

TEXTUAL NOTE

The following abbreviations for works from the Aristotelian corpus are occasionally employed: DA = *De Anima*; EE = *Eudemian Ethics*; MM = *Magna Moralia*; Met = *Metaphysics*; NE = *Nicomachean Ethics*; Pol = *Politics*; and Rh = *Rhetoric*. In speaking of the “*Ethics*,” I mean to include not only the *Nicomachean* but also the *Eudemian* writings; and, deferring to tradition, I shall mark the “common books” of the *Ethics* (NE V–VII = EE VI–VIII) as parts of NE, without prejudice.

Unless otherwise noted, all translations of Aristotle are taken from either the Clarendon Aristotle Series (= CAS) or the Revised Oxford Translation (= ROT), with minor modifications for style and consistency; of course, specific references to Aristotle employ Bekker’s system. (For the ROT, see Aristotle (1995a); for the CAS, see Aristotle (1995b; 1995c; 1999b; 1997; 2006).) I occasionally insert transliterated Greek for crucial terms, sometimes recast in the nominative or as nominalized verbs; with a few exceptions noted below, the Greek follows the Oxford Classical Texts, whether Ross’s of Pol (Aristotle (1957)) or Bywater’s of NE (Aristotle (1894)). In line with the typical practice of Anglophone scholars, I follow the chapter divisions of NE given by Bywater.

I sometimes translate *eudaimonia* by “happiness,” but this can be misleading, for well-known reasons. Of course, that these reasons are so well known suggests that not many will now be misled: a happy thought. But, as will become clearer below, the term is perhaps best translated by “success,” since Aristotelian *eudaimonia*, at least in the human case, is a special kind of achievement in and through action, without a clear connection to terms equivalent in meaning, as they fall from our lips, to “well-being” or “welfare” or “benefit.” “Flourishing”—the other main rival

to “happiness”—implies, I think, too close a connection to ethically neutral or quasi-biologistic conceptions of *eudaimonia*. And so I will often forbear from translating *eudaimonia* at all.

EPIGRAPHS

We must enjoin everyone who has the power to live according to his own choice to set up for himself some target for noble living to aim at, whether honor or reputation or wealth or culture, with reference to which he will then do all his actions, since not to have one's life organized in view of some end is a mark of much folly.

ARISTOTLE, *Eudemian Ethics*

Our purpose is to consider what form of political community is best of all for those able to realize their ideal of life.

ARISTOTLE, *Politics*

A man got to have a code.

OMAR LITTLE, *The Wire*

0 Introduction

0.1

This is mainly a dissertation about Aristotle, and even more centrally about a certain intersection between his *Ethics* and *Politics*. Its topic can be captured by reflection on a well-known passage from the latter work:

The *polis* is a community [*koinonia*] of like persons, and it exists for the sake of the best possible life. And, since happiness [*eudaimonia*] is the highest good, as the perfect employment and activity of virtue [*aretēs energeia*], which some can share in, while others can have little or none of it, the various qualities of men are clearly the reason why there are various kinds of *polis* and many forms of constitution [*politeias*]; for different men hunt after [*thēreuontes*] happiness in different ways and by different means, and so make for themselves different modes of life and forms of constitution [*bious heterous poiountai kai tas politeias*]. (Pol VII.viii 1328a35–b2)

All that follows constitutes a sustained meditation on the claims Aristotle makes in this passage. What does it mean for us to “hunt after happiness”?¹ And to hunt after it “in different ways and by different means”? How can we hunt after happiness but sometimes come to “have little or none of it”? What are the conditions under which one *cannot* be said to be hunting after happiness at all?

These are questions whose salience arises most obviously in cases of individual action. But Aristotle surely means to connect these topics with an explanatory claim that seems much wider in scope; for facts about the different ways in which humans seek happiness are supposed to explain the diversity that marks the political commu-

¹ Of course, Aristotle’s deep prejudices—whether sexist, racist, ethnic, or classist—against most of humanity stand in the way of characterizing his thought as speaking directly to *us* and to *our* efforts at becoming *eudaimōn*. But he surely means for his discussions of *eudaimonia* to apply to the set of human beings of whom so-called “first potentiality” for *phronēsis* (“practical wisdom”) can be rightly predicated. (On the Aristotelian notion of grades of potentiality and actuality, see DA 412a and 417a). I assume that we can, with excusable violence, extend Aristotle’s thinking to our own predications to a set much wider than Aristotle could have imagined.

nities with which he is familiar. But what is the shape of the kind of explanation he suggests? Political communities can of course differ in a number of respects, the awesome variety of which the *Politics* frequently, and sometimes tiresomely, underscores. So which respects are supposed to be illuminated by an appeal to the diversity of ways in which we seek *eudaimonia*? What are the relevant descriptions of a *polis*'s "mode of life" and its "form of constitution"? In what sense is the *polis* a "community" oriented towards the "best possible life," the life of *eudaimonia*?

