WAS ARISTOTLE A PERFECTIONIST?

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1. In a well-known passage, Rawls brings out what he considers “the two main concepts of ethics”: the “right” and the “good.”\(^1\) One way of understanding these concepts is to deploy them in the way “teleological” theories do:

The structure of an ethical theory is, then, largely determined by how it defines and connects these two basic notions. Now it seems that the simplest way of relating them is taken by teleological theories: the good is defined independently from the right, and then the right is defined as that which maximizes the good.\(^2\)

Now the content of any teleological view, in the above sense, will of course depend on how the good is understood. Rawls goes on to suggest different ways in which the good might be defined; he imputes one explicitly to Aristotle, while another seems in any case Aristotelian. First, since Aristotle takes the human good to consist in “the realization of human excellence in the various forms of culture,” his theory is a form of “perfectionism.” Second, insofar as one defines the human good as happiness, one’s theory is an instance of “eudaimonism.”\(^3\)

And this second gloss sounds plausibly Aristotelian.\(^4\)

Rawls’s topic here is the general structure of teleological theories. So the context tempts one to think that, for Rawls, Aristotle’s view counts as teleological, whether in a perfectionist or eudaimonistic form. In either case, the temptation has it that Rawls takes Aristotle to ground a conception of right action on an independent definition of the human good. In

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\(^2\) Rawls, 21–22.

\(^3\) Rawls, 22.

\(^4\) This may depend on how comfortable we are in translating ‘eudaimonia’ as ‘happiness.’ But the context makes clear that Rawls means to distinguish eudaimonism from hedonism and utilitarianism, where the former takes the good to consist in pleasure and where the latter takes the satisfaction of rational desire to be crucial. If we understand happiness as distinct from these other kinds of specifications, then we can—so far—translate ‘eudaimonia’ in this way, without much worry. But I shall raise some worries below, in §???. For now, I don’t think it matters whether we prefer something like ‘flourishing’ or ‘well-being’ or ‘welfare.’ For more on the difficulties in translating ‘eudaimonia,’ see John M. Cooper, *Reason and Human Good in Aristotle*, 89–90n1; and Richard Kraut, *Aristotle on the Human Good*, 3n1.
one case, the good consists in happiness; in the other, it consists in cultural achievement. But these Aristotelian doctrines about the human good are supposed to fit into a seemingly Aristotelian teleological structure. The temptation is helped by the impression that Aristotle does define the human good independently from the right; much the structure of Book I of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (= NE) suggests that impression.

Strictly speaking, though, Rawls does not say in this neighborhood that Aristotle’s ethical theory is teleological. Rather, he tells us that, if we define the good along Aristotelian lines, we have different ways of making out a teleological theory, given that the good is to be defined independently from the right. We need not read Rawls as taking Aristotle to affirm that italicized clause above.

That is fortunate. Rawls stresses that a theory counts as teleological, in his sense, only if “the theory enables one to judge the goodness of things without referring to what is right.”

But I agree with Gisela Striker when she says that “Aristotle’s version of eudaimonism is not a theory like utilitarianism in which we can use the conception of the good to find out what is right, simply because Aristotle’s conception of the human good includes moral virtue.”

If Striker is correct about Aristotle, given that, for him, moral virtue includes right action (NE 1105a31–32), then Aristotle’s ethical theory is not what Rawls would call teleological, since it doesn’t define the good independently from the right. So Aristotle cannot assent to

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1. Now some will already object that this kind of view is misplaced: the terrain as Rawls carves it was not, the objection goes, glimpsed by Aristotle, and so the view suffers from anachronism. Whether or not this is so, there is still the temptation to view Aristotle’s theory as teleological, in Rawls’s sense. No doubt, this temptation may be caused, in some cases, by assimilating different senses of ‘teleology.’ But the temptation need not be a mistake just of terminology, as I will soon suggest.

2. Rawls, 22.

the italicized clause above.

That would be enough to dislodge the impression that makes plausible saddling Rawls with a teleological interpretation of Aristotle.

2. Now what does it mean to say that “the human good includes moral virtue”? At the very least, it means that, in acting viciously, an agent falls short of the human good, which Aristotle identifies, by common consent, with eudaimonia (NE 1097b22–24). So an agent fails to achieve eudaimonia if she acts without moral virtue; and one way of lacking moral virtue is to act wrongly (NE II.4). But this minimalist gloss leaves open how further we are to understand the relationship between virtuous action and eudaimonia.

