the craft of medicine aims at unlimited health, […], whereas the things that further the end are not unlimited (for the end is the limit of all of them), so too of this sort of craft of wealth acquisition there is no limit where its end is concerned, since its end is wealth of this sort, namely, the possession of money. […]
(3) The cause of their being so disposed is that what they take seriously is living, not living well.
(4) But even those who do aim at living well seek what furthers bodily gratification; […]
(5) And if they cannot provide [wealth] through the craft of wealth acquisition, they try to do so by means of some other cause of it, using each of their capacities not in accord with nature. For it does not belong to courage to produce wealth but to produce confidence in the face of danger, nor does it belong to generalship or medicine to do so, but rather to produce victory and health, respectively. These people, however, make all of these into the craft of wealth acquisition, on the supposition that acquiring wealth is the end, and that everything must further the end.

Bad wealth acquisition, (1) explains, aims for the acquisition of unlimited wealth, because it considers that no amount of wealth is ever enough, that there is no limit beyond which possession of wealth would be worthless or even harmful; more wealth is, by definition, always better than less wealth. The most appropriate way to counter the claims of bad wealth acquisition is to undermine the argument about the alleged value that is associated with the unlimitedness of wealth. This is exactly the crux of (2).

To understand the internal contradiction in unlimited wealth, we need a comparison with the productive knowledge par excellence, that is, medicine. There are two ways to understand medicine; (a) as a technical activity, like building. It corresponds then to three concepts of limitedness: (a1) health is not something unlimited or indefinite, but rather, it's defined by the very nature of the human body (limited in accord with the definition); (a2) if medicine is a technical activity, then it is also limited in terms of time, as patients' treatment ends when they get well, and it is

foolish to go on treating them when they are well; (a3) medicine is limited in terms of its instruments, since the nature of health and its treatment also define the instruments needed for the craft of medicine.

The other way to understand medicine is, (b), as a body of knowledge whose goal is unlimited healing—healing anyone who gets sick. So as long as there are people who get sick, there will be the productive knowledge of medicine. If one day or in another world people didn't get sick, then of course medicine as a *productive* knowledge wouldn't exist or would be pointless. Contrariwise, as long as the problem of sickness exists, medicine will perpetually aim to restore human health. So we have distinguished the limited nature of medicine as a productive activity from the unlimited nature of medicine as a body of knowledge.

The contradiction inherent in bad wealth acquisition lies in the fact that it confuses these two things. It considers that, from head to toe, it possesses an element of unlimitedness, as if there were no end in terms of time nor in the definition of wealth as a good, nor in the means of acquiring it. And that's because, as (2) points out, bad wealth acquisition's goal is the constant accumulation of wealth, since the next volume of wealth is superior in value to the last, and so on, without limit. Hence, no amount of wealth can represent a final value, a limit to give meaning to the path toward it: there is no point where it is legitimate for the acquisition of wealth to stop. This is where the contradiction lies: it's like a doctor claiming that even when the patient is cured, they are entitled to continue the treatment. Good wealth acquisition, though, would comprehend that, as a form of productive knowledge, it is not in a position to define the quantity of the target-wealth itself; all it knows is how best to acquire it. It takes a political or practical kind of knowledge, not a productive one, to define what a sufficient amount of wealth—one that promotes happiness—really is. When this is achieved, acquiring further wealth would undermine happiness itself. In addition, if the craft of economics were to claim political science's role, it would also claim a double role: to be, at the same time, both a productive and a political/practical knowledge, which would mean that its end would lie both inside and outside the relevant activity—which is absurd.

This claim is so irrational that, in fact, as (3) points out, those who claim that the life of a moneymaker ensures happiness don't even understand the difference between life in its biological sense (*zên*) and the living well (*eu zên*) that is proper to human beings. In essence, they attribute to their lives the unlimitedness of natural living, which goes on forever by means of the circle of birth and death, without realizing that this natural unlimitedness is irrelevant to the question of what the human good, living well, or happiness actually is. That's why, in the passage we read in Sect. 1.3, Aristotle connects the life of a moneymaker with natural necessity.

And this also explains why the life of a moneymaker is included under the life of indulgence—while we would expect it to be a version of the political life given that wealth and its exchange take place in a political community—tied as it is to mere natural life. (4) invokes our everyday experience to solidify this argument: if you ask these people to try and answer the question about what they take happiness to be, it will turn out that what interests them, that from which they draw pleasure, is not wealth itself, but rather all those carnal pleasures of the life of indulgence that they can get by means of it.

We can see the same kind of indifference toward genuine goodness in another symptom of bad wealth acquisition, namely, that it deprives human activities of their own good, and it transforms them—all of them—into moneymaking: as if the general did not have victory as an end, or the doctor health, but rather all activities were valued in terms of wealth. This means that, in the scenario where the craft of economics takes the place of politics, it wouldn't be able to organize human activities and respect their proper ends, as it tends to destroy their nature—their goodness. Substituting craft of economics for politics is a politically comedic and dangerous idea.

1.5 The Three Criteria of Happiness (I 7)

We're attempting to define happiness, and already in Sect.1.3 we reached some conclusions, taking human lives as our empirical basis. This, however, is as far as this approach can take us. We need criteria that would help us pose the question of what happiness is more exactly. Let's call them *formal criteria*, since in Book I of the *Nicomachean Ethics* they will not answer our question but rather *tell us how we must formulate it*. These criteria serve like grammar or syntax rules regulating our conceptualization of happiness, rules that respect or mirror the very structure of happiness itself.

Before we go into them, let's check where we are now. We know that happiness is connected to human activities and that they in turn are defined by their ends (*telos*). So, to evaluate human activities we have to be able to comparatively evaluate their ends. Consequently, we're looking for a classification of these ends, a scale based on perfection which culminates in the highest end: a perfect end or a perfect perfection (!)—*teleion telos* in Ancient Greek. We have to wonder, then, are there any formal criteria that allow us to compare ends, or are the ends of human activities incomparable? Aristotle sets out three such formal criteria in the following passage:

I 7 $1097^{a}30$–$1097^{b}20$

(1) We say that what is intrinsically worth pursuing is more complete than what is worth pursuing because of something else, that what is never choiceworthy because of something else is more complete than what is both intrinsically choiceworthy and choiceworthy because of this one, and, accordingly, that what is unconditionally complete is what is always intrinsically choiceworthy and never choiceworthy because of something else. Happiness seems to be most like this. […]

(2) The same conclusion also apparently follows from self-sufficiency; for the complete good seems to be self-sufficient.

(2a) By "self-sufficient," however, we mean not self-sufficient for someone who is alone, living a solitary life, but also for parents, children, wife, and friends and fellow citizens generally, since a human being is by nature political. […]

(2b) we posit that the self-sufficient is what, on its own, makes a life choiceworthy and lacking in nothing, and this, we think, is what happiness is like.

(3) Further, we think it is the most choiceworthy of all things, when not counted among them. But if it is counted among them, it clearly would be more choiceworthy with the addition of the least of goods; for what is added would bring about a superabundance of goods, and, of goods, the greater one is always more choiceworthy.

The criterion in (1) may seem labyrinthine, but what's really going on is that Aristotle is separating three kinds of goods. Let's call the first kind *instrumental* goods. These are the ones that we choose as a means to something else. For example, the bridle maker makes bridles, and bridles are valuable to the extent that they are useful to the rider, and if this usefulness stops existing, then the bridles will stop being valuable as well. These are the lowest kinds of goods. There are other goods that are in a way *composite*, as they have value both in themselves and because they are useful for something else. For instance, public recognition is something that has value or beauty in itself, but at the same time it's instrumentally useful, since it allows us to engage in valuable political activities more easily. This entails that even though it's important, it's less valuable than the good it is a means to. So, the question arises whether there are goods that have value within themselves and never serve any further end, given that one accepts there exist *complete goods*, goods that exclude the existence of even more superior goods they would be a means to. We don't know what these complete goods are, whether there are many or just a single one, or whether they even exist. For now, we are looking into the supposition that, since a scale of goods exists, there must also exist one or more highest goods as its summit.

The only example of a highest good that we know of is happiness, because we think it's irrational to ask what end happiness serves, since it explains all other goods without being explained by any of them. Truly, the questions "Why do you want to be happy?" or "What is the purpose of being happy?" don't seem to need an answer. This, however, is exactly what makes happiness so elusive: the idea of a good that is preferred at all times and only because of itself is hard to grasp. In any case, the first criterion does not commit us to any view about the content or possibility of happiness.

The criterion in (2) comes from shared experience, which relates completeness to self-sufficiency, in the sense that if something needs other things, it's missing something or is deficient in something and therefore is not complete. Self-sufficiency can be understood in two ways. The first, (2a),[6] assumes that a self-sufficient person is a person living by himself, outside political society. But this assumption is wrong.

[6] The syntax of sentence (2a) is unexpected. We would expect that the opposite of solitary life would be the life *with* friends, children etc. It doesn't say that, however; rather, it attributes self-sufficiency to children, parents, etc. (which is strange, especially since it includes children). In any case, the meaning of the sentence is what we would expect. And perhaps we should understand that self-sufficiency involves people who are, necessarily, someone's children or someone's parents, or that our children's or our friends' misery cannot let us indifferent—this is already how the ancient commentator Aspasius (note that his commentary is the earliest extant one) reads the passage (*CAG* XIX: 16.11–22).

This kind of self-sufficiency is not possible for a human being, whether biologically, as no one is self-grown but needs parents, or socially, since no one can be fully developed through the simple effect of natural factors—that is, outside a political community. So, (2b) suggests an alternative, defining as self-sufficient that which, by itself, makes a human life choiceworthy and in need of nothing extra. This, however, again leads to a dead end: no matter how self-sufficient an activity is, human beings need at least the goods of health and nutrition so they can carry it out (X 8 $1178^{b}33$–35). So, equating perfection with self-sufficiency must be restated in a more flexible manner: the more self-sufficient an activity is for human beings, the more perfect it will be, even though the most perfect one will *not* be absolutely self-sufficient for us. Absolute self-sufficiency is god's privilege.

To understand self-sufficiency of human activities in the most exact way, we must introduce the concept of *external goods*, which are things that have value but are external to their corresponding activities. Aristotle's example of wealth is to the point. Wealth is an external good in that if we can't afford the necessities of life, we devote all our time to seeking material goods and can't undertake any other activities. To this extent wealth affects all human life and ensures what Aristotle thinks of as leisure (*scholê*): not being forced to struggle to make a living, so we can be able to devote ourselves to whatever activities we think are important or meaningful. Wealth, however, is an external good also in the sense that, for example, people can be generous only if they have material possessions to give. Of course, generosity doesn't draw its value from material possessions; they are however a component of the activity of giving. The actions of generosity are dependent on wealth, and their self-sufficiency is thereby undermined. So, the second criterion asks us to look for activities that depend on external goods the least.

The third criterion, (3), is a bit hard to decipher: out of all activities, the one most preferable is the one that's "not counted among" the other goods it is being compared to. Otherwise, if it were possible to add some good (G) to happiness (H), that would mean that G+H > H, since the sum of two goods is greater than each one separately, no matter how little the initial value of G is. And then, everyone would prefer to have happiness *with* something else, a fact that contradicts the very idea that happiness is supposed to be the highest good.

Thus, it is vital to show that it is unthinkable for one to conceive of the sum of happiness and some other good, something like G+H. There are two ways to go about this. The first is to maintain that happiness belongs to a completely different class from the rest of the goods, and so, given that they can't be combined by addition, the G+H sum makes no sense, like "cat+2" makes no sense. A second strategy is to accept that happiness doesn't describe *one* activity but rather all valuable activities combined, the sum of all goods, and so there is no good outside this sum and there is nothing to be added to happiness. The first interpretation is often called *exclusivist* and the second one *inclusivist*. In I 7 of the *Nicomachean Ethics* no explicit support is given to either interpretation, although the insistence on the concept of self-sufficiency and the reference to a best and most complete virtue might be taken as implicit support of the first. The important thing is that we have a formal rule that excludes the aggregate G+H as being a greater good than H alone.

In any case, the three criteria we examined don't bind us to any specific understanding of the *content* of happiness; they just provide the grammar and syntax of happiness.

1.6 The Human Function: Human Beings Weren't Made to Sleep (I 7)

We're still in I 7 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, dealing with preliminary questions. Aristotle himself clarifies a few lines later that we would like to know more clearly what happiness is. The formal criteria, then, were not sufficient, motivating us to take a new kind of approach. The text does warn us, however, not to expect a lot from this new investigation: "*Maybe*, then, this would come about if the function of a human being were grasped." The argument that follows is known as the *function argument*. The term "function" (*ergon*) is ambiguous: it sometimes denotes an object's essential activity (e.g., the function of a saw is to cut, and therefore something that doesn't cut can't be a [good] saw, just like a wooden imitation of a hand is not a hand), and sometimes it denotes the result of an activity (like the house when related to the activity of building). In the passage that follows, the term has the first meaning. With these few things in hand, let's read the decisive passage **I 7 1097^{b}25–1098^{a}20** in parts:

(1) For just as for a pipe player, a sculptor, every craftsman, and, in general, whatever has some function and action, the good—the doing well—seems to lie in the function, the same seems to hold of a human being, if indeed there is some function that is his. Are there, then, some functions and actions of a carpenter and of a shoemaker but none at all of a human being? And is he by nature idle [i.e., without a function, *argos*]?

(1) suggests an analogy: precisely because it makes sense to accept that every craftsman is defined by a specific function or a specific activity, we are invited to wonder whether, in a way, a generalization is allowed, to examine not specific activities, but rather human activities in general. If everything is defined by its familiar function, the same must apply to human beings (if they have a function over and above their specific ones). Aristotle uses here the example of the craftsman and not, let's say, his preferred (in the case of a function) example of the tool (for instance, that the function of a knife is to cut well), exactly because he aims to use the analogy to make a generalization; and this generalization reminds us of the relation between servicing crafts and an architectonic activity we encountered in I 1, where politics regulated servicing productive activities and we escaped the danger of an infinite regress to an ever more productive activity.

Of course, from another perspective this example is misleading, because nothing guarantees the success of the desired generalization, since there is no way for a person to move without any loss from the multiplicity of individual activities (and maybe their incompatibility, as in the case of a person who is at the same time a

builder and a guitarist, in which case the first activity harms the agility in the fingers needed in the second activity) to the unity a single human function would require. Besides, the example's activities are productive ones and, hence, the generalization has to somehow bridge the gap between productive activities and actions in the proper sense of activities that have an internal end. That's why we need a second analogy to help us out:

(2) Or just as of eye, hand, foot, and of each part generally, there seems to be some function, may we likewise also posit some function of a human being that is beyond all these?

This is a biological example that corrects the flaw we found in the previous one, since in the case of a body there is unity of the parts as well as a codependence of the parts with the whole. If the body is healthy in total, all of its parts work properly, and likewise, if the parts work properly, so does the body. Moreover, this example reminds us of something we tend to forget, that it's not possible to talk about the human life without considering the fact that human beings have a specific nature, with specific bodily and mental capabilities. Whatever the content of happiness proves to be, it would be impossible to deduce it without an at least elementary knowledge of the physical and psychological (in the Aristotelian sense) composition of the human being.

This however cannot mean that the answer to the question about human happiness is to be answered by biology or psychology and merely dictated to political science. If this were the case, then the craft-analogy should be removed, and the rest of the conversation would be different. And we would also expect a final answer to the question about happiness, as Aristotle's biology and psychology actually know what a human being is. *None of this is going on in I 7*. Besides, we already saw in Sect. 1.2 that Aristotle is clear about political science or political philosophy shouldering responsibility for answering this question, not biology or psychology (and he makes the same point in I 13 1102^{a}18–26). In addition, the physical example, in turn, is not devoid of problems. After all, it's somewhat problematic to compare the unity of the body with the unity of human life: not only because the first is defined by nature, while the unity of our life depends on our own actions and decisions too, but also because the unity of our lives is necessarily shaped through time and our consciousness of time, while the unity of our body can be examined synchronically. So, we're invited to see the two examples as complementary and ancillary tools. The argument goes on as follows:

(3) What, then, could this be? For living is evidently shared with plants as well, but we are seeking what is special (idion). […] There remains, then, some sort of practical living of the part that has reason.

Again, (3) doesn't define the human function. It just excludes some wrong answers, all those that would define it as they define other living beings, while obviously, defining the human function presupposes that we're in a position to trace what is special about the human being. For example, if we claim that humans are made to eat, we don't point out a quality distinguishing them from other animals. Such a claim however does not exclude eating from the activities of the rational part

of the soul, since eating may be portrayed as a rational activity: for instance, we choose to eat something because we find the food tasty or nutritious and that we have the right to eat it, since it doesn't belong to someone else. Similarly, if there is a divine being with which we share a common activity (like, let's say, the activity of understanding), the human function will have to do with the specific and different manner in which the human understanding works. In any case, the set of rational activities is spacious, and the goal of this argument is *not* to distinguish one of them. We're now approaching the conclusion:

(4) If, then, the function of a human being is activity of the soul in accord with reason or not without reason, and the function of a sort of thing, we say, is the same in kind as the function of an excellent thing of that sort (as in the case of a lyre player and an excellent lyre player), and this is unconditionally so in all cases, when we add to the function the superiority that is in accord with the virtue (for it is characteristic of a lyre player to play the lyre and of an excellent one to do it well). […]

This very twisted sentence starts with something we already know: the human function consists of some activity or activities and not, for example, of capacities or states. Aristotle repeats this crucial clarification in I 8 $1098^{b}31–1099^{a}5$, and that's another indication that in I 7 no final solution has been reached: happiness is not a capacity or a state, just like in sport it's not the best athletes that get the prize, but only the best of those athletes who actually exhibited their athletic capacity by participating in a specific game.

Aristotle does however add a somewhat fine distinction. It is necessary to consider the most perfect way possible in which a function is realized. And this occurs when it is realized according to its corresponding virtue. The analogy used is again borrowed from the field of productive doings. Both the bad and the good lyre player engage in the same activity, they play the lyre, and if we *already* know what playing the lyre consists in, the only thing changing is the *quality* of the activity. If, however, we don't know what it consists in and if, the first time we listen to someone playing the lyre, that lyre player happens to be bad (so bad that the technique is totally incorrect and the sound unpleasant), then we'll get the wrong impression of the *kind* of the activity. And this is exactly our present condition as it concerns the definition of happiness since we have for the moment no clear view of it.

In the same way, in our effort to define the human function, we need to trace those who realize it in an exceptional way, that is, with virtue. And those who don't realize it with the same virtue will not be "good" as people. This last wording sounds bold. Aristotle asks us to observe it in a neutral way: the term "bad" people should be perceived as in the case of the "bad" lyre player and signify just the less than adequate execution of the respective function. Nothing more, nothing less. There is no space here for further analyzing the place of happiness in human life, as there is no space for asking whether the activity of playing the lyre well (*eu*) is beneficial (*eu*) to the lyre player. Happiness involves goodness, solely from the teleological standpoint of the function corresponding to the human being as such. Whether true happiness is something most people actually understand as beneficial to them is not

part of the argument. Neither does anything like this appear in the argument's conclusion:

(5) If all this is so, the human good turns out to be activity of the soul in accord with virtue and, if there are more virtues than one, then in accord with the best and most complete.

As in (4), it is stressed here that the human good is a good of the soul. Because, as Aristotle reminds us later (I 8 $1098^{b}12$–15), some people lump together the different kinds of goods, by tending to confuse the human good with the goods of the body or with external goods. So, they ignore the fact that goods of the soul are the highest ones since these determine the quality of our activities. Therefore, we do learn something that is certain: happiness has to do with a good of the soul. *In other aspects, we are still in the dark*. We don't learn what specific function of the soul constitutes the human function, nor what virtue is particular to it. We don't even learn whether we're looking for one function and virtue or for many.

That happiness is an "activity of the soul in accord with virtue" cannot mean that "happiness" tells us what that activity is. "Happiness" is a placeholder for the highest rank of goodness. The function argument is meant to show that only virtuous rational activities can be candidates for that rank.

The conclusion of the argument does not satisfy our expectations. It only paves the way that leads us to connect happiness with activities and virtues. And the only fresh element we find in the rest of Book I is the distinction between happiness and a happy *life* or a happy *person*. In the latter cases, two more prerequisites must be satisfied. The first is presented in the very clause that follows (5):

(6) Further, [the human good turns out to be activity] in a complete life. For one swallow does not make a spring, neither does one day. Nor, similarly, does one day or a short time make someone blessed and happy.

We did not anticipate this poetic finale coming. We had just suspected that it's not possible to define happiness without referring to some sort of temporal unity. What the clause "in a complete life" means, however, admits of various interpretations. But there are some interpretations we should rather dismiss. For instance, a "complete life" cannot denote some biological fulfillment of human life, as if a happy life had to last for a given amount of time according to the average life expectancy! Nor can it mean that human lives should have the strict unity and coherence we may expect or require from a good tragedy's plot, to which nothing needs to be added or subtracted (*Poetics*, 8 $1451^{a}32$–35). For, in that case, a single unhappy event in our lives or a single bad action or even a single failure to accomplish our virtuous plans would condemn our lives to inescapable misery. On the contrary, "one swallow does not make a spring" not only suggests that a happy life cannot be reduced to an isolated happy moment but also, inversely, that rare or sporadic bad experiences or activities do not render our life unhappy, at least, not necessarily. We should not assume either that "a complete life" denotes a second additional end, an end beyond or next to happiness, as if the completeness of life were not already encapsulated in happiness itself.

I propose that Aristotle's picture of how we should understand a happy life is based on the following assumptions: first, a happy human life needs a hierarchy of values, not in the sense that there is a single activity that we are aiming for at every single moment, but in the sense that it helps us evaluate the goodness of all other activities and, hence, establish a certain coherence and compatibility in between our various activities and ends—I will revisit this point in Chap. 9. Second, a happy human life is not an aggregate of many periods of living well and fewer periods of living badly, for its goodness is not an aggregate in the first place. It rather has a narrative structure: happiness depends not only on the sum of happy periods but on the *way* in which unhappy past moments we remember or future moments we expect are integrated into the narrative of a happy life.

The important thing here is that the required integration is not achieved due to what we today call psychological or existential strength, thanks to our subjective stance toward our past and future, or thanks to the awareness that past pains may have led to a desired outcome. The integration of unhappy, failed, or misguided activities through shorter or longer periods of time within the narrative of a happy life can only be attained due to our present and future *actions*, to the extent that they can correct and compensate for our previous misdeeds and failures or forestall the future ones (I 10 1101^{a}9–13). There is no way for people to live a happy life when they are haunted by regrets at their past actions, that is, actions they cannot recognize as compatible with their character and their sense of integrity and whose outcome is somehow irreparable. The same holds true regarding the future. Life's happiness goes hand in hand with a sense of unity, albeit a flexible unity that makes room for revisions, amendments, surprises, etc. The problem is, once again, that for the moment we have no clue about what virtue enables us to establish such a unity *correctly*.

The second prerequisite for a happy life is a sense of control over our lives:

I 10 1101^{a}14–16

What, then, prevents us from calling "happy" the person who is active in accord with complete virtue and is adequately supplied with external goods, not for some random period of time but in a complete life?

A happy person doesn't just act in accord with complete virtue; a happy person is also supplied with enough external goods. So, while the definition of happiness depends on what the perfect activity and the virtue that is particular to it are, the definition of the happy person is more comprehensive, by including a reference to all the prerequisites needed in order for that perfect activity to be indeed attainable for humans within the world as we know it. What we said about self-sufficiency in the previous section comes back here in an emphatic way. External goods are necessary in order for the *virtuous* person to be happy or blessed. Even though happiness does not consist of these goods, a happy life "cannot exist apart from external goods, and they come about as a result of good luck" (*MM* II 8 1107^{b}16–18). Put in another way, external goods are here situated somewhere on the trajectory leading from virtue to a happy life. The possession of external goods provides us with a sense of

control or security that we will have the opportunity to devote our time to our lovely activities and, further, to exercise these activities in the most thriving and pleasant way.

We know by now one thing: happiness is impossible in the absence of virtuous rational activities. We still don't know, however, what virtue is, or which rational activities are the worthiest. Book I of the *Nicomachean Ethics* leaves us in the dark. But it provides us with a blueprint for all the questions to be raised and answered in the rest of the treatise.

1.7 Chapter Summary

This chapter proposes an analysis of Book I of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. The *Nicomachean Ethics* is a work of practical philosophy. This means that it promises to answer the question of how human life can be happy. But, in order to know what happiness (*eudaimonia*) consists in, we should first investigate the following issues: What are the kinds of activities we are involved in? Which science is more suitable for handling questions of this sort? Which are the starting-points of this science? How should we locate the field of phenomena that are related to the theoretical question of human happiness? It proves that we need criteria that would help us pose the question of what happiness is more exactly. I call them formal criteria, since in Book I they do not answer our question, but rather tell us how we must formulate it. These criteria serve like grammar or syntax rules regulating our conceptualization of happiness, rules that respect or mirror the very structure of happiness itself. To offer a more robust definition of happiness, however, Aristotle will develop the much-discussed "function argument"; I offer a close reading of the argument, its premises, and its open-ended conclusion. For the conclusion of the argument only paves the way that leads us to connect happiness with activities and virtues: happiness is impossible in the absence of virtuous rational activities. We still don't know, however, what virtue is or which rational activities are the worthiest. Book I of the *Nicomachean Ethics* leaves us in the dark. But it provides us with a blueprint for all the questions to be raised and answered in the rest of the treatise.

1.8 Further Reading

For Aristotle's notion of a political science, see Reeve (2014: xix–lvi). For the craft of wealth acquisition, see Meikle (1994). My reading of the function argument is aligned with Barney (2008) and Lawrence (2006). Aristotle's comments on happiness in I 8–13 are nicely presented in Heinaman (2007). For meaningfulness and happiness, see Wolf (1997). For a different interpretation of the clause "a complete life," see Kraut (2018: 148–235).

1.9 Study Questions

1. Aristotle's political science defines goodness for all our activities. Do you find this idea sensible?
2. Aristotle states that the human good is the object of a science. What reasons does he give for thinking this?
3. Which are the three kinds of human life and how do they differ from each other? Do you agree with Aristotle that this list is exhaustive?
4. Why soldiers' courageous act is an action/*praxis*, not a production/*poiêsis*?
5. Explain why Aristotle rejects the life of the moneymaker.
6. Critically evaluate the idea that self-sufficiency is a criterion of goodness.
7. Explain the craft-analogy and the body-analogy in Aristotle's "function argument." How effective are they?
8. What is a complete life? Why might one think that only a complete life can be a happy life?
9. Why is it necessary to distinguish between the definition of happiness and the definition of a happy life?

1.10 Essay Question

Try to explain the "function argument" in your own words. Develop a criticism of it that you think particularly strong.

Chapter 2
Virtues of Character: They Make "all the difference"

2.1 Virtues of Thought and Virtues of Character (I 13, II 1)

Happiness, we have just learned, consists in activities that are done in accord with virtue. But our search for the highest activity seems to have reached a dead end. Should we instead look into what the virtues are? It is reasonable to think so, since in our everyday practices we are pretty familiar with all sorts of virtues. Moreover, the Greek word *aretê* (virtue) is applied to almost everything: it designates the qualities that make everything that has a function to be good in its kind, whether it is a human being or an animal or even an inanimate object like an instrument. That is why it is also connected with notions of excellence and success. But where can we find the virtues that are involved in matters of political science?

In ancient Greek thought, in Plato as much as in Aristotle, a favorite method was to divide the soul into parts and to identify the virtue(s) of each part. Of course, there are many ways to do that, and Aristotle proposes various divisions of the soul depending on the purpose of his research. This time he suggests a twofold distinction.[1] Here, one part is the *logon echon,* the rational part of the soul, which enables us to think or reason. The other part is the *alogon*, the non-rational part. This second part is itself cut into two sub-parts. One sub-part has to do with our merely biological or physical functions: we get hungry, we get taller, we breathe, etc. This is irrelevant to ethics because, as something shared with plants and animals and not distinctively human, it has nothing to do with virtues of character: we aren't virtuous because we grow or digest our food.

[1] For instance, in *DA* III 9, Aristotle refers to Plato's tripartite division of the soul—the rationally calculative, the spirited, and the appetitive part. But in *DA* the emphasis is on movement, perception, and imagination (*phantasia*) (III 9 432ª15–17). In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, the mapping of the parts of human soul will be completed in Book VI where Aristotle also cuts the rational part into two sub-parts.

P. Kontos, *Introduction to Aristotle's* Nicomachean Ethics, Palgrave Philosophy Today, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-41985-0_2

The other sub-part is the appetitive *(epithumêtikon)* or desiring (*orektikon*) part. It includes not only what we today call desires but also what we call feelings ("passions" or "emotions" are alternative translations of Aristotle's term *pathos*) or inclinations. For example, all passions, such as anger, envy, and fear, belong to the appetitive part of the soul. This part doesn't have reason autonomously, but it can obey reason or disobey it. For, while we all get angry, we can get more or less angry than others or we have good or bad *reasons* to get angry or not (we'll talk about this again in a bit). Let's adopt then a twofold distinction, with one side being the rational part and the other the appetitive part—leaving aside the (useless for our present purposes) part of bodily functions.

II 1 1103^{a}14–18

Virtue, then, is twofold, of thought (*dianoêtikê*) and of character (*êthikê*). That of thought both comes about and increases mostly as a result of teaching, which is why it requires experience and time. That of character, on the other hand, results from habit (*ethos*)—indeed, this is the source of the name *êthikê*, which derives with a minor variation from *ethos*.

Aristotle draws a distinction here between virtues of thought and virtues of character, adding that virtues of thought are acquired through learning and take experience and time. A virtue of character is gained from habit. These explanations, however, are quite shaky. Notice, for instance, that virtues of thought too are states or habits (*hexis*): the fact that doctors possess scientific knowledge of medicine—let us accept for the moment that possessing such knowledge is an intellectual virtue[2] of a sort—means that they have acquired an intellectual capacity or skill that shares the stability that is proper to all states. In addition, virtues of thought are not the only ones acquired through learning; virtues of character also presuppose some teaching offered, for instance, by the parents or the city and whose overall plan has already been laid, at a very high level, by the legislator. The same goes for time: virtues of character also take time to be acquired (all the time until adulthood, if not throughout life). What is more, we will see later that in order to acquire the virtues of thought we have to already possess the virtues of character and, the other way around, virtues of character presuppose our possessing certain virtues of thought. Thus, their relation is extremely complicated and needs further elaboration.

Even so, however, the distinction is valuable, because it would be almost impossible to analyze the virtues of character and those of thought in parallel: we have to start from one or the other. And the most fitting is to start with the virtues of character, as they're more familiar, since everyone has at least some idea of what honesty, friendship, or justice is. An extra reason is that these—or, at least, a sort of them—are acquired first in human life, while the virtues of thought are acquired much later, some in late middle age!

[2] I use the terms "intellectual virtue" and "virtue of thought" interchangeably.

Warning: Since the virtues of character and certain virtues of thought are mutually dependent, no account of the former can be finalized without understanding the latter. In a sense, then, Books II–V of the *Nicomachean Ethics* that present the virtues of character unavoidably suffer from a lack of completeness: their investigations are somehow underdone. That is also why many topics discussed there will be revisited in the following Books, deliberate choice (*prohairesis*), deliberation (*bouleusis*), and pleasure (*hêdonê*) being the most notable examples.

2.2 Virtues of Character and Pleasure (II 2–3)

Virtues and vices of character show us what things we (must) pursue and what we (must) avoid. For example, the virtue of temperance explains how the virtuous person avoids excessive bodily pleasures. And the virtue of justice shows why a just action brings pleasure to just people while an unjust action brings them pain, so that they pursue the just one and avoid the unjust one. This provides sufficient background for understanding the crucial passage below:

II 2–3 $1104^{a}33$–$1104^{b}5$

(1) […] From abstaining from pleasures we become temperate.
(2) and, having become so, are most capable of abstaining from them. Similarly, in the case of courage; for if we are habituated to despise frightening things and to endure them, we become courageous and, having become so, are most capable of enduring frightening things.
(3) We must take the pleasures and pains that supervene on a person's works as a sign of his states.

The passage sheds light on three different aspects of the relationship between character states (virtues or vices) and pleasures.

In (1) we see pleasure or pain to be the *vehicle* that the legislator or the educator uses to instill virtues of character in the young. By regulating, for example, children's relationship with bodily pleasures, we pave the way for them to gain temperance at some point. This overly simple account should not hide from view the deep complexities of the issue. For instance, pleasure may be understood as pleasure-carrot or as pleasure-sun. In the familiar method of reward and punishment, we use pleasure as a carrot without presupposing that the student yet understands the reason for which something (like courage or justice) has intrinsic value. The pleasure-sun is what we see when we are in a position to recognize the moral beauty of a just action in part *because* we already know the reason for which it has intrinsic value. It seems there is a gap between these two sorts of pleasure: if the former is mechanical in nature, nothing could explain how we move from it to the latter. In order to resolve the puzzle, we need a refined account of the habituation process (which I shall postpone until Sect. 2.5).

In (2) pleasure is a *multiplier*; it helps a specific behavior become easier. The example of courage is telling: those who already have the virtue of courage can easily confront—within the limits of human endurance—any circumstance and cope with what causes pain; those who have the virtue of justice take pleasure in just actions, and this pleasure multiplies their motives for doing such actions. To understand this one should pay attention to the fact that a state of character is a sort of "second nature." Although Aristotle himself never uses this phrase, it nicely captures his conception of how states/habits work. Besides, he cites approvingly the pertinent verses of the poet Evenus: "For that is why [habit] in fact is difficult to change, namely, because it resembles nature, as Evenus too says: 'I say that habit's but long practice, friend, // And this becomes men's nature in the end'" (VII 10 1152^{a}30–33).

What is natural is more or less effortless; ease and pleasure or the avoidance of painful efforts go hand in hand. The *Rhetoric* says as much: "[…] Also, habits are pleasant; for the habitual has already become natural, as it were; for habit is something like nature; for in fact what occurs often is close to what occurs always, and nature belongs with always, habit with often. Also, what is not forced is pleasant; for force is contrary to nature" (*Rhet*. I 11 1370^{a}5–9). Note, however, that the pleasure associated with easiness or effortlessness does not coincide either with pleasure as carrot (which directs our attention to an external reward or punishment) or with the pleasure as sun (which admits of rational elucidation).

Pleasure has another role as well, (3) adds. It is an *identifier* of whether someone has a state of character or not, a virtue or a vice (temperance or intemperance, justice or injustice). A truly just person isn't someone who simply does just actions. Truly just people are those who perceive just actions as pleasant when they do them (and not as a product of oppression or fear of law, as a painful means for the sake of social recognition, etc.) or when they see other people doing them. And while it's impossible to know for sure whether people truly believe in the value of justice, it's very hard for them to hide or fake pleasure, since it isn't entirely under their voluntary control. And this makes pleasure a valuable clue to goodness: it helps make it visible. Such visibility may strike us as odd. We moderns tend to believe that the human soul and our real motives are impenetrable even by ourselves. To an even greater degree, we think the same to be true of others. For Aristotle, by contrast, our soul is much more transparent both to ourselves and to others and this is so thanks, in part, to pleasure and pain as identifiers.

For a deeper and more detailed analysis of pleasure, the reader of the *Nicomachean Ethics* must wait till Book VII and the reader of the present Introduction my Chap. 7.

2.3 Three Ways to Talk About the Virtues of Character (VI 13 & *Pol.* VII 13)

On the road to the definition of the virtues of character, it's important to note that we can refer to them in three different ways.

On a first level, each person has a natural tendency or potentiality to acquire a virtue of character or its opposite. For example, Aristotle notes, it is unlikely to meet a human being with no tendency toward pleasure, children and elderly people who do not have different tendencies, etc. Obviously, it would be pointless to praise people for the qualities they have by nature, for to be worthy of praise presupposes that we have achieved something by our own efforts. However, the knowledge of even this much of human nature is important for the legislator who must determine at what age people should be allowed to drive or to drink alcohol. So, a first way of referring to character states is in terms of *natural* virtues or vices.

On a second level, *habitual virtue* (VII 8 $1151^{a}19$) is the virtue of character that is a simple product of habit. We can understand this by looking at the virtue of students. They gain it by repeating similar actions under the teacher's guidance (II 2 $1103^{a}31$, $1103^{b}6$–13): just as we learn to play the guitar by playing under the guidance of a person who already knows how to play (either by listening to their instructions or by mimicking their movements), we can gain virtues of character. We become just by doing just actions, because that's how we gain a stable relationship with the corresponding pleasure or pain. On this level, we're not looking into whether students really know the reason why justice is valuable or can really tell on their own what a specific situation requires of them. They just repeat with fidelity whatever the teacher suggests. Since it lacks both rational justification and full responsibility, this level obviously can't be the peak of moral education.

On the third level, we find the virtue of those who also know the reason why they wish to do the corresponding action. Aristotle calls this *full virtue*, a virtue with the full extent of the word. It's the virtue of the truly just person. (You may be disappointed to learn that the account of full virtue will not be provided by Aristotle until VI 13, which we will look at in Chap. 5.)

All these three levels of virtue are important, and the legislator may focus on any or all of them. We can also group them in two different ways. One way is to group the natural and the habitual virtue together, because their common point is that those who possess it can't explain why the virtues are really virtues—that is, states that contribute to happiness. Only those who have full virtue know why this is so. On the other hand, it also makes sense to group together the second with the third, because they both require reason, albeit habitual virtue is based on the reasoning of the teacher or the legislator, while full virtue is based on the agent's own capacity of correct reasoning. But however we group them, acquiring virtue is clearly an important factor in human development:

II 1 $1103^{b}23$–25

It makes no small difference, then, whether people are habituated in one way or in another way straight from childhood; on the contrary, it makes a huge one—or rather, all the difference.

Similar passages have led some scholars to believe that, according to Aristotle, once a person acquires a state (a virtue or a vice), there is no way to change it, as if we were doomed to always possess the very same states. This would mean that Aristotle

supposedly understands states of character as something immutable and inescapable. However, such a position not only contradicts our common experience, but it is also not Aristotle's. The following passage makes this clear: "But surely people become good or excellent because of three things. These three are nature, habit, and reason. […] people do many actions contrary to their habits and their nature because of reason, if they are persuaded that some other way is better" (*Pol.* VII 13 $1332^{a}38$–$1332^{b}8$). Here, the emphasis is on the fact that people may act *against* their habit and *against* their nature (meaning, against habitual and natural states) because of *reason*, that is, because they may come to believe that something inside them (for instance, a belief or an attitude) has to change. The capacity of reason to justify our actions and reason's openness to other people's arguments can drive a person to get rid of a bad habit and act in a way that will gradually replace one state with another. So, let's not rush to attribute to Aristotle the shortsighted view that people can't change their ethical compass. His view is simply that this is very difficult. Often this is due to unfavorable circumstances; other times it is due to bad teachers; it may be also due to our somehow deficient nature. But, in principle, the only cause that renders such a change actually impossible, as we'll see in Sect. 6.5, is that practical reason itself has been irreparably damaged.

2.4 What We Pursue and What We Avoid in Life (II 3); Wish (III 4)

We're still trying to lay the groundwork for understanding the definition of virtues of character. We know so far that all our activities, both the virtuous and the vicious ones, have an end that we believe to be good. But we need a more nuanced understanding of goodness:

II 3 $1104^{b}30$–32

For there are three proper objects of choice and three of avoidance: the noble (*kalon*), the advantageous (*sumpheron*), and the pleasant (*hêdu*), and their contraries, the shameful (*aischron*), the harmful (*blaberon*), and the painful (*lupêron*).

We meet here three pairs of concepts. The first is the noble and the shameful. Aristotle frequently uses the word *kalon* as a synonym of goodness, though it also has an aesthetic connotation. The term *kalon* is employed in many ways: (a) it connotes order and symmetry (*Met.* XIII 3 1078a 36 ff.) and describes not only how something looks like but also its function; (b) it connotes an object's visibility, as is assured, for instance, by its size (*Pol.* VII 4 $1326^{a}33$–34); (c) in *Rhet.* I 9, *kalon* connotes sacrifice of personal benefit for the sake of values that serve others (e.g., the city). In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, in most occurrences, *kalon* designates something like moral beauty, nobility, and attractiveness. The opposite is the shameful.

The advantageous is meant in two ways. First, it points to what is involved in instrumental rationality: in any relation between means and ends, means are taken to be advantageous or beneficial for the sake of the respective ends. This applies throughout the sphere of human activities: in the field of political behavior (like hiring a lawyer to defend us in court), in the field of productions (like using a brick and workers to build a house), in the field of science (like making an experiment to prove a hypothesis). This is not the form of advantage that interests us here. Here the question is whether our ends themselves are good *because* they are advantageous to us, that is, whether goodness can be drawn from advantage. We know from Sect. 1.5 that this would lead to a contradiction in terms: the sort of goodness that originates in advantage is the sort that originates in instrumentality and, hence, an inferior sort of goodness.

From another perspective, the advantageous is assimilated by the pleasant (VIII 2 $1155^{b}17$–21), in the sense that when we do something advantageous, we do it for the sake of an activity that is pleasant to us. Thus, the problem is now posed as follows: All people engage in activities that they consider to be good. Some are drawn by what is truly good, the *real good* (i.e., the noble). Others are drawn by what seems good but isn't, that is, by the *apparent good*, because they find usefulness and pleasure in things that lack nobility.

The above distinctions, however, don't mean that what is noble is not advantageous or pleasant. The opposite is true: the noble is, intrinsically, both truly pleasant *and* truly advantageous for the virtuous agent. Nobility can't be separated entirely from pleasure because the latter generates desire and provides a motive to do a thing. (This doesn't mean that the noble excludes all forms of pain, since sometimes in order to achieve something noble and pleasant we may have to do some painful things.)

To further understand the connection between the noble and the pleasant, let's assume that pleasure and pain are shared by the whole animal kingdom: a hungry animal looks for food (as something useful that is good for it); when it eats, it feels pleasure. Human beings, too, feel pleasure while eating because they in doing so fulfill a need. In another sense, however, we humans feel pleasure when we eat a meal that we find tasty and well made, or when we share it with good friends. A first hasty move would be to say that people feel two kinds of pleasures: those they share with the animals and, *on top of that*, those with a more rational character. It is, however, misleading to suggest that there are layers inside a human being, that we are simply animals up to a point and rational subjects from that point on—as if there were activities that we do like mere animals and others we do as rational subjects. On the contrary, nothing is pleasant and advantageous for us in the same way as it is for an animal that has no reason; we are rational subjects from head to toe.

We're now in a position to understand the concept of wish (*boulêsis*).

III 4 $1113^{a}15$–$1113^{b}2$

(1) Wish is for the end, as we said, but some people think it is for the good, others that it is for the apparent good. […]

(2) To the excellent person, [the object of wish] is what is truly the object of wish; to a base one, it is whatever random thing it happens to be. It is just the same in the case of bodies. The things that are healthy for those in good condition are the things that are truly healthy, whereas for those that are diseased, it is different ones, and similarly with bitter, sweet, hot, heavy, and each of the others.
(3) For the excellent person judges each of them correctly and, in each case, what is true is apparent to him. For each state has it own special set of things that are pleasant or noble, and an excellent person is perhaps distinguished most by his seeing what is true in each case, since he is like a standard and measure of them.
(4) In the case of ordinary people, however, deception seems to come about because of pleasure, which appears to be a good thing when it is not.

"Wish" is a rational appetite, a rational desire (*DA* III 9 $432^{b}5$):[3] we wish for something *because* we believe it to be good. Wish is for ends, be they really or only apparently good.

This last distinction is crucial, because it leads us to reject two wrong interpretations of wish: The first is the Socratic claim that wish will either have the real good as its object or it won't have an object at all. The other is a Protagorean-like theory according to which the object of wish is whatever one wants, without any criterion separating real from apparent. Aristotle rejects both interpretations: wish is active inside all people who have practical ends and make moral decisions, whether they understand the real good or not, but this doesn't entail that the real good and the apparent good coincide or remain indistinguishable.

To explain this distinction, (2) identifies the apparent good with any random thing that may appear to us as an object of rational appetite. For example, wealth appears to be the real good to a lot of people (to the many, the crude). But the excellent person, the one who is virtuous in the full sense of the term, aspires a kind of mental health: as the physically healthy person will taste sweetness when eating something that is genuinely sweet (whereas a sick person will taste bitterness), so the morally excellent people will (almost) infallibly recognize the real good as such, when it's presented to them.

More specifically, (3) explains, the excellent person judges or sees things correctly with the eyes of practical reason and wish, while the crude person is, in a manner of speaking, blind to the real good. The excellent person is "a standard and measure" of the real good: not in the sense that really good is whatever the excellent person perceives as such but rather in the sense that the real good is an objective fact (we'll later see the nature of its peculiar objectivity) and, simply, only the virtuous person is able to *recognize* it. Then the excellent person is not a truth-maker of real goodness but a truth-detector. On the contrary, the crude person is deceived and the

[3] Cf. II 1 $1103^{b}4$ and *Pol.* II 9 $1269^{b}20$, $1270^{b}1$, $1270^{b}21$–22; II 10 $1272^{a}32$–33; III 13 $1283^{b}37$–38, IV 9 $1294^{b}34$–40; IV 12 $1296^{b}15$–16; V 9 $1309^{b}17$–18; VI 2 $1317^{a}34$. All these passages confirm that "wish" is in the rational part of the soul. In *Pol*. VIII 15 $1334^{b}22$–25, however, Aristotle says that "spirit and wish, and furthermore appetite, are present in children straight from birth, whereas rational calculation and understanding naturally arise as they grow" (*Pol.* $1334^{b}22$–25). Here, "wish" has its broad sense; it denotes a desire in general.

deception, (4) states, comes from a conflation of goodness with pleasure: while it's true that the real good is always pleasant, not all things that appear pleasant—and pleasure pervades our life—are necessarily truly good.

2.5 Virtue of Character Is a Habit, Not a Feeling, and It's Medial (II 3–6)

We arrive, at last, at the long-awaited issue: "we must investigate what virtue is" (II 5 1105^{b}19). We know that virtues of character are attributed to the appetitive part of the soul, wherein there are desires (like the bodily appetites and the sexual drive) and feelings (rage, hatred, fear, joy, etc.). Feelings are things we undergo, that is, reactions to situations that happen to us. Of course, we all have feelings, we feel anger, hatred, fear, etc., we all show some receptiveness to stimuli, whether they come from our physical nature or from our environment. Virtues and vices are the things for which we praise or blame people and, therefore, it is not possible for them to be feelings. They rather have to do with the way we manage our feelings.