Raising the above questions goes some way in fixing my topic, and in explaining my title. But it will be instructive to explore how my questions speak, not only to the interpretation of Aristotle, but also to questions of politics that are, I think, of wider concern.¹

It is easy to assume that political institutions stand conceptually apart from the intentional actions of those in their net, as though they are a mere frame or channel for what is theoretically separable: a set of rules or procedures whose understanding does not require an appeal to any particular sort of intention on the part of those who navigate within its confines. An analogy can be given by the idea that the rules of basketball settle whether any particular person is playing it, with the effect that someone can be playing basketball without taking herself to be doing so, or without taking herself to be doing so for any particular kind of reason: reasons of exercise and health can stand on all fours with reasons of pride and competition. The crucial question, then, is whether her actions, no matter her intention, conform to whatever

¹ Many of the possibilities entertained below are discussed in slightly different—and usually jurisprudential—forms by Schapiro (2001). Meta-ethical worries pressed by versions of these possibilities are examined in McDowell (1998h; 1998d). And I hope it will be obvious that the descriptions below are inspired by the targets on which Winch (2008), MacIntyre (1971), and Taylor (1985) variously set their sights.

the rules pick out.¹ A more political example might involve the idea that a law counts as democratic so long as its pedigree, its causal history, conforms to some privileged set of procedures, no matter the aims with which some sued for its passage: reasons of domination can stand on all fours with reasons of benevolence. The crux is its procedural pedigree.²

It is also possible to think of political action as conceptually circumscribed by an action's causal future, regardless of the question of rules or procedures. On this view, an action is political in virtue of its effect on some domain of more or less concrete phenomena. So an action is political only insofar as it will effect some change, of whatever magnitude is relevant, in some familiar family of events: matters of war and peace; the distribution of property; the regulation of speech, or of domestic life, or of sexual behavior.³

Now, of course, the preceding conception is radically over-stringent. We are likely to think that an action is political even when it ends up changing nothing within whatever domain we take to be appropriate. There can be *useless* political action.

¹ I certainly mean for this kind of example to be suggested by Rawls (1999). But it is hard to tell how exactly to fit Rawls's discussion into this context. For Rawls, "what is meant by saying that the practice is logically prior to particular cases is this: given any rule which specifies a form of action (a move), a particular action which would be taken as falling under this rule given that there is the practice would not be *described as* that sort of action unless there was the practice" (25). So it's clear that some actions "logically" depend on a practice and its rules, insofar as that practice is necessary for the availability of certain action-descriptions. But there are two difficulties that relate to the possibilities outlined in the main text here. The first is what else must be involved for the relevant action-descriptions to be made available. E.g., can one be playing basketball without knowing one is? The second is how to characterize, then, what an agent takes herself to be doing, in performing whatever falls under the relevant action-description. E.g., if one thinks one is playing basketball, what is one thinking when one is playing basketball? How did one come to employ the relevant concepts? For a critical discussion of these matters that diverges from Schapiro's treatment of Rawls (1999), see Thompson (2008, Part Three).

² This line of thought is inspired by the kind of position limned in Waldron (1998).

³ MacIntyre (1971) scrutinizes various assumptions behind this sort of approach to political analysis.

But we can easily adapt the conception so as to take on the point; for perhaps all that's needed is that the action be only likely to effect some change, or that the action pass some probability threshold. Or perhaps we can even allow, in a very schematic way, the mental life of agents to enter into the conception—perhaps an agent must *think* of some action as effective, or as probably effective, or as sufficiently effective, along some dimension. The important point is that the relevant dimension, the relevant domain, is not supposed to be itself circumscribed by an agent's intentions. Presumably, matters of war and peace can be affected by action undertaken for reasons of health and exercise, or for no reason at all. All the same, it can count as political action.

