Moral Virtue: The Virtue of What?

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Introduction: The Problem

Aristotle leaves us with a list of moral virtues in the *Nicomachean Ethics (NE)*, each associated with two vices. This list fluctuates slightly between various presentations, but remains, for the most part, static. Whether we think that Aristotle’s list is culturally dependent or not, at times dated or still almost completely relevant, we can surely agree that Aristotle has not enumerated all of the moral virtues. He leaves us, though, with not even so much as a suggestion about how we might, in a principled way, fill in this deficiency, bring this list closer to completion. There are surely other characteristics that can be put into the formal structure that Aristotle describes, the knowledge of which we think would help us understand and be better equipped to engage our lives. What is the criterion, though, by which we could judge whether some proposed moral virtue/vice combination is worthy of accepting into our ethical thought?

Introduction: Additional Benefits

Although this work is spurred by the interest of answering the question detailed above, this would be in no way the only benefit. Among other potential benefits, going through the exercise of answering this question in the way that I propose suggests not only mutually illuminating ways of reading Aristotle’s more theoretical psychological works together with his ethical works, but it also suggests some important features of and relationships within the Aristotelian body of knowledge in general, which seem worth further exploration.
Additionally, it might be of significant interest to the relatively new field virtue ethics. The project as a whole, of which this is the first part, might suggest principles for the newly-budding field to argue about and perhaps adopt.

**Introduction: The Scope of this Paper**

Now, although this is the aim guiding this work, it really only brings us past the first checkpoint of about three. This paper specifically tries to answer the question, “What is moral virtue the virtue of?” With the answer arrived at here, the next question becomes, “What, then, are the specific differences of the particular moral virtues?” Once a likely answer to this is provided, there will be little exertion left, for once this is found, we will likely have what we need in order to answer our guiding question, “How are we to accept or reject proposed moral virtues into our list in a principled way?” For example, if we became convinced that all of the moral virtues were specifically differentiated by being associated with a specific desire, then we would be able to add new moral virtues associated with desires not yet accounted for by our list.

**Method of Proceeding**

So, let’s get started with our question. What is moral virtue the virtue of?

In order to answer this question, we will try to give a definition, stating the genus and then the specific difference of moral virtue. In accordance with our question, “What is moral virtue the virtue of?”, we are starting our line of definition from the genus of ‘virtue’. It is worth noting that Aristotle also gives such a definition of moral virtue, but he starts from a different genus than we do, and ends up with a less clean definition for our purposes than we will. He begins his
line of definition from the genus of ‘characteristic’. He ends up defining it as “a characteristic involving choice, [consisting] in observing the mean relative to us, a mean which is defined by a rational principle” (NE II.6.1106b36-38). This, though, does not really tell us about moral virtue as a specific kind of virtue, which is what we want to know.

**What is virtue in general?**

So, to start, what will we say that the genus of ‘virtue’ is?

Virtue is a characteristic (NE II.5.1106a11). Aristotle also remarks that “every virtue... renders good the thing itself of which it is the [virtue], and causes it to perform its [ergon] well. For example, the [virtue] of the eye makes both the eye and its [ergon] good, for good sight is due to the [virtue] of the eye” (NE II.6.1106a15-19). Thus, virtue is always the virtue of or relative to something, namely some specific ergon\(^1\) (NE VI.1.1139a17). So, the virtue of a harpist would be the characteristic(s) which make the harpist play the harp well, and the good harpist is one who possesses this virtue.

**The Specific Difference of Moral Virtue**

With this, then, the next question is “What is moral virtue the virtue of?”

**Aristotle’s Ergon Argument**

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\(^1\) I use *ergon* because there is no standard English translation for it. It is translated variously as ‘work’, ‘deed’, ‘product’, or ‘function’. F. E. Peters remarks in his *Greek Philosophical Terms: A Historical Lexicon*, “Ergon, the common Greek word for something done or made, is used by the philosophers in a twofold sense: either as the activity of a thing or as the product of that activity” (p.61). It thus seems that ‘work’ might be the most appropriate English translation for capturing this twofold sense.
In order to give an answer here, we first need to see what the *ergon* of humanity is. So, we turn to *NE* I.7, where Aristotle uncontroversially recognizes that this *ergon* must be some kind of living, but not just any type of living, since it would surely not be the *ergon* of a human to live the life of plant or a cow, to the extent that that is even possible (I.7.1097b33-35). In order, then, to come to what the specifically human *ergon* is, he ascends a sort of hierarchy of the kinds of life and the kinds of *ergon* which they involve, which he, so to speak, derives in a different work called *On the Soul* (*DA*).