In this paper, I want to put into place what may be a familiar but controversial interpretation of the Aristotelian claim that the human good (and eudaimonia) includes virtuous action. This reading is marked a very restricted understanding of what Aristotle means by eudaimonia, an understanding marked by what David Wiggins aptly, I think, calls Aristotle’s “rigorism.” The restrictiveness of this understanding can be seen by distinguishing (see §§3–5) its core features: its evaluative understanding of human nature; its thoroughly ethical conception of eudaimonistic choice-worthiness; and its identification of eudaimonia with a

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1 We should note that Aristotle seems to deny that the mere possession of virtue constitutes happiness; rather, what’s essential is that virtue be exercised in action: NE 1096a1.
2 Of course, Aristotle does not believe that women, natural slaves, children, and many others can be bearers of eudaimonia. But, while these objectionable views are commitments of Aristotle, they are not commitments of those elements of the structure of his theory I want to discuss. That Aristotle restricts the class of such bearers in specious ways does not, I think, affect how we should interpret the relationship between eudaimonia and virtuous action. If anything, a clear grasp of that relationship should affect how we understand Aristotle’s embarrassing exclusions. That is a topic I explore below, in §????.
3 This interpretation characterizes each of John McDowell’s essays on Greek ethics, collected in MVR—plus “Two Sorts of Naturalism,” “Might There Be External Reasons?” and “Are Moral Requirements Hypothetical Imperatives?”—and his The Engaged Intellect (= EI). But other (perhaps less heterodox) commentators endorse some of its features; see §§3–5.
4 David Wiggins, “Eudaimonism and Realism in Aristotle’s Ethics: A Reply to John McDowell.”
special kind of action.

Now, while I will try to make this restricted reading facially plausible, I will not try to undertake a comprehensive defense or to draw out its many implications. Rather, my real aim is to show how this reading puts pressure on prominent interpretations of Aristotle’s political theory. I think that these three features require that we understand Aristotle’s references to the human good, *eudaimonia*, and virtue, both in the *Ethics* and the *Politics*, as departing in significant ways from those readings that see in Aristotle a general concern for perfecting human nature in the common-sense terms of ‘flourishing’ or ‘well-being.’ Those readings, I think, domesticate Aristotle’s thought by minimizing his rigorism. But, strangely, resisting that kind of domestication brings into view a different way in which Aristotle’s thought may appear in reach: his rigoristic departures from an ordinary grasp of well-being carve out space for what we might call a modern concern for political legitimacy.

3. What comprises the restricted reading of *eudaimonia* that I want to entertain?

Against the popular claim that Aristotle’s ethics finds its foundation in a false metaphysical biology or an implausible cosmology, we should see that Aristotle does not attribute to human nature what, following Wiggins, we would now call an “unconvincing speaking part.”

Rather:

> We may still find an intelligible place [i.e., in the restrictive reading] for some such idea as this: the life of exercises of excellence is the life that most fully actualizes the potentialities that constitute human nature. But the point will be that the thesis—justified in the appropriate way, whatever that is—that this

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1 Made popular by the writings of Alasdair MacIntyre and Bernard Williams. For the idea that the metaphysical biology is not, in its core elements, false, see P.M.S. Hacker’s recent book *Human Nature: The Categorial Framework*.

or that is what it is the business of a human being to do can be reformulated, with an intelligibly “value-loaded” use of “human nature,” as the thesis that this or that is the most in keeping with human nature; not that the justification of the thesis about the business of a human being is to be found in an independent, “value-free” investigation of human nature.\footnote{McDowell, “Role,” 19.}

In a word, human nature is not a concept whose home is metaphysical or biological speculation. Rather, its home is inquiry about what makes a life or action valuable.\footnote{Aside from McDowell, see Stephen Everson, “Aristotle on Nature and Value”; and Martha Nussbaum, “Aristotle on Human Nature and the Foundations of Ethics” (= AHN) and “Nature, Function, and Capability: Aristotle on Political Distribution” (= NFC).} And so, when Aristotle provides in NE I.7, famously, what we call the ‘function argument,’ the discussion is not meant to abstract from our going understandings of what counts as a valuable form of life or action. To appeal to human nature is to rely, implicitly, on a conception of choice-worthiness. The thought, on this view, is meant to convey little more than what Aristotle says, at NE 1103a25: “Neither by nature, then, nor contrary to nature, do excellences arise in us; rather, we are adapted by nature to receive them, and are made perfect by habit.”\footnote{Unless otherwise noted, quotations of Aristotle are taken from the Revised Oxford Translation.}

4. Now many otherwise divergent commentators can agree to this way of interpreting Aristotle’s references to (human) nature in the ethical works. But the restricted reading aims to minimize, not only the sense in which appeals to human nature are ill-grounded, but also the role that even a value-laden conception of human nature is supposed to play\footnote{Aside from McDowell, see Wiggins’s tentative endorsement of this feature, “A Reply to John McDowell.”}.