Further, we might think of political action as a modest form of collective action, in the following sense: political action as just a more or less complex assemblage of individual actions, whether intentional or not. On this view, political action can be again understood without reference to the intentions of its agents. Or, on a modified version of this view, we can allow intentional action into the picture, but only in a kind of limited way. Here, on the modification, collective action does not *itself* bear an intentional structure. That structure stops at the level of individual agents: if there is collective action, then it is just “a very complicated case of acting alone,” even if we admit that acting alone must be a form of acting intentionally.¹

I think there is a way of reading the passage with which we began as speaking to these possibilities, and indeed as setting its face against them. Aristotle seems to mark out the core features of political life as in some sense explained by a distinctive sort of action, action undertaken for special reasons and in expression of a special

¹ Laurence (2011a, 271). I think that an approach of this kind characterizes most discussions of so-called “collective-action problems.” The idea is that certain undesirable results obtain when individual agents act rationally, in some minimalist sense. “Collective action” just is, then, an event or process whose understanding requires only the kinds of terms suitable for characterizing rational action on an individual level.

kind of intention: actions that “hunt after happiness.” The idea seems to be that we are to understand our political practices—our “different modes of life and forms of constitution”—as delimited by this distinctive type of intentional action.¹ But, once this is our picture, there seems no reason to suppose that our political practices are not themselves distinctive forms of collective action, something more than just the mere byproducts of individual action. It may be that it is *in* hunting after happiness that we make up our “many forms of constitution,” just as it is *in* undertaking political, and so collective, action that we hunt after happiness.

Now, if the reading I have just sketched appears to put into place an attractive conception of political life, or at least an interesting alternative to its contrasts, then the questions posed by our passage are questions for us as much as they are for Aristotle. What answers shall I urge?

As this Introduction unfolds, a more explicit picture of the positions favored here will come into view. For now, though, a different route will help us to enter into this dissertation’s topic: I want to make a fresh start somewhat far afield, having armed myself with a few somewhat rustic thoughts.

0.2

On a natural way of reflecting on the things we do, some of them *cannot* be done unless we think we’re doing them.² Presumably, making a promise requires thinking that one is doing just that; presumably, I am telling a lie only if I think I am; presumably, you are not getting married unless you believe you are. And, at least in focal cases,

¹ We can already see this feature of Aristotle’s thought as the central theme of *Politics* I, where the goal is to isolate properly *political* excellence from the kinds of excellence that belong to other forms of authority. See Laurence (2011b). But the issues of Book I of the *Politics* will not be stressed below, except in a few indirect ways.

² See Anscombe (2000, §47).

murdering someone seems to require the thought that one is oneself killing another.¹ If these appearances are allowed to stand, we can say that some of the things we do are *thought-dependent*, in the following rough sense: they fall under certain concepts only if their agents take them so to fall. It seems, then, that some of our actions depend—in some strict, perhaps even modal, sense—on the kinds of thoughts we have.² But will the appearances stand?³

Of course, some might reasonably balk at my choice of examples. Perhaps one can get married while utterly inebriated, as many television comedies suggest. All the same, what’s needed for my purposes at this point is just the facial intelligibility of the rough idea of thought-dependent action. Different examples, cast under varying

¹ I have put these examples in the *progressive*—promise-making and lie-telling, marrying and murdering—as things one might be *doing*, even though the natural bit of reflection with which I began picks out actions in the *perfect*, as things *done*. But, if the usual ways of formulating the idea of so-called “basic action” are fundamentally mistaken, as I think they are, this should cut no ice: having done something requires having been doing it. See Thompson (2011) and Lavin (2013a). I discuss this claim more fully in §1 below.

² I do not mean to enter into a technical discussion of *modality*; rather, it is enough to mark out the relevant sense of dependence as more stringent than both the probabilistic and the merely physical sorts: in the course of human events, one is not likely, nor perhaps even physically able, to succeed at certain complex tasks, like croissant-making, if one does not mean to do them. A successful instance of French pastry is rarely entirely accidental; and, for all I know, it might be physically impossible so to produce a superlative croissant. For all that, an accidental but superlative croissant still seems at least *conceivable*. The natural thought, then, is that the stringency we need is modal. But there is a weaker form of stringency that might nevertheless do the trick: call it, not modality, but rather *Aristotelian focality*, which appeals to a thing’s *essence*, something that might be nonetheless only poorly captured in modal talk. See Boyle (2012).