The Relation between the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the Psychological Works

Now is a good time to turn to the relationship between the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the relevant psychological works, *On the Soul* (*DA*) and *On the Movement of Animals* (*MA*). Aristotle is, in all of these works, clearly and primarily concerned with the soul, and in the case of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, the human soul specifically. But these works are very different works, and they seem to have very little in common. It is, it seems, because of their different ways of investigating the soul, which is made clear by a remark in *On the Soul*. Aristotle remarks that the word *entelecheia*\(^2\) is meant in two ways. In one sense, knowledge possessed but not actively used (or at work) is an *entelecheia*, and in another sense, active knowing or contemplating is an *entelecheia* (*DA* II.1.412a23-25). Aristotle then quickly concludes that the soul is the *entelecheia* of a natural body in the first sense of *entelecheia* (*DA* II.1.412b5).

\(^2\) Here is another crucial Aristotelian term which has no standard English translation. It is variously rendered as ‘state of completion’, ‘perfection’, ‘actuality’. The Greek rendered literally in somewhat awkward English would be something like “actively possessing one’s goal” or “active completion.”
This here seems to be the primary reason for the difference between the psychological works and
the *Nicomachean Ethics*. In the psychological works, Aristotle investigates the soul as the first
*entelecheia* of a natural body, which involves primarily sorting out the capacities that belong to a
living thing as a living thing. The *Nicomachean Ethics*, on the other hand, seems to be
investigating the soul in the second sense of *entelecheia*; that is, it is investigating the activity,
the doing-well of the activity, of the capacities of the soul. The main question of the
*Nicomachean Ethics* seems to accordingly be: what does it mean to not merely live, but to live
well—to live to the fullest actualization of the capacities of the soul?

**The Division of the Soul in *NE I.13***

So, with that, back to *NE I.7*. Aristotle ascends the hierarchy of lives, or kinds of souls,
from *On the Soul*, and he concludes that the human *ergon* “consists in an activity of the soul in
conformity with a rational principle or, at least, not without it” (*NE I.7.1098a7-8*). In *NE I.13,*
then, Aristotle announces that we are seeking human virtue (*NE I.13.1102a14*), which we will
seek on the basis of the human *ergon* that we found in *NE I.7*. Aristotle then, so to speak, divides
the soul in accordance with how the various soul capacities are related to the specifically human
capacity of the soul, reason. First, we have the actual reasoning capacity of the soul, and this is rational in itself. Then, we have activities of the soul which are not themselves reasoning, but which partake of reason; that is, they can be guided by reason. Thirdly, we have the part of the soul which seems to be not rational at all, and thus which does not currently concern us.

The Division of the Virtues at NE I.13

So, we have the capacities of the soul divided according to their relation to the specifically human capacity, and now we need the virtues corresponding to these capacities. Aristotle draws the line between intellectual virtue and moral virtue in accordance with the division of the activities of the soul that he just made (NE I.13.1102b30-1103a10). So, intellectual virtue will be the virtue of the capacity which is rational in itself, the capacity of reason or thinking, and moral virtue will be the virtue of the capacity which is rational by participation, what I will argue to be the capacity of desire, as understood in On the Soul and in On the Movement of Animals.

Ostwald remarks about an apparent contradiction in footnote 47 on page 30 of his translation of the Nicomachean Ethics between Aristotle’s treatment of the so-called division of the soul at NE I.13.1102a26-32, where Aristotle announces that he will divide the soul into two elements, one rational and one irrational, and at DA III.9.432a25-b6, where Aristotle explicitly states that “it is absurd to tear the soul apart in this way.” Ostwald thus suggests that “the Nicomachean Ethics does not contain Aristotle’s last word on psychology” (Ostwald, pg.147, footnote 4).

The DA criticism, though, seems to not be a criticism of dividing the soul into rational or irrational parts in general, but of making this the primary division of the soul. For to say that the primary division of the soul is between the rational and the irrational is to miss a lot. And this division is a relatively accidental division, for the nutritive part of the soul or whatever router so-called irrational part of the soul does not have its essence as irrational but as nutritive. But, in the NE, this division seems natural in view of its end, deciding on the division of human virtue. For, Aristotle, in NE I.7 concluded that the human ergon is an activity of the soul in accordance with reason. Now, Aristotle is, on the basis of that, trying to figure out what the human virtue will be, and how it is to be divided. But, the different parts of the soul, as divided in DA, involve reason in different ways in humans. He thus divides the soul in accordance with how they involve reason. But we need not think that he is replacing or leaving behind the division of the soul that he derives in DA. It seems instead that we can think of the DA division as underlying a secondary NE I.13 division. That is, there are various parts of the soul which are rational or not to different degrees. First, we have the part which is rational in itself: the general capacity of reason in the DA. Second, we have parts of the soul which are rational by “partaking”; that is, they can be guided by reason, but they are not rational in themselves. The capacity for desire seems to be one such capacity. Thirdly, we have the parts of the soul which seem to be not rational at all: the nutritive capacity seems to be one such capacity.
Moral Virtue is the Virtue of Desire

There are a few places in the *NE* that initially suggest that moral virtue is in fact the virtue of the capacity of desire. First, in *NE* I.13, Aristotle explicitly says that the part of the soul that is rational by partaking is the “seat of appetites and of desire in general” (*NE* I.13.1102b29-30), and it is called the “appetitive part” (*NE* I.13.1103a1).

