
The Structure of Aristotle's Ethical Theory: Is It Teleological or a Virtue Ethics?

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Is Aristotle's ethical theory teleological, as Sidgwick and Ross thought? If so is it circular, as Sidgwick argued? Or is it a virtue ethics, as it has been traditionally and recently supposed? If so, does it lack sufficient practical content, as is commonly thought?

These are fundamental questions about Aristotle's ethical theory, with no general consensus on their answers, though they are crucial to understanding his ethics. Our four questions are not usually found together, but they are significantly related, and discussing them together will help us to make some progress in understanding Aristotle's theory, and perhaps even the structure of some ethical theories. Sidgwick's charge of circularity is a helpful starting point.

Sidgwick's charges of circularity

Sidgwick made the charge of circularity a century ago, and so far as I know, it has never been satisfactorily answered. But he is by no means alone. As Sandra Peterson says in a recent paper, "the appearance of explanatory circularity in the *Nicomachean Ethics* is positively dizzying." She cites no fewer than "fourteen apparitions" which writers have "seen" and tried to make disappear, writers ranging from Aquinas to Grote and Greenwood, to Ackril and Cooper.¹ But not all them have the same circularity in mind. So we must try to be clear about what the basic circularities are supposed to be and how fundamental a difficulty they present to Aristotle's theory.

I believe that there are two main circularities that are at issue, and that the most fundamental is the one brought up by Sidgwick. But it is absolutely crucial to notice that Sidgwick makes his charge on the assumptions that Aristotle had a teleological ethical theory *and* a perfectionist theory of the good.

Sidgwick has essentially the same conceptual frame-

work for ethical theories as that of Rawls, Frankena, and others in this century. He thinks there are two ways in which an ethical theory can relate the Right and the Good: Ultimate Good may be conceived independently of the Right and the Right is conceived as what promotes ultimate Good; *or*, "conduct is held to be right when conformed to certain precepts or principles of Duty, intuitively known to be unconditionally binding," and "without consideration of ulterior consequences."² Sidgwick called the second type of ethical theory "intuitional", but the more common name is "deontological" (except that Sidgwick added epistemological intuitionism to the main moral principles of deontology); while the first type, of which utilitarianism is the most well known species, is usually called teleological (or consequentialist, perhaps a narrower notion in that it insists on an instrumental relation of right conduct to the good).

Now when it comes to the question of what is the Ultimate Good, Sidgwick says that there are two ends which have "a strongly and widely supported claim to be regarded as ultimate rational ends, . . . Happiness and Perfection or Excellence of human nature – meaning here by 'Excellence' not primarily superiority to others, but a partial realization or, or approximation to, an ideal type of human Perfection." (*Ibid.*, p. 9) Sidgwick sees no problem of circularity in constructing a teleological ethical theory with happiness as the ultimate good, if we understand happiness either as pleasure (with Bentham and Mill), or (we might add) as the satisfaction of rational desire (with Rawls and perhaps Brandt), since these can be conceived and specified independently of the right.³ Sidgwick's own Hedonistic Utilitarianism is an example of a teleological ethical theory which takes pleasure as ultimate Good.

But Sidgwick sees a logical difficulty in constructing a teleological ethical theory with perfection or excellence of human nature as the ultimate Good. The

difficulty arises from the fact that “. . . [moral] virtue is commonly conceived as the most valuable element of human Excellence. . . .”⁴ But if we use moral virtue to define excellence or perfection, then we cannot also define moral virtue as what promotes excellence or perfection, without going around in a logical circle; a circle which would be evident in such explications as, “virtue is what promotes virtue,” or “virtue is what promotes virtue and. . . .” (*Ibid.*, p. 392) To make reference to *moral* virtue in defining ultimate Good violates the first condition of a teleological theory, the independence of the Good from the Right; and once such a condition is violated, either a teleological structure has to be given up or we fall into circularity.⁵

To avoid such circularity, Sidgwick classified *modern* ethical theories which take the ultimate Good to be Excellence or Perfection, as intuitional, i.e. deontological, on the assumption that the chief part, or all of, Excellence or Perfection is moral virtue.⁶ An important side effect of this move may have been that excellence or perfection was downgraded by Sidgwick to being a non-fundamental concept in Ethics, since as he points out ultimate Good is not fundamental in intuitional theories (*Op. cit.*, p. 3). I believe that the neglect of perfectionism until very recently in this century was in part a consequence of this move of Sidgwick's. But, Sidgwick argues, the ancients, even allowing for their greatness, were nevertheless guilty of falling into the circle. Sidgwick correctly perceived, in my opinion, that most ancient Greek ethical theorists were perfectionists, that is, they thought the ultimate Good was, partly or wholly, perfection or excellence.⁷ But, he argued, they were also teleologists: they explicated virtue in terms of promoting the good. Having done that, however, they failed to see that they could not also explicate the good in terms of virtue; not only the Stoics who seemed to have thought that virtue is all of the good (and so their circle is “Virtue is what ‘promotes’ virtue”), but also Plato and Aristotle who counted moral virtue as *one* element or part of the good; so for them the circle is “moral virtue is what promotes moral virtue and, e.g., wisdom” (*Op. cit.*, pp. 375–376). They explicated the good not independently of virtue and virtue not independently of the good.

It is unclear whether Sidgwick thought that the circle obtains directly between virtue as a *disposition* and the good, or between *right conduct* and the good, or among all three: “virtue promotes the good and the good consists (in part or whole) of virtue”; or “right conduct

is conduct that promotes the good and the good consists in part or whole of right conduct”; or “virtue promotes right conduct, right conduct promotes the good, and the good consists of virtue.” It is clear, however, that Sidgwick believes that virtue the disposition cannot be explicated independently of good. Thus he argues that wisdom is “insight into Good and the means to Good,” benevolence is “exhibited in the purposive actions called ‘doing Good’,” “justice . . . lies in distributing Good (or evil) impartially according to right rules.” (*Ibid.*, p. 393) Apparently he attributes this view, that virtue the disposition cannot be defined independently of good and/or right conduct, which he himself holds, also to the ancients. So, if the good is not explicated independently of virtue but is said to consist, in part or in whole, of virtue, it appears that there will be a circle, whether through the relation of virtue to right conduct or not.

The second major circularity which has often been seen in Aristotle's ethical theory is located in his analysis of the relation between moral virtue (virtue of character) and practical wisdom. In his definition of moral virtue (*N.E.*, II, 6), as a disposition to choose the mean relative to us as the man of practical wisdom would choose it, we obviously have reference to practical wisdom, the intellectual element in moral virtue which is supposed to guide our choices. But when we come to the analysis of practical wisdom (in *N.E.*, VI), first of all we are given no rules or principles for finding the mean, which adds more fuel to the charge that Aristotle's theory lacks practical content; what is worse, we are told that practical wisdom is not practical wisdom but mere cleverness unless we start deliberation from right or correct ends, and these are provided by moral virtue. So we seem have a reference back to moral virtue in the analysis of practical wisdom. This looks like another circle, a circle within Sidgwick's larger circle! And, as we would expect from more circularities, more poverty of content.⁸

Now these two apparent circles are plainly not the same. But we may well wonder how they are related – an issue we have never seen discussed. If Aristotle's ethical theory is teleological and his theory of the good perfectionist, we can see that Sidgwick's circle, assuming it obtains at all, would be the more fundamental of the two; but the second circle may well be expected if Sidgwick's circle is assumed. How so? If the theory is teleological, moral virtue is whatever (dispositions, actions, etc.) promotes the good; and if

the theory of the good is perfectionist *and* moral virtue is counted as part of perfection, then moral virtue is part of the good, and we have Sidgwick's circle – "moral virtue is what promotes moral virtue *and* . . ." But if this is so, we seem to get also the second circle: if moral virtue is part of *the* good, then practical wisdom, whose function is to discover the necessary or most effective means to this good, must always take as *an* end of such means the states of character or dispositions which constitute moral virtue: in the sense that no matter what other ends are aimed at in virtuous actions, the means to be chosen must at the very least not harm or destroy the disposition which is moral virtue. So this second circle, or at least its appearance, is really the result of a constraint on the ends of conduct imposed by a *moral* perfectionism of the good on a teleological ethical theory.

An important and unfortunate but predicable result of these circularities, Sidgwick thought, is that ancient Greek ethical theories lack sufficient practical content; as guides to choice and conduct, they are not specific enough for deciding what we ought to do. And this brings into the discussion our fourth question, whether Aristotle's ethical theory lacks sufficient practical content, a stock modern objection to Aristotelian ethics, as old as Grotius. Now some loss of practical content may well be expected from at least major circularities in an ethical theory. Circularity between definitions or explications can be vicious because it can result in lack of the information we need from the definitions. In the case of Aristotle, this is indeed a familiar complaint, though it is not usually seen as a result of Sidgwick's circle. Except for the case of justice, a rather crucial and neglected exception we shall take up later, one can read Aristotle's analysis of such virtues as courage, temperance, or generosity, and still have no specific guidance about what to do in the relevant situations. As Sidgwick puts it in the case of the doctrine of the mean: "Nor, again, does Aristotle bring us much nearer such knowledge by telling us that the Good in conduct is to be found somewhere between different kinds of Bad. This at best indicates the *whereabouts* of virtue: it does not give us a method for finding it" (*Op. cit.*, pp. 375–376; see also pp. 343–344).

The issues of circularity and practical content are related. If we find that Aristotle's theory does not lack practical content, at least any more than could be reasonably expected given the nature of the subject matter,⁹ then even if there are circularities in his theory,

perhaps they are not vicious – the theory can still be a reasonable guide to choice. We shall later pursue the issue of practical content as a separate line of investigation independently of the issues of circularity.

Now Sidgwick's charge of circularity has certainly been influential, whether explicitly acknowledged or not. In this century the tendency has been to try to get Aristotle out of Sidgwick's circle by arguing either that he had a purely instrumental view of the relation of virtue to happiness (i.e. that his view was consequentialist), and thus that he could specify happiness independently of virtue; *or*, that he did not have a teleological ethical theory, and thus happiness or the good need not be determined independently of virtue.

W. D. Ross made the first of these major moves: "Aristotle's ethics is definitely teleological; morality for him consists in doing certain actions not because we see them to be right in themselves but because we see them to be such as will bring us nearer to the 'good for man'." Ross was aware of one difficulty in his interpretation, namely, Aristotle's distinction between action and production, the former – including virtuous action – being said to be "desirable or valuable in itself," as distinct from the value of production which is derived from the product. But he says that this (virtuous actions being valuable in themselves) is not consistent with Aristotle teleological ethics, and implies that the inconsistency is in Aristotle.¹⁰

There are, however, other options within the assumption of a teleological structure with a perfectionist theory of good. One is that Aristotle had a "strict intellectualist" view in which perfection is *constituted* by the intellectual virtues, not the *moral* virtues or the virtues of character. In such a case Sidgwick's circle would not obtain. Or, there might be a *prima facie* circle in reciprocal references between moral virtue and happiness, but it is eliminable on further analysis. Or, there is a non-eliminable circle but it is wide enough so as not to be vicious, that is, deprive the theory of sufficient practical content. We shall have to look at these possibilities in examining the relevant passages.