³ It might be objected that this last example, that of *murdering*, fails to illustrate the idea of thought-dependence as I have admittedly roughly phrased it: since murdering seems not to be the same thing as killing, then, even if murdering requires the thought that one is killing, murdering might not be dependent on the agent’s thought about her action *as such*, even in what I take to be focal cases. But, in those cases, murdering not only entails killing but also seems conceptually posterior to it. A more rigorous formulation of the notion of thought-dependence might run, then, as follows: some of our actions fall under certain concepts only if their agents either take them so to fall or take them to fall under their conceptual priors. (See Anscombe (1963).) This seems attractive enough, at least for a start; but I’m not sure whether it is entirely satisfactory. At any rate, I don’t think that what follows depends on this complication.

descriptions, might resonate more or less widely, from *castling* while playing chess to *preparing* an intimate dinner for two. I trust that some such example will bear the needed weight.

Now, whether or not we ourselves cotton on to some favorable example, a less natural—because more academic—stretch of reflection might suggest taking the idea of thought-dependent action quite seriously. For that idea, or something very close to it, is what Hume means to pick out in his famous doctrine that justice is an “artificial” virtue, and is implicated in Kant’s fundamental thesis that the will is a rational being’s power to act according to its conception of laws.¹ Academic humility might require the stance that an obviously unintelligible idea couldn’t have so centrally attracted the attention of people like Hume and Kant.

These appeals to authority will not stand in the way of balking at our starting idea, if that idea is misapprehended so as to be confused with a much starker view, according to which an agent’s thought is sufficient for certain actions to fall under certain concepts, whatever we are to say about thought-dependent action. This starker view—that of *thought-sufficiency*—holds that an agent’s thought itself settles, and perhaps even makes true, some typical descriptions of what she does: in a word, that thinking so makes it so, in an apparently mysterious act of mental christening. Here some of our cases will come to seem like obvious counterexamples. Presumably, you have not made a promise to your landlord, no matter what you think, if all the world takes you to have been sleepwalking; presumably, I am not castling, if there isn’t a chessboard in sight. The bare idea of thought-sufficiency is a more radical view, since it seems patent that, for much of what we do, certain circumstances must be in place. *Action needs equipment*, we might say. So cottoning on to gripping examples, and

¹ See Hume (1978, III.ii.1–2) and Kant (1964, 412). On Hume, see Anscombe (1969; 1978); Wiggins (1996); and Ford (2011). On Kant, see Roedl (2010; 2011); and Schapiro (2001).

to the right sorts of action-concepts, will here be more difficult. If we are allowed to consider it an action, perhaps something like *waiting for the bus* approaches plausibility. At any rate, I want to mark out this kind of view, neither to defend it at this early stage nor merely to set it aside, but rather to reserve it for further examination, as we shall see.

Between the more familiar idea of an action's thought-dependence and the perhaps puzzling view of an action's thought-sufficiency lies the notion of its *knowledge-dependence*, a notion which will be familiar to readers of G.E.M. Anscombe's *Intention*. On a modest formulation of this latter position, certain actions require, not only that their agents represent them in thought, but also that they *knowledgeably* do so. If we stick with our cases, this notion will suggest that you are marrying someone only if you know that you are, and that I am not lying unless I know that I am. If this is right, then certain actions cannot be done *accidentally*: there must be knowledge, not just the kind of truth owed to the grace of fortune.

For now, we can leave open many of the vexing details about what it takes for one to qualify as more than a mere *thinker* but as a *knower*.¹ But it should be clear enough that, if one knows, then what one knows, and thereby thinks, is true: this is just the traditional "factive" requirement on knowledge. And, of course, this requirement also makes plain the equivalence between the idea of knowledge-dependence and that of *knowledge-sufficiency*, according to which an action falls under a certain concept if its agent knows it so falls. For, again, if one knows, then what is known is true. Now, then, it should also be clear how close the notion of knowledge-dependence is to the

¹ Is knowledge, as the jargon has it, merely *justified true belief*? But hasn't Gettier shown up this common thought? Or must the relevant sort of justification be—as John McDowell has everywhere argued—*indefeasible*? But what kind of justification could be so robust as to be *incapable* of incorrectness? (See, e.g., McDowell (1998b).) These difficult matters have long plagued Anglophone epistemologists, but nothing here depends, I think, on their resolution.

idea of thought-dependence. On the latter, for the relevant sort of action, what one thinks is true: as you're getting married, you not only think you are but also *truly* so think, since you are, after all, getting married. So the idea of thought-dependence goes some distance towards the notion of knowledge-dependence. But of course it does not go all the way there, so long as there is more to knowledge than satisfaction of the factive requirement, as everyone should, I suppose, accept. And, for the same reason, the notion of knowledge-dependence might not go all the way towards the more radical view of thought-sufficiency: knowing so makes it so, but thinking so can come apart from knowing so, even when what one thinks is true.