For, on the second feature of this view, the function argument brings out merely the “conceptual connections between the notions of ergon, excellence, and activity, in order to reach the conclusion that eudaimonia, the good for man, is rational activity in accordance
with excellence." It does not work to exclude or invalidate any controversial specification of the human good, except for "a life of unreflective gratification of appetite."

The idea here is that Aristotle's use (even) of evaluative notions of human nature, in the context of the function argument, does not appear to single out a particular conception of the human good, as though something like the function argument could persuade Callicles to abandon his own conception of what counts as slavish. Rather, the drift of the function argument, in light of how little it seems to do, is meant only to draw into relief the terrain over which rival conceptions of the human good conflict:

Aside from its exclusion of the brutish life, then, the ergon argument can be understood neutrally. Its upshot is not to identify eudaimonia with one of the disputed candidates, namely, Aristotle's own, but to bring out how the issue between the candidates [i.e., of specifications of the human good] can be seen as an issue between competing views about which specific properties of a person are human excellences; and the route to the conclusion brings out how the issue can be seen as an issue between competing views about what it is the business of a human being to do.

On this view, the clarity that the function argument yields, if any, is simply clarity about how the real frame for discussions of the human good is the frame given by conceptions of excellence or virtue. And so, if one has a correct grasp of virtue and its demands, "an explicit mention of human nature [or human function, for that matter] would be a sort of rhetorical flourish, added to a conclusion already complete without it."
How does this move differ from the first feature (§2), that of glossing ‘human nature’ in evaluative terms? The key is to distinguish the sphere of the *evaluative* from that of the *ethical* or the *virtuous*, where the latter sphere is what Aristotle signals with references to *aretē* and its cognates.

Lives and actions can be valuable without being valuable with respect to virtue or excellence. The view given here sees in the function argument Aristotle’s attempt at focusing on *that* sphere, a region of choice-worthiness, so to speak, distinct from general considerations of value.

Recall that the conclusion of the function argument is that the human good “turns out to be activity in activity in soul in conformity with excellence” (NE 1098a15). But the context of NE I.7 makes clear that whatever we say about the human good is supposed to help form a “clearer account” of *eudaimonia* (NE 1097b23). And so *eudaimonia* must be identified with action in accordance with virtue. This move, then, puts into place a kind of restriction on our applications of the concept of *eudaimonia*.

Of course, many people can be wrong in their conceptions of *eudaimonia*, as Aristotle evidently realizes. But that kind of incorrectness must be essentially related to the kind of discourse, about which some others can be right, that deals with virtue. This is just to say that the scope of *eudaimonia* is more narrow than the scope of evaluative discourse, since not all evaluative discourse can be plausibly characterized as discourse about virtue. And this is true even in cases in which all parties to the relevant stretch of conversation are mistaken in their conceptions of the specific content of what the excellences or virtues are. Conceptions of *eudaimonia*, then, are restricted to a distinct dimension of choice-worthiness, one that does not include just any action that is choice-worthy or valuable, nor even just any action

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1 See McDowell, “Role,” §§8–9.
that is intrinsically choice-worthy or valuable. It is a dimension governed by conceptions of virtuous action. So, on this reading, the concept of *eudaimonia* has its home in specifically *ethical* considerations of choice-worthiness.

I think that echoing a provocative but perhaps gnomic line from Peter Winch, from one of his many critical responses to Alasdair MacIntyre, may be helpful in bringing out this contrast between the feature glossed here and that in §2:

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(W)\text{hat we can ascribe to human nature does not determine what we can and what we cannot make sense of; rather, what we can and what we cannot make sense of determines what we can ascribe to human nature.}^1
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In light of this thought, much depends on the question to which our responses are assessed for making sense.

According to the position considered merely in §2, the question is, What does a valuable life or action look like? Our answers, if they make sense, shed light on what we can ascribe to human nature and, in virtue of the function argument, what a *eudaimon* life (or action) is.

But, according to the restriction put into place by §3, the right question is rather, What are the virtues and their demands? If our answers make sense in response to this different question, we shall have a stratum of specifications for what makes for a *eudaimon* life (or action). Of course, in a derivative sense, we will also have a grasp on human nature, in light of the function argument. But the grasp we have on human nature, according to this line of questioning, will be distinct from the grasp we might get from asking that different, previous question. The line of questioning determines the shape of our answers; the line of questioning, in this latter case, concerning virtue and its demands, can float apart from

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1 Peter Winch, “Human Nature,” 84.
whatever we might get from a more direct line of attack, a line that focuses on value writ large. And it should then seem that, given the alternative I’ve been trying to sketch, taking that more direct line of attack is already to adopt the route that Winch thinks is a mistake.