John Cooper has made the second major move. He clearly says that Aristotle's theory is not teleological, using Rawls's definition, on the ground that Aristotle's theory violates the first condition, the independence of the good from virtue: ". . . eudaimonia is itself not specified independently of virtuous action. . . ."¹¹ And he is correct, so far as this reason is concerned, in the sense that we have strong textual support for it in the

function argument and elsewhere; though, as I shall argue, this is not the end of the matter.

A problem with this second defence to Sidgwick's objection is that it takes the form of arguing that the distinction between teleological and deontological theories does not apply at all to ancient ethical theories; Aristotle did not have a deontological theory either, as indeed Cooper makes explicit.¹² But if Aristotle's ethical theory is neither teleological nor deontological, what is its structure?

Here we come to our third question – perhaps Aristotle had a virtue ethics, a kind of ethical theory which falls outside the modern dichotomy. If so, Sidgwick's charges of circularity might be based on a misunderstanding – that the theory is teleological –; and the question of practical content might have a reasonable answer – Aristotle's theory has as much practical content as a virtue ethics can have.

Did Aristotle have a virtue ethics?

Recent literature shows that the question is far from rhetorical. Some writers have suggested that Aristotle does *not* have a virtue ethics, but that Plato does; while most writers in the historical tradition seem to have Aristotle in mind when criticizing or defending a virtue ethics.¹³ This division of opinion may reflect unclarity or at least controversy on the answers to two fundamental questions: What is a virtue ethics? And, what is the structure of Aristotle's ethical theory? Some philosophers¹⁴ have recently tackled the first question, while a number of philosophers and classicists¹⁵ have wrestled with the second.

Clearly we need to look into the question of what is a virtue ethics, at least in the sense of considering some alternative recent sketches.

There is general agreement among friends and foes of virtue ethics that there are significant contrasts between an ethics of virtue and an ethics of principles (rules, laws, acts).¹⁶ The contemporary complaints about the neglect of virtues and vices in modern and contemporary moral philosophy, voiced by Anscombe, Foot, and others, certainly presuppose some significant difference(s). What are these contrasts?

The strongest contrasts have been isolated recently by G. Trianoski and Gary Watson. A "pure ethics of virtue", Trianoski says, makes two claims: (1) ". . . at least some judgments about virtue can be validated

independently of any appeal to judgments about the rightness of actions"; and (2) ". . . it is this antecedent goodness of traits which ultimately makes any right act right."¹⁷ Trianoski claims that Plato, in his definition of soul justice in *Republic* IV, satisfies both these conditions and so has a pure virtue ethics; and Aristotle "might be read" so as to satisfy them.

The Platonic view is worth exploring briefly. The passage is *Republic* 443E–444A: the man who has attained order and harmony¹⁸ (i.e., justice) in his soul will "then and only then turn to practice . . . in the getting of wealth or the tendance of the body or in political action or private business, in all such doing believing and naming the just and honorable action to be that which preserves and helps to produce this condition of soul, and wisdom the science that presides over such conduct . . . and the unjust action to be that which tends to overthrow this spiritual constitution. . . ." (Shorey transl.). Earlier Plato had defined justice in the soul (a virtue of individuals) without reference to some prior notion of right conduct – indeed without reference to conduct at all, as a state in which each of the three parts of the soul is performing its own optimal function: reason rules the entire soul, spirit helps to defend by obeying the commands of reason, and appetite obeys in matters of bodily needs. So here we do indeed seem to have the two conditions of a pure virtue ethics satisfied. And though this may not be an adequate interpretation of Plato's theory of justice,¹⁹ it can serve here as an example of a "pure virtue ethics".

In an ambitious article Watson tries to isolate a virtue ethics which falls outside the modern conceptual framework of teleological and deontological ethical theories. As expressed by John Rawls, for example, this modern framework recognizes three main ethical concepts, the concepts of the right, the good, and of moral worth (goodness of character); with moral worth being derivative from the other two. Moreover, the structure of an ethical theory depends on how the right and the good are related: in teleological theories the good is conceived independently of the right and then the right is defined as what maximizes the good, while deontological theories deny one or both of these two conditions.²⁰ In this framework, essentially the same as that of Sidgwick a century earlier, teleologists and deontologists agree that moral worth is derived from, or defined in terms of, the right and/or the good.

Watson seeks to show that this framework is inadequate by isolating a virtue ethics in which this deriva-

tion is reversed (or at least does not obtain): the right and/or the good (at least what Watson calls good states of affairs or good outcomes) are to be derived from the virtues. If he is correct, his view is of some historical as well as theoretical interest; perhaps Watson has succeeded in identifying a structure which fits and illuminates Aristotle's theory.

The conceptual schema defining this Watsonian ethics of virtue is as follows:

- “1. Living a characteristically human life (functioning well as a human being) requires possessing and exemplifying certain traits, T.
2. T are therefore human excellences and render their possessors to that extent good human beings.
3. Acting in a way W is in accordance with T (exemplifies, or is contrary to T).
4. Therefore, W is right (good, or wrong).”²¹

It appears from 3 & 4 (as well as from Trianoski' 2) that in a virtue ethics right conduct is defined in terms of, or derived from, or validated, or explained, by reference to the virtues. And this appears contrary to the way modern non-virtue ethics theorists have proceeded, from Grotius to Rawls. Rawls' characterization of “the fundamental moral virtues” as “the strong and normally effective desires to act on the basic principles of right,”²² is essentially the same in the relevant respect as that of Grotius;²³ not to speak of writers such as John Locke who make the matter explicit: “By whatever standard soever we frame in our minds the ideas of virtues or vices, . . . their rectitude . . . consists in the agreement with those patterns prescribed by some Law.”²⁴

This contrast is thus an essential difference between a virtue ethics and modern ethical theories which give primacy to moral laws, principles, or rules. Of course we must be careful about what the contrast is. It is not as if according to a virtue ethics a virtuous person would not do what is right. On either theory s/he would. Rather the issue concerns whether goodness of character or rightness of actions is more “basic” or more “fundamental” in some broad sense. The writers we have reviewed do not say explicitly enough what notion of “basic” or “fundamental” they have in mind. Trianoski speaks of judgments about virtue being “validated” independently of judgments about the rightness of actions, and about the goodness of traits “making” right acts right; Watson speaks of “explanatory primacy”; Locke and possibly Rawls could be interpreted as offering definitional or explanatory remarks. In

Aristotle, *one* way the issue could be posed is by using his notion of *priority in definition*: Aristotle's idea is that one thing is prior in definition to another if and only if the one is mentioned in the definition of the other but not the other in the definition of the one.²⁵ If, for example, Locke were to define a just person as one who has strong and normally effective desires to act according to principles of justice, and in his statement of principles of justice he made no reference to just persons, then in his theory just principles would be prior in definition to just persons. So *one* contrast between a virtue ethics and an ethics of principles may be about what is prior in the Aristotelian sense of priority of definition: whether the virtues as traits of character are to be defined in terms of principles of right conduct, as Grotius, Locke, and Rawls might be read to be saying, or whether principles of right or right conduct are to be defined in terms of the virtues, as the virtue theorists would have it.

We must note at once that in his ethics Aristotle seeks *real* definitions of happiness, virtue, and acting rightly, not nominal definitions (lexical or stipulative). It is *priority in real* definitions of these things that we are speaking of here: and this depends on what happiness and virtue and acting rightly are and how they are related, not on how we use words or define words lexically or stipulatively.²⁶

We must also keep in mind that there may be other relations between virtue and acting rightly that may be relevant to the priority of definition: causal relations, ontological relations, and relations of finality – what is pursued for the sake of what. As we shall see, Aristotle holds that virtue the disposition is a first actuality while virtuous activity is a second actuality. And this has implications on what he can hold about the relevant priorities of definition.

We must also note that the issue of which is more basic or fundamental, the virtues or principles of conduct, may be cast not in terms of definition but in terms of logical derivability. In Plato's *Republic*, for example, we find parallel and elaborate constructions of *two* definitions of justice, one of a just city-state and one of a just person; neither definition makes reference to the other. But Plato in fact derives the definition of a just person from the definition of a just city, the assumption that a just city and a just person do not differ at all with respect to justice, and the tripartite division of the soul as parallel to the tripartite division of the city. So what is more basic or fundamental here, the

notion of a just person or that of a just city? To find out, we may have to look at whole theories, their definitions, their assumptions, and their arguments. In Aristotle's case too, we may have to look at the relevant arguments, not only the definitions he constructs.

In trying to understand an ethics of virtue there is, however, a second question to be answered, besides the relation between the goodness of character and the rightness of acts, perhaps more difficult and controversial: What is the relation between virtue and good?

Watson admits that his schema for a virtue ethics appeals "to several notions of good: to functioning well as a human being, to being a good human being, to being a human excellence (perhaps also to being good for one as a human being)." But, he claims, there is no "essential appeal to the idea of a valuable state of affairs or outcome from which the moral significance of everything (or anything) else derives" (*op. cit.*, p. 459). It is not entirely clear what is this notion of a good state of affairs or a good outcome, other than the notions of good Watson has listed as being appealed to. Why, for example, is not functioning well, which appears to be the fundamental notion in his abstract scheme, an example – even a paradigmatic one – of a good outcome?

Watson distinguishes his virtue ethics from "character utilitarianism," which he believes is not a virtue ethics. According to this theory, (1) the virtues are human traits that promote human happiness [the good] more than alternative traits; and in turn, (2) right conduct is defined as conduct which is contrary to no virtue and wrong conduct as conduct contrary to some virtue. Because of (1) Watson calls this character utilitarianism an "ethics of outcome" rather than a virtue ethics, even though by (2) it satisfies the first condition by which we isolated a virtue ethics (the priority of virtue over right conduct); and indeed it appears to satisfy the two conditions by which Trianoski isolated a "pure virtue ethics".²⁷

Can character utilitarianism be accommodated within the modern ethical conceptual framework and characterized as a teleological ethical theory? Here the good is defined independently of the right;²⁸ and there is a principle of maximizing the good, but it is applied directly to the virtues and only indirectly to right conduct via the virtues. So, even though the virtues are still derivative from the good and the good is defined independently of the virtues, it is not true that the right is *defined* as what maximizes the good; *if* by the right

we mean right *conduct* or *principles* of right conduct, as seems to be the case in the modern conceptual framework. However, if maximizing is a transitive relation, as it appears to be (since "producing more" or "greater good" are transitive), then it will logically follow from the two propositions defining character utilitarianism that right conduct does indeed maximize the good. So right conduct being conduct which maximizes the good will appear as a *theorem* in the system, rather than as a definition.²⁹ But except for this difference the theory will be teleological. We have our three main concepts and virtue is derived from at least one of the other two. The order of the definitional/logical priorities is: The good, virtue, right conduct.