I mentioned above that the notion of knowledge-dependence should be a familiar theme to readers of Anscombe. So will the other positions just canvassed. Insofar as Anscombe commits herself to the controversial claim that *all* intentional actions are knowledge-dependent, she commits herself to the claim that they are all thought-dependent, since knowledge implies thought.¹ And an Anscombean extension of knowledge-dependence will seem at least *extensionally* similar, and perhaps even equivalent, to a generalized conception of thought-sufficiency. For, if thought-sufficiency is generally true, it will be hard to see how its explanation will not be committed to a general form of knowledge-dependence: if one is a reliable thinker over some non-arbitrary domain of contents, one will seem to be a knower with respect to that kind of domain. Indeed, some neo-Anscombeans have recently defended what appears to be a more or less radical version of that kind of position.² Still, as I said, Anscombe's thesis is widely controversial.

¹ See Anscombe (2000, §8) for the idea's debut. But of course that idea, alongside its implications and the sense in which such knowledge is *non-observational*, is the central and recurring thesis of the entire work.

² See, e.g., Roedl (2010; 2011). For a modest and largely sympathetic critique, see McDowell (2010).

0.3

Luckily, what follows does not aim to defend in any full way either Anscombe’s central contention or even some modest formulations of any of the quasi-Anscombean positions I have briefly suggested.¹ Rather, one main goal of what follows is to make out the proposal that core elements of Aristotle’s ethical and political thought can be illuminated by attending to those quasi-Anscombean possibilities from §0.2: roughly,

that *eudaimonia* and—equivalently—acting virtuously are knowledge-dependent;²
that virtuous action can variously fail to be captured by these categories;
and that a special kind of action—*prohairesis* action, which Aristotle often marks by a technical use of the term *praxis*—is knowledge-dependent and in a special sense thought-sufficient, too.³

This goal is a lucky one, because the demand to mount a full defense of any of our quasi-Anscombean positions should lapse. It will be no major part of what follows to claim that some of what we do is thought-dependent, or thought-sufficient,

¹ For clarity’s sake, I shall distinguish Anscombe’s central contention that all intentional action is knowledge-dependent, on the one hand, from what I refer to as our “quasi-Anscombean” claims, or possibilities, or categories, on the other. The difference is that the latter are not general in scope: they are supposed to apply to *some* of our intentional actions, not necessarily all of them.

² It *should* be uncontroversial to say that, for Aristotle, *eudaimonia* simply is, for those capable of it, a life made up of as many instances of *acting virtuously* as possible—perhaps above a certain threshold. But this core element of Aristotle’s thought is often met with considerable skepticism. See §2 below.

³ How is *acting virtuously* distinct from *virtuous action*? Making out the answer and its crucial importance will be a major theme of what follows. For now, we can, following Aristotle, hint at an answer by picking out the latter as the object of thought about *what* the virtuous agent would do, and by picking out the former as the object of thought about the *way* the virtuous agent would do it. See NE II.iv; and also Prichard (1912, 27). In a perhaps overly simple but helpful phrasing, we can say that an action is virtuous if the virtue-relevant facts tell conclusively or perhaps just sufficiently in its favor; and that an action is virtuously done only if it is virtuous, in the previous sense, and only if the considerations on which its agent acts are in some sense primarily those which make it the virtuous thing to do, in the previous sense. For the importance of a distinction similar to the one hinted at here, see Scanlon (2008, esp. Chapter 1).

or knowledge-dependent—let alone the bold Anscombean claim that all intentional action is knowledge-dependent. (However, I shall soon turn to a provisional defense of these positions, in §1.) What’s needed is rather a case for the idea that *Aristotle takes certain kinds of action to fall variously into the categories just sketched.*

0.4

But even this way of putting things might mislead, and in a number of ways. It will be helpful to explore at least three such ways, not only to clarify what’s at stake, but also to impose some discipline on the terminology I shall employ as the project unfolds.