Now I don’t mean for these brief remarks so far to substantiate the thesis that Aristotle must be read along the lines of ethical priority, such as has been canvassed in this section. I rather mean for these Winchian remarks just to bring out the stakes and differences between these two ways of employing the function argument.

But these Winchian remarks do, I think, suggest a compelling way of bringing out what is distinctive and challenging about John McDowell’s interpretation of Aristotle’s ethics, one that relates eudaimonia strictly to ethical choice-worthiness, not choice-worthiness in general:

It is often thought that this Arisotelian realism points to an extra-ethical basis for reflection about what eudaimonia consists in. The idea is that, in Aristotle’s view, it is possible to certify that a virtuous person’s conception of eudaimonia is genuinely correct—that the actions it singles out are really worth undertaking in the way it represents them as being—by showing that a life organized in the light of that conception would be recognizably worth living anyway; that is, worth living by standards that are prior to the distinctive values acquired in what Aristotle conceives as a proper upbringing. […] So the idea is this: Aristotle thinks he can authenticate the distinctive values that are imparted by what he conceives as a proper upbringing, and establish that that is indeed how people ought to be brought up, on the basis of the thought that a life that puts those values into practice is one that it is worth going in for anyway, for a human just

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1 E.g., that secured by an expansive employment of the function argument along the lines suggested by the mere conception in §2.
as such. It is clear that the contrast that McDowell means to draw isn’t between, on the one hand, an ethical basis and, on the other, a non-evaluative one. (It is hard to see how one can make sense of a non-evaluative conception of what “is worth going in for anyway.”) Rather, the contrast is between an extra-ethical basis, one that can be seen as justificatory from outside the stratum of the discourse of virtue, and an ethical basis, one that can be so seen only from within the particular conception of excellence that one has been trained (or cultivated) into (NE 1103a25, already cited).

5. In many articles, McDowell has supported, and continues to support\(^2\) this attack on an extra-ethical understanding of eudaimonia by focusing on one of Aristotle’s most central but controversial claims, one which I’ve already cited in a different connection: namely, that the human good—and therefore happiness, given the context of NE I.7 as a whole—“turns out to be activity of soul in conformity with excellence.”

I began this paper by trying to focus on the sense in which it is right to say that Aristotle’s conception of the human good includes moral virtue. The conclusion of the function argument suggests a very stark answer: the relevant sense of ‘inclusion’ is identification\(^3\). And the starkness of this answer itself cuts against the interpretative grain. By considerably constricting the relevant sense of ‘inclusion’—down to the strictness of identification—it appears to exclude the following familiar positions: so-called ‘inclusivist’ readings of eudaimonia, according to which happiness consists in some ideal arrangement of goods, whether

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\(^3\) Aside from McDowell, see Roger Crisp, “Aristotle: Ethics and Politics: Ethics,” in Furley (ed.), Routledge History of Philosophy: Volume II: From Aristotle to Augustine, 109. Taking the identity claim at face value is commended by the fact that it appears to be Aristotle’s official view, even after he leaves the speculative context of NE I.7: it is re-introduced at 1102a5, setting the stage for the bulk of NE.
‘internal’ or ‘external’; and instrumentalist or rational-egoist readings of virtuous action, according to which happiness is promoted or caused by virtuous action.

This paper will not canvass these implications, but it will try to bring this central identification into relation with another of Aristotle’s technical terms: *praxis*.

Aristotle believes that, if there is an object of choice whose value doesn’t depend on the value of something else, we should call this object “the good and the chief good” (NE 1094a18). The chief good is quickly identified, by common consent, with *eudaimonia*; and *eudaimonia* with “living well [eu zen] and faring well [eu prattein]” (NE 1095a18–19). So far, then, *eudaimonia* is the end of all that we do, if there is an end to all that we do. But, in line with most commentators, I don’t think Aristotle seriously questions the truth of the conditional’s antecedent. The snag is rather that it seems quite implausible to think that *eudaimonia* is the end of all that we do. This had led some translators, out of charity, to insist that Aristotle means instead, not the indicative mood that the Greek manifests, but a gerundive formulation, to the effect that *eudaimonia* is what we ought to pursue in what we do.

The implausibility of the thought, however, seems to be a creature of translation:

(i) “Do” is given by *prattein* and its cognates (NE 1094a18–22; 1097a22–23; 1102a2–3).

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2 Not least because Aristotle, at NE 1095a15, takes *politike* as aiming at the chief good, and surely he thinks political science exists.