We should understand this management as follows: on the one hand, it involves our relation to our feelings, our disposition toward them (Aristotle often connects virtues and vices with dispositions). On the other, it would be wrong to think of virtues and vices only as something self-contained, for virtues and vices lead us to actions. Moreover, they lead us to actions of a specific kind. The virtue of justice makes the just person always act in a just manner, not sometimes just and sometimes unjust. This sets virtues and vices of character apart from Aristotelian *capacities*. For capacities can produce opposite results; for example, a doctor's medical knowledge is the ability or power both to cure and to kill.

What they are, in fact, is states (both virtues and vices are states, their quality being what distinguishes them). The term state (*hexis*) suggests stability, established habits or attitudes toward our feelings and toward those things that stir our feelings: not feeling afraid or angry per se, but how much fear we feel, how often, when, from what, about what, etc. These established attitudes, virtues or vices, are things for which we are responsible, in a way. This responsibility, of course, is not absolute, because, as we already know, virtues and vices of character are acquired through education, the responsibility for which lies in the hands of the city, the legislator, and the teacher. Aristotle's ethics thus tries to balance between two demands: it exculpates a big part of states of character we have acquired, exactly because we are not to be blamed for those that are acceptable in the regime in which we have grown up (and whose values have been, more or less, espoused by our teachers, parents, etc.). On the other hand, adults (must) have the capacity to correct or reshape their states through reason (remember the pertinent passage from *Politics* VII 13).

Virtues and vices of character are states, then, but of what kind? What's important, first of all, is not to think that states of character are something mysterious and completely different from the rest of the things we know about ourselves. To avoid

such a misinterpretation, Aristotle usually invokes three simple examples of states. One is from the field of medicine: the human body's temperature. One specific degree is the body's healthy state, and when our body is in around that temperature, we are healthy. When someone's temperature is a lot lower or a lot higher, we suppose they suffer some kind of sickness. The second example is from the field of sports: how we prepare an athlete to compete in games. And the third one is from sculpting: a statue being prepared to be set up in a huge square must have a certain size; if it's a lot smaller, no one will see it, and if it's too big, it will make for an annoying spectacle.

These examples don't offer anything very substantial. They're like telling us—as Aristotle himself quips in VI 1 1138^{b}29–32—that healthy is what medicine declares or that what is good for the athlete is what the trainer commands! However, they do point us in three correct directions. First, all these states appear to involve continuous amounts: smaller versus larger volume, more versus less food, lower versus higher temperature, and so on. And the same applies to states of character and their corresponding actions: being angry a lot or a little, too much or too little hatred, giving a lot versus giving a little, etc. Second, in all of them, in order to know what the right state is, we need to be aware of the specifics: the specific square, the specific athlete, etc. It would be wrong for us to advise one diet for all athletes, let alone for all people. (The specific is referred to in the Aristotelian glossary as the *particular* (*kath' hekaston*).) Third, it seems—even though it's not proven—that for each case the medial is what is appropriate and those that are extreme, too much or too little, are the bad, the unseemly. In a way, the medial temperature is the right temperature, medial nutrition is correct nutrition, etc. Or, even better, when we know what the correct nutrition is, then whatever exceeds it by too much or is hugely short of it is to be avoided. Aristotle uses the terms "mean," "medial," "extremes." And the extremes are the excess (the too much) and the deficiency (the too little). That's still skin deep, one might say. At least, this is what Kant thought about Aristotle's notion of the mean: "a superficial wisdom which really has no determinate principles."[4]

With these thoughts in our mind, we arrive at the passage where Aristotle formulates the famous definition of virtue of character:

II 6 1106^{b}36–1107^{a}2

Virtue, then, is a (1) state, (2) a deliberately choosing one (*prohairetikê*), (3) which is in a medial condition in relation to us, (4) one defined by a reason and the one by which a practically wise person (*phronimos*) would define it.[5]

Virtue is (1) a *state*, but this we already knew. It's (2) a *deliberately choosing state*: it has to do with deliberate choice, with how we choose and do our actions. Yes, but

[4] *The Metaphysics of Morals*, 6: 404n.

[5] It's not a surprise that the editors of Aristotle's text propose different versions of this clause: some of them read "the one by which" (Bywater in OCT), others read "in the way in which" (Susemihl in Teubner). The later may lead to the false conclusion that the practically wise person is a truth-maker.

at this point, we don't know what deliberate choice consists in and so including it in the definition of virtue is as yet not very informative. The third element is that it is in a medial position, and one "in relation to us" (I'll come back to this). (4) It needs to be determined by practical wisdom. But, again, at this point we don't understand what practical wisdom is or how it defines things. Therefore, the definition assumes things that have not been clarified. And the big question is whether Book VI, the supposed locus of all the answers, will meet our expectations.

Let's focus, though, on what we can understand; this is the wording: *in relation to us*. It should be understood on three levels: (a) firstly, *us* must mean us humans. For example, we humans experience pleasure differently from the animals, or from god, etc.; (b) *us* can mean different groups of people based on gender, age, social identity (given the city we got our education in); (c) finally, there is a level of particularity: each one of us, and at a given time, in the specific circumstances of our actions.

The relativity included in the dependence of the virtue of character from the *us*-factor has led some scholars to conclude that Aristotle supports a moral relativism that prioritizes particularities of gender, city, individual, etc. This picture is misleading. Aristotle balances between the demand of objectivity and the inevitable fact of relativity. On the one hand, there is an ideal, which envisions a mature, male adult who has been trained properly in a perfect city, has acquired practical wisdom, and, hence, can determine the mean and the medial states. At the same time, though, and this is crucial, Aristotle doesn't ignore the relativity factor: it would be extremely unfair and politically dangerous to measure everyone with the same yardstick, regardless of whether they were born in a well-legislated state or not, whether they have reached maturity yet or not, whether they have been lucky regarding the education they received, etc.

Before we abandon the definition of the virtue of character, slightly disappointed, let's look at some peripheral elements:

(a) "Virtue is medial, but, in relation to the best and doing well, it is an extreme condition" (II 6 $1107^{a}7$–8). So what is medial is actually extreme from an evaluative point of view, from the perspective of how much praise it deserves.

(b) Virtue "is able to aim at and hit the mean" (II 6 $1106^{b}28$): when we have the right states, when we're just, then the mean aims at the middle correctly. Of course, virtues of character are not virtues of thought and can't define where the middle lies. They are, however, states shaped and cultivated so as to turn, almost spontaneously, toward the middle. And this middle is the correct one, the truly good: "it is possible to err in many ways […] whereas there is only one way to be correct" (II 6 $1106^{b}28$–31). There are numerous ways to make a mistake, but only one not to. But not only one in the way that 7 is the only mean between 5 and 9. This would turn the ethical mean into something it's not—a matter of mathematical calculation. Each time, many different actions may equally hit the mean. The term "only one" simply underlines the fact that these different actions are definable, whereas extremes are indefinable. The example of the arrow and the target is appropriate: while there are many (though not infinite)

points on the target that will mark us successful if we hit them with our arrow, the points outside the target are indeed infinite.

(c) The following passage makes an additional remark: "But not every action or every feeling admits of the medial condition; for in some cases, they are named in such a way that they are united with baseness from the start—for example, spite, shamelessness, and envy, and (in the case of actions) adultery, theft, and murder. For all these and things like them—and not the excessive varieties of them or the deficient ones—are said to be what they are because they are base" (II 6 $1107^{a}8$–13). The feelings of spite, shamelessness, envy, along with the actions of adultery, theft, murder, appear not to be amenable to a mean. This impression is false. For when we have already decided that someone is an adulterer, then a justification like "adultery with five lovers is medial, because other people have more" is comical. Contrarily, *before* we decide that an action is adulterous, the accused may claim that there was no adultery on their part, because they were forced or cheated into the specific act of sex, etc. (see: *EE* II 4 $1221^{b}23$–25 and *Rhet.* I 13 $1373^{b}38$–$^{a}13$).

Given that we don't yet have a "defining mark" of virtue and vice, and this is so to the extent that we *still* know nothing about practical wisdom, some people object that Aristotle's analysis of the virtues of character is just borrowed from the moral beliefs or prejudices of his time, and therefore, it's unsuitable to guide modern moral thought or a cultural community distanced from that of classical Athens by time or condition. But are Aristotle's virtues of character really that relative?

Some reply yes, and they explain that this is due to a double dependence: one from the city or state of the time and one from the basic principles of Aristotle's metaphysics. Others respond that Aristotle's virtues of character are not that relative, for Aristotle has identified all spheres of the human experience that we also consider today—even if we perceive them differently—to be linked to virtues of character. For example, our relationship with pleasure, physicality, others, material possessions, etc.

The most essential part of Aristotle's position, however, the one that has also inspired modern "virtue ethics," is that the virtues of character play a critical role both in our moral lives and in the project of Aristotle's political science, because they constitute a starting-point in three different, albeit intertwined, perspectives:

(a) The definition of the virtues of character—the one that encapsulates their "essence and the account that states its what it is to be" (II 6 1107a6–7)—is a starting-point of political science in the same way in which the definition of happiness is.

(b) Good states of character are the starting-point of our moral development (I 4 1095b4–7), for without them we get no access to the real good, since arguments or advice coming from others often fail to make us change our acquired attitudes. Without the virtues of character, no really good action is possible either and this is an important lesson for those who incline toward moral intellectualism.

(c) From legislator's perspective, habituation to good ethical states is the starting-point of any attempt to establish a good constitution, that is, to make citizens assimilate the very principles that the constitution is meant to instill into them.

It's now time to revisit the habituation process or what one calls the learning-by-doing process. The key passage is the following one:

II 1 1103^{b}6–22

Further, it is from the same things and through the same things that each virtue both comes about and is ruined. The case of a craft is similar as well; for it is from playing the lyre that both good and bad lyre players come about. […] If it were otherwise, there would have been no need whatsoever of a teacher, but people would all have been born either good or bad [craftsmen]. This, then, is also how it is with the virtues; for it is from acting as we do in our transactions with other human beings that some of us become just and others unjust, and from acting as we do in terrible circumstances and from becoming habituated to feel fear or confidence that some of us become courageous and others cowards. […] In a word, then, states come about from activities that are similar to them.

This passage—I will look at the craft example in Sect. 4.4—has given rise to a false understanding of the habituation process, which we may call the "mechanical view." According to it, learners have simply to repeat certain external, so to speak, actions in a sort of mindless way, and their motives have to do with punishment and rewards, not with their being attracted by the noble itself, that is, the true good. This view is obviously mistaken, and had Aristotle ever adopted it, his concept of habituation would be flawed. It creates two evident gaps: (a) if the process doesn't require any exercise of rational deliberation and judgment, it could never generate full virtue, since the latter necessarily implies the good functioning of practical reasoning, that is, the virtue of practical wisdom; (b) if the habituation process does not require the motivational apparatus that we find in the fully virtuous people and that we may summarize as their being motivated "for the sake of the noble," nothing could ever bridge the gap between the instrumentality of the punishment and reward practice and our being attracted by the noble.

Thus, we need a sort of continuity within both the intellectual and the desiring components of the habituation process: learners should somehow exercise their rational capacities and should somehow be habituated to approximating the motivational apparatus of the virtuous person. We will explain the former in Chap. 5. As to the latter, there are three things to underline:

(a) Aristotle seems to make room for a sort of motivation which lies somewhere in between the externality of punishments and rewards and the completeness of a virtuous attitude toward the noble. For instance, in IV 9, he says that the feeling of shame makes young people—though they are not virtuous *yet* and usually live by their feelings—restrained; they are not yet motivated by pure nobility, but they feel ashamed each time they imagine themselves being seen doing base actions.

(b) We should not, however, overemphasize the continuity between the learner's motives and the motives of those who are already fully virtuous. There should be room for a sort of discovery too: learners do not merely repeat certain "external" actions, but they experience themselves as the agents of those very actions. That is to say, the learning-by-doing process reveals something to the agents themselves about their own capacity to generate fine actions and discover, from the first-person perspective, their true nobility. (Compare Aristotle's remarks about musical education in *Pol.* VIII 6 $1340^{b}23$–25.)
(c) In any case, Aristotle's habituation process strongly relies on the presence of a virtuous teacher who does virtuous actions *virtuously* (see Sect. 6.2). Thus, what the learner is invited to repeat is not a mere "outward" action, but one done in the very way in which virtuous people engage in virtuous actions—enthusiastically, with commitment, joyously, with indifference to external rewards, etc.

2.6 Courage (III 6–9) and Greatness of Soul (IV 3)

Aristotle reserves special treatment for the virtues of courage (*andreia*) in III 6–9, temperance (*sôphrosunê*) in III 10–12, generosity (*eleutheriotês*) in IV 1, magnificence (*megaloprepeia*) in IV 2, greatness of soul (*megalopsychia*) in IV 3, mild-manneredness (*praotês*) in IV 5, truthfulness (to be *alêtheutikos*) in IV 7, wit (*eutrapelia*) in IV 8, and shame (*aidôs*) in IV 9—though the last one is not a virtue at all but rather a feeling. Now let's focus on two virtues of character, namely, courage and greatness of soul. The one because it's the simplest, the other because it sounds unfamiliar.

Courage is the first virtue of character Aristotle comments on. It is a virtue everyone regards as extremely important, not only on a personal level but also on a political one. When talking about courage, we don't only mean courage in battle, since courage is clearly associated with a variety of human activities or areas of transactions. Besides, it is not fitting for virtues of character to be associated with specific activities but rather with specific feelings, no matter what context they arise in. Courage is managing the passion of fear—how we act toward those things Aristotle refers to as "the frightening things" (*phobera*) and "the things that inspire confidence" (*tharralea*). Courage doesn't just show how people should confront what's coming—that is, fear—but also how capable they are of taking the initiative on something, how confident they are. In fact, Aristotle often talks about pairs: excess in relation to fear and lack in relation to confidence or excess in relation to confidence and lack in relation to fear. And we already know that, like any other virtue of character, courage doesn't correspond to one single behavior that is demanded of all people under any circumstances; it will each time depend on who is acting, facing what problem, with what purpose, facing which danger, etc. It includes the right judgment about what, given the context, deserves to be considered fearful. Courage is neither an automatic and non-rational or animalistic denial of fear, nor is it displayed when what's at stake is miniscule compared to the danger involved.

Greatness of soul looks kind of weird. So much so that some scholars conclude that Aristotle's analysis is a completely sarcastic presentation of the great-souled person, while others conclude that only the philosopher can fit the portrait.

"The person who thinks himself worthy of great things and is worthy of them seems to be great-souled" (IV 3 $1123^{b}1$–2). It's a double condition: the value of the great-souled person, on the one hand, and what a great-souled person aspires to, on the other. And the great-souled person aspires to great things in two ways: one is by doing great things, that is, actions that have magnitude in terms of managing external goods (like a grand sponsorship) without expecting some kind of compensation; the second is by aspiring to public recognition or fame.

The image of the great-souled people is an extremely elaborate one. Let me mention only a few of their features: (a) they are risk tolerant, because they don't think to protect, for example, their property from some harm in the future. (b) As to their interest in *honor*, it should not be misunderstood. They know that honor is not the highest thing in political life; the highest is virtue, and they already have it. However, their actions are such that they are driven to demand recognition for their contributions, even though recognition is not something valuable to them. (c) This is why they often seem contemptuous to others. (d) They also show a rare kind of honesty; Aristotle very aptly takes the great-souled person to be "open about his hatreds and loves" ($1124^{b}26$–27): they will not hesitate to say who their friends and enemies are, whom they recognize as morally worthy or unworthy.

"Greatness of soul, then, seems to be like a sort of adornment (*kosmos*) of the virtues; for it makes the virtues greater" (IV 3 $1124^{a}1$–2). Literally speaking, of course, what greatness of soul achieves is that when mobilized in actions of great magnitude in the city, it makes virtues more *visible*. We can understand the value of visibility better through the comparison of a great-souled person with someone who is not. On the one hand, a person demanding many things while being unworthy is a conceited, ridiculous person. On the other, small-souled people distance themselves from great actions, as if they were unworthy of such deeds. A person that has value but is hesitant to act greatly or to demand recognition from the community is not excellent or distinguished. Of course, Aristotle doesn't claim this to be a sort of moral badness; it's a simple mishap, an error. It's a mishap because it shows lack of initiative and self-confidence, a lack of the ability to correctly evaluate oneself and demand one's due, and above all, it leads to missing the opportunity to accomplish great deeds.

Small-souled people, then, deny themselves the visibility they deserve in the public space. The conceited, on the other hand, tries to mimic the great-souled, in vain. Perhaps it's easy to mimic the honest, the friendly, the just. But trying to mimic the great-souled makes us ludicrous because imitating greatness of soul is too difficult: actions are so great and our exposition is so public that the smallest mistake during this imitation becomes immediately apparent, like botching a huge statue's nose. The greater human deeds are, the more ineffective the efforts of the imitators become. That's why the *Nicomachean Ethics* thinks so highly of the greatness of soul.

Nevertheless, there is a new puzzle to resolve for, in Aristotle's eyes, the great-souled person should process all other virtues of character (IV 3 $1124^{a}28$–29). This is the well-known problem of the *unity of virtue*; I will discuss it in Sect. 9.5, the

second to last section of the present Introduction for, as I said before, Books II–IV of the *Nicomachean Ethics* inevitably offer a tentative or inconclusive picture of the virtues of character.

2.7 Describing Moral Actions (III 1)

Now for a necessary detour. While we've been talking about moral actions from the beginning, we have not defined what they are at all. The only thing we have underlined is that actions can't be morally assessed outside the particular context they appear in. Actions themselves *are* particulars. But what are the factors that define actions in their particularity? We find the very same list at III 1 $1110^{b}33$–$1111^{a}7$ and at IV 5 $1125^{b}31$–32, V 8 $1135^{a}25$–26, $^{b}13$, $^{b}15$–16; *EE* II 9 1225^{b} 2, $^{b}6$–7:

(1) *Who:* Who is the agent? A general, a legislator, a child, a woman, a barbarian, etc.?
(2) *What:* What is the agent doing? For example, did they reveal secrets (regardless of whether they knew they were secrets or not), did they kill Laius (regardless of whether they knew that the victim was their father)?
(3) *Concerning what or to what?* Who is the recipient of the action or who undergoes its outcome?
(4) *What the agent is doing it with (for example, with what instrument)*? A lot of times the means by which something happened is important (a murder can happen by knife, by strangling, by torture, but words may also serve as an instrument of action, as in the case of wanton aggression).
(5) *For the sake of what?* With what purpose or end? For example, to save my parents, to earn money?
(6) *In what way?* For example, calmly or intensely, angrily or serenely?

It's very important to stress that the above constituents—not external circumstances—are necessary to define a moral action, even if the reference to one of them proves to be of little importance in a specific case. So, actions where one or two of these elements change are very likely to have a different moral quality; though they seem the same on a first look, they are different in reality. This means that moral actions and the field of moral experience is *the field of the multiple*: moral actions don't repeat themselves unchanged—for we can't ever precisely predict the infinite combinations of these six elements in our social and political environment, in our relationships with other people or even with ourselves. This explains why there are no recipes for how to act. There is an ineliminable variability involved. At the same time, this list of factors is exhaustive, since—with an addition made by Aristotle himself—there are no others to take into consideration in order to describe a moral action.

A correction on behalf of Aristotle: the above list of action's constituents does not include a crucial constituent, its temporality. Time is relevant regarding our

actions as particulars—and we know how important it is for our life as a whole from Sect. 1.6—and this in three ways:

(1) **III 1 1110^{a}12–14**: [actions] are choiceworthy at the time when they are done, and the end of the actions is in accord with the opportune moment (*kairon*).
(2) **VI 9 1142^{b}26–28**: one person may deliberate a long time to reach it, while another does so quickly. So the former is not yet a case of good deliberation.

(1) points out that conditions can force us to take action. An unexpected change in the course of events each time indicates different actions as choiceworthy. So, (a) time determines our actions in that it triggers them. (b) Time is an element relevant to determining our ends. For example, the general must consider the temporal factor to determine what the right opportunity is to attack the enemy, night or day, summer or winter, etc. Or time is a constituent element of how our feelings (should) work: for instance, there is a timespan after which virtuous people should "digest [their] anger" (IV 5 1126^{a}24–25). (c) A third element of temporality has to do with deliberation. Deliberation, as we'll later see, is about estimating and choosing the best means to achieve an end. (2) states that often it's important to decide promptly, it's not enough that we make the correct decision; failing to decide in time may mean that there is no more room for action, or at least for the right action. Belated deliberation is *false* deliberation.

Now, we have the full table of constituents of a moral action. And all these, as one can easily presume, require a certain capacity to correctly recognize particulars; it should be a perceptual capacity of some sort (see Sect. 5.3).

Digression: For the Most Part (hôs epi to polu)

Now is a good moment to clarify something we already encountered in Book I, that is, the idea that political science concerns what is *hôs epi to polu*. This formulation aims to stress the contrast between the sciences whose objects are necessary (theology, astronomy, and mathematics) and those whose objects are *hôs epi to polu* (natural sciences, political science, productive sciences).

What is not necessary is either random or "for the most part." The first ones are things for which we cannot form a science and cannot have any kind of knowledge. For example, it is random that when I'm coming to pay you a visit, someone who owes me money happens to be there and he/she gives it back to me. No part of the knowledge that made me visit you included the fact that a person who owes me money might be there. By contrast, objects that hold "for the most part" have regularity. For example, in the sphere of living beings, two humans can give birth to a human but not all babies are born with the same health, they're not all male or all female, they're not all able-bodied. And the reason is that the materiality that is involved in the birth of living beings or the factors affecting it present different qualities each time. As in biology, so in political science, the variability and mortality of its objects does not mean that it's not a science. It is a science that deals with its object "in outline" (*typôi*). Indeed, asking to turn political science to a hard science is a sign of ignorance. We'll come back to this in Sect. 4.3.

2.8 Chapter Summary

Happiness, we learned in Book I of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, consists in activities that are done in accord with virtue. But our search for the highest activity seems to have reached a dead end. Should we instead look into what the virtues are? This is the task of Books II–IV of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, in which Aristotle adopts a distinction between virtues of thought and virtues of character and focus in on the latter ones. To understand how they function, we should first shed light on three different aspects of the relationship between character states (virtues or vices) and pleasures and pains. (1) Pleasure (or pain) serves as the *vehicle* that the legislator or the educator uses to instill virtues of character in the young; (2) it is a *multiplier* in that it helps a specific behavior become easier; and (3) it is an *identifier* of whether someone has a state of character or not, a virtue or a vice (temperance or intemperance, justice or injustice). I examine how virtues of character are acquired and how they are related to the noble (*kalon*), the advantageous, and the pleasant, and building on these notions, I look more closely at "wish" (*boulêsis*) as a rational desire and at Aristotle's famous definition of virtue of character as a state in a medial condition. To make things more tangible, I focus on two virtues of character, namely, courage and greatness of soul: the one because it's the simplest, the other because it sounds unfamiliar to us. The analysis of the virtues of character allows us to realize that morally relevant actions can't be assessed outside the particular context they appear in. Actions themselves are particulars and the factors that define actions in their particularity are anything but random.

2.9 Further Reading

About how relative or universal Aristotle's virtues of character are, see MacIntyre (1981: Chap. 12) and Nussbaum (1992). For Aristotle's doctrine of the mean, see Broadie (1991: 95–103) and *Apeiron* 28/4 (1995). The most influential reappropriation of Aristotle's notion of habit is to be found in Ravaisson (2008). Regarding the habituation process, see Jimenez (2016) and Hampson (2020). Regarding wish, see Pearson (2012: Chap. 6). For greatness of soul, see Curzer (2012: Chap. 6). As it regards the constituents of moral action, see Flannery (2013: Chap. 4).

2.10 Study Questions

1. Why does Aristotle's analysis of the virtues begin with the virtues of character, not the virtues of thought?
2. Explain what the common feature between habitual virtue and full virtue is.

3. Explain what the distinction between the true good and the apparent good involves.
4. What is Aristotle's theory of the mean and medial condition?
5. What are the key elements in Aristotle's portrait of the great-souled person?
6. What are the key elements in Aristotle's portrait of the courageous person?
7. Which of the following claims is correct?

   A. the real good is sometimes useful, sometimes not.
   B. the real good would not motivate us to act if it were not pleasant.
   C. advantageousness taints the goodness of the real good.

8. The excellent person is not a truth-maker of real goodness but a truth-detector. What does this contrast imply and why does it matter?
9. Why must we distinguish states of character from capacities?

2.11 Essay Questions

1. Read *Nicomachean Ethics* IV 3 and critically evaluate Aristotle's portrait of the great-souled person.
2. How does the habituation process work? What problems is Aristotle's account of it meant to solve? Is it successful?

Chapter 3
Justice and the Just: Back and Forth

3.1 What Does "Justice" Mean? (V 1)

In the eyes of the ancient Greeks, justice was one of the most important virtues of character. This applies to Aristotle, and it applied to Plato even more. Nonetheless, many of the things Aristotle says in Book V he says in order to depart from platonic positions. Let's take a look at the first lines of Book V of the *Nicomachean Ethics*:

V 1 1129^{a}1–10

As regards justice (*dikaiosunê*) and injustice (*adikia*), we must investigate what sorts of actions they are concerned with, what sort of medial state justice is, and what the just is a mean between. […] We see, then, that what everyone means to say about justice is that it is the sort of state from which people are doers of just things—that is, from which they do just actions (*dikaiopragia*) and wish for what is just. It is the same way with injustice—it is the state from which people do injustice and wish for what is unjust.

We must use the term "justice" to denote the virtue of character itself, the term "the just" for its object, the term "just action" for the action done due to the virtue of justice, and that the opposite of justice is "injustice." We also learn the three main objectives of the treatise on justice: it is meant to analyze the field of human activities that justice is concerned with and how justice relates to a medial state and the mean—the two latter things being totally unclear for the time being. We are not in an unprecedented terrain, however, for the same objectives guided Aristotle's approach to the other virtues of character as well.

Aristotle's main concern in the first chapters of Book V is to distance himself from the platonic use of the term, where "justice" refers to the full spectrum of virtues. This idea also exists in contemporary languages since we use the words "just" and "unjust" very extensively. We say: "We may have been doing him an injustice;

P. Kontos, *Introduction to Aristotle's* Nicomachean Ethics, Palgrave Philosophy Today, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-41985-0_3

his work is good," but also: "she did herself an injustice; she was talented, but lazy." We use the concept of justice both for things that concern our relationships with others and for things that characterize our relationship to ourselves, as if justice were primarily something that happens within us, a sort of harmony between different parts of our self or soul—this is kind of how Plato thought of it.[1] Aristotle wants to divert us from this very broad use of the term:

V 1 1130^{a}3–4

[J]ustice, alone of the virtues, seems to be the good of another, because it is in relation to another person. For it does what is advantageous for someone else, whether ruler or community member.

Aristotle's emphasis on justice as a good of another is so intense that, in a way, what matters most appears to be the just, that is, a quality of the relationship with others, or the principles that regulate those relationships, not justice as a virtue of character. Obviously, justice is *my* virtue, a quality of *my* soul; it demands, however, that what happens to other people be something I consider seriously in order to determine what sorts of goods I deserve myself—especially when others also desire the same goods. Thus, it does not concern, except metaphorically, the relation between the parts of my own soul (V 11 1138^{b}5–6).

There is, however, much more to the distinction between justice in its narrow sense or "particular justice" (still to be defined) and justice in the broad or holistic sense (*holê*) as what pertains to *any* virtue of character insofar as it is directed toward others: "This sort of justice, then, is complete (*teleia*) virtue—not unconditionally but in relation to another person. […] And it is complete virtue in the highest degree, because it is the complete use of complete virtue. It is the complete use because the one who possesses it is able to use his virtue in relation to another person and not solely with regard to himself" (V 1 1129^{b}25–33). It is not that Aristotle rejects this broad sense of justice. On the contrary, he is committed to the view that justice is somehow a prerequisite for any political community or any political interaction and interchange to take place and, hence, for the existence of a public space in which one may exercise the other virtues insofar as they affect others, directly or indirectly. The expression "complete use of complete virtue" is meant to give a picture of how extensive, almost all inclusive, the scope of such justice is. What is more, Aristotle willingly adopts the common idea that the most reliable sign of the truly virtuous people is whether they are able to exercise virtue toward others, not toward themselves or within the closed circle of family or friends. His one reservation is that we must first define justice in its narrow sense.

[1] The best-known example is Plato's *Republic IV*: "Justice isn't concerned with someone's doing his own externally, but with what he is doing internally, with what is truly himself and his own. […] He puts himself in order, is his own friend, and harmonizes the three parts of himself like three limiting notes in a musical scale […] and from having been many things he becomes entirely one, moderate and harmonious" (443c10-e2).

The big question, then, is how to define justice in its narrow sense. A first sensible answer would be to maintain that whatever has value in our lives has been registered in the laws, and therefore what is just is what the laws dictate, so that justice amounts to lawfulness. And if the laws cover the sum of human life and of human activities, it seems again as if justice is something that applies to whatever we do and, in particular, to whatever has a certain impact on others. Aristotle, however, takes pains to separate the just from the lawful, because, among other things, the latter proves to be a variant of the broad meaning of justice:

***Pol.* III 4 1276^{b}30–34**

[T]he virtue of a citizen must be relative to the constitution. If, then, there are indeed several kinds of constitutions, it is clear that there cannot be one virtue that is the virtue of an excellent citizen, namely, complete virtue. But the good man, we say, is such in accord with one virtue, the complete one.

The argument is simple: there are many states, and many kinds of states. Therefore, each city-state has its own sense of lawfulness and good citizens must do what is lawful within their own city. However, there is only one truly good city-state and constitution. It is only within that city and its constitution that lawfulness and justice coincide; and this is so because, in that case, one and the same view of happiness regulates the lives of the people both as citizens and as law-abiding subjects. In all other states and constitutions, lawfulness only approximates to true justice or is actually degraded to injustice (*Pol*. III 11 1282^{b}8–13). So someone may be a good or lawful citizen without being aligned with true justice or being truly just.

Things, however, turn out to be a little bit more complicated. First, the eventual conflict between justice and lawfulness doesn't make the latter morally or politically insignificant. Because lawfulness, even if it means obeying *bad* or *unjust* laws, is higher in value than unlawfulness. The worst political condition emerges when a political community is bereft of laws altogether, thus ceasing to be a state in the full sense of the term, like the extreme forms of democracy, tyranny, and oligarchy (*Pol.* IV 4 1292^{a} 31–32, IV 10 1295^{a} 15–24, IV 5 1292^{b}5–10). In such cases, decrees or tyrannical edicts replace laws and turn lawfulness to a series of fragmented, short-sighted, and short-lived rules. Lawlessness equates to radical political evil. This is precisely the state of affairs in which a political community is altogether deprived of laws and so fails to satisfy the requirements for being a genuine constitution in the first place. Extreme democracy is thus "not a constitution at all, on the grounds that where the laws do not rule there is no constitution" (*Pol*. IV 4 1292^{a}31–32); extreme tyranny and extreme oligarchy (or dynasty) are entirely lawless too (*Pol*. IV 10 1295^{a}15–24, IV 5 1292^{b}5–10). In all these extremely evil regimes, the rule of law, or law's being in control, is totally absent.

Second, contrary to what a sort of legal positivism would allege, there is room for some sort of civil disobedience. But as is often the case, the key is in the details. For the most part, the fact that the legal system of a city does not respect true justice is not in itself a sufficient reason for a virtuous person's disobedience. We just explained why: lawlessness or defiance against the law is a political evil or a form

or extreme injustice. In addition, if laws themselves were the object of endless casual reforms and changes, one would risk undermining "the power of law itself" (*Pol*. II 8 1269^{a}24). This doesn't mean, however, that the virtuous person should be obedient to any sort of tyrannical law or decision, as if slavish submission could ever coexist with genuine virtue and the will of free virtuous people (*Pol.* IV 10 1297^{a}17–23). Regardless of how rarely or against how immense a threat to their integrity virtuous people are justified in disobeying the law, Aristotle is fully aware of the fact that his view leads to a certain paradox: "those who would most have justice on their side in engaging in faction [for instance, in order to provoke a constitutional change], though the least likely to do so, are those who are outstanding in virtue" (*Pol.* V 1 1301^{a}39–40). Yes, a sort of conservatism permeates Aristotle's view of political stability; but, no, it's unfair to accuse Aristotle, as some contemporary philosophers do, of relegating genuine political activity to the mere organization of powers and the distribution of political functions.

Third, Aristotle seems to restrict justice to being within the limits of a city and its legal system. For all constitutions are based on some notion of justice and, hence, "the political good is the just, and this is the common advantage" (*Pol*. III 12 1282^{b}16–18). What about our interactions with other people beyond the limits of our own political community or with other cities with which we have no previous bonds of alliance? This is not the modern question about human rights but a much more pragmatic issue. For instance, do questions of justice arise in relation to neighboring cities or rather can we conquer them and treat them in any way we like, provided we have the power to do so? Aristotle's answer is unambiguous: he questions the tenability of the political dogma endorsed by those who maintain that mastership must substitute for politics in a city's relationships with its neighbors: "they seek just rule among themselves, but toward others they care nothing about justice" (*Pol*. VII 2 1324^{b}35–36). In the *Politics*, Aristotle emphasizes repeatedly that the most perilous and incurable political degeneration emanates from identifying political rule with mastership—the rule of a *despotês* over slaves. The attempt to distinguish these two radically different ways of exercising rule has been a guiding thread of the entire *Politics* from its very first lines to the distinction between correct and deviant constitutions. What now is important is that it concerns the relationship between one city and its neighbors.

There is something pessimistic in Aristotle's view: all human laws aim at domination (*Pol*. VII 2 1324^{b}7) and domination too easily slides into injustice. Domination can be crude and without any pretense or excuse, but, in the case of the Greeks and other people habituated to a political form of life, it is usually disguised under some pretext. It may appear as the unavoidable consequence of expansion (*Pol*. IV 4 1291^{a}20–21) or as an allegedly defensive political reflex dictating that "someone who has the capacity should not let rule pass to his neighbor, but rather take it away from him" (*Pol*. VII 2 1325^{a}36–38). Regardless of the political rhetoric adopted (rhetoric of which Thucydides' "Melian dialogue" is a dramatic example), cities tend to comport themselves toward their neighbors according to the rules of mastership or despotism. In that sense, it is meaningful to speak about injustice even when it pertains to things outside the boundaries of cities and their legal system.

It would be wrong though to be driven to adopt simplistic binary oppositions, like natural law against positive law, or the stability of one versus the variability of the other. If by natural law we mean what nature imposes and if positive law corresponds to the regulations people establish each time, then their relationship is probably as follows:

V 7 1134^{b}18–21

Of the politically just, one part is natural, the other legal. The natural one is the one that has the same force everywhere and not because it does or does not seem to have it, whereas the legal is the one where at the start it makes no difference whether it enjoins one thing or another, but once people establish it, it does make a difference.

So, the just that defines the terms of human coexistence and actions among people has two parts: the second one is whatever we would call "positive law," meaning the treaties or agreements that cities decide and the individual decisions of courts and the Assembly, rules that take effect only *after* being adopted or decided, and *because* of it. Positive law varies from city to city and changes within a city itself, reflecting the relativity of the political institutions and their respective measures. Natural law is of a different order; it does not result from positive law and doesn't share its relativity or variability. Nevertheless, it should not be reduced to something invariant, as if talking about "nature" refers to a nature that is unchangeable, eternal, and necessary. The "nature" that makes natural law be natural is not like that, because "nature" here denotes the nature of human affairs. It is, using terms that are familiar to us, something *hôs epi to polu*—something that holds for the most part. While it is indeed possible to precisely define what natural law imposes in the case of the excellent or perfect city, this normative basis is not enough on its own to define what is natural for each and every community. For it, since it is dictated by the form of the present conditions (such as the composition of the population), is variable—to the extent that it depends on factors determined only by specific conditions. That is why the person who possesses political science must know what the specific conditions mandate on each occasion, and what sort of changes, variations, or corrections are required.

Aristotle balances between the objectivity and the relativity of the just, avoiding both legal positivism (which accepts that the just is simply and only the product of the existing legal order) and a kind of legal reductionism (which would turn the just into an eternal and invariable natural order). And we know at least one rule dictating what is naturally just, namely, that every time political justice degenerates to the justice fitted to despotic rule, justice is distorted and turned to a mere simulacrum of justice.

3.2 Is Justice a Science?

One additional clarification is necessary before we try to understand the exact definition of justice. It involves the relationship of justice to science. The question shouldn't take us by surprise at all because it's also a modern question: a judge, in

order to function as one, is taught a science, law. And perhaps this knowledge sets judges at a distance from things, as if in order for them to make correct rulings, they should stand outside human affairs or espouse a stance of pure objectivity or disinterestedness:

V 4 1132^{a}20–22

Going to the judge, however, is going to justice; for the judge wishes to be, as it were, animate justice.

But this image of distancing is not Aristotelian. Because justice is a virtue of character, it shows how people can manage their feelings and passions so that they are in a position to apply the practical knowledge or science they happen to have, no matter whether they serve as agents involved in action or spectators who judge others' affairs. Aristotle in no way supposes that it's possible for people to act like external spectators of human affairs, like natural scientists or like a mere personification of the soulless principle of law. And he has two arguments on this.

First: every science, every rational knowledge, can do two things, the good and the bad (e.g., medicine can heal or poison, though doing the latter is not aligned with its true nature). Justice, on the contrary, only does one thing, it does just things. So, justice is not a science, it's a virtue of character. The second argument is this:

***Pol.* III 16 1287^{a}28–32**

The one who bids the law to rule, then, would seem to be bidding the god and the understanding alone to rule, whereas the one who bids a human being to do so adds on a wild beast as well; for appetite is a thing of that sort, and spirit distorts [the judgment of] rulers even when they are the best men. That is why law is understanding without desire.

In this lyrically beautiful passage, Aristotle denounces the idea that it's possible to find a person who would be the personification of law. And the reason is that the human soul has both a rational *and* an appetitive part, here described as a wild beast within. There is no person without this beast; the only question is how we manage it. The illusion that there is a judge out there who is totally distanced from human feelings and passions is an illusion that makes the judge look like a god. There is no such judge. Only law constitutes reason without appetite. The example of medicine proves enlightening once more: medical textbooks, as comprehensive as they may be, are imperfect in describing sicknesses and symptoms and prescribing therapies. Because they can't take account of individual cases, that only medicine with a soul (i.e., doctors) can judge. For the same reason, imposing justice demands the existence of judges, in whom, as in doctors, the beast will always be present, ready to distort reason. This is the human condition. The only difference is that in medical affairs as such, the beast has no motive to be awakened.

3.3 Justice and Greed (V 1–2)

As Aristotle understands it, the virtue of justice seems to have some relation to greed (*pleonexia*): a greedy person is unjust, and a non-greedy person is just. People are greedy when they wish for, desire, and claim more than they are worth, more than their circumstances or merit allows.

V 1 1129^{b}1–3

But since the unjust person is greedy, he will be concerned with goods—not with all of them but with those that are matters of good and bad luck.

People are not unjust when they are greedy for any kind of good, but only for those goods that are a matter of good or bad luck. These are the so-called external goods, such as wealth, health, political power, offices, and so on (see Sect. 1.5). Why does greed only concern external goods? Because it would be silly to connect it with goods of the soul, such as virtues—as if it made sense that a person could be greedy for honesty or valor. Nor can all the external goods be the concern of greed—honor, wealth, political power, and possessions can (V 2 1130b 2–4), whereas friends and beauty cannot. Why? Because only the former goods are sharable in such a way that for some person to have a lot, another person must have few. This doesn't apply to beauty, for example, since by being beautiful one doesn't undermine, diminish, or steal another's beauty. How exactly does greed envisage these external goods? Evidently, not as a mere state of affairs but as something we are eager to get by denying it to others; greed is a promise of pleasure—indeed one of a particular sort: greed "is due to the pleasure that results from making a profit" (V 2 1130^{b}4).

By introducing the concept of greed, a clearer image of justice is starting to take shape. But it is still quite dim. Let's take an example: does an act of adultery involve justice or not? We said in another context that adultery has to do with temperance alone, how well you can control your sexual drives. However, if an act of adultery aims at profit, then it involves justice. So, again, there is no defined group of actions that are the focus of justice—it all depends on the action's motive. A question of justice will arise when the motive is greed for external goods—honor, wealth, political power, and safety.

Is this enough to define justice? Probably not. Because Book IV 1 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*—I remind you that we are now in Book V—analyzes another virtue of character, generosity (the virtue that helps you properly manage wealth). But, if such a virtue exists and if justice involves greed with regard to wealth, among other things, how can we distinguish justice from generosity? Spending less money than you should is a matter of acquisitiveness. So why isn't it a matter of injustice? Taking more money from others than you should is also a matter of acquisitiveness. Why is it not injustice? The distinction we have to suppose is this: generosity involves giving and taking, but the mistake here is that it's not enough to give, you have to know how much to give, to whom, and when. Just wanting to give money doesn't mean you have the virtue of generosity. Likewise, every time you take

money from others you don't exhibit acquisitiveness, only when it happens from the wrong people, in the wrong way, for the wrong reasons.

(In-)justice, on the contrary, involves two things: that you take something that you do *not* deserve, that you have no right to, or that exceeds your share (for someone else deserves more) and *also* that this causes *harm* to another person, that is, in order for you to benefit, another person must be harmed, so that the more you benefit, the more the other is harmed, by getting less than their true share (V 4 $1132^{b}14$). In generosity, the element of harm is completely absent. Unjust people behave as if the harm that the other person suffers because of their actions were not a reason for them to change their behavior; they act as if the harm to others that is caused by their actions were *not* something morally important or relevant—something they must factor in each time they decide how to act. Therefore, there is injustice every time the other person's harm doesn't deter you from an action undertaken for your own benefit, or every time the other person's harm isn't something that saddens you and considerably lessens the pleasure you get when you benefit or, in the worst-case scenario, where injustice borders on envy, every time the other person is harmed your own pleasure increases (*Rhet.* II 10 1388^{a} 24–27). So, there is leeway to distinguish justice from other virtues that seem to concern similar actions. And the reason is that it contains two elements that no other virtue contains: a connection to greed and a connection to the harm suffered by others.

3.4 The Two Kinds of Justice (V 2–5)

We now have enough tools to approach the classic Aristotelian distinction of the kinds of justice or, to be precise, the kinds of what is "just" in different sorts of transactions—justice as a virtue of character will not be split into kinds.

V 2 $1130^{b}30$–$1131^{a}9$

(1) One kind of the justice that is a part, and of the just in this way, is the one found in the allocations of honor, wealth, or any of the other things that are to be divided among those who share in a constitution […].

(2) Another kind is rectification in transactions. Of it, there are two parts; for some transactions are voluntary, others involuntary.

  (2a) The voluntary ones are such things as selling, buying, lending with interest, pledging, giving free use of something, depositing, and hiring out (these are called "voluntary" because the starting-point of the transactions is voluntary).

  (2b) Of the involuntary ones, some are clandestine (for example, theft, adultery, poisoning, pimping, enticing away slaves, murder by treachery, and perjury), whereas others involve force (for example, assault, imprisonment, murder, abduction, disabling, verbal abuse, and insulting treatment).

We'll call the first kind of justice, the "just in allocation" (*dianemêtikon dikaion*), "distributive justice." We have to understand it as located at a very high level, at a legislative or, as we'd say today, at a constitutional level. It concerns which people the city will deem more worthy, so that they are given the most goods (wealth and honor or political offices). It shows the way a city understands its citizens' worth, either as people or as parts of the city (depending on the roles they take: judge, furniture maker, teacher, etc.). Aristotle knows very well that both the citizens' worth and the public positions they fill are subject to random or external factors. Nonetheless, he believes that a city can do nothing better than distribute these two goods, public recognition and wealth, based on the value citizens show themselves to have from the time they become adults. Evidently, the value scale adopted depends on the city concerned and its constitution. At any rate, distributive justice is somehow established prior to the claims of each individual, political party, or social class and does not emanate from their claims.

Sentence (2) introduces a second kind of justice, *rectification* (*epanorthôtikon dikaion*)—usually, albeit misleadingly, also termed "corrective justice"—and it splits it into two parts, one involving voluntary transactions and one involving involuntary ones. The voluntary ones (2a) are various kinds of commercial deals, like buying, selling, pledging, renting, and so on. They are voluntary in the sense that people (or two groups of people) determine the terms of a transaction and they shake hands. The transaction can be just, but when a party is pressured into a transaction (because, for example, one is in a state of immense poverty), even though people may agree voluntarily to the transaction, the transaction is unjust. We can more or less understand what a just transaction is because we can estimate the value of an object or compare it to the value of another object, or evaluate it based on a currency. It's no coincidence that Aristotle chooses this context to refer to currency as a common measure to define value (a theoretical approach which Karl Marx will later revisit). Rectification relating to voluntary actions is also applied, obviously, when one of the two parties in the deal acts in violation of it. And that's why it's called rectification, because it rectifies the damage someone caused contrary to something agreed upon. (Note, however, that the "rectificatory just" does not necessarily require any rectification; it only establishes what in terms of loss and gain a just transaction is and what should be the criterion to be used in case a rectification is needed afterward.)

The second part of rectification (2b) involves involuntary things, the things you suffer without prior agreement. These happen unknowingly (when someone steals from you) or knowingly (when someone curses you, tortures you, or puts you in prison). Often, in relevant literature, voluntary rectification is called reciprocal justice, while involuntary rectification is called corrective (even though in both cases there is an element of correction of an occurring injustice).

What sets apart rectification from distributive justice is that rectification is "blind," so to speak, to the extent that it doesn't consider the worth of the people involved. (Notice, by the way, that the depiction of Justice as wearing a blindfold is an invention of the sixteenth century; the Greeks prefer to imagine Justice with the

eyes wide open.) Whether the person who stole from you is rich or poor, a person with good intentions or not, you lost the same amount, and this is the damage to be restored. If, then, someone steals from you and becomes rich, you have to find a balance between the much they gained and the little you were left with. This balance between the much and the little will be the just. And in order to define it, it's enough to know in this case how much you lost and how much they won; you don't need to know anything else about each other.