Second, it seems that the whole discussion of moral weakness and moral strength in *NE* VII is an attempt to describe, in addition to moral virtue and vice, two additional ways in which desire and reason can be related to each other. Thus, Aristotle decides that the morally weak are weak in relation to their “attitudes towards pleasures and pains” (*NE* VI.4.1147b23), and appetite is a specific kind of desire for the pleasant (*DA* II.3.414b8).

Third, Aristotle tells us that moral virtue is concerned with emotions and actions and that the mean of moral virtue is found in emotions and actions (*NE* II.6.1106b17-19). He understands the activity of desire in *On the Soul*, though, as the capacity by which living things act, and desire as the primary and necessary cause and explanation for all voluntary action (*DA* III.10.433a9-20, 433b1). So the action connection is very clear: if moral virtue is concerned with action, it is concerned with desire. The emotion connection will be explored in conjunction with the next point.

Finally, Aristotle understands the genus of moral virtue to be “characteristic,” by which he means, “the condition, either good or bad, in which we are, in relation to the emotions: for example, our condition in relation to anger is bad, if our anger is too violent or not violent.

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4 This connection is suggested by both Saint Thomas Aquinas at paragraph 8 of his *Commentary on Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics* and Francis Sparshott in “The Basic Section” chapter of his introduction to *Taking Life Seriously: A Study of the Argument of the Nicomachean Ethics*.
enough, but if it is moderate, our condition is good.” One can further extrapolate uncontroversially to say that, however Aristotle gives the specific difference of moral virtue, one can see from the genus that moral virtue will be the good condition in which we are, in relation to the emotions.

Although there is, it seems, nowhere an explicit connection made between any of the capacities of the soul and emotion, desire seems like a most likely home for emotion. First, because Aristotle defines emotion as being “accompanied by pleasure and pain” (Rhet. II.1.1378a21), and appetite, a species of desire, is intrinsically tied up with pleasure and pain, having pleasure and pain as its object (DA II.3.414b8). Further, Aristotle, when defining and discussing emotions in his Rhetoric (Rhet.) often identifies emotions either as desires or as involving desires (Rhet. II.2.1378a30-31, II.3.1380a8-7, II.4.1380b34, II). For emotions which are not explicitly defined in relation to desires, the relation seems to be at least implicit, for it seems that it would be impossible to experience these emotions without some specific desire. For example, fear (considered in Rhet. II.5.1382a20-1383a14) would not be fear did it not involve the simultaneous desire to escape from the danger that prompts the fear, and confidence (considered at Rhet. II.5.1383a15-b10) would not be confidence were it not in relation to something desired.5

Discussion Common to the Psychological Works on Desire and the Nicomachean Ethics on Moral Virtue

5 For a fuller treatment of the relationship between emotion and desire in Aristotle’s thought, see Leighton, “Aristotle and the Emotions” and Cooper, “An Aristotelian Theory of the Emotions”.
Further confirmation that moral virtue is the virtue of the capacity of desire as considered in Aristotle’s psychological works is that most of the general features of Aristotle’s understanding of moral virtue and related issues, as discussed in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, seem to be, as I will try to show, lying latent within his discussion of the capacity of desire in *On the Soul* and *On the Movement of Animals*. One need only to shift one’s attention from considering the human soul as a potentiality (as the first kind of entelecheia of the living thing) to considering the human soul in activity, and more specifically in good or full activity. I develop this hypothesis solely by considering passages from *On the Soul* and *On the Movement of Animals*, and then comparing them to their counterparts in *Nicomachean Ethics*.

What, then, will the virtuous activity of the capacity for desire be? It will clearly be desiring well. And a desire is good or bad in relation to its object. Aristotle identifies the object of desire as “the good or the apparent good” (*DA* III.10.433a28). This distinction seems intended to be taken in much the same way as a nearly identical distinction in relation to wish made at *NE* III.4.1113a.22-28.

This also suggests the famous mean structure to moral virtue, for, “desire can be both right and not right” (*DA* III.10.26-27). One’s desire could be mistaken in two ways: one could either think that something is better or worse than it actually is. One could thus desire something either excessively, deficiently, or rightly. This is precisely what Aristotle concludes at *NE* II.6.1106a25-1107a27.