In any case, character utilitarianism gives a more prominent role to the virtues than do rule or act utilitarian theories or deontological theories: the virtues *are* primary over right conduct. It may also have the distinctive problems of traditional virtue ethics when trying to derive right conduct from the virtues; for example, insufficient practical content – a main modern objection to an Aristotelian ethics, as we shall see below. So perhaps it should not be dismissed as a virtue ethics. It occupies an interesting intermediate position between theories Watson is willing to call an ethics of virtue and ethics of principles. Watson refuses to consider it a virtue ethics because "the facts it takes to be morally basic are not facts about virtue" (457). That is, in character utilitarianism virtue is logically posterior to happiness or the good. But character utilitarianism does pose a significant contrast to a morality in which laws or principles or rules are primary over the virtues; and it would be difficult to find a historical or contemporary theory of virtue in which virtue does not exhibit some dependence on good.³⁰ So far as Aristotle's ethics is concerned at least, character utilitarianism is a live option for the structure of his ethical theory.

There is a third view, distinct from character utilitarianism, which, Watson says, is "naturally called an ethics of virtue." According to it, (1) right conduct is defined in terms of the virtues (the same as character utilitarianism); but (2) the virtues are either the sole or the primary *constituents* of the good (or happiness), this being its essential difference from character utilitarianism which seems to take the virtues as instrumental to happiness (457). Here it would appear that both right conduct and the good are defined in terms of the virtues; so it would be difficult indeed to see how this fails to be an ethics of virtue. Watson doubts that it falls outside

the Rawlsian framework, but it is not clear why; perhaps, I suggest, because so far the relation between virtue and good is not clear enough. Let us use a simplistic illustration.

Suppose we have a definition of intrinsic goods [or it could be, "things good in themselves"] as, e.g., things which are desired for themselves and *would* be desired even if nothing resulted from them; and a definition of *the* good as composed entirely of all (at least compossible) intrinsic goods. Then we have arguments (made up from the definitions and further independent premises) for the conclusion that all the virtues and only the virtues are intrinsic goods. From the definition of the good and the last proposition it would follow that the good is composed exclusively of all the virtues. Finally, we define right conduct as conduct contrary to no virtue and wrong conduct as conduct contrary to some virtue.

Does an ethical theory having this structure fall within the Rawlsian framework? If so, is it teleological? And is it a virtue ethics?

It is clear enough here that virtue the disposition is definitionally prior to right conduct. But the relations between virtue and good are more complex and still not entirely in sight. To begin with, intrinsic good is defined independently of virtue, so it is certainly not definitionally posterior to virtue. What about virtue and *the* good? The *formal* definition of the good, as composed exclusively of all intrinsic goods, is also independent of the virtues. A full (form *and* content) characterization of the good, to be sure, would say that it is composed entirely and exclusively of the virtues. But the content of the characterization would be the logical result of the formal definition of the good and further premises about the virtues; it would be a theorem in the system, not a definition.

It would seem then that the theory satisfies one condition of a teleological theory, the independence of the good from the right. And virtue is not derivative from right conduct but the very reverse; so the theory also satisfies one condition of a virtue ethics. But what is still not completely in sight is the relation of virtue to good: because we do not have yet the definitions of virtue and of the individual virtues, nor the arguments by which the good is said to be composed exclusively of all the virtues. What is it about the virtues that makes them desired and desirable for themselves? And why should they be the exclusive content of the good? If the virtues are constituents of the good because they are

traits of character which are intrinsically good (or good in themselves), then even though they are not in an instrumental maximizing relation to the good, they have been defined, in so far as they are virtues, in terms of good. So definitionally/logically the relation among our three concepts here is the same as in character utilitarianism: *good*, virtue, right conduct. Well, not quite: the character utilitarianism order was: *the* good, virtue, right conduct. Plainly we need a finer analysis which distinguishes, as one should anyway, between good and *the* good; as well as the arguments by which virtue is related to both good and the good.

To sum up. We have three different theories which might be counted as a virtue ethics: Watson's theory, the constitutive theory, and character utilitarianism. What all three share in common is the definitional priority of virtue over right conduct. Where they differ is in the relation of virtue to good or to the good; but this relation, we have seen, is not completely clear till a theory of virtue is in place. Aristotle, whatever the structure of his theory, has the most developed theory of virtue we have up to now, some twenty three centuries later. Because of this and because the structures we have identified are not completely clear since they lack a theory of virtue, we have a chance, in examining Aristotle's ethical theory, to clarify both the question of the structures of ethics of virtue and the question of the structure of Aristotle's ethical theory. The structures we have identified can serve as guiding hypotheses, both for identifying the structure of Aristotle's theory and for clarifying an ethics of virtue.

If Aristotle's theory has any of these structures it is a meaningful candidate for an ethics of virtue. Does it?

Before we can answer this question, though, we must consider a significant and much neglected possibility. Our investigation so far presupposes that whatever analysis of virtue one has, including Aristotle, it is the same for all the virtues. But this overlooks the possibility that *some* virtues, such as generosity and benevolence, are susceptible to a virtue ethics analysis, while others, such as justice, are not. This is a possibility for any ethical theory including Aristotle's, which, so far as I know, has not been examined.

In an illuminating modern historical sketch, J. B. Schneewind discusses the contemporary complaint, made by such writers as F. Foot and G. H. von Wright, that modern moral philosophers have neglected the virtues.³¹ Schneewind reviews such founders of modern moral philosophy as Grotius, Locke, Hume, Kant, and

Adam Smith. He makes out a plausible (to me, pretty convincing) case that these writers did not neglect the virtues; indeed Hume might well be thought of as a virtue ethics theorist; and Kant certainly devoted much analysis to the virtues, though not in the most widely read of his moral writings, the *Groundwork*. Rather, Schneewind finds, these writers were pretty much in agreement that an Aristotelian virtue ethics is not adequate for such virtues as justice; to analyze justice, even in Hume, we need a framework centered on principles or laws. Schneewind further argues that these writers used the distinction between perfect and imperfect duties – in Hume the analogous distinction between natural and artificial virtues – to give a limited role to a virtue ethics analysis. Such virtues as generosity and benevolence receive virtue ethics analysis; their duties are “imperfect,” indefinite; it is up the agent to decide when, to what extent, and toward whom to be generous. But justice, whose duties are “perfect,” definite or specific in all these respects, and enforceable, requires reference to principles and/or laws in its analysis. A virtue ethics analysis, all these writers agree, is inadequate for the “artificial” virtue of justice and its “perfect” duties. The misfortune of virtue was not its neglect, Schneewind argues, but the finding in modern times that a virtue ethics analysis is inadequate for a central part of morality, such as justice.

It is not within the scope of this essay to discuss the accuracy of Schneewind’s thesis; so far as I know it seems correct. However, both Schneewind and the writers he examines appear to presuppose that Aristotle had a virtue ethics for *all* the virtues. This is the common understanding of Aristotle, the received opinion. I believe that this is incorrect. It is one of the theses of this essay that Aristotle may have had a virtue ethics analysis for *some* of the virtues, such as generosity and magnificence; but definitely *not* for the virtue of justice. For such virtues as temperance and courage, the picture is ambiguous and unclear.

We shall examine Aristotle’s analyses of the virtues and the good, concentrating on three questions: (1) On the thesis all three virtue ethics have in common, the logical primacy of virtue over right conduct, what is Aristotle’s view? (2) On the unclarity all three virtue ethics share, the relation between virtue and good, what is Aristotle’s view? (3) Does Aristotle’s analyses of *any* of the virtues display the structure of a teleological ethical theory, and if so is it viciously circular?

We shall find that, to begin with, Aristotle’s *general*

analysis of virtue and happiness, in the function argument and elsewhere, appears to have a circular teleological structure; alternatively, it may be viewed as a constituent virtue ethics, thus accounting for the fact that we have both of these major interpretations in the literature; but in the first of these alternatives the circle may be eliminable on further analysis. Second, when we look at Aristotle’s *specific* analyses of various individual virtues of character, the story is clearly different. His analysis of justice clearly has the structure of a teleological theory, something not really appreciated perhaps because of the separation of his ethics and politics and the unfortunate result that they are not studied together. Further, though there may be an ineliminable circle in his analysis of justice, a separate investigation into the issue of paucity of practical content, independent of issues of structure, shows that his theory of justice has plenty of practical content; and so any circle there is appears to be harmless. Finally, his analysis of the other virtues such as temperance, courage, and generosity, is somewhat ambiguous and comes closer to displaying one of the structures of virtue ethics, though probably a non-Watsonian one; moreover, these analyses do display the paucity of practical content characteristic of virtue ethics (at least according to the moderns), though perhaps a reasonable one for these virtues.

Aristotle’s general analysis of virtue and the good

There is a central passage in the *N.E.* Bk. I, 7, to which we must look for the issues of structure in his general analysis of virtue, perfectionist good, and happiness. It is the famous function argument.

It comes at the end of a discussion in which Aristotle, relying on what people desire, pursue, and say about the good, has determined that the good has three formal features: it is an ultimate end, a single end of all our actions (i.e. there is only one such end), and a self-sufficient end. But Aristotle does not think he can determine what the content of the good is by simply relying on such data: for men disagree, in what they say about the content of the good, and in what they desire and pursue as the single, ultimate, and self-sufficient end of their lives; even though they verbally agree that it is happiness. Some say that happiness is (a life whose single ultimate and self-sufficient end is) pleasure, others honor, others wealth, others virtue, others reason;

and they pursue one or another of these accordingly. Within this *orectic* concept of the good, Aristotle himself argues that virtue and reason, unlike the other candidates, are desired and desirable for themselves as well as for the sake of happiness, so they are constituents of the good rather than instruments.

But Aristotle does not think that he can settle the controversy about the content of happiness within the *orectic* concept of the good; so he brings in the function argument to try to settle this disagreement about ultimate ends, a disagreement that desire satisfaction theories do not settle; though Aristotle does not disregard the view of the good as the ultimate object of desire, but tries to harmonize this account with his own functional-perfectionist account.

The conclusion of the function argument,³² is that "human good [the good for man] is [rational] activity of soul according to virtue, and if there is more than one virtue, in accordance with the best and most complete [perfect]." This conclusion seems to be a clear example of Aristotle defining the good for man by reference to virtue. And this is Aristotle's settled and considered view: when he takes up the nature of the Good and happiness again in *N.E.* Bk. X, 6, he starts by repeating this very conclusion making the very same reference to virtue. So the reference to virtue in the definition or determination of the good is indisputable.

But what conclusion should we draw from this? Sidgwick draws the conclusion that Aristotle's theory is circular, but Cooper draws the conclusion that it is not teleological.

I think we need to ask some more questions. What exactly is the reference to "virtue"? And is it essential or ineliminable?

We must note at once that there is *no* circularity if the reference is exclusively to the *intellectual* virtue of theoretical wisdom. In this view *moral* virtue (the virtues of character) is brought in at a later stage by some instrumental or other non-constituent, non-definitional relation to happiness. Since Hardie introduced the distinction between dominant and inclusive ends, there has been renewed and raging controversy among Aristotle's commentators, whether the conclusion of the function argument is to be given an exclusionary or an inclusive interpretation.³³ Roughly speaking, on an inclusive interpretation, the good or happiness is an inclusive end and the reference to "complete virtue" is a reference to all the virtues, intellectual and moral. On the exclusionary interpretation, the good or happiness

is a dominant end and the reference is *only* to the intellectual virtue of theoretical wisdom. But Sidgwick's objection is to the circularity between the good and the right, and the right can be represented in Aristotle only by *moral* virtue (the virtues of character). So if happiness consists entirely in the exercise of theoretical wisdom, as the exclusionary interpretation has it, then there is no circle at all between the right and the good.³⁴ The theory can be teleological in a straightforward sense, with the value of moral virtue being instrumental, or in some other non-constituent, non-definitional relation to theoretical wisdom. Here the theory does not violate the first condition of a teleological theory, the independence of the good from the right.