So, while in distributive justice the worth of the people involved is a defining element, in rectification it isn't (we'll come back to this). To make this contrast clearer, Aristotle describes the two kinds of justice using two analogies. He calls the first analogy "geometrical," the one that is appropriate for distributive justice: the ratio of my worth to the benefits I receive must be equal to the ratio of your worth to the benefits you receive. So, if the people are x and y, worth is W, and goods P (for profit), then it must be true that $W_x/P_x = W_y/P_y$. In rectification, by contrast, you don't need this kind of matching, all you need is to balance one's harm with another's benefits. Let's call this analogy "arithmetic."

However, these distinctions are not as airtight as they are presented as being. When we ask a judge to rectify something, it's usually impossible to avoid considering the people involved in the case, their motives, their past, their moral integrity. Because, as we saw in Sect. 2.7, if these things are not taken into consideration, it's impossible to define what kind of action took place at the start. Rectification doesn't deal with someone who repeatedly causes harm to others in the same way as with someone who caused harm by mistake, by chance, for the first time, for a very specific reason or for the sake of a very important goal. Throughout Book V Aristotle himself insists that we must distinguish between actions of injustice and whatever happened by chance or without decision and deliberate choice. It's only when we factor in all the salient features of the situation and the people involved that we can indeed reach a correct understanding of what true reciprocity amounts to. Indeed, the popular understanding of reciprocity in terms of "an eye for an eye" is far from fitting either distributive or corrective justice (V 5 1132^b23–25). Nonetheless, it is safe to say that a notion of reciprocity underpins them both: the goods to be equalized or distributed are somehow commensurable and there is a certain agreement as to their respective value. Needless to say, in the best city, virtue and happiness are the highest values.

Such an emphasis on the mathematical structure of justice and on objective criteria against which one should judge what is just or unjust in our activities and transactions may lead to a certain confusion. For one may think that such a just structure or such a just state of affairs *is* justice. But it is *not*. Justice is a virtue of character and, hence, it can only be ascribed to someone's character. This is a perplexity that concerns all virtues of character: human actions often *seem* to be virtuous, but they do not actually originate in a virtuous character and are not undertaken for the sake of the noble (see Sect. 6.2). This, *a fortiori*, holds true in the case of justice; for, because of the quasi-mathematical structure of what is a just distribution or rectification, it is possible to define what is just independently of the definition of justice and, hence, it proves very difficult to discern when a just outcome springs from someone possessing the virtue of character we call justice.

That is why Aristotle provides us with a detailed picture (V 8 1135^{b}2–1136^{a}9) of things that might appear just or unjust but do not, nevertheless, originate in justice as a virtue of character. The following distinctions are in order: (1) A just or unjust outcome may be coincidentally such—for instance, when one pays back what is due not because of justice but out of fear, or when people do not pay back what is due simply because they are under some sort of compulsion. In all these cases, the outcome is coincidental to the extent that it originates in a non-voluntary action. (2) Another category of just/unjust states of affairs that do not originate in justice/injustice encompasses all kinds of "errors" (*hamartêma*) that intervene in our transactions with others and completely change the course of events (for instance, Oedipus' ignorance about who his mother was). (3) Another sort of "error" has to do with the harm that is contrary to any reasonable expectation; Aristotle calls it "a misfortune." In this case, what really causes the harm at issue comes from outside the agent, like a car accident for which I have no responsibility at all. (4) Even more emphatically, Aristotle dissociates just or unjust outcomes from justice and injustice each time the action is voluntary and in full knowledge of the particular situation but undertaken "without prior deliberation." For in the absence of deliberate choice (as we shall see in Sect. 5.1), there is no way to judge someone's states of character, be they virtues or vices. For instance, when an unjust action springs from spirit or anger that have been provoked by others, it would be a mistake to infer that the person who committed the unjust action is therefore unjust, wicked, or depraved. Justice and injustice as states of character explain our reasons for acting, our motivational apparatus. And no matter how easy it is to confuse just actions with justice, particular justice is a distinct state of character only insofar as its way of producing just actions is also distinct.

3.5 Decency: All Laws Need Remediation (V 10)

Apart from the classic distinction between the two forms of justice, the Aristotelian theory of justice has endowed us with one more important idea, the concept of *epieikeia*, which I translate as "decency"—it would be equally appropriate to translate it as "equity."

V 10 1137^{b}19–32

Whenever the law speaks universally and a particular case arises that is contrary to the universal, at that time it is correct (insofar as the legislator omits something and has made an error in pronouncing unconditionally) to rectify the deficiency—to say what the legislator himself would have said had he been present and would have ordained by law had he known about the case […] And this is the very nature of the decent—a rectification of law insofar as it is deficient because of its universality. For this is also the cause of not everything's being regulated by law—that there are some cases where it is impossible to establish a law, so that decrees are needed. For the standard of what is indeterminate is itself indeterminate, just like the lead

standard [2] used in Lesbian-style building; for the standard is not fixed but adapts itself to the shape of the stone, and a decree adapts itself to the things.

As correct as a law may be, as appropriate as it proves to be for a specific city or state, or even for a perfect state, it is universal by nature, since it applies to all cases of the same type. The specific law is only one, but it refers to human things in a *universal* way; that is why "all law is universal" (V 10 $1137^{b}13$). This fact hardwires law with an inevitable shortcoming: because human actions do not have a universal character but they are, in contrast, particulars—meaning they change depending on who acts, why, using what instrument, with what purpose, and so on—no law, even the most perfect one, is ever able to completely respect the particularity of human affairs. In that sense, the "omissions" from the part of legislators that are due to their awareness of the fact that no law can determine with exactness the particular cases may be said to be "voluntary" (*Rhet*. 1 13 $1374^{a}25$-20). By nature, then, the law is subject to correction, reparation, or remediation. This is not because our perception of justice changed or because the political or state system was altered: any law needs to be corrected by introducing a rule that will be adjusted to the individual case the city has to deal with.

This legal or political kind of decision or rectification of the law was called a "decree" in ancient Athens. It was the kind of decision the Assembly had to take when facing new challenges, unexpected circumstances, or specific issues of everyday politics. A real example: while there are general rules in the city concerning temple constructions, the city rules that, this time, for particular reasons, it is necessary to build a temple at a considerably larger cost than what the law prescribes. Then the Assembly is asked to vote a decree to determine the rules for building this temple, how many priests will be hired there, where the marble will be bought from, and so on. Another real example: after that particular war with those losses and that positive outcome, the city might decide that, this time, widows will get a pension two times higher than the amount the law prescribes. Obviously, there is no guarantee that the Assembly will not make a wrong decision, as it takes special political knowledge and judgment to formulate a good decree. In fact, because decrees involve current political issues, it's even harder to choose them correctly.

In truth, decrees demand a two-pronged skill: on the one side, they demand political science, as the ideal thing would be to formulate and vote a decree in the way good legislators would, as if they were there in front of us and were invited to reformulate the law. On the other hand, decrees demand the skill to discern the individual, the particulars, whether the circumstances are actually special and important. This discernment is a perceptual capacity (for details, see Sect. 5.3). And if precision is strong for the first prong, for the second one, the rule has a special texture. We have to understand it, as our text explains, like a flexible ruler that can adapt to

[2] A flexible lead device used to find a match for an irregularly shaped stone that was already set in position.

the shape of things. When these are achieved, then it is *just* to circumvent the law in the name of a decree.

The law may have an internal shortcoming because of its universality, but decrees have liabilities as well: (a) the Assembly hardly has the knowledge of political science that a good legislator has and it is often governed by momentary excitement or (which may be worse) by the people's flatterers, the demagogues; (b) the excessive or unnecessary use of decrees undermines the people's trust in the value of laws; (c) substituting laws with ephemeral decrees completely, as we saw in the previous section, means the complete dissolution of lawfulness. The people then become the tyrant of the city and of themselves.

Let us return to decency, which is one of the highlights of Aristotle's philosophy of justice and law and deserves more attention.

First, one must realize that decency is not a distinct virtue of character beyond or beside justice: it "is a sort of justice and not some different state" (V 10 1138^{a}3); Aristotle says that to maintain the opposite would be absurd. It is a sort of justice, however, not in the sense that someone could ever be fully just without possessing decency or that someone, conversely, could ever be decent without being just. Decency does not designate a kind of justice next to other ones or required on certain extreme conditions, but a specific capacity necessarily involved in justice as a virtue of character, namely, the readiness to find out how one must apply a general law to the specific circumstances and, even more critically, how one must rectify the law itself. One can draw two inferences from this first clarification that will make us realize how important decency is for resolving the perplexities we encountered within Book V: (a) One of the most difficult perplexities has been for Aristotle to distinguish justice from mere lawfulness. The notion of decency provides us with a critical qualification: lawfulness does not mean to abide by the letter of the law and by the law itself but implies a certain vigilance regarding the inescapable need to rectify, reformulate, adjust the law to the ever new circumstances and challenges. For such a rectification, we know by now, is part of true lawfulness, not its opposite. (b) Another persistent perplexity has been the back and forth in between justice as a virtue of character and the just as something objective or quasi-mathematical. Decency is meant to bridge the gap, for we now come to recognize that even at the level of the law and, hence, of what is objective and somehow indifferent to the motives and the ends of the agents, there is no way to sidestep justice as a virtue of character. For it is that virtue and, in particular, decency as its component that makes us understand the nature of the law and the nature of its prescriptions at first place.

Second, one might wonder whether decency is a component of justice in its broad sense (namely, whole justice) or rather in its narrow sense (namely, particular justice), as we distinguished them in Sect. 3.1. With more exactness, the question is whether it only concerns the latter. There is no doubt, indeed, that the decent person will not be greedy (V 9 1136^{b}20–22). But Aristotle's analysis of decency in V 10 takes that for granted and focuses on how we understand the law and its inherent deficiency. More importantly, decency seems to be a term as broad as "goodness"; decent people are the good people and vice versa. Therefore, Aristotle contrasts decent people with base people—this is the most common use of "decency" in his

works. The only important qualification of this identification of decency with goodness is that the former, like justice itself, primarily concerns our relationships with others: (1) decency reappears in Books VIII–IX and the discussion on friendship. (2) It is also evoked when Aristotle analyzes how practical wisdom is exercised in our relationships with others: "What is called 'consideration' (*gnômê*), due to which people are said to be sympathetically considerate (*sungnômones*) and to have consideration, is the correct judgment of what is decent. There is a sign of this; for we say that it is the decent person, above all, who is sympathetically considerate, and that to be decent in certain cases is to be sympathetically considerate" (VI 9 1143a19–22). (3) Decency also matters in the context of persuasion both in private matters and in the public sphere of the courts or the Assembly, and Aristotle notes that we trust decent people more (*Rhet*. I 2 1356^{a}6–7). Thus, each and every virtue of character exercised in relation to others or implying an eventual harm of others—in short, "whole justice"—does involve decency.

Third, it is noteworthy that though employed to express the other-directedness of our virtues of character, decency also shines in the most intimate sphere of our own self where no pretense is possible or even meaningful. It cannot be a coincidence that Aristotle—and Greek language in general—allows for a connection between decency and our dreams (I 13) and hopes (*EE* I 4 1215^{a}10), to the extent that they result from our most hidden and unaffected self. Such a substantial isomorphism between the inside and the outside is a great lesson of Aristotle's ethics we should not remain deaf to. Here is the pertinent passage: "the things that appear in the dreams of decent people are better than those of any random person" (I 13 1102^{b}10–11).

3.6 Justice: To Keep Equal Distance (V 5)

There is a last question we left unanswered when we read the first passage of Book V about justice: it is the question about whether justice is a medial state, and if so, in what way. If not, is this a danger to the cohesion of the Aristotelian theory of the mean?

V 5 1133^{b}30–1134^{a}8

(1) [I]t is clear that just action is a mean (*meson*) between doing injustice and suffering injustice; for the one involves having too much and the other having too little.
(2) Justice is something medial, not however in the same way as the other virtues but because it is [productive] of a mean, [3]

[3] Manuscripts provide us with alternative variations of the text. According to them, the text reads as follows: "because it is related to [or productive of] a mean of what is equal" or "because it is a

(3) whereas injustice is so of the extremes […]; [it is] excess and deficiency of what is beneficial and what is harmful, contrary to what is proportional.

(2) underlines that justice doesn't relate to the mean in the same way as the other virtues do. This was probably expected, to the extent that justice refers to our relationships with other people, to what another person suffers from our actions, whereas the medial condition of virtues was a quality of both our own feelings and actions. So, the model of medial state doesn't seem to completely fit in the case of justice. In other words, justice as a medial state has more to do with an external state of affairs rather than with the feelings and emotions of the people involved. Besides, as Aristotle remarks, if the harm done to someone is one thing, how that person has evaluated or, in modern terms, personally experienced it is another thing. In Aristotle's justice, only the former seems to matter (even though, in the case of the virtuous person, they coincide). Thus, the mean in questions of justice admits of a mathematical approach.

However, in the same sentence, Aristotle insists that justice is a form of medial state. According to (1), justice seems to be a mean between causing and suffering injustice, between what would happen if I harmed someone and what would happen if I was being harmed. So, the medial character of justice doesn't concern feelings but actions, and injustice is the name of excess on both sides, both regarding too much gain and too much loss.

There is an additional reason why it is so: according to the Aristotelian understanding of human motives, people have no intention of being harmed. On the contrary, everyone always tends to take more, to take advantage of others: "someone is harmed and suffers unjust things voluntarily, but no one suffers an unjust action voluntarily; for no one wishes to suffer such an action" (V 9 1136b 5–6). While there are many occasions when we want things that prove to be harmful or that turn us to victims of injustice, it doesn't make sense that someone would want to be wronged and would act based on the knowledge of being harmed or wronged with nothing justifying it (morally or legally). The fact that there is no human tendency to be the victims of injustice doesn't mean that Aristotle overlooks the moral beauty (the *kalon*) that characterizes those who deem they have reason to forfeit or give something as a gift. There is something like a sense of grace and generosity in Aristotle's ethics (V 9 1136^{b}9–12).

The notion that justice relates to the mean is deeply rooted in western culture. Even today, if we were asked how judges should behave, our first reaction would be that they should take equal distance between the two adversaries, not to discriminate in favor of one or the other. Visualizing justice as a blind judge holding a scale draws the same image, as we believe that justice is standing in the middle between the wants or the pursuits of the contesting parts. It's no coincidence that, both in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and in the *Politics*, a judge is presented as a mediator or a referee. Even more interesting is this: in the *Politics*, Aristotle divides the citizens in

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mean of what is equal." Michael of Ephesus' commentary goes to the same direction (CAG XXII/3 40.23–25).

classes. He often mentions the middle class, the one that includes those that are neither rich nor poor. He believes that, in most cases, the best cities are those where this middle class holds the power. Even more strikingly, he believes that the legislator himself should be coming from the middle class. The legislator personifies the mean.

"Is the appeal to the mean, in reality, nothing but an empty formula? Didn't Aristotle touch thereby on certain true aspects of the moral facts, where the question of the mean—in the sense of equilibrium—includes something substantial? Obviously, this requires that we should be able to identify the extremes in themselves, not only the excess and the deficiency in relation to the mean."[4] Aristotle's notion of justice and of the mean that is fitted to it has offered a pattern that modern and contemporary practical philosophy exploits in many different ways whenever it tries to describe the demands of the self and the demands of the other as the two pans of a scale to be balanced against each other.

3.7 Chapter Summary

The discussion of justice occupies the entire Book V of the *Nicomachean Ethics.* In the eyes of the ancient Greeks, justice was one of the most important virtues of character. This applies to Aristotle, and it applied to Plato even more. Many of the things Aristotle says in Book V, the Book on justice, he says in order to distance himself from the platonic use of the term, where "justice" refers to the full spectrum of virtues. Aristotle puts the emphasis on justice as a virtue that concerns our relation to another person. But to define justice in this narrow sense, we should first dissociate it from lawfulness and also learn to avoid simplistic binary oppositions, like the one between natural law and positive law. The virtue of justice seems to have some relation to greed (*pleonexia*): a greedy person is unjust, and a non-greedy person is just. But what then about justice as a medial condition? And how is the virtue of justice related to the distinction of the kinds of what is "just" in different sorts of transactions, namely, the "just in allocation" (*dianemêtikon dikaion*) or "distributive justice" and rectification (*epanorthôtikon dikaion*)? I examine these issues and conclude by exploring the concept of decency (*epieikeia*) and its complicated relation to the two kinds of justice, lawfulness, and the practice of decrees (i.e., the kind of decisions the Assembly had to take when facing new challenges, unexpected circumstances, or specific issues of everyday politics). I argue that a proper understanding of decency allows us to overcome all difficulties involved in Aristotle's notion of justice.

[4] E. Tugendhat 1993. *Vorlesungen über Ethik*. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp: 252.

3.8 Further Reading

One should begin by Williams (1980). For distributive justice, see Keyt (1991). For an overall analysis of justice both in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Politics*, see Miller (1995: Chap. 3) and Yack (1993: Chaps. 5–6). I owe the comment about "grace" to Young (2005).

3.9 Study Questions

1. What exactly is Aristotle's objection to the "broad" or "holistic" notion of justice?
2. How does Aristotle try to deal with the problem of disobedience to bad laws? Do you agree with his views?
3. Does Aristotle juxtapose positive law and "natural law" and, if yes, what makes the latter "natural"?
4. Can Aristotle's justice be blind or impartial?
5. Why does particular justice necessarily involve decency?
6. Does justice in its broad sense entail decency?
7. Is Aristotle's claim that greed is the motive leading to injustice convincing?
8. Is there any overlap between "distributive justice" and "rectificatory justice"?
9. How might Aristotle defend the priority of justice as a virtue of character to just actions?
10. Is there any room for Aristotle's justice outside the limits of a particular political community?

3.10 Essay Question

Read Thucydides' "The Melian Dialogue" (*The Peloponnesian War*, Book V, §§84–116), and comment on it by using Aristotle's notion of justice. How effective does it prove to be?

You can find Thucydides' text here: http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Thuc.+5.84&fromdoc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0200)

Chapter 4
The Three Usurpers to the Position of Practical Wisdom: Science, Theoretical Wisdom, Craft

4.1 Correct Practical Reason

We now enter Book VI which introduces what may be the best-known and most discussed notion in the *Nicomachean Ethics*: *phronêsis* (practical wisdom).

Practical wisdom is kind of a mystery. If we removed Book VI from the *Nicomachean Ethics*, no one would suspect its importance. It's only been referenced a couple of times until now and without its precise technical meaning no less. But even after Book VI it is again nowhere to be found, at least not in the forefront. In other works by Aristotle, we also encounter the concept of practical wisdom, but not with exactly the same meaning as in Book VI. For instance, in the *Eudemian Ethics,* practical wisdom is once presented as a virtue of character (*EE* II 3 1221^{a}12), whereas in the *Politics* it's sometimes presented as a virtue that only belongs to a good city governor, not to the good citizens (*Pol*. III 4 1277^{b}25–26). In this introduction, we focus on what Aristotle says about practical wisdom in Book VI, which offers the sole exhaustive analysis on the matter throughout the Aristotelian corpus, and we'll take for a fact that here, in Book VI, Aristotle displays its most complete and philosophically robust picture.

What, then, do we know about practical wisdom? If you asked an Athenian contemporary of Aristotle's, an educated Athenian who had read Plato's dialogues, he would know nothing. Because Plato uses the terms "practical wisdom," "scientific knowledge," "craft knowledge," "understanding," and "theoretical wisdom" as if they were synonyms, oftentimes the one next to the other. In part, then, Aristotle's purpose here is to distinguish between these concepts that denoted more or less the same thing in Plato.

The reader has seen practical wisdom be a part of the definition of the virtue of character: "Virtue, then, is a state […] defined by a reason and the one by which a practically-wise person (*phronimos*) would define it" (see Sect. 2.5). The practically wise people, those who possess practical wisdom, know the reason (the

P. Kontos, *Introduction to Aristotle's* Nicomachean Ethics, Palgrave Philosophy Today, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-41985-0_4

justification) concerning the mean that juxtaposes virtue with vices. It is them that will be able to determine each time—in the particular circumstances—what is just, honest, courageous, etc.

I will offer a detailed analysis of practical wisdom in Chap. 5. For the moment, we just need a clarification for those, at least, who are familiar with contemporary philosophy: at one point Aristotle says that practical wisdom is the "correct reason" for practical matters (VI 13 $1144^{b}27–28$). In a sense, this wording is precise: practical wisdom is the virtue of the rational element that is concerned with the sphere of our morally relevant actions. It's thanks to practical wisdom that we know practical truth. In another sense, however, at least to modern ears, this wording is misleading. Because practical wisdom is *not* correct reason; it's not an argument or explanation, nor is it a rational activity, nor a rational motive, nor a rational part of the soul (to mention five meanings of the term "reason" relevant to the context). Practical wisdom is a *virtue* of thought, and its possession ensures that a sub-part of the intellectual part of the soul functions well. Practical wisdom guarantees the proper function of practical reason; it is not practical reason itself, nor its function in total. Many people have practical reason, without having practical wisdom.

Book VI starts with great expectations, and in the first two sections it cultivates these expectations and lures the readers with hopes that they will get by the end of the Book the coveted answer to what happiness is or what the highest practical good is. Anyone nourishing such excessive expectations will be disappointed, as they'll not get the answer they expected. They will have to wait until Book X. But they would never get it without Book VI. And without Book VI a series of philosophically majestic pages, that make all philosophers through the ages return to the *Nicomachean Ethics*, would have been lost.

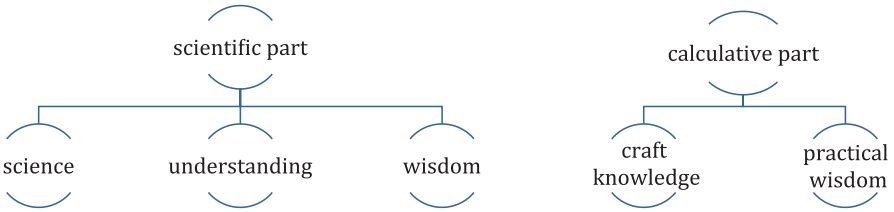
4.2 The Eternal Things and the Things Up to Us (VI 2–3)

Let's take a look at the manner Aristotle introduces practical wisdom in Book VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. We had separated the soul into two parts, the rational part of the soul and the non-rational part (see Sect. 2.1). Now we will have to make distinctions within the rational part itself.

VI 3 $1139^{b}15–18$

Let the states, then, in which the soul grasps the truth by way of affirmation and denial be five in number: craft knowledge (*technê*), scientific knowledge (*epistêmê*), practical wisdom, theoretical wisdom (*sophia*), and understanding (*nous*); for supposition and belief admit of falsehood.

The reader is taken aback by this blizzard of unclarified terms introduced in VI 3. Lucky for us, in VI 2 Aristotle was provident enough to present a comprehensive separation of the rational part of the soul, as it's presented in the graph below and clarified by some primary explanations:



(a) The term "science" is found in two places: one part of the rational soul is called "scientific," and one of the three sections of this part is called "science." The other two are "understanding" and "theoretical wisdom" (we don't yet know what they mean). This ambiguity will not affect our comprehension of the text.
(b) Separating between the scientific and the calculative part of the rational soul just follows the simple logic that knowledge of different types of objects is exercised by different parts of the soul. The most crucial distinction of the objects of knowledge is the one between what is necessary and eternal (i.e., without sublunary matter) and what admits of change (i.e., with sublunary matter). The scientific part concerns the former, the calculative the latter.

This distinction however is already highly inaccurate, as far as Aristotle's own intent and terms go. First of all, the calculative part of the soul doesn't involve all things subject to change. It involves *only* those things that are subject to change by human involvement, the things that are "up to us," and these are the things we produce based on craft knowledge (*technê*), and those that have to do with our moral actions (based on practical knowledge). Contrarily, it does not involve the things that change without this change being the result of human intervention, and those are all the natural things in the sublunary world: from rain to any kind of living being. These are the objects of the Aristotelian natural sciences. The same kind of difficulty affects the scientific part of the soul. Indeed, the Aristotelian theoretical sciences are three: theology, astronomy, and mathematics. And they all have eternal and necessary beings as their objects. But physics, biology, etc., are also theoretical sciences, even if their objects are subject to generation and passing away. They are theoretical, exactly because they are neither craft-like nor practical. But, by confining the objects of science to the eternal and necessary ones, natural sciences are left hanging. In the end, they are included neither in the scientific nor in the calculative part of the soul.

(c) The calculative part of the soul is the one that makes calculations concerning those things that are subject to change by a human factor, either through production or through moral actions. The calculative element consists in that in each case we are obliged to consider the particulars in order to judge what is good and what is bad, both in the cases of a production and a moral action. Contrarily, the scientific part of the soul doesn't make these kinds of calculations, since nothing new or unforeseen appears there, nothing about which you'll need to consider its present circumstances. In any case, the term "calculative" creates new ambiguities, because it can lead to the assumption that the function of this

part of the soul only includes calculations, whereas (as we'll later see) this does not correspond to what is actually meant. And this ambiguity is increased by the fact that Aristotle uses the terms "calculative" and "deliberative" alternatively. Deliberation is a capacity of calculation, the one that allows you to find the right means to achieve your ends (we'll also come back to this later on). A craftsman has ends (to build a house, for example), the just person has ends, the unjust person has ends as well. And we have repeatedly highlighted that the distinction between the craftsman and the doer of moral actions, as well as between the just and the unjust person, is always, in essence, a difference in terms of their ends. *The field of calculation is the realm of what furthers human ends.* But the emphasis on deliberation and calculation seems to focus on means, not on the ends themselves.

As if the above complications weren't enough, Aristotle interchangeably uses the concept of *doxastikon* (i.e., the part that forms beliefs) along with the concepts of calculation and deliberation. This choice further complicates the comprehension of the above distinctions because Aristotle occasionally connects "belief" with our grasp of eternal things (see III 2 $1111^{b}31–33$), when, obviously, in the present contiguity the objects of belief are only those that are included in the fields of craft knowledge and practical wisdom.

(d) Science, understanding, theoretical wisdom, craft knowledge, and practical wisdom are intellectual capacities that make us able to grasp truth: they are states of thought (alternatively: intellectual states). In fact, without exception, they seem to always grasp truth (contrary to belief, for example). But we need to be very careful here because the intellectual states of science and craft knowledge, contrary to the states of character, are *capacities*, as they are able to produce opposite results; let's remind ourselves that the doctor (here, as a craftsman) can both heal and poison based on the same full knowledge of medicine. As a matter of fact, in each part of the rational soul there is just *one* intellectual *virtue*: theoretical wisdom is the virtue of the scientific part and practical wisdom is the virtue of the calculative part (VI 2 $1139^{a}15–17$, $^{b}12–13$). Besides, this is what the bilateral separating of the rational part of the soul imposes. As virtues, they do not have a double use and they represent the higher capacities of each part (we don't know yet what this characterization is supposed to mean).

The Aristotelian picture of the rational part of the soul that is drawn in Book VI is not without difficulties. Nor does it fully coincide with the picture Aristotle himself draws in *De Anima*. None of this, however, should lead us to the conclusion that the ground under Book VI's analysis is shaky. On the contrary, we are asked to realize that this mapping of the rational part of the soul is simply functional—meaning it helps us to bring forward the true causes of our errors concerning the definition of practical wisdom. *And these errors are caused by the fact that science, theoretical wisdom, and craft knowledge tend to usurp the position of practical wisdom*. Book VI is nothing more than an essay on how to protect practical wisdom from these usurpers, even if, in the end, it turns out that one of the usurpers has a claim that we had previously underestimated!

4.3 Science and Theoretical Wisdom (VI 3, 6–7)

Let's start with the first usurper, science.

VI 3 1139^{b}19–32

(1) For we all suppose that what we know scientifically does not at all admit of being otherwise […] Therefore, what admits of being known scientifically is by necessity. Therefore, it is eternal; for the things that are unconditionally necessary are all eternal, and eternal things cannot come to be or pass away.
(2) Further, each and every science seems to be teachable, and what can be known scientifically to be learnable. […]
(3) Therefore, scientific knowledge is a state affording demonstrations.

(1) makes explicit that the objects of science are eternal things, those that are by nature necessary, non-generable, and indestructible (anything about which a true statement applies in an absolute and immutable manner—e.g., one about the orbit of the heavenly bodies). It is clear, then, that Aristotle is using here a very narrow concept of science, which only includes theology, astronomy, and mathematics. The fact that their objects are indestructible is because they don't include any material element that we see in the sublunary world (water, fire, air, earth). The problem with sublunary matter is that it is never uniform, but always mixed and varying in its qualities, and that, as a result, it offers resistance to form. A sphere made of bronze is never perfectly spherical; a body made of flesh and blood decays and dies. As thorough and exact as our knowledge of the human body may be, it does not provide us with knowledge of a specific body, even about whether it exists right now or not. This doesn't apply to the objects of theology, astronomy, and mathematics. Theology's object, the god we meet in *Metaphysics* Lamda, is entirely without matter and, hence, eternal (*Met.* XII 6 1071^{b}20–21): a pure form or pure actuality. Heavenly bodies have some sort of matter, but not the matter of the sublunary world. Their matter, called ether (*aethêr*), is absolutely homogeneous and their movement an absolutely homogeneous cyclical one. Mathematical objects are examined apart from sublunary matter as products of abstraction. They only have "intelligible matter." That's why only these objects meet the strict conditions that Aristotle's theoretical science sets.

The rest of science's attributes apply to every Aristotelian science, natural and productive sciences included. Sentence (2) notes that every science is teachable by nature. Given that science is an intellectual capacity, whoever has scientific knowledge knows the reasons or causes of the respective objects and could explain these causes to other people. If they can't explain them, this means that they don't really possess the pertinent knowledge.

In sentence (3) we learn that what Aristotle calls "science" here corresponds to a part of what we today understand as such. Science is simply and merely a *demonstrative state*, a capacity to produce correct conclusions in a correct way from fundamental starting-points (because you could reach a correct conclusion by accident

or through wrong reasoning). However, the capacity for the knowledge of the starting-points is not in itself a matter of science, it is a matter of another cognitive ability: *understanding* (*nous*). And the combination of these two, the intellectual capacity of someone who has both scientific knowledge and understanding, is *theoretical wisdom*. (For a more precise analysis, see *Posterior Analytics* I 3.)

It becomes immediately apparent why theoretical wisdom usurps the position of practical wisdom if we bear in mind that theoretical wisdom is the *virtue* of the scientific part of the soul. In fact, when we realize that theoretical wisdom is the virtue of contemplative life, that which materializes human happiness in the outmost degree, we'll definitely understand why theoretical wisdom calls the primacy of practical wisdom into question. This quarrel is the driving force of the *Nicomachean Ethics*: it was first introduced in I 5 as a juxtaposition of two lives (namely, the practical and the contemplative one), it is expressed in its full form in the concluding sections 12–13 of Book VI, and it will ultimately be settled in Book X. That's where we'll confront it ourselves, because only then will we know all the facts of the dilemma.

So, theoretical wisdom is a usurper to the role of practical wisdom, for good reason. And science? Science is a capacity and not a virtue, it is concerned with eternal things and not human ones, it does not possess knowledge of starting-points, but rather it is only a demonstrative capacity. In which sense, then, does it claim to the position of practical wisdom? And yet, the absolutely precise science of the eternal and necessary things undermines the value of practical wisdom, because it represents it (a) as holding for the most part and lacking absolute exactness, (b) as not grounding itself in fixed starting-points but rather on uncertain and constantly revisable beliefs, and (c) as concerned with particulars and lacking the ability to understand things in a fully universal way. The standard of knowledge that strict science involves makes practical wisdom and political philosophy (for the overlapping of these two terms see Sect. 5.4) seem like they *don't* constitute knowledge in the full sense of the word, like they're a way of revealing an inferior truth. The trap here is either to deny altogether that there exists some kind of genuine truth regarding the field of happiness and human actions, or to claim that, if some truth does exist, it is not the object of practical wisdom or political science.

This danger is real not only in Aristotle's eyes but also today, as there is a contemporary tendency to reduce the truths of human life to truths of natural sciences. And throughout the *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics* Aristotle strives to avert this danger by explaining what kind of science political science is.

Of course, it's Aristotle himself who exacerbates the problem by introducing this separation of sciences. On the one hand, he does speak of political science (I 1) or of "practical science" (*Met.* VI 1 $1025^{b}21$), or of "the philosophy of human things" (X 9 $1181^{b}15$), or of "the political philosopher" (VII 11 $1152^{b}1$–2). On the other hand, however, as we saw previously, he only includes mathematics, astronomy, and theology in the sciences proper, the objects of which are eternal and unchangeable. But, in a broader sense, natural sciences too are theoretical sciences (biology, for example, or the study of nature). And their claims also hold for the most part, just like the objects of political science (see Digression in Sect. 2.7). And this relation implies that political science constitutes a science just as much as the natural sciences do.

However, this is not enough to justify us in grouping political science (or crafts) with natural sciences. Because natural sciences and strictly theoretical ones have one more thing in common: they aim at truth. But this does not seem to be the case for practical sciences; their end is correct action (*Met.* II 1 $993^{b}19$–24). Let us see how this new difficulty crops up within the *Nicomachean Ethics*:

I 1 $1095^{a}5$–6
[…] since the end [of political science] is not knowledge but action.

II 2 $1103^{b}26$–30
Since, then, the present work is not undertaken for the sake of theoretical knowledge, as our others are (for we are engaging in the investigation not in order to know what virtue is but in order to become good people, since otherwise there would be nothing of benefit in it), we must investigate what relates to actions, that is, in what way they are to be done; for actions also control what sorts of states will come about, as we said.

This new distinction seems to undermine political science's claim to genuine scientific status. However, we have already taken measures to counteract this, as we have shown that political science possesses its own starting-points (for instance, the definition of happiness and of the virtue of character), as every science should, and its own field of phenomena to examine (see Sects. 1.2. and 1.3.). And there are many passages that insist that we must learn the (true) definitions of things that concern practical matters. The following text about political constitutions, and hence about happiness too, is yet clearer on the question:

***Pol.* III 8 $1279^{b}11$–15**
We should say a little more about what each of these constitutions is; for certain puzzles are involved, and, where each methodical inquiry is concerned, it is appropriate for the person who is carrying it out in a philosophical manner, and not merely with a practical purpose in view, not to overlook or omit anything, but to make clear the truth about each.

Therefore, the end of practical science *is* to find the truth. And the definitions of happiness, of the virtues of character, of the perfect political state, etc., are theoretical truths of this kind. What is special about practical science is that the field where you verify truth is, as we saw, the field of human life and action (see Sect. 1.3). And therefore, practical science can be truthful *if and only if* it is verified by human actions and human political institutions, either as we see them happen or as they would be after proper training or cultivation. In this sense, the end of practical science is for us to become good. Not in the terms with which we today understand the theory-practice dipole, or "applied knowledge" or "applied ethics," but in the sense that the only way to confirm a practical science is to see whether those to whom it applies are genuinely good and virtuous—genuinely happy. (We will revisit this issue throughout Chap. 5.)

Aristotle notes, moreover, that if someone wanted, on behalf of the strict theoretical sciences, to turn political science itself into such a theoretical science, that would be a sign of ignorance, not to say of vulgarity. A well-educated person, a person who is sufficiently familiar with what knowledge in the various scientific areas implies (without fully possessing scientific knowledge in all these areas), would ask for as much exactness as each specific discipline allows:

I 3 1094^{b}11–25

Our account would be adequate if its degree of perspicuousness were in accord with its subject matter; for we must not seek the same degree of exactness in all accounts, any more than in all products of the crafts. […] for it is characteristic of a well-educated person (*pepaideumenou*) to look for the degree of exactness in each kind of investigation that the nature of the subject itself allows; for it is evident that accepting persuasive arguments from a mathematician is like demanding demonstrations from a rhetorician.

Being familiar with a science involves not demanding a uniform criterion of truth in all areas. It is necessary for scientific speech to be in accord with phenomena in a way that depends on their particularities. Reducing political science to a science of a different kind is not just wrong and (politically) dangerous, it is a sign of lack of education.

4.4 Craft Knowledge (VI 4)

Let's now take a look at craft knowledge, the usurper that lives in the same house as practical wisdom, in the same section of the rational part of the soul, the calculative part. This house-sharing itself creates competitiveness:

(a) One can easily confuse the products of craft and the products of practical wisdom. For example, while one may not be likely to confuse an action displaying courage with a mathematical object such as the number 9, one might well claim that being courageous is a matter of standing one's ground in battle (as if the virtue of courage were a sort of craft knowledge, the sort that produce's standing one's ground).
(b) In both cases, as we saw, questions arise about the relation between the means and the ends. And, as we also saw, at least one version of the way we understand the things we pursue and avoid has to do with what is useful or advantageous, which concerns exactly this relation between means and ends. If the good appears as advantageous, and if what is advantageous permeates both the sphere of craft and the sphere of practical wisdom, then the differences between these two spheres start to grow dim or even fade completely.
(c) From the very beginning of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle explains matters of practical wisdom using examples from the field of craft knowledge and pro-

duction. The crafts of medicine, building, gymnastics, and sculpting are his favorite examples (we realized this in the argument about the human function, the explanation of the mean, the analysis of how we acquire the virtues of character, etc.). If, however, craft knowledge is a safe guide to understand practical wisdom, and if the objects of the former are of similar kind with those of the latter, again the differences between them tend to dim.

Thus, it's not at all a coincidence that craft knowledge plays a particularly ambiguous role in Aristotle's ethics: it is, at the same time, a housemate, an assistant, and an usurper. Therefore, we should give extra attention to it, even though Aristotle only dedicates to it a few lines:

VI 4 1140^{a}1–14

(1) What admits of being otherwise includes both what is producible and what is doable in action. But production and action are different […], so that the practical state involving reason is also different from the productive state involving reason. And nor is one encompassed by the other; for action is not production and production is not action.
(2) […] a craft would be actually the same as a productive state involving true reason.
(3) Every craft is concerned with coming to be, that is, with crafting things and getting a theoretical grasp on how something may come to be that admits of being and of not being.
(4) and whose starting-point is in the producer but not in the product.

(1) explains why analyzing craft is an indispensable part of a study on ethics: because it's not at all obvious that production (*poiêsis*) and moral action (*praxis*) are two completely different things. This is why Aristotle points out their difference over and over again. It's not enough to distinguish them. We have to make clear in every way possible that production is not action and action not production. And we will be forced to explicitly state each time whether we see something as a craft product or a moral action. For example, to classify teaching (*didaxis*), learning (*mathesis*), healing (*hygeiansis*), etc., as productions just is to apply to them the criteria of correctness that are proper to craft knowledge. It is not impossible to regard "teaching" as a matter of virtues of character displayed by the "teacher," as we often do today, but this activity will not then anymore count as a production in the strict sense of the term, it will not be judged according to criteria proper to craft knowledge, and its very definition should be stated in a different way.

Craft knowledge is defined in (2). It is the intellectual state that allows us to grasp the truth (for it "involv[es] true reason") concerning its object and whose object is the production of a thing. Let's take a simple example to see what this all means: What comprises the craft of building? Builder craftsmen know how to properly construct (and not by mistake or chance) a good house, when they know: (a) what materials are needed to construct it, the properties of these materials, and how they respond to different conditions; (b) the precise stages of the house's productive

process, what comes first or later, and the reasons for these temporal relations; (c) which craftsmen must contribute to provide the necessary materials (for instance, brick makers), who to trust, and what to ask from each of them (even if knowing the craft of building doesn't make builders able to play all these specific subservient roles); (d) the necessary tools, how to use them, and how to instruct their users. The craftsmen know the causes relevant to the production of a house. They are more like modern civil engineers than what we call a builder. The fact that the Aristotelian builder need not possess manual dexterity or physical strength is quite indicative: they are not the ones who dirty their hands with mud, or toil placing one brick on top of another. That's the manual workers who sometimes simply use their body without possessing any intellectual skill beyond the basic rational capacity of following orders.

(3) further clarifies what kind of knowledge (*theôria*) is included in the cognitive state of craft. It is a knowledge that concerns the things that are subject to human intervention, and more specifically, those that are subject to intervention in such a way that two things are clearly distinguished: the producing process and the result of production. You remember that in I 1 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, we had seen this somewhat strange image: as long as the productive process goes on, there is no house yet (only bricks), and once the house is created, there is no building process anymore, and therefore no builder as a builder. Because the builder has knowledge only of the productive process, over the house's production. Once the house is created, if the builder disappeared, the existence and quality of the house would not be affected.

This portrait of the possessors of craft knowledge should not create the impression that the sphere of craft is one of complete certainty and security. Let's not forget that the Aristotelian world that includes what admits of being otherwise is a world dependent on the vagaries of matter. Matter is a pole of resistance. For example, as perfect as the technical knowledge of a doctor can be, if the patient's body has sustained irreversible damage, the craft of medicine cannot achieve the desired result, which is to make the patients healthy or to keep them alive (*Rhet.* I 1 $1355^{b}12–14$). The vagaries of matter are infinite, unpredictable, and in many cases catastrophic as regards the production of the desired product. In the Aristotelian world the craftsman is only responsible for the knowledge of the properties of materials, not of those materials that are available at a particular time, just as the doctor is not responsible for the patient's condition at the first appointment or the teacher for the student's condition at the first lesson. Craftsmanship is exercised and is subject to criticism based only on how it uses or shapes existing materials.

The involvement of matter multiplies the ambiguity of craft and its products in another, more complex way. And this is because the materials involved are not always natural, but rather products of other craftsmen in chains of architectonic or subservient crafts. Here's a simple example. In a football team you have the trainer, the players, the coach. The trainer has the craft knowledge of how to properly train the players and the players must listen to the coach's directions, which should consider the abilities of the specific players. We watch the game, the team loses. Who is at fault? Is it the (architect and planner) coach who gave the wrong directions, is it

the players who did not follow the directions given by the coach or who are not themselves sufficiently "good material," or is it the trainer, who failed to get them into good condition? This ambiguity is inevitable and often unresolvable. But there exists ambiguity throughout Aristotle's sublunary world, throughout the fluid material world where matter plays the decisive role, not just in the world of production or of action.

(4) returns to the distinction between the producer and the final product, albeit in new terms: the starting-point of the production lies in the former, not the latter. "Starting point" here refers to (a) the craftsmen's grasp of the essence of the product and (b) the fact that they can start the productive process by activating their knowledge. After all, materials can't mobilize themselves to produce a house; the intervention of a producer is required. The importance of the product consists in the fact that despite all the vagueness that we just saw, the only assurance that the producer actually possesses the relevant craft knowledge is the goodness of the product, the extent to which the form in craftsmen's understanding is successfully transmitted to the final product.

The question still remains though: Why do we need the clear-cut distinction between craft and practical wisdom, between technical production and moral action? The latter, as we already know from the beginning of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, has to do with virtues and happiness, the former only with productive activities. Isn't it reasonable, we'd think today, to dedicate your life to a technical activity, to make it the center of your happiness? To dedicate your life to music, to art, to medicine, to shipbuilding, to farming? If we grasp Aristotle's answer to this question, we will have a clearer view not only of the reasons why he distinguishes action from production but also why he thinks that craft is a dangerous usurper.

To arrive at this answer, we need two more details concerning Aristotle's notion of craft. The first is that, according to Aristotle, it would be wrong to include some desiring or appetitive element in craft as an intellectual capacity, some motive that would make us practice it. For example, knowing how to build is not a motive to start building. Even knowing how to heal is not a motive to start healing others or oneself (*DA* III 9 $433^{a}4$–6). The second point, bearing on the first, is that craft is not a critic of its goals. Doctors know how to produce health; they don't possess the scientific knowledge of the value of health. It is not for the builders to decide how many or what sort of houses the city needs; they only know how to build them (III 3 $1112^{b}11$–16).

None of this leads to the conclusion that it would be foolish to dedicate oneself to art, to medicine, or to any other productive activity. What we are asked to reject is the idea *that to possess a craft knowledge* (e.g., medicine) is for us a sufficient *motive or justification* to want to exercise it (e.g., to become a doctor or, once a doctor, to continue practicing medicine), to want to make these activities the vehicle of our happiness. Obviously, some people may comprehend their happiness through the lens of their being devoted to exercising a certain craft. But this comprehension is not due to their possessing the craft knowledge itself, nor does it spring from it. It requires practical wisdom. And the justification of their deliberate choice will also be of a different kind. This is what we'll examine in the next chapter.

4.5 Chapter Summary

We now enter Book VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics* which introduces what may be the best-known and most discussed notion of Aristotle's ethics: *phronêsis* (practical wisdom). Practical wisdom is kind of a mystery. If we removed Book VI from the *Nicomachean Ethics*, no one would suspect its importance. It's only been referenced a couple of times until now and without its precise technical meaning no less. But even after Book VI it is again nowhere to be found, at least not in the forefront. In other works by Aristotle, we also encounter the concept of practical wisdom but not with exactly the same meaning as in Book VI. I will offer a detailed picture of practical wisdom in Chap. 5. In this chapter I examine the puzzles raised by Aristotle's distinction between the scientific and the calculative part of the rational soul and his brief comments about craft knowledge (*technê*), scientific knowledge (*epistêmê*), and theoretical wisdom (*sophia*). We are asked to realize—so I argue—that this mapping of the rational part of the soul is simply functional, meaning it helps us to bring forward the true causes of our errors concerning practical wisdom and the realm of practical affairs. And these errors are caused by the fact that science, theoretical wisdom, and craft knowledge tend to usurp the position of practical wisdom. I make this tendency more tangible by looking more closely at craft knowledge, the usurper that lives in the same house as practical wisdom, i.e. in the same section of the rational part of the soul, the calculative part.

4.6 Further Reading

For Aristotle's division of the parts of the soul in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, see Shields (2015). For a short but comprehensive introduction to Aristotle's notion of science, see Reeve (2012: 58–92). As it concerns Aristotle's notion of craft, Dunne's (1993) monograph is still helpful (see Chaps. 8 and 10); Broadie (2007: 85–100) criticizes Aristotle for offering a "depsychologized" notion of craft; Annas (2011: Chap. 3) draws on Aristotle's model of craft to analyze how we acquire the virtues of character; for a close reading of *Nicomachean Ethics* VI 4 on craft knowledge, see Kontos (2014: 207–216).