First, some of the interpretative claims I’ve just raised will at first glance seem both familiar and perhaps even obvious. It should come as no surprise to hear that Aristotelian *eudaimonia*, for instance, is no mere gift of fortune, and that it at least requires *phronēsis*, which is a kind of knowledge.¹ But the sense, on my view, in which it requires phronetic knowledge—and is therefore knowledge-dependent—is special, and often overlooked by commentators. For it comes naturally to us, I suppose, to think of phronetic knowledge, even on Aristotle’s lips, as mere knowledge about *what one should do*. “Practical wisdom is the knowledge or understanding that enables its possessor, unlike the nice adolescen[t], to do just that [i.e., “the right thing”], in any given situation.”² Of course, Aristotelian *eudaimonia* will somehow involve such knowledge. But, on the reading I mount here, that is only part of the story; for phronetic knowledge, as Aristotle means it, is essentially a kind of knowledge about

¹ I don’t mean to say anything controversial by calling *phronēsis* a kind of knowledge. All that’s needed is the idea that it is an at least partially cognitive sensitivity that is also supremely, and perhaps even infallibly, reliable; and of course Aristotle will not deny so little as that. See NE VI; and McDowell (1998h).

² Hursthouse (2013).

what one is doing. It is knowledge about a *material* process, about something that *happens*; it is about the kind of agent one is *as one acts*, just as it is about the actions one undertakes *as one exercises one's powers as an agent*. In the sense I've just sketched, to say that *eudaimonia* is knowledge-dependent is to say that, in acting virtuously, one must know what one is doing. This is plainly distinct from the claim that one is not *eudaimōn* unless one knows what one should do, even if everyone agrees that this latter kind of knowledge is necessary both for acting virtuously and for *eudaimonia*. The distance between these kinds of claims is at least as far as that between the knowledge that one should get married and the knowledge that one is getting married. Television comedies notwithstanding, perhaps getting married requires both pieces of knowledge; but they certainly seem to be distinct pieces.

Our attraction to the idea that phronetic knowledge must be knowledge-dependent in a sense *different* from the one I mean, as knowledge merely about what one should do, is held out by Anscombe as a kind of modern prejudice. In a famous passage, she issues the following rebuke:

Can it be that there is something modern philosophy has blankly misunderstood: namely what ancient and medieval philosophers meant by *practical knowledge*? Certainly in modern philosophy we have an incorrigibly contemplative conception of knowledge. Knowledge must be something that is judged as such by being in accordance with the facts. The facts, reality, are prior, and dictate what is to be said, if it is knowledge. And this is the explanation of the utter darkness in which we found ourselves.¹

Now it might seem odd to class knowledge about what one *should* do—knowledge about the *normative*, we shall say—as “contemplative,” as I mean to do, following Anscombe. Surely, the normative, it will be protested, stands opposed to the contemplative. But the answer lies in Anscombe’s idea of contemplative knowledge as “in accordance with the facts,” where “the facts are prior” to what is knowledgeable “to

¹ Anscombe (2000, §32).

be said.” It is this kind of contemplative knowledge that Anscombe contrasts with the kind of “practical knowledge” that remains “blankly misunderstood.”

However, before proceeding to discuss the sense in which normative knowledge is contemplative, we should raise two pieces of terminological discipline. First, in some non-Aristotelian contexts, I shall contrast contemplative knowledge with practical knowledge in the way Anscombe does. But this contrast is not always exactly the same as Aristotle’s contrast, as it falls from his lips, between the contemplative and the practical, nor between theoretical wisdom or knowledge, on the one hand, and practical wisdom or knowledge (*phronēsis*), on the other, as we shall see. So, then, our second bit of discipline: to mark the difference between Aristotelian practical knowledge and Anscombean practical knowledge, I’ll often reserve, where possible, the term *phronetic knowledge* for those contexts in which Aristotle’s translators usually speak of “practical wisdom,” as I did at the start of §0.4. Where this is not possible, I will speak of *Aristotelian* practical knowledge, in contrast to *Anscombean* practical knowledge, as I have just done.

To resume. On the modern prejudice, withdrawing practical knowledge—as that is understood on “an incorrigibly contemplative conception”—from some putatively virtuous agent will fail to impugn what would have been known, were the agent practically wise. For instance, it is no mark against the claim that justice demands that I now return a borrowed sword that I fail to know what justice here requires. The normative claim is not itself threatened by the fact that the agent to which it applies lacks knowledge of it. This kind of contemplative stance towards the normative has it that what we should do stands apart from the fact that we possess, in the happy case, or lack, in the unhappy case, knowledge about what we should do. In this sense, then, the normative is independent of the knowledgeable state that marks the happy case; for, when we come to gain normative knowledge, what we know does not hang

on our having gained knowledge. In a slogan: *you can take away the knowledge while leaving the reality*. That is because the “facts” and the “reality” are “prior.”