Unfortunately, there is no agreement on the exclusionary interpretation, so we cannot ignore the question whether on the inclusive interpretation – the interpretation Sidgwick took for granted – there is circularity between the right and the good. On the assumption of the inclusive interpretation, then, we must now examine the conclusion of the function argument, to determine what exactly the reference to moral virtue is, and whether it is eliminable.

Since we are dealing with a question of structure, we might try to understand Aristotle's procedure in the function argument by looking at analogies he uses twice during the argument: once at the outset of that argument, illustrating the relevance of function to the good of man, once near the end, introducing and illustrating the relevance of virtue to the good for man. Since he never gives arguments for the analogical cases themselves, Aristotle apparently believes that the functional theory of good and virtue (virtue in the wide sense of what enables a thing to perform its function well) is true and uncontroversial in such cases.

"As in the case of the flute player and the sculptor and every artist, and in all cases where there is a function and action, the good and the [doing] well is thought to depend on [or "reside in"] its function, so it may be thought in the case of man, if there is a function in his case." A flute player does well as a flute player if he plays the flute well, and a sculptor does well if he makes good or beautiful statues: literally, their doing well as flute players or sculptors consists in their performing their function well. And what about their good, as flute players and sculptors? It is certainly to their good as flute players and sculptors to play well and make good or beautiful statues; so their good depends, presumably in part, on doing their functioning

well. All this is familiar and uncontroversial for such cases: indeed the arts and crafts, occupations and social roles, may well be thought to be a logical home of the functional theory of good. It is non-controversial that a flute player has a function – and what his function is – because a flute player would be defined functionally, as someone who knows how to play the flute; indeed s/he is *named* after playing the flute. It is also uncontroversial that her playing the flute well is good for her as a flute player.

These examples, though, may be too closely connected to the notion of function as human purpose: flute playing and statues are things we want, because, say, they give us pleasure and exercise our talents. But the notion of function Aristotle applies to man is wider, does not appeal to purpose, and can also apply to organs of animals and plants, and indeed to whole organisms – this is central application of function the argument makes. The analogies do not prove that man has a function or what her function is, or that her good is functional, since the notion of function used in the analogical cases is that of human purpose, not the wider notion of function which applies to organs and organisms. Such examples as those of the flute player and the sculptor can be fully accounted by a theory of good as the satisfaction of desire.³⁵

Aristotle appeals again to a similar analogy, and here is where virtue is introduced: “. . . if, as we say, the function of a man and of a good man is the same in genus (as of the harpist and of a good harpist, and so in general), virtue being added with respect to superiority in [the performance of] function (for, of the harpist [the function is] to play the harp and of the good harpist to play well), and the function of man is a certain life, activity and actions of soul according to reason, [then] the function of a good man is to do these things well and nobly, and [if] each thing performs its function well according to its proper virtue, then the good for man is activity of soul according to virtue.” (*N.E.*, 1098a6–18)

Similar analogies are used in *N.E.* Bk. II, ch. 6, where the definition of virtue is worked out. After having decided that virtue is a disposition or state of character, Aristotle says: “It should be said that every virtue makes its possessor be in a good state and perform its function well; for example, the virtue of the eye makes the eye good and its functioning good (for it is by the virtue of the eye that we see well); and similarly the virtue of a horse makes it a good horse and good at galloping, carrying its rider, and facing the enemy. If this is true

in every case, then the virtue of a man will be the disposition or state by which one becomes a good man and by which one performs his function well.” (1106a15–25) This is a crucial passage because here Aristotle is beginning to work out his definition of virtue; and the fundamental notions he is using are being in a good state and performing one’s function well.

From the function argument and the use of the analogies we can extract a general formal theory of function, good and virtue, which we can examine for answers to our questions. The central question here is what concepts are the most fundamental; in Aristotle’s terms, what is logically or definitionally prior to what.

Let us look at the formal theory first and then its application to man. The formal theory seems to contain at least the following propositions (applicable to things with functions):

1. An F does well as an F iff it performs well the function of Fs.
2. A good F is an F which performs well the function of Fs.
3. The good of an F “depends” on its performing well the function of Fs.
4. The virtue(s) of an F is that by [the presence of] which it (a) is a good F and (b) performs well the function of Fs.
5. A good F (is an F which) has the virtue of an F. (From 2 & 4(a)).
6. The virtue of an F is [the?] good for an F. (From 3 & 4(b)).

The last two propositions can be derived from the others.³⁶ Propositions 1 and 3 capture Aristotle’s remark that the well and the good of a thing reside and/or depend on its function. The analogies might be thought of as inductive evidence for the main propositions of the theory, 1–4. But when applied to man all these propositions become controversial, with 3 & 6 the center of controversy.

The most fundamental concept here seems to be that of function, since reference to it seems to be made directly (1, 2, 3, 4) or indirectly (5, 6) in all the propositions of the theory. And the most fundamental *normative* concept seems to be that of functioning well, since reference to it is made in the explications of the other main normative concepts of the theory, the good of an F, a good F, and the virtue of an F, but not conversely. In Aristotle’s terms, *functioning well* will be *prior in definition* to the remaining normative concepts.

We obtain the same result from Aristotle's metaphysical view that actuality is both more final and *prior in definition* to potentiality. The virtues are (learned, habituated) first actualities of inborn human potentialities, while the exercise of the virtues are second actualities; and second actualities are both more final and prior in definition to first actualities.³⁷ A courageous action, for example, is a second actuality and so is more final and prior in definition to the virtue of courage, the disposition, which is a first actuality of the potential for courage humans are born with. Similarly, temperate actions stand to the virtue of temperance, the disposition, as second to first actuality, and so temperate actions are prior in definition to the disposition.

If this analysis of the formal structure of the theory is correct in its essentials, and if functioning well, at least when the theory is applied to man, can be understood without reference back to moral virtue, then we can have a teleological and non-circular ethical theory. And this can be true of the function argument. For though reference to virtue is made in specifying the good of an F in proposition 6 of the formal structure, and in the conclusion of the function argument, this reference is eliminable, if virtue itself can be defined in terms of functioning well, as it appears to be in proposition 4.

Can moral virtue be explicated by functioning well?

We may begin by noting that the references to virtue may be ambiguous: virtue may refer to a standard of excellence by which performance is judged, or to the disposition which causes and promotes well functioning. Aristotle's phrase in the conclusion of the function argument, "*according to virtue*," seems to support the standard of performance interpretation; while virtue as "*that by which a thing performs its function well*" (in *N.E.* II, 6) seems to refer to the disposition and supports the causal interpretation.

The causal interpretation fits the case of the arts, where the virtue is a skill, a trained ability or educated talent; and the case of organs, where a structure or form causes well functioning,³⁸ and it can be used to give a teleological interpretation of Aristotle's ethical theory without a circle. The builder's skill or *techne* can be defined in terms of producing good buildings, and reference to such skill need not enter into the defini-

tion of a good building; further, "right" action for a builder is whatever contributes to the production of a good building, and reference to such action need not enter the explication of good building. A good building in turn will be explicated in terms of the well functioning of buildings.

But of course these are cases of *production*, in which Aristotle explicitly recognizes the independence of the product from the process; this logic does not necessarily apply to action and activity. Indeed, Aristotle's discussion of the differences between the virtues and the *technai*, in *N.E.* II, 4, stands in the way of the production interpretation. For actions to be virtuous, he says, it is not enough that they are "right"; the agent must know they are right, he must have chosen them and chosen them for their own sake, and he must have done so from a firm disposition. So, unlike the arts (*technai*), virtuous action, which is functioning well in the case of living in general, seems to refer us back to the disposition and knowledge of the agent. Whether this reference back is viciously circular remains to be seen.

On the other hand, the standard of performance interpretation seems to introduce directly into the concept of the good for man a moral standard by which functioning is to be evaluated. Courage is to be thought as a standard by which the performance of a soldier is evaluated: to perform the function of a soldier well is to act courageously, as a courageous man would. Here functioning well seems to be referred back to a moral virtue. And when Aristotle seems to make the virtuous man a standard of what is good and pleasant, as in the case of temperance, he seems to be using virtue as the fundamental notion, not functioning well.

The idea that virtue is a constituent or part of happiness, suggested both by the conclusion of the function argument and by Aristotle's view that virtue is desired for itself, contains the same ambiguity. Is it virtue the disposition or virtuous activity which is desired for itself and is part of happiness? It must be virtuous activity. It is not virtue as a disposition that is part of happiness, but the exercise of the disposition, which is activity. Happiness is activity. How could a disposition be part of activity? The relation of first to second actuality is not that of part to whole in any plausible sense.³⁹ Virtuous activities can be part of happiness in a straightforward sense: the activity which is happiness can be literally made up of activities. Moreover, it is virtuous activity that is to be pursued for its own sake, the cultivation of the disposition being pursued because of

what it enables us to *do*; for the first actuality is for the sake of the second actuality, which of course is more final.⁴⁰

So the reference to virtue in the conclusion of our argument must be a reference to activity, *if* it is virtuous *activity* which is desired for itself and is part of happiness or the good, and *if* the reference is to a standard of performance. Virtue the disposition can be defined by a causal or enabling relation to that activity, as it is in proposition 4 of the formal theory and, as we shall see, in the very definition of virtue.

If we are correct so far, the definition of happiness at the conclusion of the function argument can be rephrased as follows: Happiness is activity of soul which manifests reason and which is virtuous (and if there is more than one kind of virtuous activity the best and most complete [perfect]). Here the reference is explicitly to activity, not to disposition; but still to virtuous activity, so the threat of Sidgwick's circle very much remains. However, we are out of the circle if we can show that *this* reference is eliminable: that is, it is explicable in terms of well functioning without vicious reference back to virtue. I believe it is, and the formal theory shows us the way: to say that an activity is virtuous is to say that the functioning which constitutes the activity is performed well. The second analogy by which virtue is introduced in the argument indeed says just this: ". . . virtue being added with respect to superiority in the performance of function." And so does the immediate hypothetical before the conclusion: ". . . and if the function of a good man is to do these things well and nobly⁴¹, and if this is done well by its appropriate virtue. . . ."

To be sure, reference to the disposition, in the statement "So and so acted (say) courageously", is not totally eliminable: because, as we saw, on Aristotle's view the man must act knowingly, rather than in ignorance or accidentally, he must choose the act for its own sake, and he must act from a firm state of character. But none of this re-introduces vicious circularity. The firm state of character is a reference to the habituated state of the relevant feelings which enable the person to do the act reason selects; the firmness of the state is a stability condition on virtue: we expect a virtuous person to act consistently "in fair and foul weather" – this is part of the value of the disposition. The phrase "for its own sake" means something like, "because it is a courageous thing to do (and courageous actions are part of happiness)" rather than, say, "because it will bring me a

fortune if I win".⁴² And knowledge refers to knowledge of the circumstances and objects of the act. If a courageous act can be explicated by functioning well, there is no circle in the relevant sense. Aristotle is not appealing to the dispositional elements to discover what act, among the various options, would be the right thing to do.