4.7 Study Questions

1. Why is it vital to Aristotle's ethics to contrast political science with the exact theoretical sciences?
2. Why do "calculative," "deliberative," and what "forms beliefs" describe the very same part of the soul?
3. In which sense is the end of political science not knowledge but action?

4. Why is it important to relativize the demand for exactness to each kind of science?
5. Why is it important to contrast practical wisdom with craft knowledge?
6. What exactly does craft knowledge know according to Aristotle?
7. Why, according to Aristotle, does craft knowledge include no desiring element?

4.8 Essay Question

"The gods had condemned Sisyphus to ceaselessly rolling a rock to the top of a mountain, whence the stone would fall back of its own weight. They had thought with some reason that there is no more dreadful punishment than futile and hopeless labor. […] All Sisyphus' silent joy is contained therein. His fate belongs to him. His rock is his own thing. […] I leave Sisyphus at the foot of the mountain! One always finds one's burden again. But Sisyphus teaches the higher fidelity that negates the gods and raises rocks. […] The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy" (Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, translated by Justin O'Brien. New York: Vintage Books, 1991. [*Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, pp. 163–168, Gallimard: Paris, 1942]).

Use Aristotle's notion of craft to explain why Sisyphus can*not* be happy.

Chapter 5
Practical Wisdom: At the Heart of Practical Truth

5.1 Practical Wisdom as the Virtue of Correct Deliberate Choice (VI 2, III 12)

Practical wisdom is the virtue of thought that enables us to grasp truth as it appears in the realm of actions or, in other words, practical truth. To show its complexity, let me begin by enumerating the functions of the calculative (or deliberative) part of the soul that are correctly or virtuously fulfilled, thanks to our possessing practical wisdom: (1) to correctly understand what happiness is and from which activities and practical ends it eventuates; so practical wisdom involves what Aristotle calls "political science," which is a knowledge of universals; (2) to inquire about and find out the appropriate means or ways to attain the ends that we consider to further happiness, which requires (2a) correct deliberation (*euboulia*) and (2b) cleverness (*deinotêta*); (3) to get a correct perception (*aisthêsis*) of the particular constituents of each moral action within its particular circumstances (let us call it "phronetic perception"); (4) to have the virtue of judging correctly the things deliberation is about, which is comprehension (*sunesis*); (5) to trigger the doing of the action itself, which Aristotle explains in terms of (5a) deliberate choice (*prohairesis*) and (5b) prescriptive power (*epitaktikê*). And there is more: practical wisdom itself is unattainable without the possession of the virtues of character!

Are people practically wise, then, only on the condition that they perform all these functions correctly? Is each one of these functions correctly performed only on the condition that all of them are? If it is so hard to acquire practical wisdom, there cannot be many practically wise people and, hence, one may wonder whether they are rare or rather constitute a regulative paradigm that one can only approximate.

The intriguing nature of practical wisdom made philosophers in the last two centuries as well as thinkers coming from very different disciplines (law, management, pedagogy, etc.) eager to exploit or appropriate Aristotle's notion of practical wisdom. It is no exaggeration to say that today it enjoys a well-deserved renaissance

P. Kontos, *Introduction to Aristotle's* Nicomachean Ethics, Palgrave Philosophy Today, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-41985-0_5

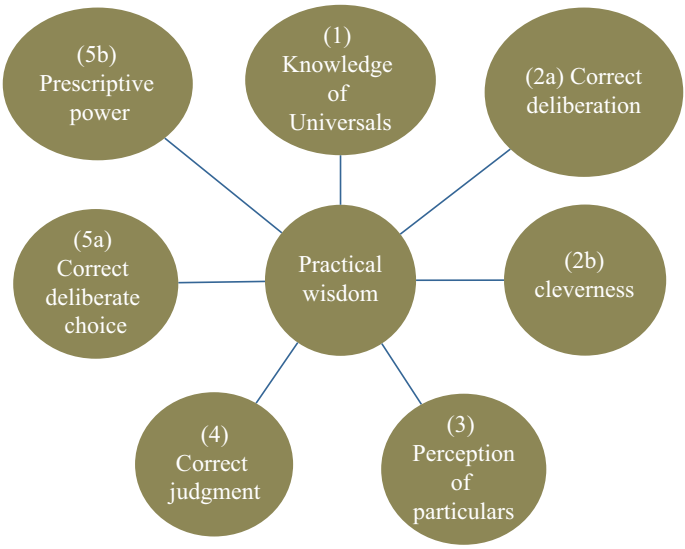


Diagram 5.1 The spokes of practical wisdom

or, as German scholars like to say, a rehabilitation. With all these puzzles and high expectations in mind, Diagram 5.1 may prove helpful, in that it illustrates the functions above mentioned as *spokes* of practical wisdom.

For reasons of clarity, I will begin by explaining correct deliberate choice, though in the pertinent section of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (VI 2), practical wisdom is not mentioned at all. Deliberate choice is extensively analyzed in the following passage (remember that we also met it in Sect. 2.1 in the discussion about the virtues of character):

VI 2 1139^{a}20–1139^{b}5

(1) [W]ild beasts have perception but do not share in action.
(2) What affirmation and denial are in the case of thought, that, in the case of desire, is precisely what pursuit and avoidance are. So, since virtue of character is a deliberately choosing state and deliberate choice is deliberative desire, it follows that both the reason must be true and the desire must be correct, if indeed the deliberate choice is to be an excellent one, and the very things the one must assert, the other must pursue.
(3) This, then, is practical thought and truth. […] in the case of the part involving practical thought, the good state is truth in agreement with correct desire.
(4) Of action, then, the starting-point—the source of the movement, not what it is for the sake of—is deliberate choice,
(5) and of deliberate choice, the starting-point is desire and reason that is for the sake of something. […]
(6) That is why deliberate choice is either desiderative understanding or thought-involving desire,
(7) and this sort of starting-point is a human being.

Let us follow the text line by line. (1) states that beasts—and children as well—do not share in action in the full sense of the term. Why? Because they lack the intellectual capacities required in order for them to be in a position to deliberately choose how they should act. This explanation needs, however, some qualification. For to anyone familiar with Aristotle's biology this view might look questionable since Aristotle sometimes attributes to animals not only intellectual capacities in general but even practical wisdom itself (*History of Animals* VIII 7 588^{a}25–588^{b}3). But there is no inconsistency: here, in Book VI, practical wisdom has a very narrow and technical sense, since it is the virtue of thought that dictates how we should act to achieve ends for which we are ready to give a justification. Animals, by contrast, are able to do nothing more than connect means with ends, which ends are nothing other than what they desire or need. It is one thing for my cat to know that by jumping and pressing the handle of the door, it will get into the house to find food or warmth, it is another thing to know whether this is right or wrong, just or unjust, polite or impolite, etc. (*Pol*. I 1 1252^{a}15–18). In the context of the present passage, the understanding of what is just or unjust, etc., is considered to be an integral part of deliberate choice, no matter whether it proves correct or incorrect.

(2) offers further clarification, albeit somehow unclear. The key notions are desire and reason. The desiring part is the one the virtues of character are connected with. But it is in the part that has reason that we meet deliberation (see Sect. 5.2). Good deliberation is the capacity to inquire about the means appropriate for realizing ends, though the ends themselves are not deliberation's object. For example, doctors deliberate about how they will cure the patient, not about whether health is valuable. Thus, if the intellectual function of deliberate choice had only to do with deliberation, we would conclude that deliberate choice regards only the means we must choose to achieve our ends. Though (2) might suggest such a reading, (6) fends it off by indicating that deliberate choice also involves understanding (*nous*), that is, the grasp of the very ends and starting-points of action. It follows that the intellectual part of deliberate choice has two functions: first, as involving understanding, it grasps the good (for instance, it understands that justice is a good and doing just actions is a constituent of happiness); second, as involving deliberation, it leads us to a conclusion about which particular actions are necessary in order for us to do the correct thing in the present circumstances—for instance, a particular just action.

However, (2) adds that deliberate choice also includes an element of desire—something that has to do with our motivation. For we know that desires are necessarily implicated in action. After all, that is one reason why the virtues of character are so important. Indeed, virtue of character, we recall, is actually defined as a "deliberately choosing state." Virtues of character, as the correct shapers of desires, belong to the desiderative part of the soul, not to the intellectual one; they ensure that desires obey reason, they do not transform them into reason. Thus, neither the virtues of character themselves nor desires are in charge of deliberate choice. Nonetheless, states of character are a necessary condition for our making correct decisions. If the states of character were not correctly cultivated, our desires could go wrong or could obtain an inappropriate strength. That is why (2) emphasizes that

good deliberate choice is only possible on the basis of good desires. But deliberate choice is rational through and through and does not take place on the terrain of desires. Desires will be involved in deliberate choice in some other way.

One learns what this way is in (3), (5), and (6), which formulate three variations of one and the same claim, and, in addition, offer some clarification of the term "correct reason" used in (2). In (3) Aristotle speaks of "practical thought and truth." In a sense, both for theoretical and practical reason, "truth" is always a question of what is true rather than false. Correct action is the truth-maker of practical truth. But here Aristotle turns his attention not to the truth-maker of practical truth (to which I will return) but to its conditions of possibility, that is, to the very possibility of our performing a good action. These conditions (i.e., correct reason and correct desire), though two in number, should be always regarded as a pair: the formulations "truth in agreement with correct desire" and "desire and reason" say as much. Such an agreement between desire and reason is not a simple coincidence between a desire that happened to be correct and a reason that happened to be true. Within deliberate choice, desire and reason are mutually dependent and it would be a mistake to sever one from the other: true reason without correct desire and vice versa are chimeras. That is why Aristotle coins the expressions "desiderative understanding" and "thought-involving desire." And if there can be no true reason about the ends of action in the absence of correct desires, any sort of incorrectness of one's desires should mirror a corresponding untruth of practical understanding (and vice versa). That is why one should latch onto Aristotle's account of deliberate choice in two complementary ways: on the one hand, as a *descriptive* analysis illustrating the fact that desire and reasoning are mutually dependent and, hence, congruent and, on the other, as a *normative* analysis of good deliberate choice and its being conditional on true reasoning and correct desire, that is, by their "best harmony" (*Pol.* VII 15 $1334^{b}10$). Thus, the mere congruity or agreement between desire and reasoning is not a normative criterion—congruity is not correctness.

But this intertwining of reason and desire may give rise—indeed, has given rise—to a number of false views of the matter. Let me mention the most widespread ones:

One might think that desire and reason are not distinguishable at all, not even conceptually. But this cannot be the case for Aristotle's framework, since he is explicit that feelings and reason belong to two distinct parts of the soul and that while children have desires, they do not have practical reason in the full sense of the term. Even within the context of deliberate choice itself, as (2) shows, desires and reason have two distinct functions: reason asserts and denies, while desires pursue and avoid. To know *practical* truth does indeed involve being attracted to the good and, thus, pursuing it. But this doesn't imply a seamless integration of desires and reason.

Or one might want to argue that desires provide us with a conception of the good, while reasoning merely amounts to deliberating about the means. Aristotle himself says that "deliberate choice is of the things that further the end" (VI 3 $1111^{b}26$–27). Yes, indeed. But deliberate choice involves understanding—see (6)—which is always connected with starting-points and ends, not with means; and, in deliberate

choice, reason—see (2)—"asserts" or "denies," that is, somehow endorses or rejects the desiderative material. In other words, although desires equip us with a certain familiarity and a more or less reliable inclination toward the good (or the apparent good), within the ambit of deliberate choice the good is rationally shaped. Besides, this is why deliberate choice is a close relative of wish (III 2 $1111^{b}19$–20). Remember that wish is a rational desire (*DA* III 9 $432^{b}5$): we wish for something (for an end) *because* we believe it to be good—see Sect. 2.4. Though deliberate choice and wish are not one and the same thing, wish is involved in deliberate choice; rationally desired (or, in other words, practical) ends are involved too.[1]

The agreement or cooperation between desire and reason allows deliberate choice to function as, (4), "the starting-point—the source of the movement, not what it is for the sake of." It is quite obvious why deliberate choice is the starting-point of action: once I know the end (thanks to practical thought), which particular action to perform (thanks to deliberation), and I have the pertinent desire, then, if no impediment stands in the way, I trigger the action itself. What sounds somehow uncanny is the claim that deliberate choice is *not* the end of action. But this brief comment is meant to prevent the reader from assuming that to make correct decisions is the end of the story. Yes, deliberate choice reflects both the way we are reasoning and our desires—or who we are. But Aristotle brings our attention to the pitfall of disregarding the fact that the final desideratum in the realm of practical truth is the action itself. In a sense, deliberate choice is still an interior process while, in reality, the truth-maker of practical truth is nothing besides the doing of the pertinent action. Aristotle himself resolves the ambiguity in Book X: "It is disputed whether it is deliberate choice or action that is the more controlling element in virtue, on the supposition that it depends on both. Well, its completeness clearly does depend on both" (X 8 1178^{a} 34–$1178^{b}1$). If I know the deliberate choice of a person, then I know whether they are virtuous or not. But the only way to recognize the quality of deliberate choice is to see it imprinted or captured in actions. Actions, for their part, if they are evaluated independently of the deliberate choice that brought them forth, are off the radar of genuine moral evaluation. Without actions done, deliberate choice is suspended in interior space. Without deliberate choice, actions are devoid of moral value.

Deliberate choice is so essentially related to human nature that, according to (7), "this sort of starting-point is a human being." One encounters here the idea, already announced in (1), that other animals do not do actions from deliberate choice. Children too are unable to do such actions. This is something we nowadays also accept to the extent that we do not hold children fully responsible for what they do. Certain sociopaths cannot do such actions either; this is something we also accept, at least with some qualifications. Unfortunately, Aristotle also denies that women and natural slaves

[1] What is the difference between wish and deliberate choice? Aristotle stresses the fact that we do not wish only for things that are up to us to do or not to do but also for impossible things, that is, things beyond human capacities. For instance, one may wish for immortality (III 2 $1111^{b}22$–23) or to do "two things at the same time or opposite ones" (*Met*. IX 5 $1048^{a}21$–22). By contrast, deliberate choice only concerns what is up to as.

are capable of deliberate choice. A completely baseless biology of feminine nature and an equally flawed conception of what he calls "slaves by nature" are the causes of this mistake. The good news is that these untenable assumptions can be easily removed without any damage to Aristotle's practical philosophy and its central tenets.

5.2 Deliberation and Cleverness (VI 9, 12 and III 3)

I have tried to put the components or spokes of practical wisdom together. I started from deliberate choice because it nicely depicts the complexity of the matter. There we also met the notion of deliberation, to which Aristotle refers so often that many readers of the *Nicomachean Ethics* have the impression that practical wisdom is nothing but the virtue of thought that enables us to deliberate well. The following clause may create the same impression: "For of the practically-wise person we say that this most of all is the function: to deliberate well" (VI 7 $1141^{b}9$–10). This sentence is ambiguous, however, for reasons that I will explain below. For one thing, as was stressed in the previous section, practical wisdom concerns the whole sphere of deliberate choice, while deliberation is just one of the intellectual functions involved in deliberate choice. Aristotle's analysis of deliberation runs as follows:

VI 9 $1142^{b}20$–33

(1) But it seems to be a good thing to have deliberated well; for it is this sort of correctness of deliberation that is good deliberation—the sort that is able to gain a good.
(2) One can also reach this by a false deduction, however—that is, reach the thing one should do but not by the means one should, the middle term being false. […]
(3) Further, one person may deliberate a long time to reach it, while another does so quickly. The former, then, is not yet a case of good deliberation, which is correctness in accord with what is beneficial and about what to do, how to do it, and when to do it.
(4) Further, it is possible to deliberate well either unconditionally or in relation to a particular end. Unconditionally good deliberation correctly furthers the unconditional end, the particular sort, some particular end.
(5) If it is characteristic of practically-wise people to have deliberated well, then good deliberation will be the sort of correctness that is in accord with what is advantageous in furthering the end about which practical wisdom is the true supposition.[2]

Deliberation is the process by which we find out the way—the right means and actions—to realize our ends. To find them, one should inquire about or calculate

[2] The Greek phrase "what is advantageous in furthering the end about which practical wisdom is the true supposition" (and, intentionally, its English translation too) is ambiguous since the "about which" may refer either to "what is advantageous in furthering the end" or to "the end" itself. The latter reading is the most natural. The ancient commentators did not have any doubt about it (Eustratius, *CAG* XX 364.15–25; Heliodorus, *CAG* XIX/2 127.28–34).

what could further the end. From that broad perspective, deliberation takes place in the realm of productions and in the realm of actions alike. The more complicated things are, the more we resort to deliberation. For instance, we do not deliberate about how to write the letters of the alphabet, but practicing medicine or navigation is, for the most part, impossible without deliberation.

The analysis of deliberation aims, then, at providing a definition that, on the one hand, will put productions and actions under the same umbrella while, on the other hand, shedding light on their difference.

(1) stresses in an apparently neutral way that correct deliberation is the one that attains a good. Thus, while even successful thieves correctly inquire about the means to their ends, their deliberation is not considered to be correct, if it does not lead to something actually good but only to something that appears good to the thieves themselves.

Deliberation seems to be like a correct syllogism: both the premises and the reasoning that connect them must be correct in order for the conclusion to be correct as well. This is exactly the point made in (2). A first example borrowed from medicine might prove helpful:

[Major premise] Light meat is healthy.
[Minor premise] This meat is light.
Conclusion: This meat is healthy.

In order for the conclusion to be correct, as we saw, both premises must be correct. For instance, if this meat is not light, the conclusion is incorrect, even though this particular meat might be healthy for other reasons. The error resides in the process of deliberation or inquiry that seeks a middle term whose presence explains or justifies the conclusion (in this case the term "light"). Such errors may also concern the major premise. Correct deliberation is a capacity to move from correct premises to correct conclusions.

Let us now see an example of practical syllogism in the narrow sense of the term, which involves moral actions:

[Major premise] Just actions are constituents of what I consider to be happiness.
[Minor premise] On this particular occasion, this action is just.
Conclusion: Do this action.

Some people err regarding the major premise; for instance, unjust people believe that an unjust action may further their happiness. Others err regarding the minor premise; for instance, someone may be wrong about which action is just in the present circumstances. Others reach the right conclusion and do the right action but not through a correct syllogism; for instance, they may do a just action, but do it for the sake of profit. It is noteworthy that mistakes regarding the major premise are mistakes regarding our understanding of the starting-points of action and mistakes regarding the minor premise are mistakes of phronetic perception (see Sect. 5.3), that is, not mistakes regarding how we connect the premises with one another.

The major premise of a practical syllogism needs additional clarifications. For deliberation does not concern the ends of action: "We deliberate not about ends,

though, but about the things that further ends" (III 3 $1112^{b}11–12$). Nonetheless, deliberation itself and its conclusion cannot be correct unless the major premise is also correct. Thus, the correctness of ends or the correct understanding of the starting-points of action is a necessary condition of correct deliberation and therefore only the practically wise person deliberates well, not the base person. Thanks to the implication of ends within the process of deliberation, there is also room to distinguish between deliberation within the realm of production and deliberation within the realm of action. For it is only from this perspective that one is in a position to distinguish the deliberation that concerns particular productive ends from the deliberation that concerns our life as a whole and our happiness. Otherwise, the respective processes of deliberation are quite alike. For instance, they resemble each other regarding their connection to time: correct deliberation is the one that respects the urgency of the matter (see Sect. 2.7). More importantly, the necessary implication of the ends allows us to understand why practical wisdom is the virtue of good deliberation: for the capacity to correctly understand the starting-points of action is a question of practical wisdom. (5) says as much.

Aristotle's notion of deliberation is certainly intended to emphasize the rational character of our moral doings, their relying on a sort of correct syllogism, not a sort of inspiration or a merely spirited reaction. It is also intended, however, to make clear that the conclusion of practical syllogism is the doing of the action itself; people who steadily miss the mark of doing good actions, no matter how reliably correct their deliberation may be, are not virtuous, nor do they possess practical wisdom:

VI 12 $1144^{a}23–29$

There is, indeed, a capacity they call "cleverness," and this is the sort of thing that, when it comes to the things that further hitting a proposed target, is able to do these and to hit upon them. If, then, the target is a noble one, this capacity is praiseworthy, but, if it is a base one, it is unscrupulousness. That is why we call both practically-wise people and unscrupulous ones "clever." Practical wisdom, however, is not the capacity of cleverness but does not exist without this capacity.

Cleverness is the intellectual skill needed to find the right means to any random end. It looks like the virtue of good deliberation, if the latter is examined independently of the goodness of the ends envisaged. Both base people and virtuous people can be clever. Thus, in contrast to good deliberation, cleverness is defined as a capacity that has two opposite results: it leads to the realization of both good and base ends. This nicely echoes our modern notion of instrumental rationality. What matters the most, however, is that practical wisdom *necessarily* involves cleverness: practically wise people should be clever, that is, able to find the best means to their ends.

5.3 Phronetic Perception: *This* Is Just, Don't You *See* it? (VI 8)

We know by now that the minor promise of practical syllogism concerns particulars. We met the notion of particulars in Sect. 2.7 about the constituents of moral action. And it has been signalized in passing that practical reason also performs a function of a perceptual sort, what I earlier called "phronetic perception." Practical wisdom involves such a correct or accurate perception of particulars: it can correctly and reliably identify what is, for instance, a just or unjust action in the present circumstances. The pertinent passage is, according to some commentators, the most difficult in the *Nicomachean Ethics*; I will limit myself to presenting an interpretation that meets a large consensus:

VI 8 1142^{a}23–30

(1) But that practical wisdom is not scientific knowledge is evident; for it is concerned with the last thing, as we said; for what is doable in action is of this sort.
(2) It stands opposed, then, to understanding; for understanding is of the terms for which there is no reason, but practical wisdom concerns the last thing, of which there is not scientific knowledge but rather perception
(3) —not the perception of special objects
(4) but like the sort by which we perceive that the last thing among mathematical objects is a triangle; for it will stop there too. But this is more perception than practical wisdom, although of another kind than that.

(1) stresses that practical wisdom is not a theoretical science like those whose object is something eternal and necessary. Though it has access to universals (see Sect. 5.4), here Aristotle highlights the fact that the object of practical wisdom and the object of our moral experience in general is something particular, that is, a "last thing," whose change depends on human action. (This "last thing" is called *prakton*, something "doable in action.") Practical wisdom, for the same reason, is opposed to understanding (*nous*). Again, this is not to say that there is no practical understanding at all, but that here the emphasis is put not on our knowledge of the starting-points but on our perception of particulars.

(2) invites us to assume that practical wisdom is a sort of correct perceptual capacity. But since our minds immediately go to our five senses, (3) rushes to explain that phronetic perception is "not the perception of special objects," which are the objects of those senses. They are so called because each sense has its own proper object, to which no other sense has access (*DA* II 6 418^{a}11–16): for instance, it's vision alone that sees colors, it's hearing alone that hears sounds, etc. Phronetic perception is not of that sort. It identifies particular just or unjust, honest or dishonest, courageous or coward actions or state of affairs. For example: a hungry child steals a loaf of bread. We are invited to judge whether this particular action is just or unjust and, to do so, it's not enough to know a universal principle dictating that

justice is good or which actions are just. We should be able to recognize or perceive justice or injustice *in* the particular action.

What does the practically wise person perceive? Aristotle is aware of the fact that the answer is anything but obvious. Thus, (4) proposes an analogy: phronetic perception is analogous to that "by which we perceive that the last thing among mathematical objects is a triangle" (Attention: the phrase does not mean "by which we perceive that the triangle is the last thing"; by mistranslating the phrase in this way many scholars have been led to confuse the function of phronetic perception with the function of deliberation, as if phronetic perception itself were a sort of inquiry.) The analogy is helpful indeed: Imagine yourself in the process of resolving a geometrical problem; a complicated scheme with many overlapping lines and figures is drawn on the blackboard. To resolve the problem, you must search for the most basic figures and let us assume, with Aristotle, that these are the triangles. But it is one thing to know the geometrical rules that pertain to triangles, it is another to be able to identify the triangles within a complicated scheme. The former is a sort of universal knowledge, while the latter is a sort of perceptual knowledge or skill.

Phronetic perception is of the same kind as in the geometrical example. We begin with a problem: a decision to make about how to act or a judgment about an action already done by myself or others or about a state of affairs. To do so, we need to isolate those elements that are salient or relevant in the present circumstances. In the previous example with the child, these elements may be the age and the nature of the theft. Phronetic perception reliably—as much as this is possible for human beings—identifies these elements in their connectedness and thereby renders us able to correctly see the moral quality of the action or of the state of affairs. To play its role well, phronetic perception requires experience, for in moral matters people see correctly "because they have an eye formed from experience" (VI 11 $1143^{b}13$–14). By contrast, the inability to discern these features is like a sort of color blindness.

It comes as no surprise, then, that contemporary moral realism heavily draws on Aristotle's phronetic perception.

5.4 The Definition of Practical Wisdom (VI 5–6)

It's time to read the definition of practical wisdom:

VI 5 1140^{b}4–6

Therefore, the remaining possibility is for practical wisdom to be a true state involving reason, a practical one, concerned with what is good or bad for a human being.

That practical wisdom is a "state" and, in particular, an intellectual state is something we already know from Sect. 4.2. The expression "true state" might sound strange, for Aristotle usually speaks of "true reason," not of true states. However, intellectual states are directed toward or target on truth and, hence, they grasp it, and function therefore as truth-holders.

Practical wisdom is a *practical* state. On the one hand, practical wisdom is preoccupied with the agents' own actions and what is good and advantageous for them and aims at doing these actions: "It seems, then, to be characteristic of a practically-wise person to be able to deliberate correctly about what is good and advantageous for himself" (VI 4 1140^{a}25–27). From this perspective, practical wisdom is prescriptive (VI 10 1143^{a}8): it guides deliberate choice in triggering the action. But the *Nicomachean Ethics* draws a broader picture of practical wisdom as knowledge of practical matters *in general* rather than as an intellectual virtue simply guiding our deliberate choices. The very definition above mentioned is a clear sign of this second meaning; here the emphasis is put on what is good or bad for human beings in general. From this perspective, practical wisdom is the virtue of thought that enables us to know what kind of actions are, for the most part, appropriate for human beings, or what kind of actions are good or bad for a specific group (specified according to natural capacities, age, gender, political environment, etc.) whether in particular circumstances or in the abstract.

(What is good or bad for human beings in general and for each individual in particular is a question we addressed in our discussion of happiness. Nothing new is added in the present context with the exception of VI 13, whose analysis I will postpone till Sect. 9.1.)

How do we acquire practical wisdom? Aristotle does not address the question directly. It certainly requires—as all virtues of thought do—a certain education, for instance, the education provided by the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Politics*. In addition, it requires experience—as also craft knowledge, the other intellectual state which deals with particulars, does—or "the eye of experience." Experience of what? Aristotle doesn't tell, but it should be experience of moral actions we or others did, their outcome, how we now appraise our past actions, what has been the impact of good or bad luck on our life, what sort of feelings or desires made it hard or easy for us to judge correctly and to make correct decisions or to follow our best judgment, etc.[3]

But this is not enough. The acquisition of practical wisdom also requires the possession of the virtues of character. Though practical wisdom itself is the standard by which the mean and, hence, the virtues of character themselves are defined, it is impossible to acquire practical wisdom at first place unless our ethical states are well shaped. Aristotle will later use a well-chosen metaphor to describe the non-bad or non-corrupted condition of the states of character as a prerequisite for our being

[3] Aristotle's *empeiria* is not what we mean by "experience." Today, we take "experience" to be something like a mental process or occurrence (*Erlebnis*) which, for instance, is recorded in memory. For Aristotle, things go the other way around: memories give rise to *empeiria*, though not necessarily. Suppose that A perceived that when Peter was sick with a fever, giving him honey-water was followed by a reduction in fever and retains this connection in memory. Then A also perceived that giving honey-water to others has been also followed by a reduction in their fever. A retains these connections in memory. If A is able to associate drinking honey-water with fever reduction, A has "one experience," since "memories that are many in number form one experience" (*Posterior Analytics*, 100^{a}5–6). Thus, *empeiria* is a cognitive accomplishment; it doesn't grow naturally or with the simple accumulation of perceptions or memories (see *Met*. I 1 980^{b}25–981^{a}12).

potential possessors of practical wisdom: habits must be prepared beforehand "like earth that is to nourish seed" (X 9 1179^{b}26). Yet the sort of impact that the states of character have on our capacity to acquire practical wisdom will remain quite unclear until we see, in Sects. 6.2, 6.3, 6.4, 6.5, the sort of damage *bad* or corrupted states of character cause to this capacity.

What is the object of practical wisdom's knowledge? Practical wisdom as the virtue of thought regarding matters of action is the virtue of a twofold practical knowledge: first, of the universal knowledge about the starting-points of action we also met in political science (such a starting-point is the definition of happiness) and, second, of a quasi-perceptual knowledge directed to particular actions and states of affairs. Whoever does not possess them both is not practically wise. Neither replaces or substitutes for the other and neither is a simple byproduct of the other:

VI 7 1141^{b}14–16

Nor is practical wisdom of universals only. On the contrary, it must also know the particulars; for it is practical, and action is concerned with particulars.

In Sect. 5.3 I explained the perceptual knowledge involved in practical wisdom. How now should one understand the universal knowledge? If it is the same as the one included in political science, do practical wisdom and political science coincide?

The political science explored in Aristotle's *Politics* and *Nicomachean Ethics* provides only a knowledge of universals and of the kinds of relevant particulars—it does not coincide with practical wisdom. It only overlaps with, *without being identical* to, the universal knowledge included in the latter. The overlapping is only partial because these two types of knowledge show, at least, two important divergences which it is impossible to eliminate:

(1) The universal knowledge embedded in practical wisdom is a component of a truly practical and twofold knowledge, not an independent body of universal knowledge such as the knowledge embodied by the *Politics* and the *Nicomachean Ethics* themselves. The latter only have a theoretical grasp on the kinds of particulars one should factor in, without having to deal with those particulars themselves. By contrast, practical wisdom deals with these very particulars and deliberates about them; its universal component serves its practical and particular-oriented function. In other words, to write the *Nicomachean Ethics* or the *Politics* the political scientist hardly needs to exercise the right phronetic perception or the subtle capacity of decency to deal with particulars.
(2) The *Politics* and the *Nicomachean Ethics* exhibit and incorporate their starting-points as starting-points about matters that hold for the most part and, in that sense, they also hold for the most part or in outline. Nevertheless, they do not take this to mean that their starting-points are unstable and changeable, as if, for instance, another theoretical treatise could yield a new or different definition of happiness or of the virtues of character. With practical wisdom things are different: although the good deliberate choices of the practically wise person are steadily grounded in the same solid starting-points, they incorporate or accom-

modate them in the major premise of ever new deliberate choices, deliberations, and practical syllogisms, and so on, made by a particular person at the moment of ever new actions in every new circumstance. Thus, though solid in themselves, the starting-points stand, from practical wisdom's perspective, on a *moving vehicle*, on the ever new deliberate choices, and hence they are seen as moving too. In other words, the practically wise people inescapably experience starting-points in a twofold way: (a) each time they—mostly without any effort or deliberation, but just by being the kind of person they are—put these starting-points in the major premise directing their new particular actions; (b) the starting-points are each time specified or filled in with precision according to the demands of the present action and, in this sense, they admit of change. There is nothing strange then in the claim that the starting-points of action admit of change (VI 5 $1140^{a}33$–34; *EE* II 6 $1222^{b}41$–42).

5.5 Comprehension (VI 10)

I have by now examined all the components or strokes of practical wisdom as I presented them in Diagram 5.1, all but one, namely, correct judgment. Aristotle connects it with comprehension (*sunesis*). This is a delicate matter for Aristotle's analysis is somehow elliptical and ambiguous and only occupies some ten lines. It deserves, however, some space in an Introduction to Aristotle's ethics, because it has been revived and extensively exploited by modern philosophy and, especially, by hermeneutics post Hans-Georg Gadamer.

VI 10 $1142^{b}34$–$43^{a}15$

(1) Comprehension, too, that is, good-comprehension […] is not the same as scientific knowledge […], nor is it any one of the sciences dealing with a particular area, as medicine is concerned with healthy things […] For comprehension is not concerned with what always is and is unchanging, […] but with those things one might puzzle and deliberate about.
(2) That is why it is concerned with the same things as practical wisdom,
(3) although comprehension is not the same as practical wisdom. For practical wisdom is a prescriptive virtue, since what should be done or not is its end, whereas comprehension is discerning (*kritikê*) only. (For comprehension and good-comprehension are the same […])
(4) […] just as learning something is called 'comprehension' when one is using scientific knowledge, it is also so called when one is using belief to discern, when someone else speaks, matters with which practical wisdom is concerned—that is, discern correctly.

In (1), in reaction to Plato (see, for instance, *Cratylus*, 411a, 412a) and his somewhat negative views on the knowledge of perishable things, Aristotle dissents from identifying comprehension with scientific knowledge. Comprehension is not to be

located in the scientific part of the soul, since it is not about eternal and unchangeable things but rather the same things deliberation is about. The intellectual state of comprehension belongs to the calculative part of the soul—that is, the deliberative part. It should not be included, however, among the crafts since it is concerned with the same things as practical wisdom: it is strictly practical, not craft-like. But, according to (3), though practical, comprehension also differs from practical wisdom. And this divergence is due to the fact that practical wisdom is prescriptive, while comprehension is *merely* judgment-oriented.

But what does "*merely* judgment-oriented" really mean? Well, it does not involve charging comprehension with a sort of deficiency. For there is no doubt that comprehension *is* a virtue of thought of some sort (I 13 1108^{a}7–8), since both in (1) and (3) Aristotle equates comprehension with good comprehension. The contrast at issue is rather a matter of *cartography*. Insofar as it is prescriptive, in the sense of initiating and guiding actions, practical wisdom is active within the ambit of deliberate choice as the starting-point of actions. By contrast, insofar as comprehension is not prescriptive, it functions outside the ambit of deliberate choice and, by entailment, its practical judgments do not trigger moral actions here and now.

And here is the interpretive dilemma we are facing: first, which is the common view, one might want to claim that the exercise of one and the same intellectual state admits of a certain ancillary differentiation according to whether it is active inside (by being prescriptive) or outside (by being merely judgmental) the ambit of deliberate choice. From this viewpoint, comprehension represents practical wisdom itself exercised in specific occurrences or a modification of practical wisdom. Second, one might want to argue that practical wisdom is not merely capable of correct judgment but also prescriptive; only comprehension is merely capable of correct judgment. And comprehension, as a virtue of thought on its own, can function independently of practical wisdom because the cognitive and ethical states required for doing correct actions are not identical with those required for correctly judging matters appearing outside the ambit of deliberate choice. And, hence, some people will possess comprehension without necessarily being practically wise and will be able to correctly discern practical matters from outside the ambit of their deliberate choice, whereas they sometimes fail to make fully correct deliberate choices. Unfortunately, VI 10 does not provide us with the support needed to corroborate one or the other interpretation.

However one wishes to settle the above open question, it is important to dispel two misleading ideas regarding comprehension. The first idea concerns its object. Aristotle says, in (4), that *sunesis* is used "when someone else speaks." Then one draws the conclusion that comprehension only responds to what others have to say and is closely related to giving and receiving advice. In Aristotle's own framework, this other-directedness is evidenced by the kinship between comprehension, consideration (*gnômê*), and sympathetic consideration (*suggnômê*), since the latter two apply in our understanding of others and their situation (VI 11 1143^{a}19–24). Indeed, comprehension is paradigmatically applied to our serving as spectators who appraise

others' actions. Nevertheless, it would be quite arbitrary to reason as follows: practical wisdom judges only the agent's own actions whereas comprehension judges the actions of others. For such a conclusion is unfaithful to the spirit of Aristotle's ethics and fails to capture the political or other-directed aspect of practical wisdom itself, which is active whenever we undertake actions for the sake of others or for the sake of the community (see Sect. 5.6). More importantly, one should notice that there is no impediment to accepting that comprehension can also consider the *agent's own past actions*. In their case comprehension is, for the most part, retrospective: should I have done what I did?

The second misleading idea is found in the following line of thought: if comprehension is not prescriptive, it is theoretical and so is not influenced by human desires and feelings. But this is totally mistaken. Aristotle's view throughout the *Nicomachean Ethics* is that the peculiarity of practical matters resides, among other things, in the fact that our ethical states partially determine our intellectual capacity to understand practical truth, no matter whether we occupy the position of the deliberator in a course of action or the position of someone who simply listens to a lecture on political science. Yet, things are more complicated. For, on the one hand, it is the very prescriptive character of practical wisdom that makes it require the ethical virtues. On the other hand, for the reasons just mentioned, comprehension as a virtue of thought *appears* to be impossible without the virtues of character. Thus, it would be vain and misguided to search in Aristotle for desire-free or disinterested spectators or judges of practical affairs who would allegedly discern practical truth no matter what their ethical character might be. Hence, the only controversial issue is whether the cognitive state of comprehension belongs to the practically wise person alone or *also* to other types of agents who possess the starting-point of practical matters, that is, among other things, a correct grasp of happiness. For their ethical states are not base, albeit not fully virtuous either (see Sects. 6.3 and 6.4).

I will not pursue this discussion any further. I hope it is clear by now why Aristotle's notion of comprehension is at the root of modern attempts to describe a sort of moral judgment that evaluates states of affairs or actions already done by ourselves or others or actions and plots we read about, for instance, in literature. In hermeneutics, comprehension has been elevated to the position of the hermeneutical virtue par excellence.

5.6 The Sub-branches of Practical Wisdom (VI 8)

Throughout Book VI Aristotle reasons as if practical wisdom were an intellectual virtue that concerns our own actions or the actions of other individuals. But in VI 8 he introduces a broad notion of practical wisdom which applies to all spheres of our activities, be it the intimacy of household or political rule. I will not go into much detail; I only want to underline how anachronistic it is to impose upon Aristotle's ethics an individualistic perspective.

VI 8 1141^{b}23–33

(1) Of the practical wisdom [4] concerned with the city, the architectonic part is legislative science (*nomothetikê*), while the part concerned with particulars has the name common to both—"politics." This part is practical and deliberative, since a decree is doable in action, as the last thing. That is why only these people are said to take part in politics, since only they do things in just the way handicraftsmen do.

(2) It also seems that the practical wisdom concerned with oneself as an individual is most of all practical wisdom, and it is this that has the name common to all the sorts. Of the other sorts, one is household management, another legislative science (*nomothesia*), another politics, and, of the latter, one part is deliberative and the other judicial.

In (2) Aristotle invites us to broaden the concept of practical wisdom so that it applies to four different sorts of practical knowledge: (a) a narrow practical wisdom concerned with oneself as an individual (henceforth: N-practical wisdom), (b) household management, (c) legislation, and (d) politics in the narrow sense of *Tagespolitik* (henceforth: N-politics), which is further bifurcated into (d1) the deliberative and (d2) the judicial part. One can hardly overestimate the significance of this terminological clarification: all these sorts of practical knowledge, instantiating the branches of practical wisdom itself, are expected to meet the critical requirement stated in VI 6 1141^{b}14–16 (see Sect. 5.4): they should, by definition, encompass both knowledge of universals and knowledge of particulars. Otherwise, they would not constitute forms of true practical *knowledge* at all, or they would not constitute *practical* knowledge.

I will only make some comments about "legislation," or legislative practical wisdom, for it is the most challenging and, at the same time, revelatory case. (1) leads the reader to assume, at least provisionally, that legislation deals only with universals, not with particulars. Only N-politics, Aristotle seems to say, is about particulars.

At first glimpse, indeed, Aristotle makes three claims. First, legislative science is exclusively about universals while only N-politics is about particulars. Thus, Aristotle seems simply to be alluding to the well-known opposition between the universality of the law and the particularity of decrees. Second, legislative science has nothing to do with actions in the strict sense of the term. Third, legislative science is neither practical nor deliberative. But the meaning of "legislative science" at this juncture (i.e., in 1141^{b}25) is highly ambiguous. For the above three claims would be, from Aristotle's own point of view, entirely untenable if they were to concern legislative practical wisdom (i.e., the *legislation* appearing in 1141^{b}32). For legislative *practical wisdom* necessarily possesses two branches, both a universal and a particulars-oriented knowledge. It is the intellectual practical state of the

[4] Scaliger and Susemihl, not without good reason, seclude *phronêsis*. Then, one should read "Of the [intellectual] state concerned with the city."

excellent legislators that enables them to accomplish the political action of legislating correctly and reliably. Thus, there can be no doubt that legislative practical wisdom, though not identical with N-politics, is both practical and deliberative. Indeed, in Book VIII of the *Politics*, Aristotle observes the excellent legislator in action and examines the particulars legislators should look at to accomplish their work. Such particulars concern the size of the city to be established (or the one whose constitution the legislator is invited to reform), its territory, its access to the sea and its naval power, regulations, etc.

How do the above-mentioned sub-branches of practical wisdom differ from one another? The difference cannot lie in the sort of universal knowledge they include, for in all cases one should possess knowledge of the starting-points of action, that is, knowledge about the essence of happiness, its constituents, and its conditions of possibility. The difference must lie in the sort of particulars they are dealing with. In this regard, I make the following suggestions: (a) the particulars each of the four sub-branches of practical wisdom deals with are different in kind and, hence, nobody can acquire one of the sub-branches without also having the specific experience that is proper to it; (b) the kinds of experience proper to these four branches of practical wisdom are structurally disparate, for the distance or the gap between particulars and universals is not necessarily of the same width in all of them. For one thing, political science provides us—for instance, in *Politics* VII—with a much more precise *theoretical* account of political particulars than the schematic account offered by the *Nicomachean Ethics* of the components of morally relevant actions (who, when, why, by what means, etc.). And, hence, one is entitled to assume that the phronetic perception exercised by the practically wise people regarding their own actions has, for the most part, a tremendously open and ambiguous terrain of particulars to factor in, while the phronetic perception exercised by the legislator can much more substantially rely on the universal knowledge concerning the sort of constitution-relevant particulars. For instance, finding out which is the correct size for a particular city may prove to be a more theory-laden enterprise than finding the mean in questions of courage or everyday justice.

Book VI is a unique hymn to practical wisdom. But in its very last lines, as we shall see in Sect. 9.1, it ends with its disparagement and its relegation to the status of a mere servant, to make room for a hymn to theoretical wisdom (*sophia*). Or rather not? This is the paradox that haunts the *Nicomachean Ethics* and its resolution can only come, if ever, at the end of the treatise and, hence, of the present Introduction too.

5.7 Chapter Summary

Practical wisdom is the virtue of thought that enables us to grasp truth as it appears in the realm of actions or, in other words, practical truth. The chapter offers a detailed examination of all the functions of the calculative part of the soul that are correctly or virtuously fulfilled, thanks to our possessing practical wisdom: (1) to

correctly understand what happiness is and from which activities and practical ends it eventuates; so practical wisdom involves what Aristotle calls "political science," which is a knowledge of universals; (2) to inquire about and find out the appropriate means or ways to attain the ends that we consider to further happiness, which requires (2a) correct deliberation (*euboulia*) and (2b) cleverness (*deinotêta*); (3) to get a correct perception (*aisthêsis*) of the particular constituents of each moral action within its particular circumstances (what I call "phronetic perception"); (4) to have the virtue of judging correctly the things deliberation is about, which is comprehension (*sunesis*); (5) to trigger the doing of the action itself, which Aristotle explains in terms of (5a) deliberate choice (*prohairesis*) and (5b) prescriptive power (*epitaktikê*). I conclude by examining the definition of practical wisdom in VI 5–6 and the distinction of its sub-branches in VI 8. I argue that by approaching these functions as intertwining spokes of practical wisdom, we are in a position not only to properly understand Aristotle's cryptic comments about practical wisdom itself but also the elusive notion of practical reason.

5.8 Further Reading

One should begin by Reeve's (2013) excellent line-by-line commentary on Book VI. A recent and thought-provoking account of practical truth is given by Olfert (2017: Chaps. 2 and 3). To get a first idea about the tremendous impact of Aristotle's notion of practical wisdom on the phenomenological and hermeneutical tradition from Heidegger on, see Kontos (2018b). For deliberate choice and deliberation, read Segvic (2011). The most discussed accounts of Aristotle's perceptual model are offered by McDowell (1979) and Wiggins (1987: Chap. 6). For a long—though currently unpopular—tradition of ancient and modern commentators suggesting that phronetic perception should be modeled upon the perception of common sensibles, see Kontos (2013: 32–53). Regarding the notion of comprehension, see the landmark analysis in Gadamer (2004: 309–319), and Kontos (2021: Chap. 1). For the sub-branches of practical wisdom and legislative knowledge, see Kontos (2021: Chap. 2).

5.9 Study Questions

1. What do the expressions "desiderative understanding" and "thought-involving desire" mean?
2. Why is correct action the truth-maker of practical truth?
3. In what sense is good deliberation about the ends of action and in which sense is it *not*?
4. Why does practical wisdom entail cleverness?
5. Why does practical wisdom have a perceptual component?

6. What examples would you give to show that practical wisdom needs a perceptual component?
7. Do practical wisdom and political science coincide?
8. Do practical wisdom and comprehension coincide?
9. Is legislative practical wisdom practical and deliberative? (Read VI 8 $1141^{b}23–33$)
10. Why is it important to distinguish sub-branches of practical wisdom?

5.10 Essay Question

"The person of real practical wisdom is the one who brings to bear upon a situation the greatest number of genuinely pertinent […] considerations commensurate with the importance of the deliberative context. The best practical syllogism is that whose minor premise arises out of such a one's perceptions, concerns, and appreciations. It records what strikes the person as the *in the situation most salient feature of the context* in which he has to act. This activates a corresponding major premise that spells out the general import of the concern that makes this feature the salient feature in the situation" (Wiggins 1987: 233).

(a) Identify which component of practical reason does each one of the above-mentioned tasks;
(b) Is there anything missing or inadequate in the above description of the practically wise person?

Chapter 6
Those Who Are Not Practically Wise: Baseness, Self-control, Lack of Self-control, and Beastliness

6.1 Involuntary Actions (III 1)

In the previous chapter, I drew a detailed portrait of the practically wise person. But to be practically wise is so demanding that one may doubt whether there are any such people around us or whether the possession of practical wisdom is an unattainable ideal. At any rate, if they exist at all, practically wise people will be rare. All the rest of us are not like them, though we are not all equally far away from them either. Aristotle puts us all under four headings: we may be base (*phaulos*) or vicious (*kakos*), self-controlled (*enkratês*), lacking self-control (*akratês*), or beast-like (*thêriôdês*). I shall discuss these four groups one by one.