3 The sense of charity must extend quite far. The beginning of Book I confirms the indicative-mood rendering: *eudaimonia* is the chief good, both by common consent (1095a17–20) and by the formal considerations concerning finality and self-sufficiency (1097a25–b21); and, explicitly, the chief good *is* the end of all our actions (1094a18–22). In addition, the discussion at 1095a17–28 suggests the indicative, insofar as Aristotle admits that, while all agree that *eudaimonia* is the chief good, many parties disagree as to what *eudaimonia* consists in. The recognition of terminological agreement would be out of place, if all Aristotle had wanted to say was that we should pursue what really instantiates *eudaimonia*.
(ii) *Prattein* indeed has, for Aristotle, a technical, restricted use: it is denied to animals, among others (NE 1139a12–20; *Eudemian Ethics* 1222b18).

(iii) But animals possess the capacity for the voluntary (NE 1111b7–10).

(iv) So the scope of “do” cannot mean something like voluntary doings.

(v) “Do” should be given the same scope as *prohairesis* (NE 1111b7–10).

(vi) The acts of the incontinent are not outcomes of *prohairesis*, but they are of *boulesis* ['deliberation'] (NE 1142b18–20).

(vii) *Prohairesis* is a deliberative desire to do something for the sake of *doing well* [*eupraxia*] (NE 1139a31–b5).

(viii) But *doing well* [*eu prattein*] is identified with *eudaimonia* (1095a19–20).

(ix) So *praxeis* are undertaken, by definition, for the sake of *eudaimonia* (= a definitional rendering of the indicative reading).

(x) Also, *praxeis* have doing well [*eupraxia*] as their end (NE 1140b6–7).

(xi) So, in light of NE 1095a19–20, *praxeis* have *eudaimonia* as their end.

(xii) But *praxeis* are distinct from *makings*, since *praxeis* are done for the sake of themselves (NE 1094a3–5).

(xiii) So *praxeis* are actions that both (a) stem from a deliberative desire to instantiate *eudaimonia*; and (b) constitute *doing well*.

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1 See Engstrom, 112–113: “Aristotle identifies life in accordance with ethical virtue as eudaimonia, and he holds that a life of this sort is a life of action, and indeed of good action, since it is in accordance with virtue. But he distinguishes action (*praxis*), or doing, from the exercise of art and in general from
I’ve lingered over Aristotle’s identifications here to bring out a tight network of relationships, those between *eudaimonia*, action (*praxis*), and virtue. On the reading I’ve been rehearsing, the human good is *eudaimonia*, which is acting well, which is acting in accordance with virtue. These identifications single out the challenging features that come with taking at face-value Aristotle’s central claims, all of which make intelligible, and facially plausible (on the level of interpretation), the sense in which considerations of *eudaimonia* mark out a distinct dimension of *ethical* choice-worthiness in *action*. But the point of this rehearsal will be to suggest that prominent *perfectionist* readers of Aristotle do not feel the full force of this tight network, a topic to which I now turn.

6. In a series of influential articles, Martha Nussbaum has articulated what David Charles plausibly calls a “perfectionist” reading of Aristotle’s political thought,[1] according to which, for Aristotle,

>[t]he aim of political planning is the distribution to the city’s individual people of the conditions in which a good human life can be chosen and lived. This distributive task aims at producing capabilities. That is, it aims not simply at the allotment of commodities, but at making people able to function in certain human ways. [...] [T]he task of the city cannot be understood apart from a rather substantial account of the human good and what it is to function humanly[2] all making (*poiēsis*), or producing, on the ground that making has an end other than itself, whereas action does not, since its end is just acting well (*EN* VI.4–5; see also 1105a26–b5), so his recognition that ethical virtue pertains to action rather than to making suggests that, for him, in life in accordance with such virtue the “end for all things done” does not lie beyond the doing of them.”

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1. David Charles, “Perfectionism in Aristotle’s Political Theory: A Reply to Martha Nussbaum.” Charles agrees with Nussbaum that Aristotle was a perfectionist, in his terms, diverging, then, from the account that I’ve been entertaining.

The context of the article from which this quotation comes makes plain that, for Nussbaum, the relevant notions of the human good, capabilities, and “good human functioning” are not to be seen as constrained by a strictly ethical basis such as §4 aimed to make plausible. Aside from the lack of virtue-theoretic constraints in Nussbaum’s articulation, she makes explicit that, on her view, a distinctly “moral” understanding of flourishing is not her, or Aristotle’s, concern:

Interpreters who stress Aristotle’s role as theoretician of civic virtue often forget that the Aristotelian virtues are, for the most part, dispositions concerned with the reasonable use of external goods: so they are not “moral” in the sense of being occupied with a noumenal realm of moral life. In general, Aristotle does not recognize any separate realm of moral as opposed to non-moral values and virtues. Interpreters of Aristotle in affluent parts of the world too often forget, furthermore, and very much underemphasize, Aristotle’s deep and urgent interest in the questions of hunger and scarcity, of property and its distribution and redistribution, of population control and its relation to scarcity.