Aristotle's analysis of virtuous action, as making ineliminable reference to the cognitive and motivational state of the agent, is shared by theorists who do not have a virtue ethics, writers who take laws or rules as primary over a virtuous disposition. For example, Rawls' general characterization of the moral virtues as "the strong and normally effective desires to act on the basic principles of right" (*Op. cit.*, 436), shows clearly enough that on his own view "virtuous action" will indeed make reference to (the relevant) motivational state of the agent: it makes reference to desire to act in accordance with principles of right. But this clearly does not imply that any appeal is made to these elements to determine what the right act is; we do *that* by applying the basic principles of right. Ross's distinction between *action* and *act* could also be used here: virtuous act refers to the rightness of the act, virtuous action to right act done from a virtuous motive.

The whole burden of the solution to our problem now falls on whether man's virtuous activity can be explicated in terms of functioning well *and* functioning well can be explicated without further reference back to virtue. I propose to show that this is so in two test cases: the general definition of moral virtue, and the definition of justice.

Can functioning well be explicated by the mean?

Let us begin with the definition of moral virtue in Bk. II, 6. Having decided that virtue is a disposition, and taking it for granted from the general formal theory that the virtue of man is something by which he is a good man and which enables him perform his function well, Aristotle asks what sort of disposition it can be, and in response brings in choice and the theory of the mean. It is clear in this discussion that the mean is supposed to provide a standard of well functioning. Indeed in the middle of the discussion of the mean, after giving examples of the mean relative to us in eating and exercise, he tells us: "If therefore the way in which every art or science performs its work well is by looking

to the mean and applying it as a standard to its works (functions) . . . it will follow that virtue aims at hitting the mean." (1106a8–16). So, the definition of moral virtue which comes at the end of this discussion is supposed to explicate virtue the disposition in terms of well functioning and well functioning in terms of the mean: "Virtue then is a state of character concerned with choice, lying in the mean, i.e. the mean relative to us, this being determined by a rational principle, and by that principle which the man of practical wisdom would determine it" (1107a).

In the context we supplied, this definition explicates moral virtue in terms of a disposition to choose those actions and activities which constitute well functioning for man as an animal whose feelings and actions are capable of being informed and directed by reason; and it does so by reference to the theory of the mean. In the case of the moral virtue of temperance, for example, which is concerned with well functioning in the activities of eating, drinking, and having sex, the definition explicates the virtue in terms of the disposition to choose the mean in such activities and their enjoyments.

But this explication of well functioning in terms of choice of the mean has two problems, both of which are relevant here. First, the theory of the mean does not seem specific enough to guide choice. We saw Sidgwick making this charge when he said that all the mean tells is that virtue lies somewhere between two kinds of bad. Grotius makes a similar charge. The complaint is familiar and notorious: when we ask what is the rational principle by which we are to choose the mean, we get no answer in Bk. VI. We shall return to this soon when we discuss the alleged paucity of practical content of Aristotle's theory of the mean in the cases of justice and courage and temperance.

Second, in the definition of moral virtue as the disposition to choose the mean we have reference to practical wisdom – the virtuous man will choose the mean as the man of practical wisdom would. But in Bk. VI, when practical wisdom is distinguished from cleverness, we have reference back to moral virtue: apparently, practical wisdom is knowledge of efficient means to *virtuous* ends, whereas cleverness is knowledge of efficient means to *any* ends a person has. Here we have the second circle we discussed earlier, and we now see how it is an obstacle to attributing a teleological theory to Aristotle: Moral virtue, the state of character, is explicated in terms of functioning well, functioning well in terms of choosing the mean, the

mean in terms of practical wisdom, and practical wisdom finally refers us back to the state of character. So, if teleological, the theory is circular; or else it is a virtue ethics.

We need to ask why Aristotle refers back to moral virtue in his distinction between practical wisdom and cleverness, and what sort of reference this is.

What Aristotle does in Bk. VI is to distinguish practical wisdom from other intellectual virtues, to delineate what it is wisdom about, and to determine the contribution practical wisdom makes to the life of virtue and happiness. Some of this is reflected in his definition of practical wisdom in Bk. VI, 5: "Practical wisdom is a state grasping the truth, involving reason, concerned with action about what is good or bad for a human being."

Here, we notice at once, there is no reference to moral virtue; the normative concepts the explication uses are truth and what is good *for* man. This is perfectly compatible with a teleological conception of virtue, and there is no Sidgwickian circle. The context of this cryptic definition explains its main elements, and confirms that the virtue is teleologically conceived. All wisdoms and arts are virtues by which we grasp the truth of something; practical wisdom, unlike theoretical, is that by which we can grasp the variable truths about effective means (White chicken meat is wholesome), and by which we can reason truly from ends to effective means (Since I need to eat only wholesome meat and white chicken meat is wholesome, it is permissible to eat white chicken meat). The contribution which the virtue of practical wisdom makes is in the deliberation through which we discover the best means; it enables us to perform well the function of deliberating. Since deliberating well is necessary for attaining any ends, it is necessary for attaining the subordinate and ultimate ends which constitute the good for man. And since deliberating about means is an exclusive and essential function of man, deliberating well, besides enabling us to discover correct means to ends, is also a subordinate end and part of the good for man: for it exhibits one sort of essential well functioning, and according to the function argument well functioning of an exclusive and essential human function is part of the good for man. Deliberating well is a subordinate end of man. As Aristotle says, in Bk. VI, 12, practical (as well as intellectual) wisdom is desirable for itself and also for the effects it produces. So far so good.

But Aristotle also wishes to distinguish practical

wisdom from cleverness. The latter seems to be what the moderns, Hume and Rawls for example, call practical rationality – taking effective means to one’s ends, *no matter what one’s ends are*. Aristotle wishes to distinguish cleverness from practical wisdom because cleverness or Humean rationality is not a virtue: a virtue enables us to function well, choosing cleverly does not necessarily do so. Whether with respect to behavior toward one’s self or toward others, one can choose effective means to bad ends, and in neither case is one functioning well. One can choose efficient means to the pleasures of recreational drugs and thus harm oneself, even more than if he had chosen less effectively; and one can choose the most efficient means to embezzling funds and in this one harms others, even more than if he had chosen less effectively. So Aristotle has practical wisdom beginning with good ends, i.e. ends supplied by moral virtue. And so we seem to have a Sidgwickian circle once more.

But this is misleading. What Aristotle is worrying about here (*N.E.*, VI, 12) is not distinguishing the virtuous man from the wrong-doer, but the virtuous man from the man who does the right thing wrongly, i.e., “unwillingly” or “in ignorance”, or “for the sake of something else and not for itself” (see 1144a15–25). Here the man is hitting the mean, but not from choice, or accidentally, or for some end beyond the act and not for the act itself. Because of these three factors the man’s “wisdom” is only cleverness, though in hitting the mean it resembles the virtue of practical wisdom. But the good man does the same thing (hits the mean) “from choice” and “for the sake of the acts themselves” (1144a20–25). And it is precisely these two elements that moral virtue, the emotional element in the disposition, supplies; practical wisdom, the intellectual state, becomes a virtue by hitting the mean, but only when these two elements supplied by moral virtue are present. So, what moral virtue supplies are not some ends other than what practical wisdom supplies, but a firm inclination to choose the mean for its own sake. And this makes perfectly good sense within Aristotle’s perfectionist theory of the good: for choosing the mean constitutes well functioning in the case of action, and it is well functioning of an essential and exclusive function of man. Choosing the mean is well functioning in the case of the practical activities of reason, as discovering invariable truths is well functioning for the theoretical activities of reason; and both are subordinate goods and parts of the ultimate good for man. In the case of the

virtue of temperance, for example, which is concerned with functioning well physically and with the rational regulation of (some of our) animality, functioning well consists in choosing the mean with respect to the pleasure of food, drink, and sex, the animal pleasures: practical wisdom determines this mean, while the emotional element of the moral virtue of temperance inclines us to choose that mean and choose it for its own sake.

Does this explain adequately Aristotle’s remark that moral virtue sets the ends and practical wisdom finds the means? A confusion is possible here. If we imagine ethical virtue *apart* from practical wisdom, all that we have left is a certain habituated tendency to fare well with respect to the feelings appropriate to the various ethical virtues. This tendency neither *discovers* nor in any way *cognitively* determines the subordinate or ultimate ends of man any more than it discovers or so determines the major means to such ends – only wisdoms can do that. The tendency to fare well means that the feelings have been habituated so that the person enjoys acting according to the mean; thus in the case of temperance, the non-cognitive part of the contribution of that virtue is that the temperate person has been habituated so as not to have excessive or defective appetites for food, drink or sex, and to enjoy the corresponding activities when they fall on the mean. That is all that can be meant by moral virtue “setting the end” while practical wisdom finds the means; it is all that can be meant because when moral virtue is abstracted from practical wisdom there is no cognitive element left. From the point of view of discovering or validating means *or ends*, moral virtue, apart from wisdom, is simply blind. When we look to see how Aristotle *in practice* tries to settle disputes about ultimate ends (in *N.E.*, I, 4, 5, 7, and X), it is by such things as appeal to what men in fact pursue as ultimate ends, or what they say are the ultimate ends of their lives, or by the function argument, or by appeal to the ways we sort out and evaluate pleasures. And if we ask ourselves what sort of Aristotelian psychic faculty is at work here, we have to say that it is reason, theoretical or practical; for his arguments about ultimate ends are either dialectical from what people say or deductive about the nature of human beings and their place in the animal kingdom. So we have to say that in Aristotle’s view it is reason, dialectic or demonstrative, that settles questions of ultimate ends, and practical reason that discovers the means to them.

What the moral disposition, considered apart from

practical wisdom, contributes is the regulation of the feelings relevant to the ends and means reason discovers. We could stretch the point and even say that the moral disposition contributes "the motive" – the desire and even the enjoyment of choosing (what practical wisdom says is) the mean because it is the best thing to do. What it does not contribute is to discover or validate the ends of, say, temperance – health and the rational regulation of animality; or the ends of courage – freedom and independence for one's country. And if the moral disposition, aside from practical and theoretical wisdom, cannot discover or validate human ends or the means to them, then there is no relevant circle when in the analysis of practical wisdom Aristotle refers us back to the moral disposition; for it is not an appeal to determine what acts are right.

The disposition is also valuable because it brings stability into the notion of a virtuous person: she is not one who does the right thing only occasionally or unpredictably or only in "fair weather". The virtuous person, because she acts from a "steady" disposition to act virtuously, can be counted upon to follow the guidance of practical wisdom. The moral disposition has to come into the analysis of the virtuous person and virtuous action, but not into what acts are right.

None of these reasons for retaining a reference to the disposition re-introduces Sidgwick's circle: for neither is needed to determine what the right *act* is. *Right acts* are acts falling on the mean and can still be conceived teleologically, as those which promote the good of the agent and others; *virtuous actions* are right acts chosen knowingly and for their own sake.