First, though, we must remedy a lack in our discussion. From the beginning of this Introduction as well as from the beginning of the *Nicomachean Ethics* itself, the topic is moral action, moral experience, moral virtue, etc., and there is a concept that contemporary readers would expect to play a quite prominent role but that has not cropped up in our discussion: freedom. Today, the notion of freedom is an essential element in any moral theory, even though what freedom amounts to is a controversial matter. There is nothing similar in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. For one thing, there is nothing even close to the modern post-Cartesian subject or to Kant's transcendental freedom. Ancient Greeks are certainly familiar with the notion of political freedom as it springs, for instance, from the opposition between a free person and a slave. But its moral significance is skin deep. The only concept in Aristotle that remotely foreshadows the modern concept of freedom is the opposition between the voluntary (*hekousion*) and the involuntary (*akousion*).[1] To avoid a false matching, however, one should keep in mind two things: (a) the opposition between voluntary

[1] The discussion in *EE* II 7–8 has a more dialectical character (see Sect. 7.1). Though it is developed from a different perspective and focuses on "impulse" (*hormê*), it is structured around the concepts we also encounter in the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

P. Kontos, *Introduction to Aristotle's* Nicomachean Ethics, Palgrave Philosophy Today, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-41985-0_6

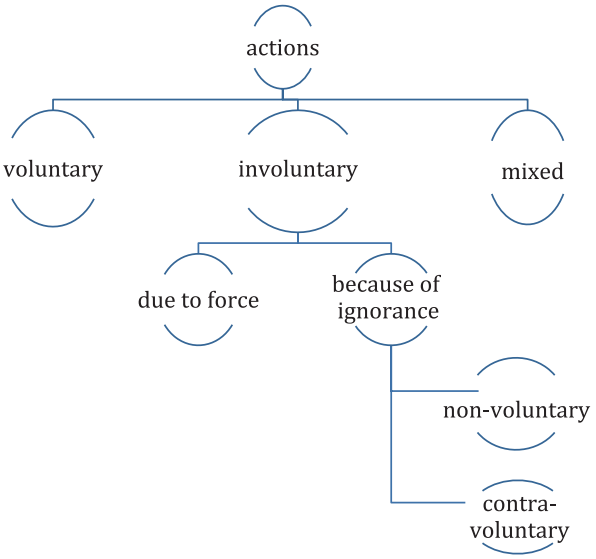


Diagram 6.1 Voluntary and involuntary actions

and involuntary actions emerges at the background of the social practice of praise and blame (III 5 1113^{b}21–33), not in the context of, say, our self-awareness regarding our free choices; (b) the account of the voluntary is grounded in the assumption that there are things that admit of being otherwise, that human actions are among such things (see Sect. 4.2), and that, therefore, we are responsible for doing them or not, that is, "they are up to us to do" or not to do (III 3 1112^{a}18–26). Let us read the text and see the pertinent distinctions with the assistance of Diagram 6.1:

(1) **III 1 1110^{a}15–18: Voluntary actions**

[F]or in fact the starting-point of his moving his instrumental parts in actions of this sort is internal to himself, and—because the starting-point is internal to himself—it is also up to him whether to do them or not. Such actions, then, are voluntary.

(2) **III 1 1111^{a}22–24: Voluntary actions**

[T]he voluntary would seem to be what has its starting-point in the agent himself, when he knows the particulars in which the action lies. (See also: III 1 1110b4, III 5 1113b19–21.)

(3) **III 1 1109^{b}35–1110^{a}4: Involuntary actions due to force**

The involuntary seems to be what comes about by force or because of ignorance. Also, what is forced is what has a starting-point that comes from outside, that is, the sort of starting-point where the agent, or the one being affected, contributes nothing—as, for example, if the wind or human beings with control over him took him off somewhere.

(4) **III 2 1110^{b}18–24: Involuntary actions because of ignorance**

All of what is done because of ignorance (*di' agnoian*), however, is not voluntary, although it is contra-voluntary (*akousion*) when involving pain and regret; for the

person who has done whatever it is because of ignorance, but sees nothing repulsive in his action, has not acted voluntarily, because he did not know what he was doing. But neither has he acted contra-voluntarily, because he is not pained by it. Of those people, then, who act because of ignorance, the one who regrets what he did seems a contra-voluntary agent. The one who does not regret, since he is a different case, let him be a non-voluntary agent; for since he is different, it is better for him to have a special name.

(5) **III 1 1110^{b}5: Mixed actions**

[T]hese, though intrinsically involuntary, are, on this occasion and done in exchange for these things, voluntary.

(1) states that voluntary actions are the ones whose starting-point is *in* the agents themselves. We know that deliberate choice is the starting-point of action (see Sect. **5.1**). The circle of voluntary actions, however, is much broader than that of deliberate choice. For instance, actions due to anger or spirit are done without any prior deliberation or deliberate choice; yet the starting-point of such an action *is* within us. Hence, we need a broader notion of what counts here as a starting-point. (1) claims that it is a matter of whether we move our body by ourselves in order to do the action. Nevertheless, such an account will not bring us too far since Aristotle does not offer much in this direction. It's much easier to understand his conception of voluntary action by analyzing its opposite, involuntary action. The need for such a detour becomes evident in (2), for the two parts of the comprehensive definition of the voluntary, namely, (a) that the "starting-point [should] be in the agent himself," and (b) that "he [must] know the particulars in which the action lies" are just the contraries, as we shall see in a moment, of the two sub-categories of involuntary actions.

First, according to (3), involuntary actions are those that are due to force, that is, whose starting-point is external to us: we have contributed nothing to the accomplishment of the action. For example, if someone takes my hand by force and hurts the person sitting next to me with it, this action is involuntary, for I did not move my hand, and I am not responsible for the deed. Aristotle's examples run as follows: "the wind or human beings with control over him took [him] off somewhere."

Yet, there is something puzzling in these examples, for it is clear that events like my being knocked down *by* a strong wind hardly count as actions of mine in the first place. Should we conclude that, in Aristotle's framework, there are no real cases of involuntary actions done by external force? I doubt this is Aristotle's intention. His intention is rather to alert us to a number of facts we tend to overlook or to conceal: (a) external force is many times made the scapegoat for temptations or external pressure we should have resisted instead of "being easily ensnared by such things." (b) External force and compulsion are widespread in human lives—abuses and offenses committed by tyrants were a commonplace in ancient Greece—and, in extreme cases, indicate the limits of human nature itself. Then we have to acknowledge these limits both as agents and as spectators: as agents, alas, we are sometimes obliged to prefer death over being led to do shameful acts, and as spectators, we are invited to bypass the Manichaean practice of *either* praise *or* blame, and show

"sympathetic consideration," when the circumstances and the dilemmas involved overstrain human nature (III 1 1110[a]23–27). (c) It is sometimes a delicate matter to dissociate voluntary from involuntary actions when we are encumbered by external constraints or by force. That is why Aristotle introduces the concept of "mixed actions" (see below).

Second, there are things that I do by myself, but I do them because of ignorance of the real circumstances or of the very components of my action (see Sect. 2.7): I gave you something I thought to be a medicine but proved to be a poison (for unbeknownst to me someone changed the vial). I killed you involuntarily; this is not the action I indented to do. Given that our moral experience and action concerns particulars, mistakes of this sort are unavoidable, for we often simply ignore many of the components of our actions. Luckily for us, this ignorance rarely proves harmful to our doings; other times, however, ignorance makes human life take a tragic turn. In the ancient world, Oedipus' murder of his father and marriage with his mother is the paradigmatic and most dramatic case.

We now understand why (2) states a double condition of voluntariness: the starting-point of the action must lie in the agent (in distinction to external force or compulsion that make the agent to contribute nothing morally important to the accomplishment of the action) *and* the agent must know the particular constituents of the action done (at least, the ones that are morally relevant in each case).

Evidently, not every action involving ignorance is involuntary. Thus, the analysis is still in want of further clarifications. (a) When ignorance concerns the very content of goodness, it is intrinsic to deliberate choice, regardless of the cause of such ignorance, and, hence, has nothing to do with involuntariness. (b) Even the sort of ignorance and contrary impulses that characterize the self-controlled people and those who lack self-control (see Sects. **6.3** and **6.4**) is irrelevant to involuntariness (*EE* II 7 1223[b]18–28). (c) According to (4), each time we do something due to ignorance regarding the particular circumstances or components of the action and afterward feel regret, the action is involuntary in the strong sense of "contra-voluntary," that is, of what goes *against* our true moral character. (d) Each time, by contrast, we do not regret the shameful action, that is, if we would be willing to do it even if we knew the real circumstances, then our action is not involuntary in the full sense of the term, but only non-voluntary; it is in line with our moral character, though it occurred by accident. (e) Ignorance does not account for the involuntary character of an action when I am responsible for my ignorance, that is, when the reason of my ignorance has its starting-point in myself. For example: if I drive back home while drunk, my causing a car accident is certainly not something I intended to do or something that I did knowingly. But my action is not involuntary because I knowingly put myself in the condition of unknowingly handling the particulars. Let us say that these actions are done "*in* ignorance," not "because of ignorance."

These distinctions are more experience-based than theory-laden. They are intended to acknowledge the multiple ways in which ignorance affects our lives and actions and catalogue the forms of ignorance for which we are responsible: negligence or unwillingness to remedy our ignorance by seeking advice from experts, by exercising our critical thinking, or by taking the necessary precautions.

What is more, it is noteworthy that involuntary actions due to external force or compulsion and involuntary actions because of ignorance are not two disparate kinds. For in both cases the agent feels regret and pain: "people who are forced to act and act involuntarily find it painful" (III 1 1110^{b}11–12), and contra-voluntary actions involve "pain and regret" too (III 1 1110^{b}19). This sort of pain expresses our suffering a radical undermining of our agentive self: involuntary actions weaken the effectiveness of our true moral character or, even worse, relegate us as agents to the status of a pawn at the hands of others or of mere luck.

As already anticipated, there are, however, more complicated cases that Aristotle calls mixed actions (5): someone keeps my parents as hostages and asks me to do something illegal to free them, otherwise they will be killed; or, because of a storm, the captain of the ship is obliged to throw cargo overboard to save the lives of those aboard. We commit these actions because the alternative option is a greater evil or brings about the loss of something valuable. Are these actions voluntary or involuntary?

At first sight, they seem to be involuntary for I would never have willingly done something shameful, had my parents not been hostages in the hands of a ruthless person. In other words, the very fact that I am doing this shameful action does not originate in my true character, and the starting-point of the action—in the sense of what triggers it, leads to it, or causes it—lies outside myself. The action then is not something I would have done "unconditionally" (III 1 1110^{a}10), that is, in the absence of these undesired circumstances that are entirely beyond my reach. It looks as if these actions are done because of external force or compulsion, be it exercised by other people or by nature. Aristotle claims that they are *not*.

He is adamant that the description of an apparently clear case of involuntary actions is misleading for at least two reasons: (a) it takes for granted that the timing of action and the relevant particular circumstances are external factors to the action, while we know (see Sect. 2.7) that they are constituents of the action itself; (b) it views the action as an aggregate of two succeeding separate acts, "my doing something shameful" *plus* "my doing something for the sake of saving my parents," as if it were possible to conceive of the end of action as a simple add-on.

Thus, one should say that these actions are *voluntary*, for I am the person who deliberated and chose—in line with my moral character—to do something shameful: it is myself who judged that, shameful though it is, the action serves a noble end, while the cost of not doing it would be too high, that is, a much more shameful action (e.g., my parents' death). My choice reflects the hierarchy of goods I espouse; for instance, the fact that saving my parents from death has a higher value than rejecting ransom demands. These actions are "mixed" for, given the circumstances, they cannot attain the maximum of goodness (for instance, it is impossible to both save my parents and refuse collaboration with the abductors). Whether these actions are called mixed or voluntary, at any rate, their praiseworthiness or blameworthiness is predicated on the hierarchy of goods they are grounded in. Most notably, when the end is something great and noble, mixed actions reveal genuine courage: for it requires much endurance for virtuous people to do what they themselves consider shameful and painful.

Aristotle wants thereby to stress two things: (1) It's wrong to exculpate ourselves from blame for bad actions on the grounds that they were due to external force and compulsion; for then most everyday actions would count as forced. *The terrain of our responsibility is much wider than what we have the tendency to admit*. (2) But it would be cruel and insensitive to the human condition to conclude that shameful deeds always bespeak a bad person or a bad character. The human condition is such that neither bad luck nor injustice and malevolence in the hearts of some people will be ever altogether eradicated from our world and, thus, it often happens that the good is only attainable at a high price, as it is the case when it is impossible for virtuous people to avoid doing shameful actions. That is, *the circle of praiseworthy people is much wider than the circle of purely good actions*.

6.2 Baseness or How to Recognize the Virtuous People (II 4)

Let us return to voluntary actions. We already know who the practically wise people are and how they act. Now, the question is how all the other kinds of people act, that is, how many kinds of morally wrong actions there are and how many sources of moral mistakes.

In the case of baseness, wrongness lies in the fact that the base person (*phaulos*) misunderstands the true content of the good:

III 4 1113^{a}15–b1

Wish is for the end, as we have said, but some people think it is for the good, others that is for the apparent good […] to the excellent person, [the object of wish is] what is truly the object of wish; to a base one it is whatever thing it happens to be […] deception seems to come about because of pleasure, which appears to be a good thing, when it is not.

We read this passage before, in Sect. 2.4. Here, Aristotle clearly states that both the virtuous and the base person have wish, or a rational desire (*DA* III 9 432^{b}5), which is possessed by human beings alone insofar as they are rational. It would be wrong to assume with Socrates in the *Gorgias* that the apparent good "is not a proper object of wish at all" (III 4 1113^{a}17–18). For the object of wish is not necessarily the true good, but merely "what one thinks is good" (*Rh*. I 10 1369^{a}3–4). Nonetheless, for both the virtuous and the base person the objects of wish are rational ends, not the goals of desires we might share with non-rational creatures: "wish is for the end."

The failure of base people is due to their inability to properly grasp and desire the real good. For example, they might wish for the pleasant when it is not good. But one should clearly distinguish between the pleasant as the object of the non-rational appetites of animals and children and the pleasant as the object of wish, the apparent good. It is only the latter that constitutes an object of genuine human concern. It is about the latter that Aristotle says, "wish wishes, in accord with nature, for the good, but, contrary to nature, for […] the bad" (*EE* II 10 1227^{a}30–31). It is important to

emphasize that the rationality involved in wish is end-oriented, not a mere instrumental means-ends rationality; and this holds true for the wish of both the virtuous and the base person. Hence, the objects of wish may be correctly or mistakenly envisaged as good, but the wish is always rational.

The practical-intellectual state that renders us able to recognize something as a practical good of some sort while, at the same time, making us fail to discern the real good is called by Aristotle "lack of practical wisdom" (*aphrosunê*). In plenty of places, *aphrosunê* has nothing to do with mindlessness or madness; it merely denotes the state that makes us "suppos[e] that bad things are good" (VII 2 $1146^{a}27–31$) or goes hand in hand with injustice and other vices (*Pol*. III 11 $1281^{b}26–28$; *Rh*. I 10 $1369^{b}21–22$, I 11 $1371^{a}12–13$). In *On Virtues and Vices* we encounter the most explicit allusion to it: "*Lack of practical wisdom* is a vice of the rationally calculative part, a vice that is a cause of living badly. […] to lack of practical wisdom belongs bad judgment about things […] and false belief about what is noble and good in life" (*VV* $1250^{a}16–17$, $1250^{b}44–1251a2$; see also: $1249^{b}29–30$).

Baseness and vice go hand in hand with the lack of practical wisdom. The only piece of evidence, however, that people are virtuous or vicious is their deliberate choice as it is imprinted on their actions (see Sect. 5.1). That is why, in a much-discussed passage from II 4, Aristotle is adamant that we develop a virtuous or a vicious character only by doing virtuous or vicious actions (II 4 $1105^{b}11–12$), not by arguments and thoughts. This seems to be a triviality, but it isn't. For there is a widespread view that virtue and vice primarily characterize our most intimate self, our heart, or our hidden intentions and thoughts, not the sort of actions we do.

In the absence of their base actions, one could hardly distinguish base people from virtuous people. For they are quite similar. To follow the thread of II 4, the similarities are obvious: (a) virtuous and vicious actions are only those that come about because of, respectively, a virtuous or a vicious state of character; (b) virtuous and vicious actions alike come about because of the sort of knowledge possessed by, respectively, virtuous and base people and, in both cases, the agents *believe* that they actually possess true knowledge; (c) virtuous and base people alike deliberately choose their actions "because of themselves," that is because they find them noble (though, in fact, base people mistake mere usefulness for true nobility); (d) virtue and baseness are states and therefore show some sort of stability.

It is only this last point that may serve as an indicator of baseness, according to Aristotle. The exact phrase is as follows: virtuous people do their actions "from a stable and unchangeable state" (II 4 $1105^{a}32–33$). First, a clarification: the word "unchangeable" (*ametakinêtôs*) may mean both "something that is impossible to change" and "something that it is very difficult to change." We already know (see Sect. 2.3), however, that states of character do admit of change. The eventual changes are of three kinds: (a) a virtuous person may become base and this happens indeed, though rarely, because of the strokes of bad luck, each time the unbearable circumstances of life undermine our virtue; (b) a shift from baseness to virtue is possible through the influence of reason; this change is rare, uncertain, painful, and slow and demands much effort, favorable circumstances, and good guidance; (c) there is no real change *within* the sphere of virtue, but there is permanent change

within the sphere of vice. We will see why in Sect. 8.2. For the moment, let me only give a hint: in a sense, base people *steadily* pursue what is advantageous and pleasant, and since they identify the noble with the advantageous, their success in life often confirms that they are on the right path. From this perspective, they have no reason to quit their base way of life. Nevertheless, Aristotle believes that there is much hustle and bustle in their lives and retrospectively regret many things, for there is a permanent shift from one thing to another depending on what they each time consider to be advantageous or pleasant. They always regret the missed opportunities in the past to increase the goods they *now* consider to be advantageous or pleasant.

6.3 Self-control (VII 2–4, 7–10)

Most people among us are neither practically wise nor base. We rather belong to the self-controlled people or to those who lack self-control. This pair of states is analyzed in Book VII.

Let us begin by the self-controlled person, the enkratic (*enkratês*). Self-control is presented as a kind of character-relevant state (VII 1 $1145^{a}15$–16); it represents a compound of mutually reflecting intellectual states and states of character. To put it in a nutshell, the self-controlled person knows the true good, has some base desires too, battles against them, gains the victory over them, and does the right action. Thus, it is a sort of mixed state: in comparison with its opposite, lack of self-control, it is certainly something valuable or even an accomplishment in overcoming base appetites that most people would give in to; in this respect, one is entitled to ascribe to it excellence and praiseworthiness (VII 2 $1145^{b}8$–9, VII 1 $1146^{a}15$, VII 8 $1151^{a}27$, VII 9 $1151^{b}28$). In comparison, however, to temperance (*sôphrosunê*), it would be misleading to subsume it under the virtues. Nothing that incorporates base components, and some sort of unfitting pain, can meet the high standards of virtue, and self-control, by definition, implies both these shortcomings.

What does the failure of enkratic people amount to? Given that self-control is an alloy of intellectual and ethical states, the failure in question must be grasped as something both desires and intellectual capacities show the symptoms of. Here are the most critical passages on the topic:

(1) **VII 2 $1145^{b}10$–14**

Also, a self-controlled person seems to be the same as one who is also such as to stand by his rational calculation […] knowing that his appetites are base, does not follow them, because of his reason.

(2) **VII 2 $1146^{a}9$–12**

If someone cannot be self-controlled unless his appetites are strong and base, a temperate person will not be self-controlled or a self-controlled one temperate, since it is not characteristic of a temperate person to have appetites that are too strong or ones that are base.

(3) **VII 9 1151^{b}34–52^{a}3**

Both a self-controlled person and a temperate one are the sorts of people to do nothing contrary to their reason because of bodily pleasure. But a self-controlled one has base appetites, whereas a temperate one does not, and a temperate one is the sort not to feel pleasure contrary to his reason, whereas the self-controlled one is the sort to feel such pleasure but not be led by it.

In all three passages, Aristotle refers to appetite in two ways: first, appetites might lead us to understand the good only in terms of pleasure and, hence, render us prone to confuse the apparent good for the true good. Enkratic people do *not* run this risk since, in them, the knowledge of the true good is preserved. Second, appetites might make someone eager to satisfy pleasures for things that are not pleasurable to the virtuous person. Indeed, enkratic people have appetites of that sort; they are victorious over them but, nevertheless, they do so after a far from noble battle and are answerable for not having stayed away from that battle in the first place.

The kind of appetites implicated is in need of further specification. First, not every kind of appetite is relevant to self-control, but only those proper to intemperance (*akolasia*), namely, those connected with touch and taste; these are the ones we share with animals. [2] Henceforth, I will call them *fleshly appetites*. The moment that sexual intercourse or an amount of food or drink are ready to hand, enkratic people are somewhat tempted by base pleasures that would look unattractive to the virtuous person.

Second, the appetites which tempt the enkratic people are not only base but also strong. How strong? It is hard to say exactly but, for the most part, a feature that distinguishes enkratic people from intemperate ones is that the latter are led to base actions even when fleshly appetites are weak (VII 4 1148^{a}18–19). To follow Aristotle's examples in Book III, a way to draw a border is by reference to the arousal of fleshly appetites when there is no *present* object of touch to excite us, but the excitement is provoked by some substitute.

Both in the case of enkratic and akratic people, the sparking of fleshly appetites does not pervade their whole life but remains restricted in range and in duration. *In range*, to the extent that fleshly appetites, like being sexually aroused, do not occupy the whole terrain of their activities. For enkratic people do not live, as animals or maybe also intemperate persons do, in the need to constantly satisfy excessive fleshly appetites. The only problem is that strong appetites are indeed, in certain conditions, inflamed in their soul and attract their attention so that they have to struggle to overcome the seduction. *In duration*, because the arousal is provisional, it has, as in the case of those who lack self-control, the duration of an epileptic fit (VII 8 1150^{b}34–35).

What about the sort of intellectual failure characteristic of enkratic people? Their problem is that they do not properly take pleasure in the nobility of the action they

[2] Intemperance is related to appetites we share with beasts and involves the total atrophy of our capacity to grasp the starting-point of action (VI 5 1140^{b}17–20). That is why it exists in us "not as human beings, but as animals" (III 10 1118^{b}2–3). See Sect. 6.5.

nonetheless do (where "properly" designates the full access to the noble enjoyed by the fully virtuous person). This answer is in line with Aristotle's proviso that the distinctive feature of enkratic people does not lie in the incapacity to recognize the true good but only in a sort of deficiency regarding the modality of this recognition. They have a view of the noble, but this view is clouded because the prospect of satisfying base appetites is also envisaged as a source of pleasure or not as shameful as it should be. They fail in that they take into account premises that they shouldn't—premises that would seem completely irrelevant to the practically wise person. They are obedient to reason, stand by their rational calculation, or are victorious after a pretty much painful battle against their appetites, a battle that provisionally unbalanced their soul. Throughout the *Nicomachean Ethics*, they are visualized as someone whose efforts swing the balance in favor of correct reason.

The range and time limits of their failure should be also considered. Enkratic people do *not* always fail to get an unclouded view of the noble. This happens only when and as long as their base appetites are inflamed. It would be awkward and counter-intuitive to assume that regardless of the actual stakes, self-controlled people always put in the balance their base fleshly appetites. Enkratic people are not totally blind; *their intellectual myopia is general but only on occasion constitutes a real problem for their access to the noble*.

Another way to respect the idiosyncrasy of the intellectual failure of enkratic people is to understand it as a lack of attentiveness that develops only in the presence of strong fleshly appetites. Self-control seems to involve a weak or blunted capacity of attention to what reason demands because of a deficiency in its intellectual texture—a sort of *proneness to distraction*.

6.4 Lack of Self-control (VII 2–4, 7–10)

We are now well prepared to address the question of self-control (*akrasia*). People who lack self-control (*akratês*) know the true good and, hence, have correct states of character and correct appetites; for without them, the possession of the true good would be impossible. But they also have bad appetites, like the enkratic people. Their most tangible difference is that, in distinction from the latter, akratic people lose the battle they give with themselves and do what is morally wrong. How should we explain their failure?

VII 9 1151^{a}20–26

But there is a person who, because of feeling (*pathos*), is disposed to depart from and go contrary to correct reason, who is controlled by that feeling to the extent of not acting in accord with correct reason, but not so as to be the sort of person who is persuaded that he should pursue such pleasures freely. This is the person who lacks self-control; he is better than the intemperate person and is not unconditionally base; for the best thing is preserved in him: the starting-point.

Unlike enkratic people, akratic ones act contrary to correct practical reason because of their feelings and appetites. These feelings are certainly base, but they show the following particularity: they are such that, *provisionally*, they take control of the soul of akratic people and lead them to incorrect actions. Nonetheless, they are not base to such a degree as to make them adopt the false belief that they should always pursue any random pleasure. That is why the last clause in the previous passage states that, in the case of akratic people, "the starting-point"—namely, the knowledge of the true good—is preserved. Akratic people are not base for they don't confuse the apparent good for the true good. Nevertheless, they temporarily pursue the apparent good (i.e., appetites and pleasures) and commit base actions, *contrary* to what they know to be true and contrary to their belief that these appetites are base (VII 3 $1146^{b}22$–24).

The deep perplexity regarding the very possibility of akrasia is now palpable: if the knowledge of the true good possessed by akratic people is *practical*, then it should lead to correct actions. How is it possible then for akratic people to share with the enkratic and the practically wise ones the same practical knowledge and nevertheless, at least sometimes, to accomplish base actions? How is it possible for them not to be always and reliably doers of good actions (VII 10 $1152^{a}9$)? Aristotle inherits this philosophical puzzle from Plato and Socrates, from the *Protagoras* and the *Republic*. To resolve the puzzle, we need further clarifications:

(a) Let us limit the analysis to those who show lack of self-control regarding the objects of temperance and intemperance, that is, regarding the appetites associated with the pleasures of touch (VII 5 $1149^{a}21$–24). All other cases shall be investigated in analogy with the previous one.

(b) The episodes of lack of self-control have the duration of an epileptic fit. Before that epileptic fit as well after it, the akratic people are not the victims of the ignorance caused by their appetites during it. Before they are affected, that sort of ignorance does not appear *yet*; and, likewise, after the appetites have stopped to prevail in their soul, the ignorance "is resolved" (VII 2 $1145^{b}30$–31, VII 3 $1147^{b}6$–7). Therefore, in retrospect they are easily persuaded that their past akratic action was a mistake and show remorse (VII 8 $1150^{b}29$–31, $1151^{a}14$). When not under the corrosive influence of appetites, akratic people turn out to know and pursue the true good.

(c) It is meaningful, then, to distinguish between a lack of self-control as a permanent state and the actions displaying lack of self-control, the latter being denoted by the verb *akrateuomai* (for instance, in VII 3 $1146^{b}25$, VII 3 $1147^{a}24$, $1147^{b}1$). Their epileptic fit is not continuous, while the epilepsy as a disease is something permanent in the person suffering from it.

(d) It may prove useful to also distinguish various forms of akrasia. For instance, let us separate "impetuosity" from "weakness" (VII 7 $1150^{b}19$–22). The former is the akrasia of those who, being quick-spirited and passionate, do not give time to their deliberation to rationally examine the case at hand and, consequently, are led on by their feelings and the appearances they are associated with. The latter is the akrasia of those who, though they have deliberated,

accomplish actions that go contrary to the results of their deliberation. The former case is easier to explain; these people just don't have the intellectual patience to be involved in genuine deliberation and hastily embark on action. The latter case, by contrast, is baffling, for these people seem to share the practical and deliberative knowledge possessed by the practically wise and the enkratic people and, yet, they fail to do the right action.

(e) To explain why akratic people, provisionally, suffer from this kind of epileptic fit, we should have recourse to physiology, for it seems that something affects our feelings and appetites and paralyzes, during that fit, our capacity to apply or activate our knowledge (VII 3 1147^{a} 15–18, 24–25). That is why one can hardly resolve the problem of akrasia without appealing to the natural sciences (VII 3 1147^{a}24, 1147^{b}8–9). The guiding idea is that we must investigate the way in which akratic feelings and appetites affect us by analogy with the way in which physiology or medicine investigate psychosomatic phenomena, like sleep, intoxication, madness, or intense desires (what Aristotle calls *melancholia*). The proposed analogy (VII 3 1147^{a}10–25) is meant to highlight the fact that the lack of self-control cannot be properly understood unless we presuppose that the soul of akratic people is somehow defective, in that it tends to be affected by passions more than ordinary people are. The analogy works as follows: as their natural constitution makes some people get drunk on the first glass of wine—that is, on a quantity of wine that, for the most part, is far from enough to affect the sobriety of ordinary people—and as during sleep or because of *melancholia* appearances (*phantasmata*) and dream visions prevail in the soul—while when we are awake, sensation and the senses are the primary sources of appearances—likewise, akrasia is a matter of physiology. All these do not mean that lack of self-control is *only* a matter of physiology or that akratic people are not responsible for their state and behavior.

The appeal to physiology does not allow us to resolve the problem of akrasia through and through: nothing has been said yet about the sort of practical knowledge possessed by akratic people. Let us, then, recall Socrates' view on the matter, since there is always something true in his sayings (see Sect. 7.1):

VII 2 1145^{b}23–24

[F]or it would be terrible—as Socrates used to think—if, when scientific knowledge is present, something else is in control and drags it around like a slave.

Socrates is partially right and partially wrong. He is right to the extent that, actually, *on condition* that someone possesses practical knowledge in its entirety, there can be nothing in the soul that would ever overthrow knowledge and lead to a contrary action. For, as has been emphasized before, practical knowledge involves a desiring element and is built on our virtues of character, that is, on the correctly developed desiring part of the soul. Hence, everything able to motivate human actions is, directly or indirectly, under the influence of practical reason. Nevertheless, Aristotle's Socrates gets the matter wrong, to the extent that he draws the conclusion

that akrasia is impossible, a conclusion that is in tension with our everyday experience.

The solution to the puzzle is similar to the one we encountered in the case of enkratic people. Socrates' mistake, as well as the mistake of all those who consider akrasia to be an unsolvable problem, resides in the fact that they understand knowledge only with reference to its object: they assume that those who know the *same thing* also share the *same knowledge*. This account is too restrictive. Instead, the quality or the sort of knowledge admits of several differentiations. A first differentiation is the one between knowledge of universals and knowledge of particulars. We know that in the practical realm we should possess both. Thus, it seems sensible to suppose that akratic people possess the universal knowledge about the true good but are unable to recognize what is good here and now, that is, in the particular circumstances. Because of their feelings, they lack the ability to piece together these two sorts of knowledge and trigger the correct action (VII $1147^{b}9$–19). Though useful, however, such a distinction doesn't explain the case of weakness, for here akratic people reach the correct conclusion of practical syllogism. Then, a second differentiation is needed:

VII 3 $1147^{a}10$–24

Further, human beings can have scientific knowledge in a way other than the ones we have just described; for among those who have but are not using it we see a difference in the having of the state, so that someone both has it in a way and does not have it—for example, if he is sleeping, mad, or tipsy. […] But the fact that they talk the talk that stems from scientific knowledge signifies nothing; for those in the grip of these feelings can even recite demonstrations and verses of Empedocles. And those who have first learned something string the words together but do not yet know what they have learned; for it must grow to be a natural part of them, and that takes time. So we must suppose that those acting without self-control in fact speak like actors on a stage.

We are familiar with these terms. To possess knowledge may mean, at least, two things: to possess it and actualize or use it or to possess it as a capacity or state that is not actually exercised. For example, builders continue to have the craft knowledge of building even when they are asleep or drunk, but they are unable to use it. Likewise, the most appropriate way to describe the phenomenon of akrasia is to assume that something makes the practical reason of akratic people to get lethargic or fall asleep or make them behave like tipsy people. In all these cases, the exercise of practical knowledge is provisionally deactivated or paralyzed. The crucial thing is that sleep, madness, intoxication, and *melancholia* share common traits, the most important of which is that *phantasia* and dreams prevail in the soul and fill it in with appearances that do not correspond to what is witnessed by our senses. Similarly, all kinds of akratic people alike don't exercise during their epileptic fit their practical knowledge, or not properly.

Thus, it's important to emphasize that the akratic fit is provisional and the inability to exercise our practical knowledge doesn't amount to a total lack of knowledge

but to a sort of paralysis. However, to suffer from such akratic fits, akratic people must suffer from a certain *permanent* deficiency regarding both their feelings or appetites and their intellectual states. There is some permanent intellectual deficiency for, were their practical reason robust and powerful, lack of self-control would be impossible. To name their intellectual deficiency, it might be fitting to exploit one of Aristotle's physical explanations of being asleep, drunk, etc., and say that they suffer from *intellectual moisture*, which nicely captures the intellectual defects of flabbiness and sloppiness.

It would be wrong, then, to assume that the function of their practical reason is impeccable and put the entire blame for their akrasia on their base appetites and inclinations. Evidently, there is some permanent deficiency in their desiring part too, for what only produces in ordinary people weak feelings produces in the soul of akratic people too strong and irresistible ones, even in the very absence of the objects of desire.

In reality, this is a vicious circle: the inability of practical knowledge to prevail in the soul and the excessive power of base feelings are the two sides of the same coin. And to escape from a vicious circle is anything but a walk in the park. Very often, the vicious circle functions as a vortex that pulls the akratic people into its center; their condition will be then exacerbated and their akrasia will edge toward positive intemperance. Nonetheless, the escape from the vicious circle is not unattainable either, since Aristotle's akratic people are, by definition, curable (VII 2 $1146^{a}33–34$, VII 8 $1150^{b}30–32$). Circumstances may prove favorable so that there are no temptations around that the akratic person cannot resist, or it may happen that living together with virtuous people or in a city with correct and severe laws proves enough to break the vicious circle. Or, if the cause is indeed physiological, medical treatment may also prove beneficial. In any case, the change should rather start from outside the akratic person, not from within. And this brings to the surface the dramatic dimension of akrasia: akratic people, as the Greek word indicates (*a-kratos* means "lacking control"), don't have full control over themselves.

6.5 The Beast-Like People: "beyond the limits of vice" (VII 1, 5–6)

The practically wise people as well as the enkratic and the akratic ones know the true good, while the base ones confuse the apparent good for the true good. All of them, however, contrast with an extreme case of evil people, those who are *altogether unable to understand the very distinction between goodness and badness*. These people are called by Aristotle "beast-like" (*thêriôdês*) and their condition "beastliness" (*thêriotês*). Their portrait in the *Nicomachean Ethics* is, to use a modern expression, Aristotle's answer to the problem of radical evil.

Like self-control and lack of self-control, beastliness is not an ethical state but rather "something having to do with character" (VII 1 $1145^{a}16$); it involves both

ethical and intellectual components. Despite its rarity, it does occur among human beings, not just among monsters, mythical creatures, and uncivilized barbarians (VII 1 1145^{a}29–30). It consists in obedience to desires for things that only certain beasts are naturally inclined to long for, things that are not "naturally pleasant" to human beings. In the case of beast-like people, Aristotle proposes a tripartite taxonomy:

VII 5 1148^{b}15–19

Some things are naturally pleasant, and, of these, some are unconditionally pleasant, while others are so with reference to particular kinds both of animals and of human beings. Other things are not naturally pleasant, but come to be so—(1) some because of a disability (*pêrôseis*), (2) some because of habit (*di'ethê*), (3) some because of depraved natures (*mochthêras phuseis*). That is why where each of these is concerned, we also see corresponding states. I mean the beast-like ones.

This triadic division is grounded in a distinction between *causes*, not between behaviors or different sorts of pertinent intellectual deficiencies—for instance, madness might be the outcome of both (1) and (3), and excessive sexual urges and deviancies are symptoms of both (2) and (3). Such an etiology is needed because some beast-like people might not be responsible for their state—for instance, those who are beast-like because of their depraved nature. There is much symptomatology too. But the most important challenge here is not to isolate the different symptoms of each causally different kind of beast-like state but to identify their common feature:

VII 5 1148^{b}34–49^{a}1

[Beastliness is] outside the limits of vice (*kakias*).

I take this to mean that beast-like states resist any explanation in terms of the opposition between the real good and the apparent good. Why? Well, because beastliness includes the idea of a total atrophy of practical reasoning, so that beastly people "fall away from [human] nature" (VII 6 1149^{b}35). Although it is sensible to assume that many beast-like people are capable of means-ends reasoning (the tyrant Phalaris is certainly such a person), they lack *practical* reason and, hence, are completely unable to recognize practical ends. The only thing that matters to them is to satisfy their appetites. Their appetite-focused life is not a question of commitments to the value of these appetites or their satisfaction. Nor do these appetites appear to them as reasons against other competitive reasons that they could have adopted had they espoused a different ethical perspective. Beastliness does not involve the grasp of false practical ends but rather a total lack of access to practical ends. Beast-like people are deprived of the very capacity to distinguish moral goodness from moral badness or to choose goodness instead of badness:

VII 6 1150^{a}1–5

Beastliness is less than vice (although it is more frightening), since the better thing has not been corrupted, as in the human case [of vice], *but is simply not*

present. So it is like comparing something soulless to something ensouled, to see which is worse. For the baseness of what does not possess the starting-point is always less harmful, and understanding is the starting-point.

The rationale of this cryptic passage, at least according to one interpretation, bolsters the previous claims. [3] After having described the *thêriôtês* proper to beasts and explained why they lack practical reasoning and deliberate choice by nature, Aristotle concludes that beasts should not be blamed or praised. He then turns to the case of people for which the beast-like condition is not natural but a sort of degeneration. These are the people "without rational calculation [who] live by perception alone" (VII 5 1149^{a}9–10). What is natural for beasts, in other words, is for humans the outcome of a kind of destruction.

Let us return to the claim that beastliness is outside the limits of vice. Why? "For the bad is posterior in nature to the capacity" (*Met*. IX 9 1051^{a}18–19). A way to understand the above claim is this. Human beings possess, by nature, certain motivational and cognitive capacities. Capacities are for opposites: through habituation and education, these undergo a change and issue in the establishment of *either* ethical and practical-intellectual virtues *or* ethical and practical-intellectual vices. Yet, virtues have a priority in that the end of natural capacities is something good, that is, a virtuous activity and, in consequence, the acquisition of (ethical or intellectual) virtue as the pertinent state. Vices are cases in which the change has gone awry. Virtues and vices themselves are not capacities. Virtue results only in virtuous activities and vice only in vicious ones (anything else just happens by accident). In both cases, virtuous and vicious activities themselves are prior to the states of virtue and vice, for states come-to-be thanks to pertinent activities. However, the states of virtue and vice are *posterior* to the capacity to become *either* virtuous *or* vicious. In this sense, vice (the bad) is posterior to the capacity (i.e., the capacity to become either virtuous or vicious) and results from its corrupted development. This is the developmental story of what I take to be ordinary vice.

However, vice "involves [false] reason" and, hence—at least, in principle—there is always the possibility of some change, whether major or minor, whether more or less difficult to make (*Pol*. VII 13 1332^{b}6–8). This open possibility establishes a route between the capacity and vice: in ordinary vice, there is still a *seed* of our capacity to become either virtuous or vicious or, in other words, if persuaded by reason and if the circumstances are favorable, one is able to somehow re-take the route that leads from that capacity to either virtue or vice. In radical evil, practical reason is destroyed and, hence, this route is altogether destroyed too. But in the absence of such a route, radical vice has no connection at all with the capacity it developed from and, hence, no connection with goodness either. Radical evil is, in this sense, for the sake of bad activities or ends (*Met*. IX 9 1051^{a}15–17).

Thus, the distinguishing feature of beastliness is its incurability (VII 8 1150^{b}29–30) since practical reason is totally degenerated. Being deprived of

[3] I follow Aspasius' interpretation in *CAG* XIX: 129. 5–130, 21.

practical reason, these persons are "handicapped in relation to virtue" (I 9 1099^{b}19) and are susceptible to no improvement in moral matters. Nothing internal or external to them can counterbalance the privation they suffer. Hence, one should expel them from political communities (X 9 1180^{a} 9–10). This is how nature functions too: individuals fall victim to incurable degenerative diseases and their practical selves are no exception. In nature, such degenerations are not the norm but happen rarely; beastliness is like that too.

6.6 Chapter Summary

In the previous chapter, I drew a detailed portrait of the practically wise person. But to be practically wise is so demanding that one may doubt whether there are any such people around us or whether the possession of practical wisdom is an unattainable ideal. At any rate, if they exist at all, practically wise people will be rare. All the rest of us are not like them, though we are not all equally far away from them either. In Book VII of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle puts us all under four headings: we may be base (*phaulos*) or vicious (*kakos*), self-controlled (*enkratês*), lacking self-control (*akratês*), or beast-like (*thêriôdês*). After exploring Aristotle's opposition between the voluntary (*hekousion*) and the involuntary (*akousion*) as it is developed in Book III, I discuss each of these four groups separately, by giving equal attention to all of them, and I propose an explanation of the rationale of this scale of badness. In particular, I explain why we should understand baseness as a lack of the virtue of practical wisdom, self-control as a sort of proneness to distraction, lack of self-control as a sort of intellectual moisture, and beastliness as Aristotle's version of radical evil. Only such a scale of baseness and the distinctions it establishes, so I argue, allows us to properly identify each one of the four above-mentioned character-relevant states.

6.7 Further Reading

For the voluntary and the involuntary, see Echeñique (2012: Chap. 5), Sauvé Meyer (2006), and Grgić (2021). On II 4 1105^{a}17–1105^{b}12, see Williams (1995) and Taylor (2006: 81–96). For the role of freedom in Aristotle's ethics, see Lear (1988: Chap. 5.5). For self-control, lack of self-control, and beastliness, one should begin by Natali (2009) and Curzer (2018). For self-control and lack of self-control, in particular, see Charles (2009), Francis (2011), Coope (2012), Radoilska (2012), Charles (2015), and Kontos (2021: Chap. 1). For vice and beastliness, see Beere (2018), Kontos (2018a), and Pearson (2018).

6.8 Study Questions

1. How is ignorance related to the voluntary and to responsibility?
2. Can you formulate a mixed-action case of your own?
3. Why does the life of base people lack stability?
4. Why is the influence of base appetites on enkratic and akratic people restricted in range and in duration?
5. Why might one think that mere lawfulness is a sort of self-control? Would Aristotle agree?
6. Why is it necessary to distinguish between lack of self-control as a permanent state of character and actions displaying lack of self-control?
7. What is the difference between impetuosity and weakness as two kinds of akrasia?
8. Must we have recourse to physiology to explain akrasia?
9. What are the intellectual deficiencies of enkratic and akratic people?
10. Why is "[beastliness] outside the limits of vice"?

6.9 Essay Questions

1. Read *Nicomachean Ethics* II 4, explain, and evaluate Aristotle's arguments.
2. Watch the film *No Country for Old Men* by Coen Brothers (122 min., 2007, USA) and try to identify examples of practically wise, enkratic, akratic, vicious, and beast-like characters.

Chapter 7
Absolving Pleasure

7.1 Pleasure and Reputable Beliefs (*endoxa*) (VII 1)

We now have the whole picture of the practically wise person and of the various ways in which all those who lack practical wisdom fail to perform properly virtuous actions. It all amounts, among other things, to how one conceives happiness and its components or constituents. However, no conclusive definition of happiness has yet been offered by Aristotle. And how could it be otherwise, given that there is an indispensable element of happiness that has not been examined in detail yet: pleasure (*hêdonê*)? A painful or sorrowful happiness would be a contradiction in terms.

We met pleasure in at least three crucial junctures of the *Nicomachean Ethics*: in Book I, where we learned that it is a necessary component of happiness; in Book II, where we learned that virtues of character relate to pleasures and pains; and in Book III, where we learned that the confusion between the real and the apparent good is due to how people understand the intertwining of goodness and pleasure. The omnipresence of pleasure in our moral lives as well as in the *Nicomachean Ethics* explains the following sentence of Book VII: good politicians, those who possess political science, must know about pleasure, because it's them who must know what happiness consists in, and happiness is inextricably connected with pleasure: "Having a theoretical grasp on pleasure and pain is characteristic of the political philosopher" (VII 11 $1152^{b}1$–2).

It's no surprise then that the *Nicomachean Ethics* contains a long account of pleasure, which takes place both in Book VII 11–14 and in Book X 1–4. And this is strange because the latter account makes no clear reference to what was said in the former, nor does the former intimate that the latter will revisit the same topic. In a way, each of the two accounts talks about pleasure as if the other didn't exist. And not just that: they somehow diverge from each other. As would be expected, there have been many suggestions to tackle this issue, some quite imaginative (e.g., that one of the two Books does not belong to the *Nicomachean Ethics*, that some copyist

P. Kontos, *Introduction to Aristotle's* Nicomachean Ethics, Palgrave Philosophy Today, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-41985-0_7

wrongly incorporated the passages about pleasure in one of the Books, or that the two Books claim the exact same position). In order for us to not proceed with biased assumptions, let's begin with the hypothesis that Book X starts where Book VII lefts off for the sake of adding further clarifications.

First things first. In the beginning of Book VII Aristotle touches—more clearly than in any other passage from the *Nicomachean Ethics*—on a matter of methodology:

VII 1 1145^{b}2–7

We must, as in the other cases, set out the things that appear to be so and first go through the puzzles and in that way prove preferably all the reputable beliefs (*endoxa*) about these affections, or if not all of them, then most of them, and the most authoritative ones; for if the objections are resolved and the reputable beliefs are left standing, that would be an adequate proof.

The key to this sentence is the term "reputable beliefs," that is, the opinions of the many or the wise: "Reputable beliefs […] are things that seem so to everyone, to the majority, or to the wise—either to all of them, or to most, or to the most notable and most reputable" (*Topics*, I 1 100^{a}21–23). These are, for instance, reputable beliefs about goodness or the good life (*Topics,* I 14 105^{b}12–15) or about the laws that enjoy "a good reputation" (X 9 1180^{a}12–^{b}12). In the present context, they are about pleasure. So, reputable beliefs will offer not just the trigger for the forthcoming discussion on pleasure but its very foundation.