Aristotle also remarks that the good and the bad are present in things in relation to the desirer (*DA* III.7.431b10-13). Thus, desiring well involves desiring that which is truly good for oneself and not that which merely seems good. And objects which are truly good in relation to
one are objects that are either part of or medial to the “highest good attainable by action” (NE I.4.1095a16), the happiness of the desirer. This point about the good being relative to some person is the same point that Aristotle makes at NE II.6.1106a29-b7 and at NE V.1.1129b5-7.

Aristotle also notes that desire and reason come to be opposed to one another (DA III.10.433b5-10), which is his acknowledgement of both of moral weakness and moral strength in the psychological works. Aristotle concerns himself exclusively with these character states in NE VII.

Further, Aristotle discussion of the practical syllogism at MA 7.701a6-37 and at DA III.11.434a16-20 in the context of trying to understand how thought sometimes produces motion and sometimes does not. These two accounts are nearly the same account of the practical syllogism which Aristotle gives in order to solve the same problem merely stated in a different way at NE VII.3.1147a1-5 and NE VII.3.1147a23-b17.

Choice is determined as sharing in both reasoning and desire (MA 6.700b23), which, taken in conjunction with Aristotle’s discussion of the practical syllogism, seems to be about the same as saying what Aristotle says at NE III.3.1113a10-13 when he defines choice as a desire arrived at on the basis of deliberation (which is a chain of practical syllogisms). Aristotle makes this clear in the psychological works when he says that “desire is the starting point for [the practical intellect,] and its last step is the starting point of action” (DA III.10.433a17-18). This, though, is the same conclusion that Aristotle comes to about deliberation when he says, “[w]e take the end for granted, and then consider in what manner and by what means it can be realized” (NE III.3.1112b14-15), and that deliberation stops at the point at which we can act (NE III.3.1112b18-20).
Aristotle also restricts the premises of a practical syllogism to premises about the good and the possible at *MA* 7.23-24. He makes basically the same restrictions on the objects of deliberation at *NE* III.3.1112b31-34.

Finally, it is important to note here what was mentioned above. Aristotle understands desire in *On the Soul* as the capacity by which living act. Desire is the primary and necessary cause and explanation for all voluntary action (DA III.10.433a9-20, 433b1). Thus, it is clear that desire must be crucially related to moral virtue, if moral virtue is concerned with emotions and actions and that the mean of moral virtue is found in emotions and actions as Aristotle states at NE II. 6.1106b17-19.

So, in the context of discussing desire in *On the Soul* and *On the Movement of Animals*, there is much in common. It would be telling, though, to consider what did not make it into Aristotle’s discussion of desire in the psychological works that is preserved in his discussion of moral virtue in the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

First, that moral virtue is more stable than vice did not make it into the relevant discussion in his psychological works. This, though, is perhaps not surprising, for Aristotle is talking about desire as a potentiality in the psychological works, and a discussion of the relative stabilities of different characteristics related to desire would thus seem out of place.

Second, nothing is really discussed that can be directly related to any of the particular moral virtues discussed in *NE* III.7-VI, but this is also not surprising, Aristotle is considering not specific kinds of desire but desire in general. No particular desires are really mentioned except by way of illustration. Aristotle does, though, give a list of particular desires in *Rhet*. 1.5-7, and
Rhet. I.11-12. These chapters will likely be helpful for the next phase of my larger project, which will seek to find the principle of differentiation of the particular moral virtues.

Moral blame and praise is also not discussed, but such a discussion also does not seem at home in a theoretical discussion of the capacity of desire.

Considerations Relevant to the Next Phase of the Project

If, then, moral virtue is the virtue of the capacity of desire as discussed in *On the Soul* and *On the Movement of Animals*, what does this suggest for us when we are trying to discover a principle for the differentiation of the specific moral virtues? Well it seems that there are only two possible principles of differentiation for desires: intensity and objects of desire; that is, a desire differs from another either by its object or by its intensity. And the differentiation of the specific moral virtues will correspond to the differentiation of the specific desires, if I have argued correctly and conclusively in this paper. But, it seems that moral virtue is differentiated from its two corresponding vices by the intensity of the desire. It seems, then, that each of the moral virtues might be differentiated in accordance with their specific object of desire. And this seems at least preliminarily correct, for, when looking at the specific moral virtues that Aristotle offers, generosity seems to be a correct desire for money, fear a correct desire to avoid danger, self-control a correct desire for the pleasures to which it is restricted, etc. So this, then, will be the hypothesis which we will test in the next phase of the project.
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