Of course, for some potential pieces of knowledge, our slogan is beyond reproach. Trees fall, whether I know so or not; cakes get baked, sometimes accidentally; and justice issues its demands, no matter my grasp of its requirements. These all seem to be things one can come to know, in a familiar enough sense. Anscombe and her readers, among others, have given various labels to the kind of knowledge that bears that sense and so fits our slogan: *contemplative*, or *speculative*, or *receptive*, or even *passive*.¹ And the slogan certainly seems to fit certain kinds of objects: falling trees, accidental cakes, the demands of justice. I accept that this is all right.

The modern prejudice, as I have taken to calling it, is rather the assumption that there is no kind of knowledge other than the contemplative or speculative sort. It is the assumption that, in the sense just glimpsed, the receptive or passive way is the only way for knowledge to be what it is. To apply this prejudice to a reading of Aristotle would then be to think, for instance, that Aristotle’s notion of *phronēsis* can be nothing other than a special kind of contemplative knowledge, one whose objects have, for all that, a normative shape.

But what might an alternative, non-contemplative kind of knowledge be like? And what stands in the way of elevating this modern prejudice into a form of sheer sanity? Unfortunately, a full reply to these two questions extends beyond the scope of this project. (But see §1 below.) As I’ve mentioned, my focus is the light that

¹ McDowell (2011) raises an important qualification. On his view, while the contrast between practical knowledge and contemplative or theoretical knowledge is exhaustive, non-practical knowledge need not be speculative or receptive or passive. His examples are the knowledge we have of our limb positions and of our more narrow psychical states. But nothing that follows hangs on McDowell’s more fine-grained distinctions; the primary and exhaustive one is what interests me. And so I shall take our labels for the non-practical as equivalent, as a terminological choice.

our quasi-Anscombean positions can shed on the interpretation of Aristotle, though I certainly hope that, over the course of what follows, a facially plausible reply will come into view. Still, it will help to say a few more words even now about the kind of knowledge that I think is often overlooked by Aristotle's commentators, the kind of knowledge that sets its face against our modern prejudice. These additional remarks will lead into a treatment of the second way in which the reader might be misled by my initial statement of this dissertation's goal.

The contrasting sort of knowledge must be a kind of knowledge that is internal to what is known. In a different slogan: *if you take away the knowledge, then you take away the reality*. For the reality depends on the knowledge of what is known; the "facts" are not independent or "prior." Again, if we stick with our initial cases, the idea will be that, if one does not know that one is promising, then one isn't doing so; that, if I do not know that I am getting married, then I am not marrying anyone at all. And, in the Aristotelian case that I have singled out, if I do not know that I am being *eudaimōn*, or that I am acting virtuously, then I am not, anyway, attaining *eudaimonia*.

As I mentioned above (§0.2), knowledge-dependence as it is meant here implies knowledge-sufficiency. This will lead us to suppose that, if there can be a non-contemplative form of knowledge, it will have to be a form that indeed *constitutes* the reality that is supposed to be known. In this sense, some action falls under a particular concept *in virtue of its agent's knowledge that it does so*. This is because we have been led, first, to the idea that the relevant kind of knowledge is both necessary and sufficient for what is known, an idea that already suggests *identity*; and, second, to the idea that, if there is non-contemplative knowledge, what is known is not prior to, or independent of, the knowledgeable state. So we are left with the odd idea that a kind of knowing just is a kind of doing. As Douglas Lavin

has crystallized the thought, “the subject’s awareness of her own activity is agential awareness, an awareness that does not merely recognize but determines the order, and thus the progress, it comprehends.”¹ To adopt a loose and non-Aristotelian idiom: non-contemplative knowledge will be a distinctively *productive* or *creative* form of knowledge, one that, borrowing from Aquinas, Anscombe telegraphically describes as “‘the cause of what it understands,’ unlike ‘speculative’ knowledge, which is ‘derived from the objects known.’”² It is this kind of knowledge—as productive or creative or *practical*—that “modern philosophy has blankly misunderstood.”

Now how can this odd sort of knowledge be so much as even possible? Can more be said, besides gesturing at some more or less controversial examples?

0.5

In §1, I shall indeed try to say more in the way of taking seriously the idea of a non-contemplative—and so specially *practical* or *productive* or *creative*—form of knowledge. Here, though, I want already to raise the suspicion that, however attractive some particular example might be, the appearances must be illusory: nothing more than *mere* appearance. For, whatever else they might be, knowing and thinking are ways of applying concepts. But how can a stretch of concept-application *constitute* an action? How can a stretch of that kind itself characterize a *material* process, which is after all something that *happens* in what we might be tempted to call a *public* world?