Now, this methodological basis, that concerns all domains of knowledge, not just political science, is premised on two things. First, Aristotle's belief that all people's opinions encompass smaller or greater flecks of truth, since all humans have the capacity to grasp some truth. Thus, reputable beliefs that are shared by most people may serve as something trustworthy, so much trustworthy as what is grounded in experience (*On Divination in Sleep*, 1 426^{b}14–16). On the whole, human beings "are naturally adequate as regards the truth and for the most part happen upon it" (*Rhet.* I 1 1355^{a}15–17; see also: I 8 1098^{b}27–29, X 2 1172^{b}36–1173^{a}1). So, it's not a coincidence that the *Nicomachean Ethics* is full of references to the opinions of Socrates and Plato, the tragedians, Homer, the poets, or the common people of the time.

Second, it presupposes a method that clears out what is true or not in reputable beliefs, be they the opinions of the wise or the laymen. This method is called by Aristotle "dialectic" and comprises the ability to examine opposite opinions or reputable beliefs in an attempt to find out which of those lead to contradictions or are refuted by the facts (*Topics*, I 2 101a34–101b4; *Sophistical Refutations*, 2 165b3–8).[1]

[1] "Dialectic is useful as regards the philosophical sciences because the capacity to go through the puzzles on both sides of a question will make it easier to discern what is true and what is false in each. Furthermore, dialectic is useful as regards the first starting-points where each science is concerned. For it is impossible to say anything about these that is based on the starting-points properly belonging to the science in question, since these starting-points are the first ones of all, and it is through reputable beliefs about each that it is necessary to discuss them. This, though, is

Evidently, not all reputable beliefs are correct. Sometimes they are, sometimes they must be more or less modified or polished up (i.e., liberated from their ambiguities or misleading prejudices), or entirely rejected. The latter is usually the case regarding the opinions hold by unrefined people, even though they happen to be the majority.

How should one proceed to discover which reputable beliefs are closer to truth and to what extent? One may at first get the impression of coherentism: it may seem as if political science were based *only* on reputable beliefs and were only to examine the degree to which they agree or disagree with one another.

To see why this is not so, let's return to the passage from Book VII regarding pleasure. There, Aristotle claims that we'll base our efforts on a kind of dialectic, we'll seclude the contradictions, and, based on the reputable beliefs, we'll find a kernel of truth. However, the sentence also mentions the *phenomena*. We know what these are. They are the empirical data that are available to us in our search for the principles or starting-points of political science. The phenomena correspond to the *hoti*, to facts of human life (see Sect. 1.3). We know by now that these phenomena are not something everyone can see correctly, since people perceive moral-political reality through the lens of their own states of character and intellectual states. We also know that this doesn't lead to a sort of relativism, since the practically wise person sees practical things in a correct or truthful way. So, no matter how much one would want to insist on the relativism of moral phenomena, no matter how close to mere reputable beliefs one would want to place them, it's wrong to overlook the fact that, in Aristotle's framework, there exists a judge of the correct way to understand the phenomena regarding human lives and happiness. Besides, dialectic will finally lead to the true and genuine starting-points of political science, as is the case in all sciences too, not to some random and shaky principles.

Why do we encounter so heavy a reliance on reputable beliefs, on the opinions of people, even of the many, in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Politics*? Does such an attitude undermine their scientific character? Not at all. This heavy reliance is due to the nature of the objects of political science. First, in other sciences (whether productive [like medicine] or theoretical [like astronomy]), the non-experts have very few, if any, things to say, and sometimes they have no exposure to the field of knowledge in question. In contrast, there are no people (except the beastly ones) without some beliefs about goodness, happiness, pleasure, etc. For all mature human beings exercise deliberate choice, and all of them, by nature, are political animals who participate in communities and acquire experience in human affairs. Second, in the practical realm, appearances or phenomena (for instance, how advantageous or pleasant things appear to us) go hand in hand with the states of character and the intellectual states of the agent and, hence, with their reputable beliefs too. In the

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a task special to, or most characteristic of, dialectic. For because of its ability to examine, it has a route toward the starting-points of all routes of inquiry" (*Topics* I 2 101a34–b4). The Greek term "*dialectic*" points to a dialogue between interlocutors, but this is not necessarily the case in Aristotle's framework; the political scientist can exercise dialectic in a way similar to what we take to be a thought experiment.

practical realm, we finally find out an array of *dipoles*: how moral phenomena appear to a certain kind of people according to their states of character goes hand in hand with their moral beliefs.

There is a third reason that makes reputable beliefs such an important factor in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, that is, the practical character of political science. Thus, it isn't sufficient to define what happiness or virtue of character truly is (i.e., to exhibit the starting-points of political science): in order for a practical science to serve its purpose, it needs to lead cities and individuals to virtue and happiness, and this requires the appropriate reshaping of their lives. It is very easy to teach you the starting-points of mathematics, even if you happen to have learned wrong ones, for the resistance of your old beliefs is not too strong. In practical matters, however, the resistance of our beliefs is very strong, for they pervade and are assimilated in our way of living. Thus, practical science must amend or even eradicate, if need be, people's reputable beliefs progressively, step by step, with the aim of convincing them to adopt the true starting-points about practical matters.

Our reputable beliefs about pleasure may be the most demanding and most stubborn case. Why? For one thing, pleasure permeates our whole life, is indeed a component of our happiness, and, in addition, seems to be indissolubly linked to our first-person perspective. Or is that not so? At this point, dialectic begins.

7.2 Why Pleasure Is Not a Movement (VII 11–13)

The discussion about pleasure starts, then, from what everyday people or the wise ones say about it. Among them, the most prominent positions are taken by Plato (who discusses pleasure in various dialogues, but mainly in the *Philebus*), the mathematician and philosopher Eudoxus of Cnidus, and the philosopher Speusippus, who was probably head of the Platonic Academy.

VII 11 1152^{b}8–12

In point of fact,

(1) it seems to some people that no pleasure is a good, either intrinsically or coincidentally (for the good and pleasure are not the same),
(2) while it seems to others that some pleasures are good but that many are base.
(3) Further, there is a third of these views, that even if every pleasure were a good, nonetheless it is not possible for the best good to be pleasure.

There are three prevalent views: (1) that pleasure is not at all a good, (2) that some pleasures are good while some are base, and (3) that pleasure is something good but not the highest good. Aristotle disagrees with all of them. View (2), though it states correctly that some pleasures are good and some are not, falls short of proposing a sensible interpretation of this distinction. View (3) also holds true, from a certain perspective (since we know that happiness, not pleasure, is the best or highest good), but is false, nevertheless.

I think it's safe to classify the arguments of those who adopt the above views into two categories: the empirical and the ontological or epistemological ones. Empirical arguments: (a) we see that the temperate and the practically wise people restrain themselves from certain pleasures, and so pleasure is not a good; (b) we observe that bodily pleasures distance us from intellectual activities, and since intellectual activities are something good, bodily pleasures must be something bad. Ontological or epistemological arguments: (c) by nature, animals and children don't have knowledge of the highest good but can nevertheless experience pleasure, and so pleasure is not the highest good; (d) if pleasure were a good, there would exist a science or craft knowledge of pleasure, but it's impossible for such a craft knowledge to exist, and so pleasure is not a good; (e) pleasure is a movement (*kinêsis*), it looks like what we've learned to call "production" (*poiêsis*). (For instance: while you're hungry, you are pained, not pleased, then you eat, and when you have eaten, you stop being hungry and you are pleased; so the coming to be of pleasure resembles the process of building [see Sect. 4.4].) If pleasure is a sort of movement, it's not an activity in the strict sense of the term, and if it's not an activity, it cannot be a constituent of happiness, and thus it's not a perfect good either, much less the highest good.

To confront the arguments above mentioned, we need some preliminary distinctions. We know the first distinction quite well: it's the distinction between the real and the apparent good (see Sect. 2.4). Maybe we can accordingly make a distinction between real pleasure and something like an apparent pleasure. The problem of course in the case of pleasure is that the wording "apparent pleasure" sounds weird, because it's strange to claim that people mistakenly, deceptively, or delusively think they *feel* pleasure. In the case of wishing for the true or for the apparent good, Aristotle distinguishes between correct and incorrect wish. But no such distinction between correct and incorrect pleasures would be justified because, among other things, pleasure does not share the intellectual character of wish. We must investigate alternative ways to formulate the distinctions that are proper to pleasure, for distinctions there certainly are.

The second distinction is between kinds of pleasure; for every activity seems to be accompanied by or attached to its own pleasure, so that all the other kinds of pleasure will be somehow alien to it. Different sorts of activities then correlate with different sorts of pleasures. What is more, different or alien pleasures are, for the most part, in conflict with the pleasure that is inherent in the very activity we are engaged in: the pleasure inherent in watching a film at home and the pleasure we take in seeing the face of our beloved sitting next to us, not to say the pleasure we take in eating popcorn, may prove to be competitive, since they distract our attention from the film, so that the pleasure we take in watching and understanding the film is disrupted.

We also have a third distinction, given that most philosophers speak of pleasure in terms of movement (*kinêsis*), not in terms of activity (*energeia*). The simplest example is that of filling a want; as I said before, you're hungry or thirsty and you eat or drink, and then you fill or replenish the want you had. The process of filling cannot constitute pleasure, as by nature it's defined by a product that doesn't exist yet—namely, being full. And the moment of fulfillment does not constitute pleasure either, because then the movement that is supposedly pleasure ceases.

But one should qualify the utter rejection of such cases as tokens of pleasure. For one thing, such a rejection would go against our common understanding of pleasure, since indeed, in everyday life, we take replenishments to be pleasurable. Aristotle has the conceptual tools to address such cases. For instance, he can say that the point is not to altogether deny to the recovery from an illness or to our not being anymore hungry the status of a pleasure, as long as one adds that it is "conditional," not something one would choose but something we equate, so to speak, with pleasure just because of the unfavorable circumstances of illness and hunger (VII 12 $1152^{b}29$–31). Or he may say that even in the case of sick people who are in the process of recovery (and, hence, not anymore *completely* ill), some parts of their organism are in their natural state and, hence, they take pleasure in the pertinent activities (VII 12 $1152^{b}35$–36). Aristotle's objective then is not to entirely deny the possibility of somehow associating certain processes or movements with pleasure but rather to contest the idea that the pattern of movement is the appropriate one to explain what pleasures are in the "full sense" of the term (X 5 $1176^{a}27$–28).[2] Besides, not all pleasures are like this—for example, the pleasures of sights and memories (X 3 $1173^{b}15$–20).

So, pleasures don't seem to fit to what we call "movement"; at least, not all of them or not the most paradigmatic ones. If we accept this conclusion and if the pair "movement vs activity" is, as the reputable beliefs also testify, our main clue for understanding pleasure, then it makes sense to maintain that pleasure is not a movement but *rather* an activity:

VII 12 $1153^{a}9$–15

[P]leasures are not comings to be nor do they all involve comings to be, but, rather, they are activities and an end. […] That is why it is not correct to say that pleasure is a perceived coming to be, but must rather say that it is activity of a natural state, and that it is unimpeded instead of perceived.

VII 12 $1153^{b}14$–17

It is because of this in fact that everyone thinks that the happy life is a pleasant one and—quite reasonably—weaves pleasure into happiness; for no activity is complete when it is impeded, and happiness is something complete.

According to the first passage, pleasure is not a coming to be, it is not something like medical treatment, teaching, or learning, but "rather" an activity, *granted* that we use exclusively the "coming to be (movement) vs activity" dipole. Let's suppose, for the sake of argument, that pleasure is indeed an activity. This would not be enough. The activity must not be impeded (not just something we are aware of), because an activity has to be *un*impeded to be pleasant. There are two types of such

[2] Aristotle himself accepts in the *Rhetoric* that, at least for the purposes of that treatise—for instance, from the perspective of the orator who aims at producing some pleasure in the soul of the listeners by evoking pleasant things—it would not be a mistake to claim that "pleasure is a process of movement in the soul, a process of intensive and perceptible restoration to its original nature and that pain is the opposite" (*Rhet.* I 11 $1369^{b}33$–35).

impeding factors: external ones—someone or something preventing you from exercising the activity or exercising it well—or internal ones—when your states or capacities are such that they impede the activity or its perfection, or when you have a desire for other activities that would impede your exercising or your willingness to be engaged in the first one. The absence of obstacles is included in the definition of pleasure because any obstacle mars the activity.

The second sentence adds a new thought: But isn't happiness such a thing? Isn't it unimpeded? Happiness is something complete, as was explained in I 7 (see Sect. 1.5.), and nothing is complete or perfect if it is impeded in its realization, either internally or externally. Aristotle didn't there explicitly state that completeness entails the absence of obstacles, but he did foreshadow the idea by defining happiness as the perfect actualization of an activity and explaining that such perfection relies on our possessing the pertinent virtue.

Nonetheless, there is something obscure in the claim that pleasure *is* an activity. Human beings are engaged in many different activities, such as seeing, hearing, thinking, remembering, acting justly or unjustly, etc., and each one of them has its proper pleasure. But there is *no* activity named "pleasure" that stands next to the activities of seeing, thinking, remembering, etc. The reason is very simple: if you ask me what I'm doing now and I respond that "I feel pleasure" or that "I'm pleased," you won't understand what I'm doing, in which activity I am engaged, which states or capacities of mine are actualized, and to which sort of objects they are directed. In order for pleasure to emerge, we should be engaged in an activity like seeing, hearing, etc. It is these activities that *are* pleasures (though, as we shall see, not always or necessarily). Thus, although nothing but an activity can be a pleasure in the full sense of term and although the definition of pleasure as an activity will not be abandoned, it needs further unpacking.

In the same section, in VII 12, Aristotle adds a new argument: there is no pleasure that is an object (product or work) of some craft knowledge.

VII 12 1153^{a}23–27

(1) The fact that no pleasure is the work of a craft is what we would quite reasonably expect; for there is no craft of any other activity either, but only of the corresponding capacity,
(2) although the crafts of the perfumer and the gourmet chef do seem to be crafts of pleasure.

Craft does not create pleasure because the object of a craft is always a product. But a productive process is not in itself pleasurable, for it is incomplete. Let's consider an example, learning. Learning aims at creating a state or capacity in the soul of the student (let's say, the capacity to play guitar). The capacity to play guitar is one thing though, playing guitar is another. No one receives pleasure by merely having the capacity for something (for the simple reason that we may have that capacity without actually exercising it, as is the case when someone is asleep). Students may receive pleasure only when the moment comes to actualize their capacity. But then there is a wide gap between the process of learning itself and the emergence of pleasure.

Of course, (2) adds, some people have the false belief that there are crafts that supposedly create pleasure, like the crafts of the perfumer or the gourmet chef. The work of cooking, however, is producing well-cooked or tasty food, not pleasure. If we feel pleasure when we eat this food and evaluate it as well-cooked, that's something other than the product of the craft of cooking. Besides, whether we take pleasure (or pain) in something cooked depends also on other things, for instance, on our temperance (how much we eat, how greedily or not, etc.), our taste, our health. The craft of cooking itself in no way ensures that someone will receive pleasure from eating its products.

A different kind of question is whether a person who cooks well feels pleasure in exercising the craft knowledge of cooking. Cooking is certainly a movement: while you're cooking, the product (the meal) is not ready, and when it's ready, the process of producing it has stopped. While you're cooking nothing is whole, and therefore nothing is complete. In a way, the same also applies to a person playing guitar (in the sense of producing a melody). This is why it makes a lot more sense to say that it's the activity of the listener that is actually pleasurable, not the activity of the person performing the melody. Listeners perform a cognitive activity in that they acknowledge the beauty of the melody; they don't produce something. And the exercise of this knowledge is actualized uniformly at any moment that the melody is heard. Indeed, in *Politics* VIII, Aristotle stresses that one of the highest pleasures that political life can offer is for the citizens to be spectators (for instance, of theatrical performances) and listeners to music.

It would be awkward, though, not to make room for musicians and builders (or craftsmen in general) to take pleasure in playing music and building houses. But this is not because they are involved in a production process aiming at the production of something that is not yet present, but because it's pleasant for them to contemplate how perfect—that is, how "natural," fluid, and unimpeded—their productive skills or states are. They take pleasure in their doings then either by contemplating their skills being actualized (X 5 1175^{a}34–36) or by contemplating the product of their doings to the extent that it confirms these same skills in their actuality (IX 7 1168^{a}7–9). In both cases, however, the emerging pleasure is only remotely connected with production as a process or movement.

7.3 The Phenomenology of Pleasure (VII 14)

What we have learned up to now about pleasure sounds somehow theoretical, distant from our everyday experience. Theoretical distinctions are useful, but they are mere words if we don't first turn our gaze to the facts. A phenomenology of pleasure will give flesh and blood to our previous findings. Besides, it is not enough to arrive at a correct definition of pleasure. In addition, we must understand why people fall into fallacies when they talk about pleasure and when they choose what is pleasant in their lives, and what sorts of fallacies these are. And the simplest way to find why they fall into fallacies is to examine the most common among them. It won't be the only one, but it will be the most revealing.

VII 14 1154^{a}22–26

But since one must not only state the true view but also the cause of the false one (for that contributes to our conviction; for when a reasonable explanation is given of why an untrue view appears true, this makes us more convinced of the true view), one must say why it is that bodily pleasures appear more choiceworthy.

This is hardly a surprise; indeed, the place of bodily pleasures in our lives and the sort of value we attribute to them appear to be the most indicative sign of our overall relation to pleasures. In the end, the problem concerning the phenomenology of pleasure will be this: Why do people consider bodily pleasures to be paradigmatic pleasures or the most choiceworthy and indisputable ones?

A first observation is that this is a matter of experience: a person who has felt only pleasures that involve the body will think that these are the only pleasures that exist. They haven't felt any other type of pleasures; they have no other frame of reference. So, there are people who have a very restrictive notion of what real pleasure is, simply because they have the experience of just one kind of pleasure.

In reality, though, what they understand as being a pleasure contradicts what we learned as basic and sound criteria for something to be pleasurable, namely, that it is an unimpeded activity. Before long, these activities are, by nature, saturated and can't go on because of the involvement of the body. Thus, activities that are connected closely to our bodies, such as eating or having sex, are halted because of their own natural impediments. Besides, they unavoidably contain an element of labor, for "an animal is always toiling" (VII 14 1154^{b}7). In general, it's because of this that bodily pleasures appear to be so appreciated in our lives: they seem to knock out our physical pain or our painful needs and, because of their curative effect, we are deceived regarding their true value; we tend to overestimate it. To understand their true value, we need a comparison: enjoying reading a poem, seeing a painting, listening to a melody, remembering a beloved person, solving a philosophical problem, playing chess, etc.

However, we don't yet know either what pleasure is or whether there are pleasures higher than the physical ones, nor what is the right way to deal with bodily pleasures. Book VII concludes without a final answer to these puzzles.

In the investigation of pleasure in Book X the focal point is, again, that pleasure is not a movement. In fact, Aristotle brings forward some new arguments (X 4): even using the term "bodily pleasures" contains a contradiction by implying that pleasure takes place *in* the body or that it's the body that experiences it, whereas, in fact, only the soul can be aware of pleasures. In the same manner, quantitative conceptions of pleasure are problematic too, be they formulated in terms of time or intensity. Whenever pleasure is determined in terms of intensity—as more intense or less intense—one presents things like this: I felt pleasure and it was getting stronger and stronger. But then pleasure is presented as if it were a movement, that is, as something that changes as closer as one gets to its climax. And then, all the early stages would not be full of pleasure; rather, they would be preliminary stages that also involve some pain (at minimum, the effort of acquiring more pleasure, or the sorrow of not having acquired full pleasure yet). But a pleasure mixed with pain

cannot be full pleasure or pleasure in the full sense of the term. If there is a pleasure that is full and deficient in nothing, it should be continuously the same. Besides, this is what was hiding behind the term "unimpeded": it must be something that constantly keeps the same flow, and nothing makes its quality deteriorate. So, it's more appropriate to think of pleasure as something that is complete at every moment than as something increasing that takes a period of time to occur or reach completion. In the same way, it makes no sense to speak of pleasure in terms of speed, as we would if it were a movement. We can't be enjoying something quickly or slowly.

What pleasure is, however, we still don't know. We just know that pleasure should not be modeled upon movement and bodily pleasures. We also know that pleasure *is* an activity, although we noted before that this definition needs further clarification. This is exactly what Book X means to provide us with: "[F]or without activity pleasure does not arise, and every activity too is completed by pleasure" (X 4 1175a 20–21). To resolve the puzzle of pleasure we need to shed light on this new formulation.

Before that, however, we have to put another question, one that's *evaluative*: if there are many pleasures, which ones would be higher than the rest?

X 3 1173^{b}28–31

(1) [P]leasures differ in kind; for those from noble sources are different from those from shameful ones,
(2) and we cannot feel the pleasures of a just person without being just; or those of a musician without being a musician; and similarly in the other cases.

X 5 1176^{a}15–19

(3) In all such cases, however, it seems that what is so is what appears so to an excellent person. And if this is correct, as it seems to be, and it is virtue and a good person (insofar as he is such) that are the measure of each thing, then pleasures would be those that appear to be pleasures to him, and the things that are pleasant would be the ones that he enjoys.

Everyone would accept, according to (1), that there are pleasures noble and shameful, worthy and unworthy. The question is whether we have a measure for evaluating them. In a sense, there is no measure within pleasure itself, because we have excluded any reference to criteria like intensity, time, and speed, that would risk turning pleasure into a movement. We need then some other strategy to carry out our evaluative approach. (2) opens a path in this direction, suggesting a shift from "which pleasure" to "who feels pleasure." It tells us that we must know people's moral quality in order to evaluate what appears pleasant to them: When you know in *advance* that a person who takes pleasure in listening to this melody is very knowledgeable about music, *only then* can you know that listening to this melody can actually be truly pleasurable. (3) proposes the same shift.

But this leads to a new vicious circle: the problem was to learn who is truly good, and we would supposedly learn this from people's lives, from the way they understand happiness and pleasure, for happiness contains pleasure. So, we recognize the virtuous people based on the pleasures they feel; for instance, we are in a position

to recognize the truly just people based on whether they feel pleasure when committing an act of justice (see Sect. 2.2). But if we must evaluate pleasures based on who experiences them while, at the same time, we should first know what things people take pleasure in to know who they truly are, this creates a vicious circle. We need a different criterion.

7.4 To Tell Me About Your Pleasures, Tell Me About What You Enjoy Doing (X 4–5)

X 4 1174^{b}14–33

(1) But since every perceptual capacity is active in relation to its perceptible object, and is completely active when it is in good condition in relation to the noblest of its perceptible objects […], in the case of each perceptual capacity, the best activity will be, then, the activity of the subject that is in the best condition in relation to the most excellent of its objects; and this activity would be the most complete and most pleasant.
(2) For with every perceptual capacity there is a pleasure connected, and the same holds for both thought and contemplation. […]
(3) And pleasure is what completes the activity. But pleasure does not complete it in the way that the perceptible object and the perceptual capacity do when they are both excellent, just as health and a doctor are not in the same way a cause of being healthy. […]
(4) And pleasure completes an activity not as the state does by being present in something but as a sort of supervenient end (*epiginomenon ti telos*), like the bloom on men in their prime of youth.

(1) states that pleasure has something to do with activities and introduces a concept we met in Book VII: completeness. Complete pleasure (and this already involves comparing pleasures to one another) will be associated with complete activities. (This insistence on completeness reminds us of the argument about the human function we analyzed in Sect. 1.6 and the conclusion that happiness must be in accordance with perfect or complete virtue.)

Now, Aristotle's primary god is eternally engaged in one single activity, to which he is identical (*Met.* XII 7 1072^{b}27): contemplating (or understanding). Nothing puts the perfection of this activity in jeopardy, for this activity is the best and eternal. God's activity *is* contemplation. "Pleasure" isn't a second activity over and above contemplation, but god's contemplation itself "is also pleasure" (*Met.* XII 7 1072^{b}16), for it is always and necessarily absolutely perfect. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, we encounter the very same idea: "[If] the nature of some being were simple, the same action would always be most pleasant. That is why the god always enjoys a single simple pleasure. For there is not only an activity of moving but also an activity of immobility, and pleasure is found more in rest than in movement" (VII 14 1154^{b}24–28).

Human activities and pleasures are *not* of the same kind. For example, our perceptual states may not be in the best condition and the object of our perception may not be either. And, of course, even when our state is perfect, it may not be active in relation to anything; it may not be active at all. In addition, no human being is engaged in one single activity and no human activity is eternal. In order for a human activity to be complete, two prerequisites must be met that are not met necessarily or always—how often or naturally they are met depends on the kind of activities involved. The first prerequisite concerns our states, which must be in their most excellent form and be actualized. The second is that the object be the noblest of the objects proper to this activity and the circumstances for engaging with them the most favorable ones.

For example, the noblest object of vision is a beautiful object with lively and clear colors on a contrasting surface, with clear lighting, etc. If you're trying to see something in poor light, you can't see it clearly, for the object is not then consonant with the natural function of sight—likewise, too much light may even destroy the capacity of sight, it may blind you, as we say. Then the activity of seeing will be painful, not a pleasure. The same goes for our states: people with limited vision don't see well and get tired from the effort of trying to see, so they don't get pleasure either. (Notice too that even if we suppose that the perfection of our states is to some extent up to us, the perfection of the objects we meet around us in the natural world and the circumstances for engaging with them are a matter of luck. One may then be tempted to infer that only things that are *not* around us, purely intelligible things, can be fully and reliably pleasurable. Aristotle finds it hard to resist this temptation!)

Though pleasure is related to the completeness of a complete activity, as is stated in (3), it is related to it in a different way than that of the object of the activity and of the state. What we want to know, then, is what exactly pleasure contributes to the completeness of an activity when its object as well as the state are already complete or perfect. This is what (4) is meant to clarify: "And pleasure completes an activity […] as a sort of supervenient end."

Take the following example: imagine that you look at a perfectly beautiful object and your sight is perfect too; while you're looking, you're still searching for the best perspective or the optimal distance from the object or the complete concentration of your attention to it—to be a photography lover just is to experience things in this way. There is no full pleasure emerging yet, since any effort to reach the climax of perfection is a form of labor or pain. Once the activity of observing reaches its apogee, when there's no point in moving or optimizing some other parameter in the activity, then pleasure supervenes on the activity. It's not something *added* that cures a deficiency or lack inbuilt in the completeness of the activity; it's not a feeling *added* to the activity either.

When these conditions of perfection are actually met, our activities (seeing, hearing, thinking, remembering, etc.) are pleasant. To explain this state of affairs one may say either (1) that our unimpeded activities *are* pleasures (for there is nothing beyond or besides them that could count as a pleasure in the full sense of the term), that is, in other words, that pleasure *is* those activities or (2) that pleasure *supervenes* on them (to highlight the distance that separates these activities from their

being perfect—from being pleasures). (1) is the definition of pleasure offered in Book VII and (2) is the one offered in Book X; the latter clarifies the former. And such a clarification is indispensable in the case of human pleasures, while it would be redundant in the case of Aristotle's primary god.

So, in a sense, pleasure is, in modern terms, the *subjective* or *psychological* facet of the activity's *objective* quality (and not the subjective *response* to the activity's objective quality, as if pleasure itself were an addendum). Pleasure serves as a sort of evidence or confirmation of the fact that the activity is perfectly performed, and it is expressed as a kind of optimization, as an incentive for one to continue the activity in the exact same manner: "For the pleasure that properly belongs to it assists in increasing the activity" (X 5 1175^{a}30–31). Which means, as Aristotle explains a few lines later, that it makes the activity last longer and remain in full alert, assuring its most precise and best execution.

Aristotle closes his argument in (4) with a metaphor: "pleasure completes an activity […] like the bloom on men in their prime of youth." This is intended to highlight the bidirectional condition just mentioned: the prime of youth is something that one can hardly overlook both from within—for young people are indeed in the peak of their ardor for living—and from an external point of view—for youth is indeed the peak of visible beauty.

People often complain that Aristotle's analysis of pleasure is inconclusive, for it seems strange to say that performing a perfect activity—that is, an activity performed in the best possible way under the optimal circumstances—*necessarily* yields pleasure. One should, so the argument goes, allow for the possibility that the performance of a perfect activity does *not* yield pleasure, to the extent that pleasure escapes from our control, is something that happens to us rather than something that we try to attain or that we can attain as the end of our doings and efforts. In other words, they blame Aristotle for making pleasure a quasi-automatic psychological *byproduct* of activity's perfection. This criticism is off the target. Human activities are not random doings we happen to undertake as if we were activity-machines, but the outcome of our deliberate choices; they are the very constituents of what we take to be a happy life. Our endorsement of activity's worthiness and our zest for its unimpeded and perfect performance are counted among the prerequisites of activity's perfection and, thus, of its being a pleasure too. An activity that is boring, overpowered by other activities and pleasures, deficient in attention and rigor, or associated with weak determination to bring forward our deliberate choice, etc., is not a perfect activity in the first place.

7.5 Pleasure's Goodness (X 4–5)

The image of such a perfection, however, creates a new paradox: complete activities, to the extent that they are pleasant and unimpeded, should also go on without stop, shouldn't they? Aristotle has additional reasons to pose such a question, because he believes that there exist divine and eternal beings that act incessantly.

And his answer to the question above is worded, as we would expect, on the basis of the juxtaposition of human beings with a divine one:

X 4 1175^{a}3–10

How is it, then, that no one is pleased continuously? Or is it that we get tired? For continuous activity is impossible for all things human. No continuous pleasure, then, arises either; for it follows along with the activity. Some things delight us when they are novelties, but later delight us less, because of the same thing; for at first, thought is called forth and is intensely active regarding them, as happens in the case of our sight when we look hard at something, but later the activity is no longer like that but has grown relaxed so that the pleasure is dimmed as well.

We get tired; it's impossible for humans to act constantly. We need pauses or sleep, as activities require physicality in one way or another, and physicality gets tired or worn. Activities cease, and pleasure ceases with them. There is also, however, a second answer for which no clue had been given to us: even when it comes to the most beautiful and noble things, while at first we focus all our attention on them, the more time goes by and the more we get used to them, our attention diminishes or weakens and our activity doesn't maintain the same precision and completeness any more (X 4 1175^{a}6–10). This simple but appropriate observation confirms how deeply rooted Aristotelian political philosophy is in human reality. Even if we conclude at some moment—and this moment will come—that one sort of human activity is more complete, more continuous, and more pleasing than all the others, even if we conclude that some people are of such a kind that they truly engage in this activity in the most unimpeded way possible, it will still hold true that this highest activity is *not* the only activity we wish to engage in; we will always want to perform other activities as well; for variety matters.

If variety matters, we need to answer the other question, the evaluative one, the one that asks which pleasures are more choiceworthy than the others.

X 5 1175^{b}24–28

Since activities differ in decency and baseness, however, […] the same goes for pleasures as well; for each activity has a pleasure that properly belongs to it. The pleasure, then, that properly belongs to an excellent activity is decent, and the one that properly belongs to a base activity is depraved.

X 5 1175^{b}36–1176^{a}3

Just as activities differ, then, so too do the corresponding pleasures. Sight differs from touch in purity, however, as hearing and smell do from taste. The pleasures, then, also differ in the same way, as the pleasures of thought do from these, and as, within each of the two, some do from others.

These two passages claim that to separate pleasures into decent and base ones, we must first separate activities into decent and base ones. The first passage uses the binary opposition of decency and baseness; the second the opposition of purity and

impurity. Both just and unjust people take pleasure in their activities, but now we have a yardstick with which to measure the value of these pleasures (a yardstick that doesn't invoke how they themselves experience each pleasure). The second is less easy to understand, as are its examples. It also supposes a distinction between activities, but this time the focal point is their objects: vision is a higher form of perception, because its objects are "clearer" than the objects of other senses, to the extent that their form is "clearer" (meaning, more intact or less dependent on their materiality), whereas the materiality of an object always plays a bigger role, for instance, in tactile sensations (*DA* II 12 424^{a}17–32). In any case, the conclusion is clear: pleasures can be evaluated depending only on the evaluation of their respective activities in terms of purity. Let's keep this thought in mind; Book X, which will give the final answer to the question of happiness, will shed new light on this matter too.

Here are some conclusions regarding Aristotle's understanding of pleasure:

(a) Pleasure is a good and an intrinsic component of happiness as the highest good. It is *not* the end of our lives; happiness is. Let's name this the *normative* element.
(b) All people long for pleasure and pursue it, regardless of the purity or the decency of the pleasures they invest in, and regardless of the explanations they may offer about pleasure. Let's call this the *psychological* element.
(c) Many people get pleasure wrong, and most do so because they identify pleasure with bodily pleasure, since they have no experience of any other kind. Let's call this the *empirical* element.
(d) If we ask people whether pleasure is a good, and they reply "yes," we are not in a position to conclude very much. Because the crucial question is *how* people associate pleasure with goodness and *in which sort of activities* they primarily take pleasure in. This way Aristotle achieves two goals at once:
(d1) The first goal is the *neutralization of pleasure*. Our longing for pleasure and for pleasurable activities says nothing about our moral character, about whether we are virtuous or vicious people; we could be either. Pleasure, while extremely important in our lives, doesn't tell who we truly are. It's only the *kind* of pleasure that defines who we are, and the kind of pleasure is defined by the activities we devote ourselves to. Our choice of activities dictates our choice of the supervenient pleasures.
(d2) The second goal is to *absolve pleasure from all blame regarding human misadventures and failings*. Pleasure, by itself and in accord to its nature, neither corrupts our lives nor tarnishes nor adulterates our goodness; on the contrary, it is a vital and inextricable part of human life and happiness.

7.6 Chapter Summary

Pleasure (*hêdonê*), the topic of *Nicomachean Ethics* VII 11–14 and X 1–4, is an indispensable element of happiness; a painful or sorrowful happiness would be a contradiction in terms. The discussion about pleasure starts from what everyday

people or the wise ones say about it. There are three prevalent views: (1) that pleasure is not at all a good, (2) that some pleasures are good while some are base, and (3) that pleasure is something good, but not the highest good. Aristotle disagrees with all of them. Yet one can hardly give a definition of pleasure. To do so, we should explain why pleasures don't fit to what we call "movement" (*kinêsis*); at least, not all of them or not the most paradigmatic ones. If we accept this conclusion and if the pair "movement vs activity" is our main clue for understanding pleasure, then it makes sense to maintain that pleasure is not a movement, but *rather* an activity. Nonetheless, there is something obscure in the claim that pleasure *is* an activity. Human beings are engaged in many different activities, such as seeing, hearing, thinking, remembering, acting justly or unjustly, etc., and each one of them has its proper pleasure. But there is *no* activity named "pleasure" that stands next to the activities of seeing, thinking, remembering, etc. Thus, although nothing but an activity can be a pleasure in the full sense of term and although the definition of pleasure as an activity will not be abandoned, it needs further unpacking. The chapter offers a detailed and unitary reconstruction of Aristotle's views about pleasure in Books VII and X and an analysis of the definition of pleasure as a sort of supervenient end.

7.7 Further Reading

One should begin by Gosling's and Taylor's (1982/2002) landmark study (Chaps. 11, 14, 15, 16). For a comparison of Aristotle's and Plato's views on pleasure, see Price (2017). As to how pleasure relates to activity and perfection, see Bostock (1988), Gonzalez (1991), Van Riel (1999), and Strohl (2011). Warren (2015) explores the metaphor of the bloom. As to "reputable beliefs," I am aligned with Reeve (2012); see also the much-discussed study by Nussbaum (1986: Chap. 8) and the objections raised in Cooper (1988).

7.8 Study Questions

1. How should we understand Aristotle's notion of reputable beliefs? Why does Aristotle's political science rely so heavily on them?
2. Why might one think that pleasure is a movement of some sort?
3. What sort of pleasure do craftsmen take in practicing their crafts?
4. Why does Aristotle deny that bodily pleasures are the most choiceworthy ones? Is he right?
5. Why does it seem strange to say that pleasure *is* an activity?
6. Explain Aristotle's claim that "pleasure completes an activity […] as a sort of supervenient end."

7. Are Aristotle's two definitions of pleasure in Book VII and Book X compatible with one another?
8. Why does Aristotle shift from an evaluative scale of pleasures to an evaluative scale of activities?

7.9 Essay Questions

1. Is Aristotle a hedonist or not? Find arguments on both sides.
2. "For some time past the words of Bergotte, when he pronounced himself positive that, in spite of all I might say, I had been created to enjoy, pre-eminently, the pleasures of the mind, had restored to me, with regard to what I might succeed in achieving later on, a hope that was disappointed afresh every day by the boredom that I felt on setting myself down before a writing-table to start work on a critical essay or a novel. 'After all,' I said to myself, 'possibly the pleasure that its author has found in writing it is not the infallible test of the literary value of a page; it may be only an accessory state [*un état accessoire*], one that is often to be found superadded to that value, but the want of which can have no prejudicial effect on it. Perhaps some of the greatest masterpieces were written yawning.' My grandmother set my doubts at rest by telling me that I should be able to work and should enjoy working as soon as my health improved." (Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time II: Within a Budding Grove*, translated by C.K.S. Moncrieff and T. Kilmartin's, and revised by D. J. Enright. New York: Modern Library, 1992—slightly modified). Discuss from Aristotle's perspective.

Chapter 8
Friendship: A Privileged Space of Mutual Visibility

8.1 The Puzzles of Friendship

Having considered Aristotle's account of practical wisdom and pleasure, we approach the end of the *Nicomachean Ethics* and expect to take up (once again) the all-important topic of happiness. Instead, we encounter an analysis of friendship (*philia*). Of the *Nicomachean Ethics'* ten Books, two address friendship, while only one is devoted to justice. It is striking that while Books VIII–IX tackle friendship, the other ethical virtues are explored in Books II–V: friendship is the sole virtue of character analyzed after Aristotle's analysis of practical wisdom in Book VI. This may, of course, be the work of an (unreliable) ancient editor. But it may not be so transparent, in fact, that friendship *really is* a virtue of character (as Aristotle encourages us to assume in II 7) in the first place. A more careful formulation might hold that "friendship is a sort of virtue or involves virtue" (VIII 1 $1155^{a}3$–4). But why think that friendship is not a virtue of character? Perhaps because, even today, it seems evident to us that friendship refers to a space *beyond* virtue: friendship is not a bundle of moral obligations; for example, no one would claim that I am *obliged* to be someone's friend. Instead, friendship involves a set of commitments that I willingly and freely take up, provided I *already* recognize someone as my friend.

This feature of friendship comes into further relief if we consider the distinction between universality and individuality, two antithetical poles. While we have some moral obligations toward everyone (at least to those in our particular political community), a circle of friends is far narrower and introduces commitments of a quite specific kind. Further, these two sets of obligations are ostensibly in tension with one another, most immediately, in cases where considerations grounded in friendship lead us to contravene otherwise universal obligations, when, for instance, we lie to John to protect our friendship with David. Similar tensions also arise in love (erotic, maternal, etc.). Further, one might hold that friendship has no moral ground at all and that it is instead a mere matter of taste or a quasi-aesthetic appreciation of

P. Kontos, *Introduction to Aristotle's* Nicomachean Ethics, Palgrave Philosophy Today, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-41985-0_8

others. If persons (so the argument would go) are unique individuals, like original works of art, then my reasons for developing a close friendship with a particular person are independent of any rules and codes, and friendship increasingly looks like an inexplicable miracle. On the other hand, if one favors a universalistic ethics, then on this view we would have moral obligations to others merely because we are *all* rational agents capable of action or, from a theological perspective, because we are *all* children of the same God. On this assumption, nothing justifies, from a moral point of view, our privileging a narrow circle of friends over against the universal community of rational beings. Friendship, then, starts to seem like a threat to ethical life.

Aristotle addresses these difficulties by invoking the distinction between justice and friendship. If justice is the virtue that dictates how we should act toward others within our political community, and friendship guides action within the narrow circle of those whom we recognize as friends, then the following question arises: Is justice or friendship the more basic virtue? Aristotle maintains that "if people are friends, there is no need for justice, whereas people who are just need friendship in addition to justice" (VIII 1 $1155^{a}26$–27). This response suggests that friendship somehow *includes* justice, and even that justice is *inferior* to friendship, since justice in no sense guarantees friendship. Genuine friendship presupposes justice because it assumes equality between two (or more) friends. This precludes the possibility of unjust behavior, like greed or aggression, between true friends. Within the space of friendship, then, a conflict between justice and friendship is inconceivable. Between friends, justice takes the form of a sincere agreement, internal to their friendship; it does not require or admit of an external judge. These relationships can be represented quasi-mathematically for they depict rational comportments. Let A and B be two persons. In the framework of distributive justice (see Sect. 3.4), the Legislator (L) objectively defines the analogy relating their Worth (W) to the Goods (G) they deserve:

Distributive Justice: $L \{ W^{A}/W^{B} = G^{A}/G^{B} \}$

In friendship, there is no such external judge, for the relations between friends obey *internal* principles (to which I will return in Sect. **8.2**) that are mutually agreed upon and respected:

Friendship: $\{A \leftarrow \rightarrow B\}$

Of course, things turn out to be more complicated. For Aristotle, the actions of *virtuous* friends should satisfy both conditions above: their friendship presupposes virtue not only *within* the space of friendship—in the form of mutual respect between two friends, on terms to be determined between them—but also as it regards the *public face* of their friendship, that is, how the two friends, individually or jointly, behave toward others. Hence, a genuine friendship can be internally just as long as the two friends do not violate their mutual commitments, and *yet* not unconditionally just or virtuous, if the two friends are unjust toward other people or other groups. Call this the puzzle of *friendship's justice*.

Another thorny problem is that Aristotle consistently includes friendship among the external goods. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, he juxtaposes friendship with wealth and political power (I 8 $1099^{b}1$), and in the *Rhetoric,* with good-breeding, wealth,

and honor (*Rhet.* I 5 1360^{b}27–28). If friendship constitutes an external good, then it is not a good of the soul. By extension, it is not a virtue of character either. Why think that friendship is in some sense an *external* good? According to a commonly held view, friendship depends on circumstances and conditions partially beyond our control: even the most virtuous people, who find themselves in a position to cultivate genuine friendships, may never have the good fortune of encountering friends at all, perhaps because they find themselves in an extensively corrupt city or political community. What is more, friendship also depends on others: a friend may have passed away, left the city, or encountered life circumstances that unexpectedly inhibit our relationship. Crucially, as a relationship essentially encompassing others, friendship *transcends* us; it exceeds the sphere of what is up to us and heavily depends on luck and on the lives of others. While friendship is indeed related to the states of our own soul, to be realized it needs active relationships with others. At the same time, to the extent that we actually *have* friends, they become a part of us, by depositing traces of love, affection, character, or worldview, a process that deepens and enlarges the self. But how can friendship accommodate these seemingly contradictory traits? How can friendship transcend the self while simultaneously enlarging it? Let us call this the puzzle of *friendship's bulk*.

Friendship is puzzling. We have all experienced difficulties in making friends and in understanding what we owe to them as well as what we can expect from them. We have all suffered from losing friends, that is, from losing a part of our world or rather a view on our world. And we have all encountered the tight link between friendship and happiness: not only is our happiness somehow dependent on our having good friends, but it also depends on our friends' happiness. At the end of this chapter, it will become clear that despite some critical differences, Aristotle's notion of friendship is in fact very familiar to us.

8.2 Friends Are Everywhere, But of Different Sorts (VIII 1–4)

Some preliminary clarifications are needed. [1] Aristotle's notion of *philia* is not our own: its scope is far broader. While it certainly captures what the English term "friendship" refers to, it also covers almost every relationship between human beings, including, for example, relationships between parent and child, between husband and wife, between partners, and even between business associates or cities. The first important point to note is that friendship in the *narrow* sense concerns relations between individuals (and not between groups, cities, or citizens qua citizens), and, in particular, relations between individuals equal to one another (or, at the very least, between those presumed to be). This narrow view of friendship, then, excludes

[1] *EE* VII is also about friendship; there are many (more or less significant) differences of emphasis between the *Eudemian* and the *Nicomachean* portraits of friendship, but I will not thematize them.

relations between, for example, parent and child, teacher and student, husband and wife, benefactor and beneficiary, human beings and gods. This is no mere descriptive claim; it has direct normative import for what a friendship *should* be. This claim, of course, is anything but self-evident. In non-western traditions, the paradigm of friendship is a child's respect for a father. In the West, however, Aristotle's narrow view is, on the whole, favorably received. No doubt, no one would hold today that husband and wife are by nature unequal. Still, psychologists, for instance, remind us that parents and children (at least until the latter attain maturity and some independence) are decidedly *not* friends. Also note that although, for Aristotle, these cases do not qualify as friendships in the narrow sense, unequal relationships remain important and can even be considered noble. They do not qualify as friendships in the narrow sense, because in cases where one party is in a superior position to the other, no true reciprocity obtains between them: they are different kinds of people, with different aims and wishes; in a sense, their relationship is asymmetrical. For instance, to describe the relationship between father and son in uniform terms, as if they were equals, would be quite misleading, for in reality the father's relation to the son and the son's relation to the father are different in kind. If this were not the case, then for Aristotle the son would be burdened with the Sisyphean and endless (and, hence, intrinsically unpleasant and futile) task of repaying his father for his existence.

A second important clarificatory point is called for. Aristotle's view of friendship should not be conflated with what we usually call altruism or selflessness. For, in Aristotle's ethics, there is no straightforward opposition between the really good and the advantageous (see Sect. 2.4). By contrast, the true good is both useful/advantageous *and* pleasant to the virtuous person (this does not preclude the possibility that base persons falsely and myopically identify the useful and the good). Simply put, the demand that people sacrifice their own self, or that they ignore what is good or pleasurable *for themselves,* is foreign to Aristotle's ethics. In unfortunate circumstances, such a disregard or sacrifice might indeed prove necessary and genuinely noble. For example, Aristotle praises "Achilles because he went to the aid of his companion Patroclus, knowing that he himself must die and that he could otherwise live [more]. To him, a death of this sort was nobler, although the advantageous thing was to live" (*Rh*. I 3 1359^{a}3–5). But this is a borderline case; there is no moral imperative to neglect our own advantage for that of our friends.