Still, this lacuna undermines, I think, her interpretation of the shape of Aristotle’s discussion of what a proper political community aims to promote.

The central passages that Nussbaum deploys in making out her account include the following.

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1 Nussbaum, NFC, 170. I should note that this argument seems, illicitly, to equate a moral perspective with Kantian conceptions of normativity. It can be admitted that Aristotle didn’t think of reasons, whether ethical or otherwise, as contentless forms on the will, untainted by substantive value or empirical content. That is not the issue. Nor is the issue about whether Aristotle cleanly separated what we call “moral” from “non-moral” reasons; clearly Aristotle’s virtues of character contain speak to considerations that we wouldn’t plausibly count as “moral.” But that doesn’t answer the point that Aristotle’s ethical thought discerns a distinctive kind of reason, one captured by talk of the virtues, “the noble,” and eudaimonia.

2 Where possible, I reproduce her translations. But I include parenthetical references for the Greek, for ease in handling; I follow the Oxford Classical Texts of Ross (for the Politics) and Bywater (for the
(P1) It is evident that the best *politeia* is that arrangement according to which anyone whatsoever might do best (*arista prattoi*) and live a flourishing life (*zoiē makariōs*).

(1324a23–5)[1]

(P2) It is the job of the excellent lawgiver (*nomothetou spoudaiou*) to consider, concerning a city and a class of human beings (*genos anthrōpōn*) and every other association, how they will partake in the flourishing living (*eudaimonias*) that is possible for them.

(1325a7 ff.)[2]

(P3) [F]or legislators make the citizens good by forming habits in them, and this is the wish of every legislator; and those who do not effect it miss their mark, and it is in this that a good constitution differs from a bad one. (NE 1103b2–6)[3]

(P4) But they leave out the capital point. For if men met and associated out of regard to wealth only, [...] the oligarchical doctrine would carry the day. [...] But a state exists for the sake of a good life, and not for the sake of life only. (1280a25 ff.)[4]

My strategy here will be unsurprising. For I think that, in each of these cases, Nussbaum relies on an Aristotelian claim that should be read according to the restricted conception glimpsed in §§3–5. Nussbaum’s interpretation, though, employs an expansive conception of *eudaimonia*, one that identifies considerations of happiness with general forms of choice-worthiness, albeit one constrained by value-laden conceptions of human nature, in line merely with the reading suggested by §3.[5] Here I shall discuss just (P1) and (P2), but the substance

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1 Nussbaum, NFC, 146. She also cites 1323a17–19, but what I shall say about the above passage will apply here, too.
2 Nussbaum, NFC, 147.
3 The Ross-Urmson translation (ROT); Nussbaum, NFC, 150.
4 The Ross-Urmson translation (ROT); Nussbaum, NFC, 150. She also cites 1266b24 ff.
5 For a more direct treatment of how such conceptions are supposed to work in Aristotle’s ethical foundations, see her AHN.
of my remarks suggest similar treatments, *mutatis mutandis*, of the other passages that Nussbaum wields.

Consider (P1). While the passage suggests that, for Aristotle, political communities should aim at the kinds of circumstances that promote *eu prattein*, we need keep in view, on the restricted reading, just the kinds of actions that relate to considerations of *eudaimonia*, where *that* kind of choice-worthiness is distinct from whatever life or action we’d normally—and evaluatively, by all means—call valuable. To be a perfectionist of this kind is to adopt a very stringent perspective on the criteria by which we rank political arrangements, more stringent than what is suggested by appeals to ‘good human functioning’ and ‘flourishing.’ This is the perspective of virtue or excellence.