Aristotle's analysis of justice: Teleological or virtue ethics?

For Sidgwick's problem *and* for the controversies over virtue ethics, there is no more instructive case than Aristotle's analysis of justice, the very virtue ironically neglected in discussions of virtue ethics. The case of justice is crucial, for it is a big and central part of virtue and rightness, whether in Aristotle or in Rawls. What Aristotle calls *general* justice includes all the moral virtues in so far as they are concerned with our behavior toward others; and his *particular* justice (a part of his general justice) includes what we call distributive justice – what Rawls' theory of justice is all about – and the justice of punishment. So general justice takes up all

of rightness, and particular justice a huge and central part of it. If Aristotle's account of justice is in terms of what promotes some good and the explication of that good does not make reference back to justice, then do we have a refutation of Sidgwick's criticism. Moreover, if he explicates general and particular justice as a personal virtue in terms of the justice of laws and constitutions, then he does not have an ethics of virtue for justice. And if his account of the justice of constitutions is sufficiently detailed then his theory of justice does not suffer from a paucity of practical content. We shall find that all this is so.

Finally, we may compare his theory of justice with his theories of such other virtues as temperance and courage, which seem more problematic in all three respects, and consider whether we can illuminate their problems.

Let us look briefly at Aristotle's procedure in his attempt to define justice. Here we are concerned with the bare essentials, for we are concerned mainly with the structure of his theory; though some detail will come in to show there is no paucity of content.

He begins with a characterization of justice the disposition: "Now we observe that everyone means by justice the disposition which makes us doers of just actions, that makes us do what is just and wish what is just. In the same way we mean by injustice the state that makes us do injustice and wish what is unjust" (*N.E.*, V, 1, 1129a). This is an explication of a just person in terms of wishing and doing what is just. Already this is some evidence away from a virtue ethics analysis for justice, since it make the justice of acts definitionally prior to justice the disposition. The rest of Aristotle's procedure is to explicate just acts in terms of just laws; just laws in terms of just constitutions; and just constitutions in terms of the contribution which constitutions make to the end or the good of the state. This is clearly a teleological procedure with no evident circle, and away from a virtue ethics. Let us look at these steps.

Having noted that justice and injustice are said in many ways, Aristotle begins with the unjust man, and notes that one can be said to be unjust both in the general sense of being acting contrary to laws and in the particular sense of "having more"; and similarly with the just person. "Hence what is just will be what is lawful and what is equal." (*N.E.*, 1129b) Accordingly, he distinguishes *general* justice, identified with what is lawful in all our behavior toward others and calls it "complete virtue" (1129b31); and *particular* justice, one

kind of which is concerned with the distribution of “honor [offices], wealth, and the other divisible assets [or “*goods of fortune*”], of the community, which may be allotted among its members in equal or unequal shares” (1131b);⁴³ the other kind of particular justice being corrective (not to be discussed here). Moreover, Aristotle argues that particular justice is part of (or a species of) general justice (1130b); so particular justice will also be explicated in terms of laws.

The explication of general justice in terms of law is very strong evidence against a virtue ethics for all the virtues, since this explication makes law primary over dispositions. Three times in the first two chapters of *N.E.*, Bk. V Aristotle explicates just conduct required by general justice in terms of lawful actions. Even for courage and temperance, which, in so far as they are concerned with our relation to others, are parts of general justice, and in which the doctrine of the mean is pre-eminent, he gives here some rules of action specific enough to guide choice: “But the law also prescribes certain conduct: the conduct of a brave man, for example, not to desert one’s post, not to run away, not to throw down one’s arms . . . that of the temperate man, for example not to commit adultery or outrage; that of a gentle man, for example, not to strike, not to speak evil . . . and so with the actions exemplifying the rest of the virtues and vices, commanding these and forbidding those – rightly if the law has been rightly enacted, not so well if it has been made at random.” (1129b20–30)

As the last sentence indicates, Aristotle is aware that laws themselves may be correct or incorrect, more or less just or unjust. And in the next stage of his analysis he gives a criterion for judging the justice of laws, a criterion which on the face of it seems teleological: “Now in every matter they deal with the laws aim either at the common benefit of all, or at the benefit of those in control, whose control rests on virtue or on some other such basis. And so in one way what we call just is whatever produces and maintains happiness and its parts for a political community” (*N.E.* V, 2, 1129b transl. Irwin). Here he seems to be saying clearly that the justice of laws depends on their promoting the good of the whole community, and this is clearly a version of a universalist or non-egoistic teleological ethical theory; or, the good of those who make the laws, a version of egoistic teleological ethical theory, earlier expounded by Plato’s Thrasymachus; in the *Polit.* Aristotle calls constitutions of this latter type “deviant”.⁴⁴

In the *Polit.* the position concerning particular justice is in this respect similar, though here we get a two step analysis: just laws are laws “constituted in accordance with right constitutions” (1282b); and the rightness of constitutions is then determined by how far they promote the *common* interest, the interest of all, rather than the interest of those in control (1279a).

Thus, in both the *N.E.* and the *Polit.*, and for both general and particular justice, we have accounts of justice which on their face are teleological and not virtue ethics: just dispositions are explicated by just conduct, and just conduct is *ultimately* explicated in terms of promoting the good. But we must remember that Aristotle’s analysis has several stages, in this respect closer to rule rather than act teleological theories: dispositions, actions, laws, constitutions, the good. And we still need to examine whether *this* good is explicated by reference back to justice and so circularly.

Returning to particular justice, the next question Aristotle takes up is, what distribution of the divisible goods of office, honors and safety, is just distribution? He reasons that since the unjust man, in the sense of particular distributive injustice, is the man who “has or takes more”, that is, more of the divisible goods or less of the opposite evils (or burdens), the just man must be the one who has and takes something between the more and the less, and that is in some sense the equal. And since the equal is somewhere between the extremes of the more and the less, he also brings in his theory of the mean and says that the equal is also a mean.⁴⁵

What happens next is instructive. In the case of the other virtues, Aristotle was content to argue that virtuous acts, courageous, temperate, or generous, fall on the mean; there was no further analysis of the mean, in terms of rules for determining the mean. But in the case of particular justice the mean is said to be the equal, between the extremes of the more and the less, *and* we get a precise mathematical analysis of the equal.⁴⁶ Everyone agrees, Aristotle says that the equality in question is in proportion to worth (axian) of some sort, and that this is a geometrical, as distinct from an arithmetical, proportion. Accordingly, a distribution is just to the extent that the value of the things (the divisible goods) it assigns to one person stands to the value of the things it assigns to another as the worth of the one person stands to the worth of the other.⁴⁷

So far, we do *not* have a teleological account of particular justice. We have an explication of just distri-

bution of divisible goods in terms of proportional equality; and the latter, I would suppose with Rawls,⁴⁸ falls intuitively under the concept of the right. What we have so far is simply a further characterization of just distribution as having the form of a geometrical proportion. There is no reference to *maximizing* good or goods.

We need to look at the next stage of Aristotle's argument. People agree on the evaluation of the things distributed, but they disagree on what this worth should be, which is the basis for the distribution. "All agree that the just in distribution must be according to worth of some sort, though all do not recognize the same sort of worth; but democrats say it is freedom, oligarchs wealth, and aristocrats virtue" (*N.E.*, V, 3, 1131a25–29). Accordingly, we have three different conceptions of distributive justice, under the same concept. In the *Polit.* Aristotle gives us a detailed analysis of the different constitutions based on these different conceptions of distributive justice; and of the institutions which embody these different constitutions. Thus a democratic constitution, according to which all free born citizens should have an equal share of political authority, includes several institutions and rules which embody this democratic political egalitarianism: universal membership of free men in the assembly, rotation in other offices, terms of office, selection by lot and by election, and so on (*Polit.*, VI, 1–3).

We may pause here to note that these are certainly specific enough to provide plenty of practical content, more than Sidgwick's theory of justice, for example, and as much as Rawls' theory. And almost the same is true of Aristotle's discussion of oligarchic constitution, according to which a distribution of political offices is just to the extent that the share of political office it assigns to one person stands to the share of political office it assigns to another as the wealth of the one person stands to the wealth of another; so it is just that persons of equal wealth have equal shares of political office, and persons of unequal wealth proportionately unequal (*Polit.*, IV, 9, VI, 6). Here also there is no paucity of practical content. Rules and devices can be easily thought of which would be specific enough to determine what is just in particular cases. For example, one could have a rule weighing votes by wealth, as is done with stockholders in a company: one share of stock—one vote, rather than one person—one vote. (The suggestion is due to Keyt.) Thus, when we look at Aristotle's discussion of just constitutions in the *Polit.*,

we find a wealth of practical content; and this is considerable indirect evidence that there is no *vicious* circle here, whatever the structure of his theory of justice.

But we still have not seen a teleological explication of particular justice. What we have so far are three interpretations of the concept of proportional equality, and three different sets of rules or constitutions, and from that we cannot tell one way or another whether the theory is teleological and whether there is a circle.

We need to look at the final stage in Aristotle analysis of justice: his attempt, in *Polit.*, Bk. III, to resolve the disagreement among the three conceptions (democratic, oligarchic, and aristocratic) and determine which one is just, or at least to rank them by how far they are just. It is also instructive to look and see how he knocks out deviant constitutions as unjust.

He begins by arguing that it cannot be superiority in any respect whatsoever (for example, a person's height) that is a ground for distributing greater shares in offices; and he gives a reduction ad absurdum to rule out this possibility.⁴⁹ It must rather be something which is related to the office, such as fitness for the office or contribution to the end for the sake of which the office exists that is a ground for distribution (*Polit.*, III, 12). But this does not settle the matter; for one thing, free birth, wealth, and virtue all make some contribution; for another, each of the three proponents, democrat, oligarch or aristocrat, can still claim that their attribute makes the greatest or only contribution: who is correct, Aristotle says, depends on what the function or the end of the state is (*Ibid.*, III, 13). For example, "If property were the end for which men came together and formed an association, then men's share [in the offices and honors] of the state would be proportionate to their share of property; and in that case the argument of the oligarchical side . . . would appear to be a strong argument" (*Ibid.*, III, 9, 1280a). To resolve the matter, we need to know what the function or the end of the state is, toward the realization of which contributions are made (*Ibid.*, III, ch. 13). As is well known, Aristotle argues that property is not the [complete] end of the state. The end of the state is not only life (survival) or a shared life: it is "a good life" or a "fine or noble life" or "a perfect and self-sufficient life" (*Ibid.*, III, chs. 9 & 13). And for that end, Aristotle argues, superiority in free birth and wealth are not enough for distributing shares of office but virtue must above all be included.⁵⁰

It is not entirely clear that Aristotle's argument here is that of an ethical teleologist. It might be thought, for

example, that the “contribution to the job” criterion in the first stage of the argument is some sort of deontological principle of desert, rather than a maximization principle: just as punishment must fit the crime, so awards of offices must fit the social contribution made. But the fitness for the job (*ergon*) criterion and the flute player analogy (“. . . nobody will play better for being better born. . .” [1282b]) assure us, I think, that the criterion is proposed with a view to assuring the performing well of the function. Whatever the correct end or the function of the city is, Aristotle is saying, shares of offices should be assigned with a view to performing that function or serving that end well. And this is a maximizing principle: for in his view the good of the city and the performing well of the function of the city are identical.