After all, we encounter Aristotle's discussion of friendship in Books VIII–IX of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, just before his final word on happiness. Friendship is important for happiness because it concerns *my* happiness. Even in political friendship, Aristotle's core idea is that the community of the city can only be happy if its members are. This is not to say that Aristotle's friendship is grounded in selfishness or that he disapproves of altruism. The practically wise people know under which circumstances altruistic actions are noble. But they also know that it is hard for human beings—except in extreme circumstances—to sacrifice their lives to create a world they will be unable to enjoy. We are now in a position to consider a first definition of friendship:

VIII 2 1155^{b}31–34

But for a friend, it is said, (1) we must wish good things for his own sake (*ekeinou heneka*). Those who wish good things to someone in this way, however, if the same wish is not reciprocated, are said to have goodwill (*eunoia*) toward him; (2) for friendship is said to be reciprocated goodwill. Or (3) must we add "that does not go unawares"?

In (2) and (3), Aristotle introduces an analogy between friendship and goodwill. Goodwill is similar to friendship, but it is not identical to it (IX 5). Goodwill indicates a positive stance toward others and their worth, but it does not bring with it a willingness to undertake common actions with them, nor is it grounded in any long-term acquaintance. More importantly, in goodwill there is no reciprocity requirement, since A's positive view of B does not presuppose B's positive view of A. There is no awareness requirement either, for B may not know of A's goodwill toward him/her. Hence, though it makes no sense to say that "I am David's friend, but he does not know it," or that "I am David's friend, but he is not my friend," the grammar of goodwill allows for such formulations.

This teaches us something important about the grammar of friendship. But, in any case, the key lies in (1) above: we must wish good things to our friends for their own sake. Only after we decipher this statement will we be able to fully understand Aristotle's account of friendship. Before that, however, we need some further clarifications.

Aristotle distinguishes three kinds of friendship according to their proper objects. These objects are the noble, the pleasant, and the useful (see Sect. 2.4). Given that the useful or advantageous can be subsumed into the pleasant (VIII 2–3 1155^{b}18–56^{a}8), in the end there are two kinds of friendship: that based on the (real) good, and that based on the pleasant. This latter distinction is the basis on which Aristotle develops a new evaluative or normative distinction between perfect and inferior friendship:

VIII 3 1156^{b}7–11

(1) Complete (*teleia*) friendship, however, is the friendship of good people who are alike in virtue; for each alike wishes good things for the other insofar as he is good, and each is intrinsically good.
(2) And those who wish good things for their friends for their friends' own sake are friends most of all, since it is because of themselves and not coincidentally that they are disposed in this way.

(1) contends that perfect friendship obtains between good people, that is, between those who are of similar ethical (viz. virtuous) standing. This claim may give us the impression that friendship is merely a state of affairs in which two virtuous people happen to meet and like each other. Or, alternatively, the impression that friendship is nothing more than the crowning moment of two already virtuous lives achieved independently of this particular friendship. Both impressions are false. Crucially,

for Aristotle, friendship is a vehicle through which we may *become* virtuous (the full justification for this view will be explored in Sect. 8.4).

As (2) makes clear, a friendship between two virtuous people is perfect because one wishes good to the other for the other's sake. To clarify this somewhat obscure claim, Aristotle appeals to a number of equally obscure terms: "intrinsically" (*kath'hautous*), "because of themselves" (*di'hautous*), and "not coincidentally" (*ou kata sumbebêkos*). These terms are meant to illustrate the idea that, in perfect friendship, virtuous people recognize one another for what they really are, that is, they take into account each other's true identity, which displays someone's moral quality qua doer of moral actions. There are, of course, infinite coincidental qualities our friends might have that are *not* constitutive elements of our friendship or of their moral self: for example, that they are short/tall, beautiful/ugly, rich/poor, etc. (we will return to these coincidental qualities in a moment).

For now, note that claim (2) is more complex: *perfect* friendship relies on what Aristotle had initially (in the passage from VIII 2 above) considered to be an element of any friendship *in general* (i.e., of both perfect and inferior friendships), namely, that we should wish good to our friends for their own sake. This new difficulty becomes more pressing in light of Aristotle's definition of inferior friendships:

VIII 3 1156^{a}10–19

(1) Now those who love each other because of utility do not love each other intrinsically but only insofar as some good comes to them from each other.
(2) Similarly with those who love because of pleasure; for they like witty people not for having a character of a certain sort but because they are pleasant to them.
(3) Those who love because of utility, then, feel affection because of what is good for themselves, and those who love because of pleasure do so because of what is pleasant to themselves, and not insofar as the beloved is who he is, but insofar as he is useful or pleasant.
(4) These friendships, then, are, in fact, coincidentally friendships; for a person who is beloved in that way is loved not insofar as he is precisely who he is but insofar as he provides some good, in the one case, or some pleasure, in the other.

Inferior friendships develop when we befriend someone because they provide us with pleasure (e.g., money, sexual pleasure, etc.). Such goods are coincidental, to the extent that information about our friends' wealth or sexual attractiveness tells us nothing about their ethical quality; imperfect friendship concerns itself with coincidental or circumstantial features that are not proper to the ethical sphere.

But these distinctions still seem somewhat abstract. Before giving them more content, let me clarify two more subtleties: (a) inferior friendships are not insincere, exploitative, or fake, for two persons might sincerely and wholeheartedly agree that whatever is advantageous and pleasant is always good, and hence, that their friendship can be grounded in mutual advantage or an exchange of benefits (e.g., money, pleasure, assistance in public affairs, etc.). (b) The distinction between perfect and inferior friendships is not meant to suggest that virtuous people actually have, or should have, *exclusively* perfect friendships. That would be impossible. Beyond the

circle of perfect friendship, they also undertake activities for which the moral identity of the other person may be irrelevant (e.g., business transactions). At issue is only whether someone is capable of participating in a perfect friendship *too*. What only matters is the sort of friendship one deems highest, the kind of people one wants to share one's life with, and the kinds of activities that are constitutive of a person's happiness.

Having accumulated a number of open questions, let us now flesh out the theoretical distinctions above, by considering their implications for the two kinds of friendship. First recall the distinction between production (*poiêsis*) and action (*praxis*) (see Sects. 1.1 and 4.4). In productions, so long as a builder builds a house, the house does not exist yet; but when the house is constructed, the builder's building activity ceases. Such a distinction would be superfluous in a treatise on ethics, if it did not help us understand why we err in our grasp of justice, friendship, etc. Indeed, it will prove that those who devote their lives to inferior friendships conceive of friendship *as if* it were a sort of production. Three considerations are especially important in this respect.

First, inferior friendships dissolve once the advantage one was searching for or expecting is produced or attained (VIII 8 1159^{b}10–12; IX 1 1164^{a}8–10). Productions are completed in a similar way. Assume that in my inferior friendship with John, I expect to receive some money. Once John gives me the money I needed, our friendship becomes meaningless and effectively ceases. For this reason, inferior friendships are very competitive. If George can provide greater, easier, or more immediate profit, this offers another reason to cease my friendship with John. In addition, whenever the pleasant or advantageous things I have a penchant for start to differ (such changes are symptomatic of the lack of virtue, for Aristotle), then I will be motivated to find new friends who can better supply the pleasures or advantages I am now interested in. By contrast, perfect friendships have no reason to end. So long as subjects retain their moral identity, perfect friendship can continue. Aristotle does not romanticize perfect friendships as if they were immune to change or dissolution; nothing within the realm of human affairs enjoys such an immutability. Virtuous people can change too. Sometimes, albeit rarely, they cease being virtuous due to unfortunate circumstances or traumatic experiences. These changes may even be irreversible, such that we no longer recognize them (IX 3 1165^{b}21–22); we are then unable to help them restore their previous condition. Under circumstances of that sort, perfect friendships dissolve. But even in these extreme cases, the value of our past friendship is never called into question; rather, it functions as a reminder of noble things.

Second, the distinction between perfect and inferior friendships becomes clearer if we consider the difference between active (*philein*) and passive (*phileisthai*) stances in friendship, loving and being loved (VIII 8 1159^{a}12–28). In inferior friendships, subjects enjoy to passively receive another's love, for the advantage one gets from another is more important in these cases. That the fulfillment of inferior friendships rests only on outcomes that pertain to the receptive or passive part reveals affinities to the structure of production. By contrast, in perfect friendships, the

opposite is the case: the presence of my friend motivates me to accomplish morally good actions.

Third (VIII 13 1163^{a}9–23), the antithesis above can be also described in terms of deliberate choice (see Sect. 5.1). In fact, those involved in inferior friendships measure the worthiness of their friendship against the benefit they receive. In inferior friendships, the motives behind my friend's actions are insignificant. Only their product-like result or utility matters (i.e., the benefit I actually receive). In these cases, my friends' intentions, deliberate choices, ends, or the steps they took in deliberating are of secondary importance. Inversely, in perfect friendships only my friends' virtue matters, as it is reflected in their deliberate choices and actions.

We now have a more complete picture of the distinction between perfect and inferior friendships, but it still seems that we are caught in a vicious circle: if in *all* friendships we wish the good for our friends for their own sake, as stressed in the initial definition of friendship in VIII 2 1155^{b}31–34, how can I wish the good for my friends for their own sake in inferior friendships—which, although inferior, remain *friendships*—provided that in such cases I am chiefly interested in my *own* advantage? Should we conclude that, in the end, inferior friendships do not constitute genuine friendships? (In the relevant literature, this set of questions is often discussed under the label "the focal meaning of friendship.")

Any contradiction here is merely apparent. Friendships, perfect and inferior ones alike, point to another source of moral actions, separate from me, which I depend on: I need the existence of others as doers of morally relevant actions (why this is the case will be explained in Sect. 8.4). Once again, we encounter the notion that a friend is an external good, which I cannot generate by myself. Importantly, acts flow from other agents, who apprehend goodness as I do. In perfect friendship, others are sources of virtuous actions like actions of justice, courage, greatness of soul, etc. In inferior friendships, they undertake actions for the sake of wealth, pleasure, etc. In both cases, the presence of a friend is something good for me. In both cases, it is clear that actions (of any kind) depend on a ground (i.e., another agent) that makes them possible. Wishing the good for my friends for their own sake is tantamount to wishing that they continue to generate the kind of goods that are proper to our friendship. And generating such goods is certainly also something good to my friends, that is, something they themselves consider good, for friends share the same notion of (true or apparent) goodness.

Call the above pattern the principle of *symmetry*: from the perspective of either friend, the same things appear to be good—in perfect friendships, this is the true good, while in inferior friendships, it is the apparent good, that is, the merely advantageous and pleasant. Aristotle explicates the principle of symmetry using the following analogy:

IX 4 1166^{a}1–2

The features fitted to friendships toward neighbors, and those by which the various sorts of friendship are defined, seem to derive from the features of a person's friendship toward himself.

When Aristotle develops this analogy, he shifts from a focus on various kinds of friendship to a focus on perfect friendships. Nevertheless, his argument can be reconstructed such that it coheres well with the principle of symmetry: (a) Toward ourselves and toward our friends, we wish our own or our friends' good for our own or for our friends' sake; that is, we wish that they and I, respectively, continue to exist as we actually are. (b) Further, this equilibrium within friendship is possible provided that we spend time with friends and undertake activities guided by the same choices or by the same understanding of what is painful or pleasant.

Notwithstanding the principle of symmetry, one can still distinguish between perfect and inferior friendships. In perfect friendships, we wish our friends to remain virtuous, while in inferior friendships, we see a friend as a source of advantage and pleasure. In virtuous friendships we also wish that we remain virtuous, while in base friendships we wish that we remain a generator as well as a recipient of advantage and pleasure.

The fundamental difference between the above antithetical pairs can be better grasped by taking up a dynamic, temporal perspective, instead of a static one. Doubtless, Aristotle sometimes makes the hyperbolic claim that the soul of base people is permanently torn by faction and that they hate themselves or the very fact that they exist (IX 4 1166^{b}11–13). However, everyday experience shows that this is rarely the case. Base people are often in agreement with themselves, for they are convinced that advantage or pleasure is indeed the real good. Besides, all too often, their success in life consolidates their conviction. Nevertheless, both in inferior friendship with others and in base friendships for ourselves, the passage of time brings instability. We already know why (see Sects. 6.2 and 7.4): the true good is determinate while the apparent good is indeterminate. The advantageous and the pleasant are relational goods; they depend on what one takes, at this very moment, to be the good for which something is advantageous. Similarly, our grasp of which activity can yield pleasure varies from one situation to another, or from one period of life to another. That is to say that the category of advantage/pleasure does not *definitively* identify specific good activities. Hence, even if base people want to continue the same life path, they experience a sort of internal tension that mimics the ways in which inferior friendships dissolve. They regret many things in life. They do not regret having always chosen the pleasant or advantageous, but rather the specific things they once considered to be advantageous or pleasant. In retrospect, they realize that they missed many opportunities to increase the goods they *now* consider to be advantageous or pleasant, and blame themselves for this strategic mistake. In contemplating the future, they suffer from the same sense of futility we encountered in the craft of commerce (see Sect. 1.4): no matter how much wealth, pleasure, etc., they actually get, they want more and more, and cannot determine or predict a future point of fulfillment. Such persons might also suffer from the anxiety that, as in the past, they will soon abandon their present devotion to that specific (apparent) good. In both cases, although they do not intend to disown their moral attitude, they are bound to disown parts of their past and their future self.

It's time to sum up our findings: despite some important differences, in both perfect and inferior friendships there are two separate, symmetrical, and equal

poles. *Separate*: my existence is external to that of my friend, and our fusion into oneself with two inseparable members would not constitute a maximum of friendship bur rather its destruction—this is also Aristotle's conception of plurality within the city in *Pol.* II 2–6. *Symmetrical*: friends share the same notion of goodness. *Equal*: one friend's good does not take priority over the other's. Inferior friendships are indeed friendships, but not because they mimic perfect friendship or because, allegedly, the advantageous or the pleasant are always dependent on the true good. Instead, they satisfy in their own way a basic requirement any friendship must meet: as long as the relationship lasts, I wish that my friend exists. A highly interesting sketch of friendship begins to emerge.

8.3 Friendship Is an Activity (VIII 5, IX 12)

It may sound familiar to modern ears that friendship is about expressing or sharing sentiments, feelings, and our most inner self, under the sign of the unreserved trust that is proper only to genuine friendships and not to relations established in the political sphere. Aristotle's notion of friendship is different for a number of reasons. Allow me to mention just two. First, according to the Greek worldview, there is no clear-cut dichotomy between public and private life, and Aristotle's legislator regulates both, on the assumption that they belong to the political realm. Second, the need to express ourselves in private is a modern invention that presupposes, among other things, the notion that our inner self is invisible from the outside and that disclosing it presupposes our willingness to *express* it. Beyond these key disanalogies, most importantly, Aristotelian friendship is primarily about *activity*. Aristotle says as much:

IX 12 1171^{b} 32–1172^{a}13

(1) For friendship is a community (*koinônia*), and (2) as a person is related to himself, so he is related to his friend as well. […] (3) And no matter what existing consists in for each sort of person, no matter what they choose to be living for the sake of, it is *this* they wish to pass their time doing in the company of their friends. […] (4) And they even seem to become better by being active and correcting each other; for they take on the imprint of those things in each other that they find pleasing.

(1) clearly states that friendship is a kind of community or communication. Aristotle specifies time and again in the *Ethics* that friendship is a community of words (or speech) and actions. Someone is a friend of mine if I enjoy exchanging words and thoughts with them and if we undertake common projects (granted that both discussions and actions actually occur). Two conditions, then, should be met: first, that one wishes the accomplishment of common actions; and, second, that everyday circumstances enable the former obtain. When friends are separated at length, friendship

becomes an illusory wish. This reminds us of the distinction between friendship and goodwill, and why the latter does not make for friendship.

A communion of words and actions renders friendship a space of *privileged visibility*. But do we not exchange words or deeds with various people in our political community in everyday engagements? After all, Aristotle also uses the term *koinônia* (community) to describe political associations. Which qualities or features do make friendship a *privileged* space of community or living together? Multiple considerations speak in favor of friendship's particularity. (a) Only within (true) friendship can we cultivate a solid and permanent relationship with the same people, to the extent that we share the same conception of the good; (b) a long acquaintance makes us aware to a fairly high degree of the ethical quality of our friends' actions and deliberate choices; (c) as a result, our communion or relation with them has an exceptional transparency and visibility, which we do not encounter in the public sphere, often characterized by anonymity. Within (true) friendships, our certainty about our friend's moral quality is such that it is immaterial who among friends takes the initiative to undertake a certain action: what matters is that the action takes place (e.g., a just action), for perfect friends are certain as to the starting-points or principles grounding the action (e.g., for the sake of justice). Notice that here, it is action, not expression of an invisible self, which is of utmost importance.

Claim (4) complements this picture: we become better people, thanks to the actions of our friends. Their continuing presence motivates us to keep doing morally good actions. In a sense, friends imprint their traces on one another. Thus, perfect friendship is not exhausted in common actions that depend on a prior state of virtue; instead, friendship has a *dynamic* character. This holds true in the case of inferior friendships too, albeit in terms of accumulating advantage, cultivating cleverness, enjoying reputation and public honors, etc.

(2) and (3) further expound what above I called the principle of symmetry. Since friends in perfect and inferior friendships alike share the same conception of the good, and since that conception also determines the way we understand our relation to our self, it follows that we necessarily treat our friends how we treat ourselves. In other words, who we truly are also determines the criteria according to which we choose our future friends. In perfect friendships, our actions toward ourselves and toward our friends are calibrated on the basis of the true good, and friendship gives access to ourselves and to our friend's self, as each really is. In inferior friendships, our actions toward ourselves and toward our friends are calibrated on the basis of apparent goods, and friendship grants access only to coincidental features. (This shared conception of the good might look narcissistic to modern eyes; its true content will be explored in Sect. 8.5.)

The fact that friendship requires activity resolves the puzzle of *friendship's justice*. For activities are not private things, sheltered from the public eye, and confined to a circle of friends. While our actions toward friends (or the actions we undertake with them) originate in friendship, they cannot help but be public. Now consider that friendship's justice is operative in two ways. The first is *internal*: friendship is a microcosm in which, by not being greedy, we exercise justice. The second is *external*: friendship is primarily an activity and hence, the microcosm in which we act justly is never separated from the public domain, for friends' behavior toward one

another is subject to public view and occupies a place in the broader sphere of political justice. Perfect friendship will respect justice for the sake of justice in both instances. Inferior friendships based on advantage and pleasure will not. In the latter case, friends might have a very "close" relationship and may not be greedy toward one another. They might even respect, love, and admire each other—accounts of criminal gangs lend support to this scenario. But a "close" friendship is not tantamount to a "perfect" one, for the latter is unconditionally grounded in justice. A friendship which is internally just but externally unjust can never be unconditionally virtuous or perfect.

8.4 Why Does the Virtuous Person Need Friends? (IX 9)

The previous section called attention to the dynamic character of Aristotelian friendship. But one crucial issue remained unresolved. Addressing it will soften the impression conveyed by numerous passages in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that friendship is something hopelessly static, as if true friendship were to come *too late*, only after the attainment of virtue or happiness. Aristotle addresses this issue by posing the following questions: If we are already virtuous and happy, why would we need friends? Why is friendship a necessity rather than a luxury in our lives?

IX 9 1169^{b} 3–1170^{a}12

(1) There is also a dispute regarding a happy person as to whether he will need friends or not. […]
(2) The happy person does need friends. […]
(3) For we said at the start that happiness is a sort of activity, and an activity is clearly something that comes to be and does not belong to us like some possession. But if being happy lies in living and engaging in activity, and if the activity characteristic of the good person is intrinsically excellent and pleasant (as we said at the start), […]
(4) and if we are better able to contemplate our neighbors than ourselves and their actions than those that are properly our own, […]
(5) [and] if indeed [the virtuous person] deliberately chooses to contemplate decent actions that are properly his own, and the actions of a good person who is a friend are like this.
(6) Well for a solitary person life is difficult; for it is not easy him, when all by himself, to be continuously in activity, whereas together with different people and in relation to others it is easier. […]
(7) [And] a sort of training in virtue also comes about from living together with good people.

(1) establishes the terms of the problem: if we already possess the virtues of character and are practically wise, and if we also possess external goods like wealth and health, then why would we need friends? Why is it not enough to successfully

accomplish actions of justice, courage, etc., within the political community? (2) Alludes to the reputable belief (see Sect. 7.1) that friends must be present for us to be happy. But what sort of necessity is at work here? Is friendship an indispensable, *constitutive* element of virtue and happiness, or does it simply share the status of external goods as *pre*-conditions that make happiness attainable? In the passage above Aristotle claims that friendship is an intrinsic part of virtue, not a mere external presupposition. He illuminates that claim from three different perspectives.

First, friendship is a condition for happiness in that it serves as a *spectacle*: (3) and (5) demonstrate that happiness consists in activities and that a common activity in life is the observation or attention to something while being fully aware of its worthiness. Virtuous people should have at their disposal noble spectacles, adequate to the standards of their conception of the good. Thus, if happiness consists in pleasant activities, and if one such activity consists in contemplating virtuous actions, then the virtuous actions of my friends are just the sort of spectacle I need to be happy. For I know with certainty the deliberate choices these actions are the result of, while all other seemingly virtuous actions I encounter within the political community may be the outcome of mere legality or even luck. The actions of my friend are an unambiguous spectacle of nobility. By consequence, they also constitute an irreplaceable source of pleasure and happiness.

Second, friendship is a condition for happiness because it also serves as a *vehicle for virtue.* (6) and (7) stress that while it is not easy for us to be continuously active, together and in relation to others, this becomes far easier. "Together with others" here means that, thanks to friendship, I am in a position to engage in activities that, when alone or isolated, I could not realize. "In relation to others" means that my friend's presence motivates me to do things I might not have done, or not as intensely, for the sake of people unfamiliar to me. In any case, my activity increases in intensity, that is, it achieves the maximal *continuity* and *unimpededness* possible within the practical realm: on the one hand, more activities, including more difficult, noble, and longer lasting ones, become open to me. On the other hand, my friend's activities may be counted as my own. To the extent that our self is constituted by our activities, friendship results in an *enlargement* of the self. And since these actions are pleasant, happiness is actualized in the fullest sense. Obviously, the enlargement of the self is not a question of aggregating as many friends as possible: "He who has [many] friends, does not have a single friend" (a motto attributed by Diogenes Laertius to Aristotle). Given human finitude, we cannot have many true friends; nor does our practical self admit of limitless enlargement.

Third, friendship is also a condition for happiness in that it provides *full access* to the other. (4) invites the suggestion that it is easier to contemplate our friends and their actions, and obtain the corresponding pleasure, than it is to observe ourselves and our actions. This formulation is complicated, however, since according to the principle of symmetry, access to our self and access to our friend's self should be symmetrical and should display the same degree of transparency. It is true that, even today, we find the suggestion presented in (4) intuitively true. But it is still in need of some refinement, as we will see in the next section.

Aristotle concludes that happiness and virtue require friends. Nevertheless, a new difficulty arises, which cannot be exhaustively explored yet, but which should nevertheless be noted. The remarks above apply to the political life (*bios*). Here, happiness is constituted by activities of a moral and political character, performed toward others within a political community. However, *if* there is another kind of life, which we called "theoretical" or contemplative (see Sects. 1.3 and 4.3), then this life will be devoted to the activity of exercising our knowledge about the principles of eternal beings. *If* this kind of activity exists, and *if* it can span the entirety of a human life, then this kind of existence may not require friends at all. For we enjoy a contemplative life chiefly due to the pleasures that flow from contemplating the principles of eternal things, and not from accomplishing politically virtuous actions, or observing our friends. Such a life would be self-sufficient to the highest degree, and hence, the presence of co-contemplators or co-workers would be a mere luxury, not a necessity (X 7 1177^{a}34).

This kind of paradox can be better understood in light of the following example. When we go to the theater, our end and the source of our pleasure is the spectacle itself, that is, the theatrical performance. Even if no other spectators are present, we will see the *same* spectacle. To the extent that we can understand and critically appraise it, the presence of other spectators contributes nothing to our aesthetic judgment or to the pleasure we may derive from the performance. Even worse, in cases where spectators lack adequate theatrical or aesthetic education, they might be noisy, annoy us, and undermine our enjoyment, for we have to exert more effort to remain fully attentive to the spectacle. But in other cases, it may prove *more* pleasant to contemplate others who also experience the same spectacle, granted that they also fully possess the relevant knowledge and share our evaluation of the pleasure it offers. It is not difficult to see that, in these cases, friendship is a weaker and non-necessary condition, especially when compared to the political life. (To grasp why this is so, think of those who co-contemplate the sun in the Edward Hopper's painting "People in the Sun" as if they were friends. [2]) The deeper dimensions of the difference between the political and contemplative lives will become clearer in the next chapter. At this point, the key take-away is that the differences above rest on a hypothetical claim.

8.5 How I Delight in Perceiving You Existing (IX 9)

The initial definition of friendship that has guided us until now has proven quite useful. With a number of distinctions in hand, we can now consider a second definition of friendship. This is Aristotle's final statement on the matter and is found in one of the most compelling passages of the *Nicomachean Ethics*:

[2] *People in the Sun* (1960, oil on canvas, 102.6×153.4cm; in the Smithsonian American Art Museum). Visit: https://americanart.si.edu/blog/eye-level/2011/22/832/seeing-things-8-people-sun-edward-hopper.

IX 9 1170^{a}18–1170^{b}12

(1) Living in the full sense, then, seems to be [actively] perceiving or understanding. Living, however, is among the things that are intrinsically good and pleasant;
(2) for it is something determinate, and being determinate is characteristic of the nature of the good. […]
(3) But if living itself is good and pleasant […], and if a person who sees perceives that he sees, and one who hears perceives that he hears, and one who walks perceives that he walks, and if in the other cases there is similarly something that perceives that we are in activity, so that if we are perceiving, we perceive that we are perceiving; and if we are understanding, we are perceiving that we are understanding; and if perceiving that we are perceiving or understanding is perceiving that we are existing (for existing, we said, consists in perceiving or understanding), and if perceiving that we are living is one of the things that is intrinsically pleasant, […]
(4) and if living is choiceworthy and most so for good people, because for them existing is good and pleasant, […]
(5) and if in the way an excellent person is related to himself he is also related to his friend (for a friend is another himself),
(6) then just as his own existing is choiceworthy for each one, so—or to much the same extent—is that of his friend too. But, as we saw, his existence is choiceworthy because he perceives himself as being good, and such perceiving is intrinsically pleasant.
(7) He must, therefore, also co-perceive his friend's existence together with his own, something that comes about in their living together and sharing in talk and thought.

This is doubtless an intricate and complex passage. Its basic idea is that human life consists of activities. More specifically, it consists of cognitive activities in the broad sense, which include simple activities (like perception) and advanced ones (like understanding). Life also involves actions with a moral relevance (e.g., just and unjust actions), for they too have a cognitive component. Of course, human beings also perform many other activities that they share with animals (we eat, move, etc.). In (2), Aristotle says that activities of a cognitive character identify some specific qualities, that is, they focus on something determinate. For example, something edible can satisfy the need for food and so, as a result, eating it is good to the person who is hungry. But on this level, no essential qualitative distinction has been drawn yet, for we don't know whether the edible thing in question is healthy or not, that is, if it is truly good to the hungry person. A similar distinction can be applied in the sphere of morally relevant actions. Take the example of justice and injustice. The virtuous people know what justice is and can recognize just actions in particular circumstances. What they discern in a just action, performed by themselves or by someone else, is something fully determinate, something noble and pleasant done for the sake of justice. The case of injustice is different. Injustice is indeterminate

and indefinite, for actions of injustice are of a diverse and disparate nature, like the reasons motivating them. Unjust actions primarily depend on a further good for the sake of which someone undertakes them. That further good may indeed be wholly random, for example, the attainment of public honor, a desire to conform with legality, or to escape fear of punishment, etc. Thus, when we contemplate the actions done by unjust people, we cannot know what they aim for. Indeterminacy indicates a lack of goodness and is an impediment to genuine pleasure.

In the same vein, (3) and (4) invite us to see things from a complementary perspective: pleasure originates in perceiving that *we* live and act. It is the experience of *our* being the subject and the object of perception. Pleasure supervenes on the activity of perceiving that the actions perceived are *our own*. At first sight, this duplication or mirror-effect seems to be the Aristotelian version of the modern notion of self-consciousness. But it is *not*. The main difference is the following: In the modern world, one tends to believe that the self is extremely plastic, and that self-*reflection* is the primary means by which *we* create ourselves. In other words, how we see or confront ourselves is thought to guide our remaking or reforming of ourselves; self-*reflection* primarily gives meaning or creates the self, for the self is not reduced to the actions one has already completed. At any moment, self-reflection, new decisions, and a kind of existential rebirth can generate a *new* self that overpowers almost any resistance from our *past* self. The Aristotelian world is wholly different. For Aristotle, perceiving our own actions (self-perception) does not determine who we are and does not thereby create the self. Instead, it is *what* we perceive, that is, our actions as *perceived*, that shapes the self. The activity of perceiving my own actions is determined by *what* I see, not the other way around. Thus, my actions constitute a sort of resistance I cannot overpower. Certainly, I am the origin of my own actions (provided they are voluntary). But once I have acted, the self has already taken shape.

Up to this point, although he is concerned with the topic of friendship, Aristotle has touched only on our relation to ourselves. Friends are conspicuously absent! They are introduced, for the first time, in phrases (5) and (6), which allude to the principle of symmetry: our relation to ourselves and our relation to our friends are grounded in the same conception of the good. What makes my own actions a pleasant spectacle for me also makes me delight in my friend's actions. And this occurs because I am certain that we share the same notion of goodness. There can be no difference regarding the pleasure yielded by my view of my own actions and that yielded by my friend's actions, since they are equally determinate and good. Hence Aristotle's famous phrase: "a friend is another himself (*heteros autos*)." In no way does this statement introduce a duplicated self, as if my friend were nothing more than a copy of myself. Aristotle is clear that a friend is "another himself" (*heteros autos*), not "another myself" (*heteros heautos*). My friends are similar to me not because they are myself or my reflection, but simply because, like me, they are a source of virtuous actions in the world. This similarity does not in the slightest undermine their standing as a (separate) self in their own right.

Noticeably, specific features or differences that may obtain between two friends are immaterial. Only their virtue (or lack thereof) matters. Within the Aristotelian

worldview, the modern ideal of *individuality* is inoperative. The objective is not to be different or unique, but rather to become virtuous and happy. Thus, when clause (3) explains that pleasure supervenes on the perception of the fact that "I" am the person that acts, the "I" in question does not denote a modern sense of individuality. That is why phrase (3) is not in conflict with phrases (5) and (6). The argument goes as follows: (a) if a good self is constituted by good or virtuous actions, and (b) if many of my own actions are the effects of an enlarged self who undertakes activities together with my friend(s), and (c) if I know with certainty which deliberate choices motivate my actions and those of my friend, then (d) when my friends act, I recognize in their actions the virtuous person that I also grasp in my own actions.

Sentence (7), with the deft use of the verb "co-perceive" (*sunaisthanesthai*), brings together all previous elements with one word: my relation to another, like my relation to the self, is a sort of perception. My perception that my friends are alive, that is, that they exist and act, is pleasant in the same way that perceiving that I live is pleasant. In both cases, the object perceived is identical: namely, virtuous actions. So too is the subject of perception: myself. (That is why, as implied by the concession "or to much the same extent" in (6), the pole of the self enjoys a slight predominance that does not, however, threaten equality (see below).) The verb "co-perceive" should be understood in two complementary ways. First, it means that I perceive my actions and those of my friend at the same time, and, second, that we perceive together—as in the verb "live-together" (*suzein*)—that is, that we perceive each other acting or existing. This sort of perception is only possible in the context of common activities (here phrase (8) is particularly helpful). Hence, the title I gave to this section just reiterates the most profound words one can address to an (Aristotelian) friend: "How I delight in perceiving you existing."

This final definition of friendship builds on and resolves all the puzzles we encountered above. Friendship requires two separate selves. Any attempt to transform friendship into something like a fusion or seamless unity leads to its destruction, because it deprives friends of genuine co-perception. At any rate, we (moderns) tend to take refuge in such a fusion in order to overcome excessive individuality or selfishness. But for reasons that are already clear, if our concept of the self is informed by the axis of activities, no such a problem emerges in the first place.

Perfect friendship between virtuous people is determinate and therefore pleasant, for their actions are virtuous as well, while those between base people cannot be perfect. These friendships may be close, and still genuine, as in the case of a gang whose members have taken sincere oaths of fidelity, admire each other, and take pleasure in one another's activities. But even a close friendship will never be a perfect friendship, for the latter requires justice both within and outside a circle of friends. We (moderns) often fall into the trap of seeing friendship only from within. And we are probably entrapped in this myopic perspective by our desire to trade the voracious, unjust, and all-powerful modern individual for the enlarged, close, and selfless association of two friends. However, insofar as we overlook the demands of friendship's justice, we turn friendship into a kind of voracious entity to the second power, thereby replacing an unjust individuality with an unjust duality.

For Aristotle, the self is never nullified in the name of some alleged requirement for self-sacrifice or a disregard for my own happiness—though, in extreme circumstances, a sacrifice for my friend's sake, or even for the sake of a political community, might be what virtue does indeed demand. My friend's existence is valuable in itself, but it would be odd to wish that *my* friends exist in a world without *me*, or that they become gods, in which case they would no longer be *my* friends (VIII 7 $1159^{a}5$–8). Friendship requires two separate selves. This principle applies not only to my friend but also to myself.

Friendship needs time to develop and is not something to be decided on in advance. I do not meet someone, realize that I like them or that we share common beliefs, plans, worries, etc., and then *decide* to henceforth become friends. Friendship is not like the planning of a theatrical production or the bringing forth of a common life project, irrespective of our degree of existential investment in it. Aristotle's account of friendship is very different and, I believe, much closer to everyday experience. Aristotle's account is as follows (IX 5 $1167^{a}3$–14):

We enjoy socializing or associating with people when we *surmise*—with varying degrees of certainty and often following a hunch rather than a transparent epistemic state—that we share some conception of the (real or apparent) good. And such a conception is conveyed, among other things, in actions of justice or injustice, courage and cowardice, etc., in our public self, and in the sort of conversations, dinners, films, etc., we both like. For the most part, virtuous people like to socialize with one another (and base people with one another), quite simply because they like, are familiar with, and approve of the same activities. If good luck permits—if death, serious disease, distance, or circumstances that completely and irreparably change our lives do not separate us from one another—then this community of actions and words will last for a long time. And, some day, the one will be *certain* about the deliberate choices of the other, and a genuine co-perceiving accompanied by its proper pleasure may occur. That day, we will realize that we are *already* friends, and, good luck permitting, our friendship will never dissolve (and if it does, we will remember it as something noble and valuable). This achievement of a co-perception of pleasant activities within a space of privileged visibility is constitutive of happiness.

We are now ready to turn to Book X to find out—at long last—what a happy life consists in.

8.6 Chapter Summary

Of the *Nicomachean Ethics*' ten Books, two address friendship, while only one is devoted to justice. It is striking that while Books VIII–IX tackle friendship, the other ethical virtues are explored in Books II–V: friendship is the sole virtue of character examined after Aristotle's analysis of practical wisdom in Book VI. This may, of course, be the work of an (unreliable) ancient editor. But it may not be so transparent, in fact, that friendship *really is* a virtue of character (as Aristotle

encourages us to assume in II 7) in the first place. A more careful formulation might hold that "friendship is a sort of virtue or involves virtue" (VIII 1 1155^{a}3–4). The chapter organizes Aristotle's rich and influential discussion of friendship around a number of puzzles: (a) friendship's justice (i.e., in which sense friendship includes justice), (b) friendship's bulk (i.e., the question of why Aristotle treats it as an external good), and (c) the focal meaning of friendship (i.e., whether all sorts of friendship share a common core trait). I will argue that despite some important differences, in both perfect and inferior friendships there are two separate, symmetrical, and equal poles/friends. I conclude with an interpretation of one of the most compelling passages of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (IX 9 1170^{a}18–1170^{b}12) to explain why the most profound words one can address to an (Aristotelian) friend are: "How I delight in perceiving you existing."

8.7 Further Reading

With respect to the relationship between justice and friendship, see Sokolowski (2001). For the definition of friendship, see Cooper (1977). For an analysis of IX 9, see Kosman, (2004). For the differences between self- and other-concern in ancient and modern ethics, see Annas (1993: Chap. 12).

It would be profitable to contrast Aristotle's view with two modern notions of friendship: Montaigne's in his *Essays* [I/XXVII: "On Friendship"], and Kant's in the *Metaphysics of Morals* and the *Lectures on Ethics*. For a defense of the latter, see Honneth (2014: Chap. 6.1). For a challenging defense of the former, see Nehamas (2016: Chaps. 1 and 6).

8.8 Study Questions

1. "Friendship is said to be reciprocated goodwill"; why?
2. How must we understand Aristotle's idea that there are just two objects of friendship, namely, the noble and the pleasant? Do you think he is right?
3. Is there any room for selflessness in Aristotle's account of friendship? Do you think that selflessness is a requisite of true friendships?
4. Do inferior friendships count as real friendships?
5. Do perfect friendships dissolve? Can you find examples from literature?
6. Are perfect friendships merely a confirmation of our already acquired virtues of character?
7. "For a friend … we must wish good things for his own sake": In what sense does this principle apply to all kinds of friendship?
8. In which sense do friends constitute, according to Aristotle, an external good?
9. What is the relationship between friendship and justice?
10. In what way is a person's friend "another himself"?

8.9 Essay Questions

1. "Friendship, unlike Christian love, involves loving some people more than the rest of the world, toward which, though not necessarily ill-disposed, friends may remain more or less emotionally indifferent. Friendship and Christian love seem profoundly incompatible with each other, and their conflict underlies the continuing clash between the partiality of friendship and the universal claims of both religious morality and … its modern philosophical descendants during the Enlightenment and beyond" (Nehamas, 2016: 31). What does the "partiality" of friendship amount to for Aristotle? How would he defend it?
2. The most famous illustration of friendship in the Greek world probably is the painting attributed to the Sosias Painter (on an Attic red-figure kylix, ca. 500 BC. from Vulci): see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Achilles_and_Patroclus.

   Use Aristotle's concepts to analyze it.

Chapter 9
First- and Second-Class Happiness

9.1 Practical and Theoretical Wisdom: Fighting for First Place (VI 12–13)

Early on, in *Nicomachean Ethics* I 7, when we were addressing the issue of the human function, the discussion was left pending: while we concluded that happiness is an activity of the soul in accord with virtue, the problem was that there are many virtues (see Sect. 1.6). And therefore, in order to figure out what happiness is, we were obliged to find out which virtue is the best and most complete. By the time we reach Book X, we still haven't been provided with a definite answer to this fundamental question.

In Book VI, however, it became clear that there are three candidates: the virtues of character, the intellectual virtue of practical wisdom, and the intellectual virtue of theoretical wisdom. So, the definition of happiness could be formulated in three ways: happiness is an activity in accord with the virtues of character, or in accord with practical wisdom, or in accord with theoretical wisdom.

We can easily rule out the first candidate, since virtues of character require practical wisdom (a point to which I will return in Sect. 9.5); for they reach their fullest form only when guided by practical wisdom, which enables us to know how to define each medial condition as well as to choose and justify our ends. Even the habituated virtue of a child being in the process of education presupposes practical wisdom, namely, that possessed by the educator or the legislator (see Sect. 2.3).

Thus, we have two candidates left, namely, practical wisdom and theoretical wisdom. And this is the exact point where it all comes down to. The "gigantomachy" in the field of happiness is a battle between two rivals: on the one side, practical activities in accord with practical wisdom within the framework of political life; on the other, theoretical activities in accord with theoretical wisdom within the framework of contemplative life. The winner, whose identity Aristotle is slowly revealing

P. Kontos, *Introduction to Aristotle's* Nicomachean Ethics, Palgrave Philosophy Today, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-41985-0_9

from Book I on, is anything but obvious. It is not even certain that there is any real rivalry at all. Book VI, though, has at least set the agenda:

VI 12 1143^{b}18–21

One might, however, go through some puzzles about what these virtues are useful for. For theoretical wisdom will not have a theoretical grasp on any of the things from which a human being will come to be happy (for it is not concerned with anything's coming to be), and while practical wisdom does have this grasp, what does one need it for?

Aristotle starts with an argument that seems to be cancelling the candidacy of theoretical wisdom, because it is the virtue of rational activities that essentially involve the knowledge of eternal beings. Obviously, human happiness is not something eternal. We are not born happy; we *become* happy. Thus, at least initially, it sounds strange to say that theoretical wisdom ensures happiness when it does not at all deal with human life itself. Further, the claim that *only* those who exercise pure theoretical activities will be happy sounds extreme and barely convincing. So, it looks like we are turning toward the candidacy of practical wisdom. However, at the moment that we are convinced that this is indeed Aristotle's thesis, the concluding question in the passage shakes our convictions. Much more so when Aristotle adds a further clarification a few lines later:

VI 12 1144^{a}1–5

First of all, let us state that these states must certainly be intrinsically choiceworthy (for each is the virtue of one of the two parts [that have reason]) even if neither of them produces anything at all. Next, they do indeed produce something—not, however, as medicine produces health, but as health does. That is also how theoretical wisdom produces happiness.

VI 13 1145^{a}6–9

But yet [practical wisdom] does not control either theoretical wisdom or the better part any more than medicine controls health; for it does not use it but sees to its coming into being. So it prescribes for its sake, not to it.

Now, one may associate something with health in many ways: (a) the healthy condition of a body makes it do healthy activities, (b) medicine brings or restores health, (c) with practice and exercise a body can become healthy. A distinction, then, arises between the first case and the other two, as the latter ones have to do with knowledge or activities that bring health about, whereas the first one concerns the relation of a state (being healthy) with its actualization or use (practicing healthy activities). In it, we can't distinguish between an internal and an external part; for it is the very same capacity that exists either as a state or as an actualized state. And Aristotle asks us to consider the following analogy: theoretical wisdom isn't linked to happiness as medicine is to health, but as health is to health. If we follow the thread of this analogy, then we must think that theoretical wisdom is a healthy (virtuous)

intellectual state, and each time it's activated, it *necessarily* manifests itself as health (happiness). In other words, *every single* activation of theoretical wisdom is by nature happiness. Consequently, even though the objects of theoretical wisdom—eternal beings like god (when practicing theology), heavenly bodies (when practicing astronomy), or mathematical objects (when practicing mathematics)—are *not* us, nonetheless, each time we engage in the pertinent theoretical activities in accord with theoretical wisdom we are happy. So, while both practical wisdom and theoretical wisdom are virtues, and therefore "choiceworthy" (meaning something that good people would like to have), theoretical wisdom and contemplative life take precedence over practical wisdom and political life.

Likewise, practical wisdom neither constitutes the activation of health nor uses health; it resembles the science of medicine that *produces* health. Medicine however only comprehends, respects, and serves what the nature of the human body determines to be health. In the same way—so does our passage seem to claim—practical wisdom's single goal is to be a servant, ensuring that the activity of theoretical wisdom is possible by as far as possible bringing about favorable conditions for the practices of theoretical wisdom. Just as health is superior to medicine, so theoretical wisdom is superior to practical wisdom. If we substitute the term *philosophy* for theoretical wisdom, then only philosophers will be happy, and they will be happy only when activating their philosophical knowledge. So, if practical wisdom is just theoretical wisdom's servant (like a doctor), then the person who is theoretically wise doesn't need to also be practically wise to be happy, just as no one needs to be a doctor himself in order to be healthy.

If this conclusion were Aristotle's last word, and if we stopped here, at VI 13, we'd have to conclude that the activation of theoretical wisdom *is* happiness and that practical wisdom is only a servant, whose function consists in creating the right conditions for the activation of theoretical wisdom; nothing more, nothing less. Thus, Book VI, the only one in the whole Aristotelian corpus lauding practical wisdom with such devotion, would end up humiliating it, and the proponents of the political life, of the sort there have been throughout the centuries, would have to content themselves with contriving ways to swallow their deep disappointment.

These thoughts, however, don't conclude the discussion, and though Book X does not change the agenda, it does show why this picture is too simplistic.

9.2 Complete Happiness (X 6–7)

So far three important questions have been left unanswered:

1. In what sense does the exercise of theoretical wisdom constitute happiness?
2. In what way does the theoretically wise person *need* practical wisdom to be happy?
3. Is it possible to be happy *without* possessing theoretical wisdom?

First things first. There is no doubt that X 6–7 is grounded in Aristotle's investigations of pleasure in X 1–5. Be that as it may, it is noteworthy that, in X 7, Aristotle suggests that to properly understand how activities in accord with theoretical wisdom are associated with happiness, one should speak not simply of happiness but rather of "complete happiness" (X 7 1177^{a}17). The wording, if nothing else, sounds strange: if happiness is activity in accord with the best and most complete virtue, and if completeness is a criterion of happiness of any sort, then what's the point of talking about "complete happiness"? A long passage from X 7 puts all the cards on the table:

X 7 1177^{a}12–1177^{b}26

(1) But if happiness is activity in accord with virtue, it is reasonable that it should be in accord with the one that is most excellent; and this would be the virtue of the best element. Whether, then, this element is understanding or something else … —whether by being something divine itself or by being the most divine element in us—the activity of it, when in accord with the virtue that properly belongs to it, would be complete happiness. That it is contemplative activity we have said. […]
(2) And, further, it is the most continuous activity; for we can contemplate more continuously than we can do any action whatsoever.
(3) Moreover, we think that pleasure must be mixed in with happiness. […]
(4) Moreover, the self-sufficiency that is spoken of would belong most of all to contemplative activity … But the theoretically-wise person, even when by himself, is able to contemplate, and the more theoretically-wise he is, the more he is able to do so. It is perhaps better for him to have co-workers, but nonetheless he is most self-sufficient. […]
(5) Moreover, this activity, and only this, would seem to be liked because of itself […]
(6) Moreover, happiness seems to reside in leisure; for we do unleisured things in order to be at leisure, and wage war in order to live in peace…. But the activity of the politician too is unleisured. […]
(7) then this activity [i.e., the theoretical one] would be the complete happiness of a human being, provided it receives a complete span of life (for nothing is incomplete that is characteristic of happiness).