Interestingly, though, the context of the passage Nussbaum cites supports this stringent conception, aside from a weighty appeal to Aristotle’s technical understanding of *praxis*: the discussion of “doing best,” as given by (P1), is embedded within a close inquiry on the demands of virtue. At 1324a12, Aristotle equips himself (again) with a conceptual connection between *eudaimonia* and virtue. That connection sets the stage for a quick discussion of whether virtue should be understood along political or philosophical lines, as between practical excellence and contemplation, moving confusingly into an evaluation of the rival and defective aims that other communities have set themselves (1324a28 ff). Now, no matter how Aristotle treats that specific question about contemplation, it is clear that the discussion moves straightaway into considerations of the relationship between justice and happiness. The entire focus of the chapter seems governed, not by a general notion of living well, but by frequent appeals to the constraints that the virtues impose on action and on *eudaimonia*. 
That the whole chapter is oriented in this way should also lead us to question how far Nussbaum can get with (P2), I think. For starters, what I’ve said above about the role played by *praxis* (and its cognates) should be applied here, in the case of *eudaimonia*. For (P1), I mentioned the restricted conception of *praxis*, in light of my discussion from §5. But now, in (P2), the reference to *eudaimonia* should trigger a similar response, in light of what I mentioned in §4: considerations of *eudaimonia* mark out a distinctly *ethical* application of flourishing or happiness—a more stringent perspective from which one sees what makes for happiness.

How stringent is that view? Aristotle’s explicit reference, in (P2), to the aims of the *spoudaios*, the man of perfect virtue, suggests that it is very stringent indeed. Now, if a general conception of choice-worthiness were in play, then an appeal to the *spoudaios* would seem otiose. Rather, it is tempting to think that Aristotle’s invocation of the man of perfect virtue is meant precisely to mark the great distance between that general conception and the specific conception in the light of which a legislator is supposed to organize “states and races of men and communities” (NE 1325a9).

For Aristotle, that distance is great. There are many places where Aristotle stresses the virtuous agent’s point of view. But perhaps one will suffice to draw out how distinctive that perspective is.

At 1113a30, after equipping himself with an analogy concerning the correctness of judgments of food, Aristotle tells us that

the good man [*spoudaios*] judges each of these questions correctly, and what appears true to him in each of these cases is true. For each sort of character there is a particular account of what is noble, and of what is pleasant. It is, perhaps, the greatest mark of the good man to see the truth about each of these
things. He is, as it were, the standard and the measure of them.

Of course, the idea that the *spoudaios*’s distinctive faculties are similar to a healthy body’s being apt to perceive correctly the taste of food may seem to undermine the stringency I mean to bring out. But the key component here is the *spoudaios*’s correct grasp of the *kalon*, the “noble.” But the ability to grasp and apply correctly the concept of the noble is the mark of the virtuous agent: “Now excellent actions are noble and done for the sake of the noble” (NE 1120a23). It is this ability that marks the distance between the *spoudaios* and others, and the distance indeed seems great, in light of Aristotle’s bold statement that the man of perfect virtue is himself the “measure” of correctness.

7. I’ve been urging, so far, that we have good reason to doubt an expansive or extra-ethical conception of *eudaimonia* and *praxis*—and this on textual grounds alone. But I want to mention here an interpretative cost that attends the expansive or extra-ethical reading.

Nussbaum’s reading has met with many challenges, especially considering the obvious difficulty that arises when a general conception of choice-worthiness does duty for *eudaimonia*: Aristotle seems to deny that many people can be bearers of happiness, including,

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1. This is Timothy Chappell’s translation, from “‘The Good Man is the Measure of All Things’: Objectivity without World-Centredness in Aristotle’s Moral Epistemology” in *Virtue, Norms, and Objectivity*, 234.

2. Also see NE 1144a33: “the end, i.e., what is best […] is not evident except to the good man; for wickedness perverts us and causes us to be deceived about the starting-points of action”; and, echoing Protagoras, NE 1166a8: “excellence and the good man seem, as has been said, to be the measure of every class of things.” And, at NE1176a15:

   > But in all such matters that which appears to the good man is thought to be really so. If this is correct, as it seems to be, and excellence and the good man as such are the measure of each thing, those also will be pleasures which appear so to him, and those things pleasant which he enjoys. If the things he finds tiresome seem pleasant to some one, that is nothing surprising; for men may be ruined and spoilt in many ways; but the things are not pleasant, but only pleasant to these people and to people in this condition.
famously, women and natural slaves; and he seems to be committed to denying that farmers, metics, and other laborers can be citizens, proper “parts” of the political community, though they can be, in a way, supports. The difficulty arises because the more expansive, or less stringent, one takes *eudaimonia* to be, the harder it will be to explain how Aristotle could make the relevant denials. The point is straightforward: it requires much to explain how Aristotle could have denied that women and many others lack a general conception of choice-worthiness or valuable action; it requires (perhaps just slightly) less to explain why Aristotle could have made these embarrassing exclusions, exactly because the criterion that the excluded populations run afoul of is a criterion that is harder to pass.

Now I certainly do not mean to exculpate Aristotle here, as though his exclusions could be more than halfway intelligible to us now. But I do think that there are considerable challenges, anyway, in explaining Aristotle’s exclusions; a domesticated perfectionist account, like an account based in natural rights, amplifies these challenges.