The teleological character of his argument comes out also in the crucial opening lines of *Polit.*, III, 12, in which he takes up where he left off in the discussion of justice in the *N.E.* “In all arts and sciences the end in view is some good. In the most sovereign of all the arts and sciences – and this is the art and science of politics – the end in view is the greatest good and the good which is most pursued. The good in the sphere of politics is justice; and justice consists in what tends to promote the common interest. General opinion makes it consist in some sort of equality.”

“The good in the sphere of politics is justice” – this statement Sidgwick could cite as evidence of a circle once more. But the statement which immediately follows, that “justice consists in what tends to promote the common good” is one that J. S. Mill (and every non-egoistic teleologist) could have written, though the common good might be different. And the passage also explains why Aristotle takes up the view that justice is some sort of equality – it is among the general opinions it is the business of ethics to take up and examine.

But, supposing that Aristotle’s argument here does display a teleological structure, is it not also circular? We saw that the end of the state according to him is not merely life or shared life but “a good life.” And the notion of a good life or happiness he is using is that of the *N.E.*, which makes reference to virtue. But is this not circular once more? The concept of a just man is explicated (though not completely) in terms of just actions; just actions in terms of just laws; just laws in terms of just constitutions; and just constitutions in terms of common good rather than the good of the rulers. Finally, the common good is said to be not mere

life or shared life but a good life and life of happiness; that is, presumably, an active life of reason according to virtue; that is, presumably, a life in accordance with courage, temperance, justice, wisdom, and so on. The reference to justice seems to introduce circularity. In a chain of arguments attempting to discover what is justice we ultimately used the notion of the good of the citizen, and in specifying that we used justice. Perhaps so. The threat of a circle remains in Aristotle’s analysis because of his view, as old as Socrates in Plato’s *Gorgias*, that the end of the state, and so the end of constitutions and the laws, is not merely or primarily the goods of self-preservation, the protection of property, the wealth of the nation, and protection from external threats; but also and above all the promotion of living well, which for all three, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, includes living virtuously. So there is indeed a potential for such a circle. But so far as I have been able to determine there is no explicit circularity in our texts, that is, a definition or description of the end of the state which explicitly includes justice; nor is it clear that if there is a reference to justice in the notion of the good of the state, the same notion of justice is being used (that is, the notion of distributive justice which is being analyzed).

It is noteworthy that, in the case of the justice of the deviant constitutions of oligarchy, democracy and tyranny, the analysis is clearly teleological, and as clearly non-circular; because in the justification of these constitutions there is reference to the good of somebody, but no mention of promoting virtue. In oligarchy, for example, offices are distributed on the basis of wealth, and the securing and promotion of wealth is the end of the oligarchic city.

The evidence that Aristotle’s analysis of justice is teleological is overwhelming; here there is no alternative of interpreting the theory as being a virtue ethics. If in Aristotle’s own favored analysis of just constitutions there is a circle, in the reference to the virtue of citizens, it is awfully hard to find. And now we shall also see definite evidence that if there is a circle it is harmless.

Paucity of practical content and virtue ethics: Justice and the other virtues

All three interpretations of the concept of distributive justice which Aristotle favors in the *Polit.* provide

plenty of practical content.⁵¹ From the analysis of the justice of polity, for example, it follows that it would be unjust to deprive some one both of whose parents were free and citizens of the right to participate and vote in the Assembly; unjust not to give such a person his rotating share in office in the Council and the Courts; unjust not to have limits to terms of office, and so on. In general, as Keyt has shown,⁵² Aristotle's step procedure (just persons – just acts, just acts – just laws, just laws – just constitution), when applied in reverse, will give us a lot of standards by which to judge individual conduct, though of course not perfectly so. If Aristotle's account of justice is teleological and circular, the wealth of practical content in his account shows that the circularity is pretty harmless.

But we have no such richness of practical content in Aristotle's analysis of courage or temperance. The theory of well functioning and the mean seems to give us very different results in the case of justice and the other moral virtues, that is, much more specific and fruitful in choice-guiding in the case of justice. Part of the reason for this is perhaps that in the case of distributive justice Aristotle was able to give a mathematical formulation to the equal or the fair, geometrical proportion, and was also able to specify several different bases for the proportionally equal distribution of goods of offices, wealth, and safety. Apparently he found this view in common beliefs, he was able to give it a mathematical formulation, and simply superimposed his theory of the mean on it. In addition, justice is a virtue that applies to institutions as well as to individuals, as John Rawls has so forcibly reminded us by making justice a virtue primarily of the basic institutional structure of society. And institutions almost by definition have rules. So Aristotle was able to rely on institutional rules – such rules of election to office, terms of office, rotation in office, and so on – which can serve as guides to action. In sum, in the case of at least particular justice Aristotle was aided by the established relation of justice to equality – which is susceptible to mathematical analysis – and by the institutional character of justice.

But in the case of temperance and courage Aristotle is unable to give any mathematical formulation of the mean which would allow us to derive rules of what constitutes temperate or courageous acts. One reason Aristotle gives for this inability is that the mean is relative to the individual, taking this apparently to mean that it varies too much to receive quantitative formula-

tion. And so he says it is a matter of "perception," meaning not necessarily sense perception but experienced judgement of what individual act is correct, what the mean relative to us is in the particular circumstances we find ourselves in. Or, he cites the virtuous man as the model to follow. The reference to the virtuous man and the man of practical wisdom is an individual model device, in the absence of measurability and a mathematical formula.

Aristotle of course is perfectly aware of this lack of exactness in his theory of the mean. Indeed he prefaces his first discussion of the mean with the remark that matters of conduct have nothing fixed or invariable about them, "but the agents themselves have to consider what is suited to the circumstances on each occasion, just as is the case with the art of medicine and navigation" (*N.E.*, 1104a5–10). The reference to medicine is crucial. As D.S. Hutchinson has recently shown,⁵³ this lack of exactness was standard theory in medicine. Thus the author of *Regimen* tells us: "If . . . it were possible to discover for the constitution of each individual a due proportion of food to exercise, with no erring either of excess or insufficiency, one would have discovered exactly how to make men healthy. But . . . this discovery cannot be made. . . . There are many things to prevent this [such a discovery]. First, the constitutions of men differ . . . then the various ages have different needs. Moreover there are situations of districts, the shifting of winds, the changes of the seasons, and the constitution of the year. Foods themselves exhibit many differences. . . . all these factors prevents its being possible to lay down rigidly precise rules in writing" (*Regimen*, I, 2, and III, 67, transl. Jones). The author appears to be saying that there are too many – perhaps an indefinite number – of variables involved in the choice of the mean in eating and exercise, and thus no hope of an exact mathematical formulation of such a mean. Significantly, he goes on to say that if a doctor were constantly present when the patient exercised, the doctor would be able to find the mean in exercise and food; perhaps because in the particular circumstances of a particular patient the doctor has to watch out for only a small number of actual variables at work, out of the indefinitely large set of possible variables. So the absence of a mathematical formulation, and even its alleged impossibility, did not keep doctors from successfully finding the mean for particular patients in their particular circumstances. Aristotle was simply taking over both parts of this theory of the mean in medicine:

its theoretical lack of precision and mathematical formulation, and its success in practice for the expert doctors. The parallel for ethics is a theoretical lack of precision and mathematical formulation, and the success in practice for men of practical wisdom.

In the case of temperance the medical theory of the mean was of direct relevance, since temperance is concerned with the rational regulation of the activities and pleasures of eating, drinking and sex, where health or physical well functioning is one of the standards of temperate behavior. Courage is further away from medical cases, and the difficulties of finding the mean here are even greater.

The difficulties of mathematical formulation and an exact account of the mean are still with us. Have we done any better at all in specifying rules for such virtues as temperance and courage? In this respect Sidgwick did no better in his fine analysis of the virtues a century ago. And when Rawls characterizes the moral virtues as “strong and normally effective desires to act on the basic principles of right”, what principles of right has he identified for courage or temperance or benevolence?

But here we must remind ourselves of Schneewind's sketch. It may be that the duties of courage, temperance, generosity, and love are all imperfect duties: the problem here is not an epistemic one, lack of knowledge of principles or rules, which is responsible for the indefiniteness of these duties; the problem is not that we have not yet discovered rules of how much, when, toward whom, and so on. It is the nature of these duties to be indefinite. Their nature allows for discretion, as the moderns might say; or it calls for practical wisdom, as Aristotle would say.⁵⁴

Summary and conclusion

Aristotle's analysis of justice is clearly teleological. If it contains a circle it is remarkably hard to detect, and in any case it is harmless since his analysis of justice contains plenty of practical content. Moreover, since his analysis of justice as a virtue of persons is in terms of just conduct, just laws, and just constitutions, Aristotle does not have a virtue ethics for the virtue of justice. However, his analyses of the other virtues, such as courage, temperance, generosity and magnificence, display neither a clear teleological structure nor a clear sufficiency of practical content. His particular analyses of these virtues look like virtue ethics analyses, and they

have been taken so traditionally. But this diagnosis is troubled by Aristotle's general metaphysical view that second actualities are prior in definition to first actualities. Moreover, the lack of a lot of practical content in his analyses of these virtues, which has also been traditionally taken as evidence of a virtue ethics analysis, may be due to the nature of these virtues, rather than to Aristotle's treatment of them. In any case, we need to give up the generally held and unexamined assumption that whatever analysis of virtue Aristotle has it must have the same structure for all the virtues – something we can see clearly if we give up studying his ethics alone and return to the relatively neglected study of Aristotle's political philosophy.⁵⁵

Notes

¹ Sandra Peterson, 'Apparent Circularity in Aristotle's Account of Right Action in the *Nicomachean Ethics*,' *Apeiron*, June, 1992.

² *Methods of Ethics* (ME), 7th edition, prefaced by John Rawls, Indianapolis, 1981, pp. 3, 96, 391. This classification of ethical theories is, I believe, essentially the same as that of W. Frankena and John Rawls in this century. See Rawl's *A Theory of Justice*, Cambridge, pp. 24, 30.

³ Rawls, *op. cit.*, ch. VII. R. Brandt, *The Good and the Right*, Oxford, 1989. For fine expositions of good as desire satisfaction see also Jon Elster, *Sour Grapes*, Cambridge, 1983 and John Broome, *Weighing Goods*, Oxford, 1991.

⁴ *Methods of Ethics*, p. 11. We might call such perfectionism *moral* perfectionism; it does not appear to be part of Rawls' definition of perfectionism. For a fine recent extended discussion of perfectionism, see Thomas Hurka, *Perfectionism*, Oxford, 1992.

⁵ Rawls does not follow Sidgwick in this, but classifies perfectionism as a teleological theory, and criticizes it on other grounds, not circularity. *Op. cit.*, pp. 25, 325–332.

⁶ For example, T. H. Green's ethical theory.