These seven arguments attempt to answer the first two questions we asked above. For the most part, they draw on ideas we are already familiar with, so I'll refer to them briefly:

(1) Theoretical wisdom is the virtue of the highest part of the human rational soul, of that part of us that is closest to being what god is, that is, understanding (*nous*). We are *not* gods, but there is something divine in us to the extent that understanding involves god-like features, namely, being a ruling element and dealing with divine eternal things. (Puzzle: is the metaphor of "ruling," which is drawn from the practical sphere of politics, appropriate to theoretical wisdom

or rather to practical wisdom?) Therefore, it makes us capable of achieving the kind of immortality that is accessible to humans, which Aristotle beautifully describes a few lines as immortalizing. In a sense, this is what we really are, namely, understanding (X 7 1178^{a}2–3). It, as we say nowadays, is our real or true self—the one with which we ought to identify.

(2) Theoretical wisdom is the virtue concerned with that activity which, being fully rational, is the most continuous of all human activities since it's the least dependent on physicality and decay. It is much easier to think continuously than to do just actions continuously. However, this easiness does not amount to idleness; it is the sort of easiness that is intrinsic to the purest human activities and the purest human pleasures. For the rest, Aristotle means to emphasize, against the common idea, that theoretical activities are indeed a sort of action, even if not an action of the ordinary sort which involves doing things with one's body (*Pol.* VII 3).

(3) Pleasure is a constituent of happiness. And the more continuous, unimpeded, and stable the activity is, the higher the correspondent pleasure will be (as we learned in Sect. 7.5), and the more complete the happiness will be.

(4) Theoretical activity is the most self-sufficient, as it has minimal need of external goods, since external goods (e.g., friends or wealth) are not constituent parts of theoretical activities. And to engage in theoretical activities, one needs no collaborator, even though one may benefit from one: theoretical activities are the most solitary ones (see Sect. 8.4). By contrast, practical activities need other people and external goods: one cannot be generous without wealth and others to give it to (see Sect. 1.5).

(5) Theoretical activity is the only activity that does not serve any other end beyond itself. It is in no way useful since there is no higher part or achievement of the soul that understanding is useful to or for. More importantly, theoretical activity does not aim at bringing about some change in the natural world while practical wisdom does. This makes practical wisdom dependent on external goods and somehow dependent on whether our deeds actually have any impact (even if in a radically different way from craft knowledge and productions).

(6) Theoretical activity is coextensive with what Aristotle calls leisure (*scholê*). Leisure embraces the idea of a framework where the subject does not engage in any physical activity whose object would be to acquire the goods necessary for our subsistence or that is the outcome of some sort of necessity or undesired condition, like a war. Theoretical activity is activated in leisure precisely because it never has such goods as its object or as its constituents. By contrast, political life is, as we read in the text, "unleisured" (I'll come back to this).

(7) The complete happiness that is proper to contemplative activity can occur at various junctions throughout a complete adult human life. As we also saw in the argument about the human function (see Sect. 1.6), the word "complete" denotes here internal unity and coherence, without any important lack or surplus.

Here in Book X, then, for the first time in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, we find an Aristotelian defense of the primacy of the theoretical life: happiness is the activity of the soul in accord with the virtue of theoretical wisdom (to paraphrase the definition of happiness given in I 7). So it looks as though we have answered our first question, as to whether exercising theoretical activities in accord with theoretical wisdom *is* complete happiness, and that the answer, despite the need for some further clarifications, is affirmative.

The second question was whether practical wisdom is simply a servant of theoretical wisdom, in the way that a doctor is a servant of our health. This would mean that practical wisdom sees to the provision of some goods (e.g., basic external goods or a well-legislated city to live in), and once these exist, the activation of theoretical wisdom *is* happiness so that every time the circumstances allow for the exercise of theoretical wisdom, those theoretical activities will simply be happiness.

To answer this question correctly, one should recall the distinction between *happiness* and the happy *life* (or the happy person) we met in Sect. 1.6: happiness, I said, is a placeholder for the highest goodness and we now know that this goodness belongs to theoretical activities exercised in accord with theoretical wisdom. But a happy *life* is a different thing in that a *life* involves a sort of unity and a certain awareness of that unity; besides, no human life could possibly consist solely of theoretical activities.

With this in mind, let's revisit the argument about leisure in (6). In (6), leisure is presented as a condition of human life that is provided together with a blueprint and that our leisured times could and should be filled with only theoretical activities. It is not so. In the *Politics* Aristotle is much more careful and explains that for the right management of leisure, temperance and justice are required (*Pol.* VII 15 1334^{a} 11–34). Without temperance, we may always be too drunk or too full of food to contemplate. But if the correct handling of leisure requires these virtues of character, then it presupposes the possession of practical wisdom. Leisure is not, then, an empty space to be filled with theoretical activities, and neither are theoretical activities entitled to occupy the whole space and time of leisure; helping a friend, protecting my children, or responding to the demands of justice may well—and usually will—have priority. To well administer the time of leisure one needs practical wisdom, not theoretical wisdom. And, since happiness consists in a life with leisure, the theoretically wise person cannot be happy without being practically wise too.

The clause "a complete span of life" we met in (7) points in the same direction. Yes, complete happiness is actualized in theoretical activities, but it also requires the completeness of a span of life and the latter is predicated on our ability to envisage our life as a whole rather than as independent episodes of leisurely pleasure. But theoretical wisdom doesn't know how to lay out a life plan, it doesn't know anything about human things, the vicissitudes of life, etc. Practical wisdom, on the other hand, has been defined from the beginning as the sort of knowledge that provides us with a view of our life as a whole. Therefore, in order for instances of exercising theoretical wisdom to form a happy *life*, practical wisdom is indispensable.

In conclusion: exercising theoretical wisdom is indeed complete human happiness, but a happy life is not possible unless the theoretically wise person also possesses practical wisdom. A *happy* theoretically wise person is, always and by necessity, practically wise too.

9.3 Second-Class Happiness (X 8)

One question, however, still remains unanswered: can a practically wise person be happy *without* being theoretically wise too? For most of us, the most pressing issue is whether political life—within which our lives circle around our family and friends, justice and injustice, the arts, physical exercise, good meals with people close to us, our sex life, acquiring and using knowledge, etc.—can be a happy life. And Aristotle's answer is the following:

X 8 1178^{a} 9–10
Happiest, but in a secondary way, is the life in accord with the other virtue; for the activities in accord with it are human.

So, for all those not exercising theoretical wisdom at all, a very happy life is possible, but in a secondary way. "Secondary" is indeed a derogatory term and the use of the term *human* (it comes back a couple of lines later) turns out to be equally demeaning, like talking about the life of a small fry, especially when comparing it to the term *immortalizing* that applied in the case of contemplative life. Despite that, the happiness of the political life *is* true happiness.

We can easily deduce that happiness that is proper to the political life is real—not an illusion, a mere substitute, or a placebo—if we examine one by one the arguments that we met which prove the superiority of the theoretical life. Because, based on the same arguments, we can demonstrate how superior the life of the practically wise person is compared to the life of anyone else: the people who lack self-control, those who show self-control, the base ones, etc. Compared to all those, the practically wise person *is* happy.

In the *Politics*, in fact, Aristotle is much more detailed than he is in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, since he devotes two entire books, Books VII and VIII, to explaining that the life of the practically wise citizen in an almost ideal city (exercising rule at one time and being a citizen at another) *enjoys* leisure. Leisure, then, is not an exclusive privilege of theoretical life, Aristotle claims in the *Politics*. The educational program is aiming, among other things, at offering the maximal and best leisure to the citizens. And the most typical example of this education is musical education: teaching the citizens not to play music, but to listen to music, to enjoy it by distinguishing its noble beauty. While then, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, political life is characterized as remaining unleisured, in the *Politics* a form of leisure is attributed to it, and therefore, the door to happiness is wide open.

Can the practically wise people be happy "in a secondary way" without being theoretically wise too? *Yes*, they can. They can, on condition that they recognize that theoretical activities are indeed the highest ones fitting to human nature, and therefore, on condition that they (both as rulers and as ruled) are willing to shape the city in a way that these activities be always accessible and privileged. In other words, they should be sufficiently well-educated (*pepaideumenos*) so that they be able to comprehend the noble beauty of the objects of theoretical sciences and of these sciences themselves and be ready to provide the theoretically wise people with the position they deserve in the city. To come back to the vocabulary of VI 13, the practically wise person is happy only when practical wisdom, beyond guiding all our practical activities, also acknowledges the primacy of theoretical wisdom.

In any case, the happiness we can enjoy in political life shares the traits of the one we enjoy in contemplative life: (1) it requires leisure; (2) it is incompatible with any priority given to unrefined utility or benefit; (3) it is premised on our engaging in rational activities that actualize our capacity to grasp truth.

9.4 The Allure of Contemplative Life

As much as the above discussion blunts the initial oddness of Aristotelian happiness, it is still a fact that the allure of the contemplative life is not immediately tangible. It is equally a fact, however, that the same allure attracts many great philosophers of western thought, from Plato and Aristotle to Hegel and Heidegger (even if its justification and its consequences for the political life differ substantially).

Now that the strenuous work of decoding the *Nicomachean Ethics* is almost finished, let's allow ourselves a bit of leisure. I will attempt to show why the contemplative life charms Aristotle by resorting to the observation (*theôria*) of two paintings by Rembrandt: one mistakenly known as *The Night Watch* (its exact title is: *Militia Company of District II under the Command of Captain Frans Banninck Cocq*; oil on Canvas, 1642, 363cm × 437 cm, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam) and *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp* (oil on Canvas, 1632, 2165cm × 1695 cm, Mauritshuis, Hague).[1]

[1] I drew material from: Wallace, W. 1968. *The World of Rembrandt: 1606–1669*. New York: Time-Life Books; Schupbach, W. 1982. *The Paradox of Rembrandt's* 'Anatomy of Doctor Tulp'. London: Welcome Institute for the History of Medicine; Mitchell, D. 1994. "Rembrandt's 'The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Tulp': A Sinner among the Righteous." *Artibus et Historiae* 15/30: 145–156; G. Schwartz, G. 2002. T*he Night Watch*. Amsterdam: Rijksmuseum; Berger Jr., H. 2007. *Manhood, Marriage, and Mischief: Rembrandt's "Night Watch" and Other Dutch Group Portraits*. New York: Fordham University Press, New York. Greenaway, P. 2007. *Nichtwatching* (123′); Wright, J. L. 2007. "Reading Rembrandt: The Influence of Cartesian Dualism on Dutch Art." *History of European Ideas* 33: 275–291; Steiner, G. 2010. "The Cultural Significance of Rembrandt's 'Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolass Tulp'." *History of European Ideas* 36: 273–279.

Picture 9.1 Rembrandt, Militia Company of District II under the Command of Captain Frans Banninck Cocq (Oil on Canvas, 1642, 363cm × 437 cm [Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam])

The Night Watch (Picture 9.1) is of enormous proportions: its figures are almost life-size. The painting was mistakenly titled because multiple coatings of varnish made it look dark. When it was restored and cleaned in the twentieth century, it was evident that the scene takes place in daylight. It is a group portrait of a military company, which probably takes no part in actual battles but rather in demonstrations and marches. The painting was commissioned by this group of 18 people, the names of whom are carved on the shield in the image's background, in the top left. The remaining 16 figures are stand-ins, their presence aiming, among other things, to intensify the scene's theatricality and to emphasize the element of movement. Each of the 18 people appears whole or not, in a prominent position or not, etc., depending on social status and the amount contributed for the painting.

What matters in the present context is that the painting nicely depicts—or so I think—the nature of political life. And regardless of which interpretation one chooses—of the painting merely depicting a scene as a photograph might, that it narrates the shaping of a group or community, that it's symbolic, that Rembrandt indirectly mocks commissioners, that the commissioners themselves are indirectly mocking the need for military companies at times of peace, etc.—it is clear that the

painting illustrates life among other people inside a political community. So here is what this sort of life consists in:

1. Political life is an effort to *create unity*. It's not a coincidence that the painting is considered to be symbolizing the concord between Dutch Protestants and Catholics and the unity of the Netherlands. Unity requires *historicity*—notice that in many figures, the clothing or helmets don't belong to the time the painting was made. It also requires that it is under threat, is in constant danger, hence the need for a military company, or in any case, for a group devoted to saving the community from anyone threatening it. The unity of a political community is never granted once and for all; it requires constant action.
2. Political life is based on a clear *hierarchy*, where someone takes on the burden of giving orders. Here, that someone is Captain Frans Banninck Cocq. His position in the center of the painting, his extended leg, and the movement of his arms suggest the *triggering of a movement*; it is *he* who gives the order for the company to move. Hierarchy is associated with comparison, and this is very clear from the fact that the captain's figure is disproportionately bigger than that of the lieutenant next to him. This is even more evident by the funny shadow that his arm's movement creates on the lieutenant, with its clear insinuations. But it is also evident from the fact that some faces are barely recognizable or are completely hidden behind others.
3. This hierarchy, however, is *put in question*: the lieutenant's figure, thanks to his light-colored attire, is much brighter than that of the captain, his gaze is clearly livelier—and, according to some commentators, more brilliant and smarter. His youth is apparent. Also, another figure with an extended right leg in the right side of the painting seems to be taking an initiative like that of the captain's, ignoring him or wanting to be him. In political life, *competition* is unavoidable.
4. Also, political power is *feeble* by nature*:* while the captain has commanded the participants to start moving, the political body remains idle. Some just seem to be posing for the painter in order to be visible, with no interest in the command coming from their superior. The political message is not diffused in the same way and with the same clarity throughout the political body. Maybe it reaches the lieutenant intact, but not the rest. As we move away from the center of political decisions, the message weakens, blurs, or dims, or at least its delivery is delayed, resulting in the common action being left hanging.
5. More dramatically, the political body is a place of *disorder and centrifugal forces*. Most figures are facing toward themselves and in any case, do not move coordinately. Each one produces work but is indifferent to or ignorant of other people's work. It is difficult to balance each person's individuality and agency with the demands of a *common* mission. The figure of the man in red clothing is the most characteristic: in a prominent position to the left and slightly behind the captain, he is busy loading his gun and shows indifference to what is happening around him. In fact, by placing 16 "theatrical" characters as scattered about the scene, Rembrandt multiplies the feeling of *chaos*, that is accentuated also by the painting's almost audible sound elements: the children shouting, the dog barking, and the drum beating.

6. Even more dramatically, political life contains *danger* or even *violence*: the figure behind the captain has just fired a shot—the smoke is visible next to the lieutenant's hat, while another person is trying to divert the gun's aim. Who is the target? Is it the lieutenant? How did that person take the initiative to fire while no such command was given? In political life, no matter how much power the captain or ruler has, there will always be unpredictable behavior, dangerous for everyone. Equally dangerous is the way that the old man to the right of the lieutenant is cleaning his weapon, holding it too close to his face. Perhaps it's not by chance that these two figures are the youngest and oldest people.
7. Political life is never clear; it always needs *supplemental meaning* or *symbolism*: one cannot ignore the enigmatic figure of the girl carrying on her belt what is probably the company's symbols (and being accompanied by another female figure behind her). No matter how one interprets this figure, what's certain is that it's moving in the opposite direction than all the others, and it introduces an element of femininity or family life, also opposite to the idea represented by this military group. In any case, the mere fact that a symbol needs to occupy a central part of the painting shows that political life never, by itself, contains the full meaning of things. A second symbol, the company's banner at the center of the painting, occupies an equally prominent position.
8. As an anecdote, it is noteworthy that the *danger* and *symbolism* that run through political life also run through the history of this painting. From its creation up to the present day it has been used as a symbol of the unity and power of the Netherlands. This political use however was the reason that an important part of the painting was actually removed, when it was placed at the Amsterdam City Hall in the eighteenth century! Such is the historicity of political life, that each next generation always strives to manage the past as it sees fit: a management over which people of the past have no control and which makes our understanding of the past always conditional, disputed, and open to abuse.
9. Political life makes the position of *external spectators* problematic: facing this enormous painting, whose figures seem ready to walk into the museum hall, spectators feel threatened, almost afraid that they'll get trampled down by this chaotic company, unless they get assimilated into it. In political life, *for the most part*, *theôria* hardly finds the space or shelter to be practiced in peace and tranquility. The painter is also equally external. The lore concerning the speculations whether Rembrandt is mocking the company he's painting, whether the commissioners were pleased with the result, whether they eventually paid him, etc., is undoubtedly owed to the vast distance that separates what takes place in the painting from the work the artist himself performs.

The political life is beautiful and pleasant; it includes some form of leisure, financial robustness and social recognition, team spirit, historicity, excellence, maybe even peace. It is a life that has space for happiness, especially for those that are in the place of the captain or close to him. But it also includes danger, ambiguity, centrifugal forces, inefficiency, disorder, war, incompatible individualities, and incompatible goals: in a word, many dark shadows. The more you withdraw into these shadows

or you let them envelop you, the more the chance of becoming happy is diminished or even destroyed.

Now compare the above illustration of political life with what we see in the other painting, the one which, so I believe, reflects the Aristotelian image of the contemplative life. Of course, we are looking at a lesson on anatomy, which means, not on theology, astronomy, or mathematics. Aristotle himself however seems to be describing a lesson like this in the *Parts of Animals*, I 5 $644^{b}23–645^{a}$ 30, all the while talking about *theôria*: theory here is the ability to see and examine the causes of things, and even if it concerns the knowledge of the lesser or even the most disgusting animals, it does not cease to be true that there is something *wonderful* or nobly beautiful in natural things. The same applies, the text continues, with the knowledge of the human body: as repulsive as the spectacle of blood, nerves, bones, etc., may be, if regarded properly it looks beautiful to the eyes of the knowledgeable spectator. Here, then, Aristotle uses a broad concept of *theôria* to describe the knowledge of causes of natural beings that admit of generation and passing away and emphasizes that this knowledge includes pleasure for those who recognize the *wonder* of natural purposes and the functions that, for example, the organs of the human body are made to perform.

Picture 9.2 Rembrandt, The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp (Oil on Canvas, 1632, 2165cm × 1695 cm [Mauritshuis, Hague])

The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp (Picture 9.2), which preceded the other by a decade, is also a group portrait—the first one that Rembrandt signs with his own name. This time the painting was commissioned by Dr. Tulp himself, as the head of the Amsterdam Guild of Surgeons, along with seven other surgeons. Each head of the guild was expected to offer an anatomy lesson for the general public, an event permitted to occur only once a year and on the condition that the body belonged to an executed criminal sentenced (the one here had been hanged for theft). In the lower right part of the painting, we see a medical handbook, most probably *De humani corporis fabrica* (1543) by Andreas Vesalius, a famous anatomist, and the founder of modern medicine. The portrait seems to be depicting all the following:

1. Knowledge *beyond utility*: This is an anatomy lesson, not some medical action. The end is not to heal someone, for the body is already dead, but to exhibit the truth of nature. But given the fact that we are, despite the faith in the power of science, in a religiously charged environment, this knowledge has the work of god as its object at the same time. Knowledge of the human body, then, is at the same time self-knowledge, knowledge about nature, and knowledge about the divine.
2. *Theoretical life is an activity of those who possess knowledge*: contrary to what usually applied in paintings with such themes, Rembrandt doesn't add a wide audience to the painting. The only audience are the surgeons themselves, who already possess the pertinent knowledge. And what they are doing is practicing the activity of *theôria*. There is no place here for multiple activities: apart from Dr. Tulp, everyone is doing the exact same thing, for the exact same reason, based on the exact same knowledge: they watch, theorize. In the realm of contemplative life, there are no centrifugal forces or unexpected initiatives. No one obstructs another, no one challenges another person's position, no one person's actions undermine the actions of others, no one is entirely dependent on others. In fact, compared to what happens in the political life of *The Night Watch*, everyone's intensity of attention is obviously higher.
3. *Theory is a common activity of equals*: not only are all the surgeons in the painting practicing the same activity, in a way they are co-spectators in the strict sense of the term. It's not hard to see that apart from the one keeping notes for the people present—the one behind Dr. Tulp—the other six people are in the shape of an arrow pointed at Dr. Tulp, as if each one is looking through the eyes of all. Individuality is present, but it's not a hindrance to common action. Besides, Dr. Tulp himself is depicted in the painting as Andreas Vesalius used to depict himself: the former is presenting himself as the latter's successor. And the surgeon at the back of the painting (Van Lunen), the one looking toward the spectator, was originally wearing a hat (as we can see using x-rays), an indication that he was considered to be Dr. Tulp's equal.
4. Theory is a *purely scientific* activity: It makes an impression that Dr. Tulp is not the one that prepared the body by making the incision and cleaning it; he is not a manual worker. Knowledge of the body and the causes of death declare the

grandeur of the human mind. In fact, scientific knowledge always keeps the position of a *distant* spectator that doesn't get involved with the object itself, doesn't risk contact with it: none of the surgeons touches the dead body, they only look at it. And therefore, the scientific knowledge of even the most repulsive or sinful thing doesn't risk being contaminated by its object.

5. In theoretical life there is no *loss of meaning*: The activity of Dr. Tulp himself represents the completeness and integrity of theoretical knowledge. There is no resistance here: what Dr. Tulp says, what his left hand does thanks to the body's muscles, the very ones demonstrated by the tweezers in his right hand, and what is discussed in the Vesalius anatomy handbook, all reflect one another. That's why it's not important if some are looking at Dr. Tulp himself, at his hands, or the book: wherever they look at, they get access to the same truth.
6. Theoretical life is *risk-free*: not only have the surgeons participating in the activity nothing to fear from each other, even the viewer and the painter feel safe. Because they all participate, in one way or another, in an activity of the same kind: they are all spectators. In the field of contemplative life, the invitation is unambiguous: whoever can see, let them see, since no issue of competition or hierarchy arises. Of course, contemplative life claims a place within political life. Indeed, such paintings reveal that Europeans recognized a distinct place for the scientific community in the political sphere. The only thing that contemplative life asks for, however, is room to exist. It doesn't claim some extra involvement in political things; it doesn't challenge Captain Cocq's position.
7. Theoretical life is *life*, in that it embodies a stance with moral content, one that respects the eternal worth of knowledge, in contrast to the baseness of the dead thief in the painting—a stance that represents the victory of good over evil. It is not by chance that the position of the body undoubtedly references Mantegna's *Lamentation of Christ* (1480, tempera on canvas, Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan). And, perhaps, this is the role taken by the surgeon looking toward the spectator, the one of underlining that acquiring and practicing knowledge does not happen without a conception of a human life, that knowing the world's structure does not deprive us of the obligation to understand life in terms of values. Such a value in Dr. Tulp's age was the salvation of the soul within divine grace. In Aristotle's world it was to become immortal as far as it is possible for humans. These differences matter very little here. In both cases contemplative life is the best vessel for the journey toward the highest good.

So, this is why theoretical life is so seductive, at least to those who have the experience of pleasure that the pure knowledge of the causes of things can offer. We have to imagine Dr. Tulp and the rest of the surgeons to enjoy first-class happiness. For Captain Cocq and his lieutenant a second-class happiness is in store. Unless, of course, the young man behind them is really trying to shoot them.

9.5 The Unity of Virtue

Here is the appropriate place to revisit the well-known "unity of virtue" thesis that we met in Sect. 2.6, not only because we just realized the perplexities that arise regarding the relationship between theoretical and practical wisdom but also because the very relationship between practical wisdom and the virtues of character needs further unpacking. The following passage is critical:

VI 13 1144^{b}30–1145^{a}2

(1) So it is evident that it is impossible to be practically-wise without being good. […]
(2) [F]ull virtue does not come into being without practical wisdom.
(3) That is why indeed some people say that all the virtues are sorts of practical wisdom and why, in one respect, Socrates used to inquire correctly but, in another, erroneously; for in thinking that all the virtues were sorts of practical wisdom, he was in error, but in saying that they did not exist without practical wisdom, he spoke correctly.
(4) It is clear, then, from what we have said, that it is neither possible to be fully good without practical wisdom nor practically-wise without virtue of character.
(5) Moreover, in this way we can also resolve the argument by which someone might contend dialectically that the virtues are separate from each other […]. In the case of the natural virtues, indeed, this is possible, but in the case of those in accord with which someone is called "unconditionally good," it is not possible; for at the same time as the one, practical wisdom, is present, they will all be present.

This array of ideas accurately illustrates the "unity of virtue" thesis. It is structured by Aristotle around three claims, namely, (1), (2), and (5): (a) to possess practical wisdom one must also possess the virtues of character; (b) to possess the virtues of character in their full sense—that is, neither as natural virtues nor as merely habituated virtuous states under the guidance of a teacher (see Sect. 2.3)—one must possess practical wisdom; (c) the oneness of practical wisdom implies the oneness or unity of the virtues of character—that to possess one of them means to possess them all. (4) accentuates the dependence of practical wisdom on the virtues of character, and vice versa, while (3) states that this two-way dependence is a function of the fact that practical wisdom, as an intellectual state, is distinct in kind from the virtues of character. The "unity of virtue," then, whatever it may prove to be, far from implying the levelling of this distinction, is actually grounded in it.

It is often thought that these three claims, especially in combination, create a philosophical scandal or lead to a dead end: they seem to flirt with Socratic intellectualism, to falsify the specificity and the localism of each virtue, to imply a flawed developmental account of how the virtues of character are acquired, and in general to contradict the supposedly common thought that someone may be fully virtuous in one domain of moral doings without possessing all the virtues. I doubt

that these charges are valid, but I also worry that the standard way of defending Aristotle's view, or a mild version thereof, pays only lip service to its complexities and nuances.

I discuss the unity of virtue at the very end of the present Introduction because I think that the solution of these problems lies in the details of Aristotle's ethics as they have been exhibited so far—besides, the reader will now have the opportunity to recapitulate certain key points from previous chapters. My aim is to decipher and defend Aristotle's thesis and show how faithful it is to our moral experience.

(I) One might think to defend Aristotle by appealing to the case of the crafts, claiming that just as one can be an expert in one craft without being an expert in many or all of them, likewise one can possess a virtue of character without possessing them all. But this is bound to fail. For one thing, practical wisdom differs from craft knowledge in precisely these respects: (a) it encompasses a knowledge of what is good for our life as a whole (VI 5 1140^{a}25–28) and (b) provides us with a holistic view of that life as it develops in time so as to constitute "a complete life" (I 10 1101^{a}9–13). To achieve this task, practical wisdom must, among other things, monitor and supervise the compatibility and substantial aligning of our states of character and, hence, create a unity. This is not creation ex nihilo, but rather a sort of perfection or completeness, for the virtues of character as habituated virtues are already shaped by the practical wisdom of our parents, teachers, or city's legislator so as to enjoy a sort of non-yet-developed unity or a receptiveness to unity. But how one understands this creative role depends on a developmental story: we know (see Sect. 2.5) that it is false to regard practical wisdom as something added on once habituated virtues of character are already established. The truth is that virtues of character and practical wisdom grow together. How exactly this happens is a key point for resolving the puzzle of the unity of virtue (see below).

(II) That is why Aristotle is adamant that the unity of the virtues of character is not premised on a meta-virtue of character—something (3) is meant to stress by recalling the distinction between intellectual virtues and virtues of character. This is also why in Book V Aristotle took such a firm stand against Plato's notion of justice as the whole of virtue (see Sect. 3.1), that is, as a virtue of character that can establish the unity at issue. By making practical wisdom the unifying element of the virtues of character Aristotle nicely explains their common access to a rational and explanatory conception of the noble. Hence, the "unity of virtue" thesis is, first of all, a statement about the very structure or nature of virtues. The last claim, however, requires qualification. Nowadays, it is common to distinguish the "attributive" perspective, from which we attribute a virtue or all virtues to a particular person, and the "model" or "theoretical" perspective, from which we only propose a theory about the nature of virtue, and to argue that Aristotle's "unity of virtue" thesis holds true only from the latter. But in Aristotle's account there is no room for such a dissociation. Which people are virtuous or not, which actions are virtuous or not, the conditions of attributability and responsibility, etc.—all these concerns pri-

marily emerge within the practice of praise and blame and in the sphere of our moral doings themselves, before they become objects for theoretical models. And the latter must be tested against the former.

(III) Let us suppose that Peter's actions show courage and justify our praising him for being courageous. In another context, however, it is revealed that he does not possess the virtue of magnificence. If the "unity of virtue" thesis holds true, so the argument goes, one should take back our previous positive assessment of him. But this contradicts our everyday experience and, consequently, the "attributive" conception of the unity of virtue should be withdrawn. However, in Aristotle's mind—correctly, I think—to ascribe to Peter the virtue of courage *just is* to ascribe to him the virtue that is evidenced in a particular domain (where the circumstances test our management of fear and confidence) *together with* practical wisdom as involved in any virtue of character whatever: each time we ascribe to Peter a virtue of character in the full sense of the term, we ascribe to him practical wisdom. Inversely, practical wisdom has no terrain of exercise that lies beyond or next to the ones in which the virtues of character are actualized and practiced: each time practical wisdom is actualized; it is actualized *in* actions of courage, generosity, sincerity, etc. (I leave out of the present discussion legislative practical wisdom and political practical wisdom [see Sect. 5.6].)

(IV) Notice however that the manifestation of Peter's lack of magnificence does not *necessarily* make us withdraw or renounce our previous assessment regarding his being courageous. It does not appear irrelevant to our previous assessment either, as if this were an independent and unshakeable truth. In reality, it makes us *doubt* his virtuous character and, consequently, his courage too. For instance, we may begin to wonder whether the circumstances were too easy for him up to now and his courage only skin deep, about his eventually turning out to be a pretender, or about the genuineness of his commitment to the nobility of courageous actions, etc. Whether our doubts will turn to undermine our previous assessment will depend on the reasons for his not being magnificent—I will return to that point in a moment.

My use of the example of magnificence is neither innocent nor incidental. It is meant to refute a false understanding of the "unity of virtue" thesis. Contrary to the standard interpretation*, Aristotle does not believe that to have one virtue of character one must have them all!* The case of magnificence is revelatory. "The magnificent person differs from the generous one; for the former is concerned with great sums, the latter with small" (II 7 $1107^{b}17$–19). Thus, people without great wealth or poor people can be generous, but *not* magnificent. Magnificence requires a great amount of wealth we only rarely happen to have, not the minimal amount, thanks to which we are spared the pain of everyday labor or even the larger amount we need to show generosity. Thus, Aristotle would undoubtedly accept that most virtuous people are *not* magnificent, because the external circumstances or mere luck do not let them become so; nothing, however, weakens or undermines their true virtue and its unity. Greatness of soul is of the same sort (see Sect. **2.6**). (Also of note: these

two virtues of character are anything but peripheral or secondary; they occupy one third of Book IV.)

One is entitled to generalize. The acquisition of a virtue of character strongly depends on the circumstances of life and requires experience and opportunities to be involved in virtuous actions. There are, indeed, terrains of human activity that everyone is somehow familiar with, for instance, our relationship with others, the preservation of life, the fulfilment of certain needs, our attitude toward our own body, etc. But even here, only the real and particular circumstances of life decide how we experience moral dilemmas and challenges. For instance, it makes all the difference regarding courage whether one lives in a peaceful environment (familial, political, etc.) or not.

Let me build on the example of magnificence. As said before, fully virtuous people who do not possess great wealth *cannot* be magnificent, but this says nothing against their virtuous character and the unity of their virtues. Suppose that a virtuous person suddenly inherits an immense fortune. Will they become magnificent instantly and automatically? *Not at all*. To say the opposite would be a sign of intellectualism, that is, of the view that intellectual virtue alone does all the work. By contrast, for Aristotle—and correctly so—fully virtuous people who suddenly become very rich will need a lot of time to get familiar with their wealth and find out how exactly they should use it, what the right mean is in spending great sums, etc. *During that transitional period* nothing counts as a counterevidence against the unity of virtue. We still keep praising them for their other virtues, *anticipating* that, after obtaining the necessary experience, they will indeed show magnificence; one recognizes in them the potential to do so. If after a long time of acquaintance with their wealth, they prove unable to acquire magnificence, then, indeed, we start to doubt their excellence. Aristotle, Thucydides, and Greek tragedians were fully aware of the fact that unexpected and repeated episodes of good luck prove no less challenging to our virtue than strokes of bad luck, for they bring to light hidden character defects. Tiny or not, defects are incompatible with virtue in the full sense of the term and, a fortiori, with the unity of virtue. (Failings that are due to things that overstrain human nature are of a completely different sort and do not at all compromise virtue; see Sect. 6.1.) But notice that I shifted the emphasis from a static observation about the possession of all virtues to a dynamic relation between practical wisdom, the unity of virtue, and the possession of all virtues.

The same holds true regarding the emergence of one and the same virtue of character across domains: Peter, though truly courageous in political life, may altogether lack familiarity with army and military missions. Should we take for granted that had he been involved for the first time in a battle, he would *necessarily* show courage? *Not at all*! Though both cases involve the management of our feelings of fear and confidence, it would be a mistake to assume that we can automatically and straightaway *transplant* our exercising practical wisdom and courage from the one terrain to the other. Besides, showing genuine courage does not simply imply our managing correctly our fear and confidence but, in addition, correctly perceiving and calculating the constituents of what is going on (who, what, concerning what, for the sake of what, etc.).

(V) There is an additional impediment to the correct understanding of Aristotle's views about the unity of virtue. For the opponents and the defenders of Aristotle's views alike tend to underestimate the importance of what I called in Sect. 5.1 the "spokes" of practical wisdom: knowledge of universals, phronetic perception, deliberate choice, deliberation, comprehension, etc. No doubt, practical wisdom entails the perfected function of each and every spoke, but *nothing necessitates the simultaneous development or acquisition of all of them*. In reality, certain spokes are, by their nature, expected to grow, and should grow, earlier than others. Here are two examples: it's pretty likely that to properly regard our actions in light of "our life as a whole" is a highly delicate capacity we can only acquire at the final stages of our development of practical wisdom. This is so because, among other things, it is grounded in our familiarity with and investment in long-term plans, in our handling strokes of good and bad luck or the vicissitudes of life, etc. On the other side of the spectrum, capacities that are responsible for good reasoning, like good deliberation, may be quite accessible to inexperienced people too. For these are intellectual capacities we exercise throughout our everyday life, in crafts, sciences, morally relevant actions, etc., and, to some extent, they are teachable in the same way in which mathematics is. Once acquired, practical wisdom functions as a bloc, but until that day its spokes grow at different moments and with a different tempo.

More importantly, the spokes of practical wisdom have strong affinities with particular clusters of virtues. Remember that the acquisition of practical wisdom also presupposes our involvement in actions that are associated with the virtues of character. In other words, the process of acquiring practical wisdom involves several virtue-dependent processes. Again, let me offer two tentative examples: knowledge of universal principles may more appropriately and naturally grow together with our practicing the virtue of justice than, say, the virtue of courage. The scientific nature of justice and its being definable by means of quasi-mathematical analogies explain why this is so (VI 8 1142^{a}11–15). Or, for instance, in order to get the expertise of properly incorporating our actions within a view of our life as a whole, it may be highly important to be exposed to circumstances and challenges that are connected with the virtue of friendship. For it is within friendship, Aristotle says, that we grasp ourselves and the other selves as we truly are throughout the activities our life is devoted to. And so on and so forth.

The bottom line is that there is plenty of space to sidestep the localism and the fragmentation of the virtues of character and, at the same time, respect the richness and the internal differentiation of practical wisdom's spokes, which brings with it distinctions of the time at which, the virtues in connection with which, or how easily or speedily, the acquisition of each spoke may be attained. Thus, we no longer run the risk of creating a gap between the supposed localism of the virtues of character and the supposed indivisible oneness of practical wisdom: the creation of the unity of virtue and the development of practical wisdom are two sides of the same process.

9.6 The Addresses of the *Nicomachean Ethics*

The readers or listeners of the *Nicomachean Ethics* are integral to the treatise. Aristotle addresses them at the beginning (I 1–3) and at the end of the treatise (X 9). And the question is not simply who is expected to read it but who is expected to really benefit from what it has to offer. I think that three answers are available.

The first, and the one that is most frequently referred to, concerns what Aristotle himself explains in Book I of the *Nicomachean Ethics:*

I 3 $1094^{b}27–1095^{a}9$

(1) But each person correctly judges the things he knows and is a good judge of these. Therefore, a person well educated in a given area is a good judge in that area, while a person well educated in all areas is an unconditionally good judge.
(2) That is why a young person is not a proper listener for politics; for he has no experience of the actions of life, and the accounts are in accord with these and concerned with these. Further, since he tends to follow his feelings, it will be pointless and not beneficial for him to listen, since the end is not knowledge but action.
(3) And it makes no difference whether he is young in years or youthful in character; for the deficiency is not a matter of time but is due to living and pursuing each thing in accord with feelings. For to people like that, knowledge turns out to be profitless.

The requirements seem overly high. For, according to (1), the readers of the *Nicomachean Ethics* have to be *well-educated*. We have seen this term before, in Sects. 4.3 and 9.3. It refers to those who are aware of the fact that for every field of human experience and knowledge there is a special form of exactness. If there are people who lack any familiarity with the sphere of human things, then there is no way that they be well-educated in the corresponding branch of knowledge (namely, political science), and therefore, they are not appropriate readers of the *Ethics.* Of course, we emphasized on many occasions that all people are somehow involved in political life, political beings as we are. This may be true, but mere involvement does not constitute experience: experience is a cognitive achievement, not just an accumulation of memories or the like (see p.85n3).

As sentence (2) explains, a way to think of those who would be disqualified as readers under these conditions is to consider which people would not be able to acquire such an experience. Young people fit this profile, for two reasons: (a) their young age doesn't allow them to take on responsibilities in the city, to realize the frictions between the private and the public sphere, to see the effects of good and bad luck, and so on. (b) Young people follow their passions since their practical reason has not yet been developed or is somehow immature. Their life is very close to the life of indulgence, to the life led by passions, and this is due to their nature and not to any error they make.

Obviously, the same goes for anyone who lives just by following crude passions. The beast-like and the intemperate people behave like children. They act as if reason had been exiled from within them: their passions knock out rational calculation (III 12 $1119^{a}33$–$1119^{b}10$). While children have no deliberation by nature, people who, even though they are mature in age, are like children, make no deliberate choices because of their states of character. It doesn't matter if they are capable of understanding the *Ethics*. What's important is that their practical reason is not capable of connecting the teachings the *Nicomachean Ethics* contains about the starting-points of action and happiness with the starting-points of their own deliberate choice. They are incapable of seeing with their own eyes the starting-points of action uncovered by Aristotle as relevant to their own actions. For all those people, practical knowledge is inaccessible or profitless.

It is important that, nevertheless, Aristotle does not set the bar too high. For example, he doesn't claim that only the good people are capable of understanding the *Ethics.* On the contrary, as we very often saw, Aristotle trusts the power of reason greatly, provided our states of character are not completely destroyed. Obviously, both those who exercise self-control and those who lack self-control are capable of listening to reason. Besides, the question was not—and it can't be—how *effective* the *Nicomachean Ethics* will prove to be for the moral transformation of all these people. What's important is only who are able to correlate what is said here with their own lives. So, who is the appropriate listener or reader of the *Nicomachean Ethics*? Any rational subject, mature in terms of age, capable of deliberate choice; only those who are unable to exercise practical reason, like children or the beast-like people, are excluded.

There is also a second answer: the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Politics* are useful to every citizen who lives in a well-legislated state, and, therefore, their addressee is this citizen:

***Pol.* III 10 $1282^{a}3$–23**

(1) A doctor, however, may be either an ordinary practitioner of the craft, an architectonic one, or thirdly, someone well educated in the craft (for there are people of this third sort in—one might almost say—all crafts) […]
(2) for each individually may be a worse judge than those who know the craft, but a better or no worse one when they all come together; [….]
(3) there are some crafts in which the maker might not be either the only or the best judge—the ones where those who lack the craft nonetheless know its products. For example, knowing about a house does not belong only to the maker—instead, the one who uses it is an even better judge (and the one who uses it is the household manager). A ship's captain, too, is a better judge of a rudder than a carpenter is, and a dinner guest, rather than the cook, a better judge of a feast.

(1) distinguishes between those who simply follow the doctor's directions, those who possess full knowledge over medicine, and thirdly, the well-educated, those who judge correctly. This time, the well-educated people are associated with our critical function within the city. And (2) explains that each citizen makes up for the

lack of knowledge that individually characterizes them (compared to a person possessing political scientific knowledge) by participating in a political body, in a parliamentary body—the Assembly of Athens, for example—and there the plurality balances out the lack of knowledge, given that this plurality is not completely *slavish*. More than that, plurality checks for the danger of individual corruption.

There is one more reason that the well-educated people can understand the *Nicomachean Ethics*: they have a personal (in contemporary terms) interest in this knowledge, since, as citizens, they are the ones who use political science—regardless of whether they are fully aware of this—in their everyday political decisions. They may seem like handicraftsmen (as we saw in Sect. 5.5), but what they're applying is political science. Therefore, the well-educated people are not only able to understand the *Nicomachean Ethics*, but they are also able to judge it, as is explained in (3). Because, whether as doers of political actions or as users of political actions done by others, they can distinguish between people's lives. For being well-educated is a cognitive achievement and not just a simple quality, just as being able to properly manage your household is an achievement, or governing a ship, or judging the quality of a meal. Not everyone who has a family or everyone who eats can be a judge. The same applies to the user of a city.

But there is also a third addressee of the *Ethics*, probably its main addressee: prospective legislators. They are asked to acquire the architectonic knowledge concerning the happiness of individual citizens and the city, and there is no other way to acquire it except to learn the starting-points of the practical sphere presented in the *Ethics* and the *Politics*, by learning what happiness consists in (*Pol.* VII 1 $1323^{a}14$–19). So, it's not a coincidence that the last section of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (X 9) explicitly addresses the legislator and builds the bridge connecting this work with the *Politics*. The legislator, this strange figure in Aristotelian political science (as we saw in Sect. 5.6), is the addressee of the *Nicomachean Ethics* par excellence, because only legislators will get the chance to apply—and, therefore, to confirm—the full scale of the actions and strategies described by Aristotle—not only as citizens (living in some city) and as friends (acting toward particular people) but also as the architects of a political community.

The architectonic activity of the legislator, as made possible exclusively for the reader of the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Politics*, may be a melting pot of contemplative and practical life. Coming back to my Preface, "A human, all too human story," which set us off in our journey through the *Nicomachean Ethics*, we have to imagine the good legislator be happy.

9.7 Chapter Summary

The "gigantomachy" in the field of happiness is a battle between two rivals: on the one side, practical activities in accord with practical wisdom within the framework of political life; on the other, theoretical activities in accord with theoretical wisdom within the framework of contemplative life. The winner, whose identity Aristotle is

slowly revealing from Book I on, is anything but obvious. It is not even certain that there is any real rivalry at all. The chapter offers a detailed close reading of the pertinent passages in Books VI and X of the *Nicomachean Ethics* to explain why activities in accord with theoretical wisdom are associated with "complete happiness" and in which sense activities in accord with practical wisdom only offer a second-class, albeit true, happiness. I explore the much-debated question of whether contemplative life and practical life are just the two sides of the same coin on the basis of three questions: (1) In what sense does the exercise of theoretical wisdom constitute happiness? (2) In what way does the theoretically wise person need practical wisdom to be happy? (3) Is it possible to be happy without possessing theoretical wisdom? More importantly, the clue is to understand, so I argue, why the allure of contemplative life attracts Aristotle and many great philosophers of western thought; I attempt to respond this last question by resorting to two paintings by Rembrandt. I conclude with an interpretation of Aristotle's much-discussed thesis about the unity of the virtues.

9.8 Further Reading

The puzzle about the connection between contemplative and political life has been the object of countless studies throughout the centuries. For the present purposes, one may read: Aufderheide (2020: 164–192); Richardson-Lear (2006: 175–208); Reeve (2019); Salkever (2009). For the "unity of virtue" thesis, see Irwin (1988); Gardiner (2001); Drefcinski (2006); Russell (2009: Chap. 11); De Caro et al. (2018).

9.9 Study Questions

1. Why might one think that theoretical wisdom has nothing to do with human happiness?
2. In what way does the paradigm of health describe the relationship that holds between theoretical wisdom, practical wisdom, and happiness?
3. What is the true self with which Aristotle associates complete happiness? Is his proposal defensible?
4. Why does Aristotle think that leisure is intrinsic to happiness? What are the consequences of his view?
5. Why must a *happy* theoretically wise person always be practically wise too?
6. In what way is the life of the practically wise person truly—though in "a secondary way"—happy?
7. Is the unity of virtue a trait of the virtues of character or rather something created by practical wisdom?
8. Is it true that Aristotle does *not* believe that to have one virtue of character one must have them all?

9. Is it possible for practical wisdom and the virtues of character to develop together?
10. In what capacity are you the addressee of the *Nicomachean Ethics*?

9.10 Essay Question

"Suppose there were an experience machine that would give you any experience that you desired. Superduper neuropsychologists could stimulate your brain so that you would think and feel you were writing a great novel, or making a friend, or reading an interesting book. All the time you would be floating in a tank, with electrodes attached to your brain. Should you plug into this machine for life, preprogramming your life's experiences? If you are worried about missing out on desirable experiences, we can suppose that business enterprises have researched thoroughly the lives of many others. You can pick and choose from their large library or smorgasbord of such experiences, selecting your life's experiences for, say, the next two years. After two years have passed, you will have ten minutes or ten hours out of the tank, to select the experiences of your next two years. Of course, while in the tank you won't know that you're there; you'll think it's all actually happening. Others can also plug in to have the experiences they want, so there's no need to stay unplugged to serve them. (Ignore problems such as who will service the machines if everyone plugs in.) Would you plug in? What else can matter to us, other than how our lives feel from the inside? Nor should you refrain because of the few moments of distress between the moment you've decided and the moment you're plugged. What's a few moments of distress compared to a lifetime of bliss (if that's what you choose), and why feel any distress at all if your decision is the best one? What does matter to us in addition to our experiences?" (R. Nozick, 1974. *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*. New York: Basic Books, 42–43).

Draw on Aristotle's notion of happiness to answer the following questions:

1. Is it correct to say that both lives—of those plugged in and those who are not—contain the same sort of happiness?
2. "What does matter to us in addition to our experiences?" How would Aristotle respond to the question? Do you agree with him?
3. Would Aristotle's wise people, those possessing theoretical wisdom, plug in?
4. Does Nozick's experience machine corroborate or undermine Aristotle's views about happiness?

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