8. David Wiggins rightly calls the restricted reading on offer “rigoristic,” insofar as Aristotle will now seem to be working with a conceptions of virtue and happiness that make the costs of virtuous activity, say, in the face of death or maiming, count for (almost) nothing, from the perspective of *eudaimonia*. And this point is magnified if we adopt the general framework that Aristotle does in the political sphere. For here the problem will be that political arrangements are to be judged only along the dimension of a thoroughly ethical conception of *eudaimonia*: if things go poorly along some other (say, “*hairetic*”) dimension of general desirability, this will not matter to the aims of the legislator, unless such losses can be seen to affect the ethical (say, “*prohairetic*”) dimension of *eudaimonia*. For the

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1 See Charles’s reply to Nussbaum; and, for the natural-rights approach, see Julia Annas, “Aristotle on Human Nature and Political Virtue.”

individual—non-political—case, Wiggins pointedly phrases the issue in this way:

The point I want to make is this: that almost everyone now feels that there is a problem about human beings dying in battle or soldiers being mutilated in war and living on for scores of years in misery and futility. [...] The loss they have sustained unnerves us, however heroically and selflessly we may know them to have been fighting when they sustained injury. Of course, it would help to make what has happened to them more bearable if we could see their heroic acts as something somehow gained, as something actually achieved in the name of eupraxia itself. We are not strangers to that thought. But does it afford all the consolation that Aristotle wants to suggest? How can even Aristotle’s listeners have felt no difficulty here?[^1]

Here I suggest that the kind of foreign-ness that Wiggins sees in Aristotle’s ethical thought should appear, with a vengeance, also in Aristotle’s political theory, especially as the costs of courage (or nobility in general) pile up in the way that makes sense of the notorious exclusions Aristotle seems content to make (§7). Of course, whatever exclusions that we might make, were we neo-Aristotelians, need not match up, thankfully, with Aristotle’s own. But the worry is structural: the question arises so long as we operate with two distinctive conceptions of desirability or choice-worthiness, marked, as I’ve suggested, by hairetic and prohairetic dimensions. The worry is put aptly by Michael Thompson:

A high-minded moralism was and is ready to oppose this constraint [i.e., that virtue benefit its bearer in more than a thoroughly ethicized way] together with the apparently empirical claim that fidelity considered as a hexis meets it. But

this moralism inevitably overlooks the specifically moral considerations that motivate these ideas: [...] the rejection of any such link is a confession that fidelity that works to the disadvantage of its bearer. It is thus also the confession that to bring someone up into such ‘virtue,’ to counsel its acts, is to injure her. How could that be any more respectable, morally speaking, than binding her feet?\footnote{1}

I do not mean to endorse Thompson’s implicit critique of McDowell’s Aristotle. But I think it raises a crucial challenge for a certain conception of “virtue ethics.” Wiggins’s remarks and Thompson’s questions bring this out. All the same, as Wiggins admits, this rigorism—or “high-minded moralism”—is, for the most part, Aristotle’s. If this is right, then Nussbaum’s Aristotle is a profitable but inauthentic domestication.

What’s interesting, however, is that there remains a real sense in which Wiggins’s point, if transplanted to the political sphere, finds a natural response. Many people, or at least political theorists, do not evaluate political arrangements by reference merely to standards of general desirability or welfare-promotion. The world in which things go best need not be the world in which things go with justice; and a set of political institutions may be legitimate and therefore authoritative even if they fail by standards of well-being or human perfection. I hazard the thought that what Aristotle marked by the concept of the noble is now marked, at least analogously in the political sphere, by conceptions of legitimacy.

9. I began this paper by scrutinizing a small patch of Rawls’s discussion of Aristotle. That occasioned a deeper look at the sense in which Aristotle would not, in Rawlsian terms, count as a perfectionist. But my arguments against Nussbaum’s interpretation find a home in that context, too.

\footnote{1 Michael Thompson, \textit{Life and Action}, 154.}
Nussbaum contrasts her reading of Aristotle with Rawls’s conception of the good. By her lights, Rawls errs in having too thin a conception; what’s need, on her view, is a thicker—Aristotelian—account of what it means for one to flourish. But that suggests that the argument raised in §1 should have downstream applications; for, if what really distinguishes Rawls from Nussbaum’s Aristotle is the thickness of the conception, then Striker’s insistence against reading Aristotle in a seemingly Rawlsian way finds a target in Nussbaum’s interpretation. But that is just another way of stating my claim that Aristotle’s conception of the human good includes—and is to be identified with—a moralized conception of virtue.