⁷ I have argued this in 'Two Theories of Good in Plato's *Republic*,' *Archiv fur Geschichte der Philosophie*, 67, 1985; and for Aristotle in 'Desire and Perfection in Aristotle's Theory of the Good,' *Apeiron*, July, 1989.

⁸ For some recent discussions of this problem see Peterson, *op. cit.*, and Sarah Broadie, *Ethics with Aristotle*, New York, 1991.

⁹ For a thorough discussion of Aristotle's views on the limitations on exactness and specificity of practical content of theories about matters of conduct, I can now refer the reader to Georgios Anagnostopoulos, *Aristotle on the Goals and Exactness of Ethics*, Berkeley, 1994.

¹⁰ *Aristotle*, New York, 1959, p. 184. See also his note 4, same page. Ross may have taken this interpretation as a way of avoiding Sidgwick's circle, on the understanding that Aristotle did not have a deontological ethical theory.

¹¹ *Reason and Human Good in Aristotle*, Cambridge, 1975, pp. 87–88, and notes 113, 114.

¹² *Op. cit.*, p. 88. For the view that Plato and Aristotle did not have

deontological or consequentialist theories, see also Julia Annas, *An Introduction to Plato's Republic*, Oxford 1981, pp. 600–664, and Julius Moravcsik, 'The Role of Virtues in Alternatives to Kantian and Utilitarian Ethics,' *Philosophia*, July, 1990.

¹³ For the first set of writers see M. Slote, *Goods and Virtues*, Oxford, 1989, G. Trianoski, 'What is Virtue Ethics All About?', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 1990, G. Watson, 'On the Primacy of Character', in A. Rorty (Ed.), *Identity, Character, and Morality*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1990; for the second set see Grotius, G. H. von Wright, P. Foot, and others in J. B. Schneewind, 'The Misfortunes of Virtue,' *Ethics*, October, 1990.

¹⁴ See Schneewind, *op. cit.*, Trianoski, *op. cit.*, and Watson, *op. cit.*

¹⁵ See, e.g. H. Sidgwick, *op. cit.*, Part I, Chs. IX & XIII, W. D. Ross, *op. cit.*, and Cooper, *op. cit.*, pp. 87–88, 125–135.

¹⁶ In Schneewind's modern historical sketch the contrast is clear from Grotius to Rawls.

¹⁷ Trianoski, *op. cit.*, p. 336. Similar contrasts are made by W. Frankena and R. Brandt, 'W. K. Frankena and the Ethics of Virtue,' in the *Monist*, vol. 64, pp. 271–292.

¹⁸ There is a widespread mistake that Platonic individual justice is "psychic harmony": this is psychic temperance, not justice; the latter consists in each part of the soul performing its own optimal function; harmony is agreement among the parts of the soul on this order, and is a further property. This may have some bearing on whether Plato holds some unity of virtue theory in the *Rep.* See 'Justice and Democracy in Plato's *Republic*,' in *Antike Rechts und Sozialphilosophie*, ed. by O. Gigon and M. W. Fischer, Zürich, 1988.

¹⁹ Writers who cite the passage we quoted ignore the fact that Plato also has a concept of social justice, which is defined in terms of principles of conduct and from which psychic justice is derived via the assumption of isomorphism between social and psychic justice. So the Platonic case is far more complicated. The question of the priority of right conduct or individual virtue in Plato depends on the question of priority between individual and social justice. In his actual procedure Plato in fact derives psychic justice from the definition of social justice and the assumption of isomorphism. For the derivation see 'Justice and Democracy,' *op. cit.*

²⁰ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, pp. 24–25.

²¹ Watson, *op. cit.*, p. 459. Watson's "in accordance with T" and "contrary to T" might be too weak. A more specific relation would be Plato's "actions which produce and/or preserve T," and "actions which destroy T."

²² Rawls, *op. cit.*, p. 436.

²³ Schneewind, *op. cit.*, pp. 46–48.

²⁴ John Locke, *An Essay on Human Understanding*, Oxford, 1979, p. 358.

²⁵ For a recent account of Aristotle's notion of priority in definition, see M. Ferejohn, 'Aristotle on Focal Meaning and the Unity of Science,' *Phronesis*, vol. xxv, no. 2, 1980, pp. 117–128, and D. Keyt, 'Three Basic Theorems in Aristotle's *Politics*,' in *A Companion to Aristotle's Politics*, ed. by D. Keyt and F. Miller, Oxford, 1991, p. 126.

²⁶ This is not to deny that priority of definition can also hold between nominal definitions.

²⁷ Trianoski's two conditions say nothing about the relation of virtue to the good; they can be true and it can also be true that the goodness of virtues derives from their maximizing happiness – Trianoski takes up these matters later in his article.

²⁸ In character utilitarianism the good can, at any rate, be defined as happiness in the sense of pleasure, or as the satisfaction of rational desire, or as well functioning; there is no reason inherent in this theory for supposing there is danger of a circle between the definitions of the right and the good.

²⁹ Strictly, the maximizing principle is not applied twice; the relations of conduct to the virtues as dispositions are "not contrary to any virtue" and "contrary to some virtue". But perhaps right conduct maximizing the good can still be deduced from the other propositions. In any case, we can have a version of Character Utilitarianism in which we do have two maximizing principles: Right conduct is conduct which maximizes the virtues as dispositions, and the virtues are the dispositions which maximize happiness. So it can be accommodated within the modern framework.

³⁰ See, e.g., Aristotle's definition of practical wisdom in terms of good, and Sidgwick's discussion, *op. cit.*, Part I, Ch. VIII.

³¹ Schneewind, *op. cit.*

³² For my reconstruction of the function argument, see 'Desire and Perfection in Aristotle's Theory of the Good,' *Apeiron*, June, 1989. My remarks here presuppose that reconstruction.

³³ W. F. R. Hardie, 'The Final Good in Aristotle's Ethics,' in J. M. Moravcsik, *Aristotle*, New York, 1967. For analysis and references in the inclusionary/exclusionary controversy see David Keyt, 'Intellectualism in Aristotle,' in J. Anton and A. Preuss, *Essays in Ancient Philosophy*, vol. II; more recently, John Cooper, 'Contemplation and Happiness: A Reconsideration,' in *Synthese*, 72, 1987, Richard Kraut, *Aristotle on the Human Good*, Princeton, 1989, and Broadie, *op. cit.* and Roger Crisp, "Aristotle's Inclusivism," in *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, Vol. xii, 1994.

³⁴ On some versions of the exclusionary interpretation, the highest happiness consists of theoretical wisdom, but a second grade happiness, available to the common man, consists of moral virtue. See R. Kraut, *op. cit.* Here there would still be a circle relative to the second grade happiness.

³⁵ For an accounting of the good of artifacts and social roles by a desire satisfaction theory of good, see Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, Ch. VII, sect. 61.

³⁶ Perhaps with minor reformulations.

³⁷ See *De An.* Bk. II, ch. 4, W. D. Ross's notes in *Aristotle's De Anima*, Oxford, 1961, pp. 224–225, and T. Irwin's helpful discussion in *Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics*, Indianapolis, 1985, pp. 385–386.

³⁸ For form as cause in nature we now have M. Furth's fine discussion in *Substance, Form, and Psyche*, Cambridge, 1988, Part III.

³⁹ See the analysis of part in *Met.* V, 25.

⁴⁰ See *De Anima.*, Bk. II, chs. 1 & 2

⁴¹ "Nobly" or "finely" may be thought to re-introduce the circle, because we now seem to have a restriction pertaining to the rightness of the act, restricting "functioning well." But as Irwin notes, "nobly" normally indicates or makes reference to promotion of the good of others. See *N.E.*, I, 2, 1094b, where A says that it is "finer" or "nobler" to preserve the good of the city than the good of an individual, apparently on the ground that the good of a whole city is greater than that of any individual in it.

⁴² What "for its own sake" means is not always clear in Aristotle. Sometimes it may mean "because the act is kalon", as in *N.E.*, III, 9 (where the courageous man will face death and wounds because "it

is noble to do so or base not to do so"); or in *E.E.* 1229a (for a similar statement); and that may mean because it promotes some good greater than the agent's good at risk; thus an act may be kalon if it promotes the good of the city at the risk to one's own good, and it is kalon because the good of the city is greater than that of the agent, as well as because it is another's good. In this case, kalon has a teleological interpretation.

⁴³ Another such good, security, was mentioned earlier at 1130b; see also 1129b. As Keyt notes though, what in fact Aristotle takes up for distribution in the *Polit.* is honors or offices.

⁴⁴ "Deviant" constitutions, against which Aristotle argues, seem to be versions of egoism Rawls calls "first person dictatorship", which is: "Everyone is to serve my interests", where "my" refers to the ruler(s). *Op. cit.* p.124.

⁴⁵ For a recent analysis of the doctrine of the mean see Charles Young in this volume, and for modern criticisms of the mean in justice, see, e.g. Grotius's arguments in Schneewind, *op. cit.*

⁴⁶ For the mathematical analysis see Keyt, 'Aristotle's Theory of Distributive Justice,' in D. Keyt and F. Miller (Eds.), *op. cit.*

⁴⁷ The language is taken from David Keyt, *op. cit.* I am relying considerably here on Keyt's clear-headed exposition of Aristotle's theory of justice. Since Keyt does not take up the issues I am discussing, his exposition may be regarded as neutral on these issues.

⁴⁸ *A Theory of Justice*, p.25.

⁴⁹ See Keyt, 'Aristotle's Theory of Distributive Justice,' *op. cit.*

⁵⁰ One could argue that the use of virtue here introduces circularity, though not necessarily the circularity Sidgwick had in mind: a just distribution of shares of offices is a distribution in proportion to the possession of free birth, wealth, and virtue. If the virtue in question includes distributive justice, we have circularity if a just person is defined by reference (eventually) to a just constitution. Perhaps. What

Aristotle appears to have in mind, though, is the virtue of political practical wisdom. See, for example, *Polit.*, Bk. VII, chs. 11, 12.

⁵¹ The analyses of Monarchy, Aristocracy and Polity; but the same is true of the deviant constitutions, and in their cases there is no circle.

⁵² Keyt explicitly raises the question of content and gives a convincing positive answer. *Op. cit.*

⁵³ 'Doctrines of the Mean and the Debate Concerning Skills in Fourth Century Medicine, Rhetoric and Ethics', in *Method, Medicine, and Metaphysics*, ed. R. J. Hankinson, Edmonton, Alberta, 1988, pp. 18–24.

⁵⁴ The case of temperance, though, might be instructive. For *healthy* nutrition and exercise, presumably activities required by temperance, a mathematical formula, relativised to individual body weight, height, age, and fat content, may be possible, thus eliminating the need for individual models. Here we must note that the relativity of the mean is not necessarily to an individual, but rather to a body type; and this can be measured and specified. Apparently, there are indeed many variables, but their number is finite and their relations are discoverable.

⁵⁵ An earlier version of this paper was read at a conference on Aristotle at the University of California, San Diego, in 1989. I wish to thank several persons for helpful comments, including Georgios Anagnostopoulos, Julia Annas, David Charles, Gregory Kavka, David Keyt, Mike Martin, Gary Watson and Charles Young, though none of them might agree with the views expressed here and none is responsible for them.

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