One way of phrasing this difficulty is to mark the truism that “one can simply fail to do what one means to do, or do something quite other than what one takes

¹ Lavin (2013b).

² Anscombe (2000, §48), citing Aquinas. (See *Summa Theologiae*, IaIIae: Q3.a5; see also I: Q14.a16.) For a powerful and radical interpretation of Anscombe’s thought in this area, see Roedl (2010); and, as a slight antidote, McDowell (2010). But, for difficulties about Aquinas’s contrast between the practical and the speculative, see McDowell (2011); and 14 fn. 1 above.

oneself to be doing.”¹ But, if that is as truistic as it sounds, then a stretch of concept-application cannot bear a constitutive relation to a stretch of doing. For what kind of constitutive relation could that be? Familiar relations of that kind will resist the application of forms of our truism. In the general case, for instance, if being an unmarried male constitutes being a bachelor, then one cannot be a bachelor without being an unmarried male. And, in the particular case, if mixing flour here and now constitutes baking a cake, then, here and now, baking a cake must be mixing flour. Moreover, it will seem of no help to appeal to a stretch of concept-application that we privilege by calling it “knowledge,” since, so long as you can be a bachelor without my knowing it, then there will be no prospect of some constitutive relation between my knowing, when I do, on the one hand, and what it is that I know, when I do, on the other.

Now perhaps there are cases in which a stretch of concept-application is indeed invulnerable to some form of our truism. But these cases seem to be convincing only in a contrasting *private* realm of merely, or apparently merely, mental phenomena. Perhaps it is plausible to say, as many have, that thinking so is enough to know that one thinks so; and that feeling pain is enough to know that one is in pain;² and that

feeling a sensation is not a reality separate from knowing that one feels it, a reality that makes it itself known by affecting the subject. There is affection of the senses in feeling the sensation, but there is not an extra affection in being aware that one feels it.³

So, of the things that happen, some of them—the private ones—might be dependent on bits of concept-application. Maybe the bare idea of knowledge-dependence is, in cases of these sorts, entirely familiar and even indisputable. But how far into the

¹ Moran (2004, 44).

² See Wittgenstein (1965, 66–67); and Moran (2001, esp. Chapter 2).

³ McDowell (2011, 143).

public world can the application of knowledge-dependence extend?¹

This kind of picture might then raise a problem for the way I have so far stated even this dissertation's *exegetical* goal. Recall that my aim is to illuminate core elements of Aristotle's ethical and political thought by appealing to the quasi-Anscombean possibilities that have been our starting topic. But, whatever their ultimate philosophical credentials, these possibilities seem to stand at a considerable distance from the concerns that obviously animate Aristotle in his "philosophy of human affairs" (NE X.ix 1181b15).² For he urges, near the very beginning of NE, that, in his "lectures on political science [. . .], the end aimed at is not knowledge [*gnōsis*] but action [*praxis*]" (NE I.iii 1095a).³ So the problem will be that, insofar as Aristotle himself draws a central distinction between a kind of concept-application, on the one hand, and the genuine goal of what we find in the *Ethics* and *a fortiori* in the *Politics*, on the other, the idea of Anscombean practical knowledge will only very hardly be an illuminating resource on which to draw.

Further, it will seem extremely attractive to think that, if Aristotle's goal is "action"—and, as he says, "not to survey and recognize various things, but rather to do them" (NE X.ix 1179b1)—then the promise of the kind of study that constitutes his ethical and political reflections is to equip his audience with what what I've been calling normative knowledge: knowledge about what one should do. That is because it is easy to suppose that what often and centrally stands in the way of becoming

¹ For all their familiarity, it might remain a question of urgent philosophical interest still to explain how it is that ways of thinking, or of applying concepts, can themselves make true that which figures as the content of thought, even when only so-called private phenomena are in view. For work that has helped to initiate a whirlwind of impressive reflection in this area, see Moran (2001); and Roedl (2007).

² The ROT has "human nature," but the reference to "nature" here is a controversial emendation; translated literally, the text points rather to a "philosophy of the human."

³ See also EE I.v 1216b20–25.

virtuous, and acting virtuously, is precisely a failure along just that score. After all, we each want to be happy; the challenge *must* be getting straight on just what kinds of actions promote or instantiate *eudaimonia*. And, since we each want to do the just thing, the difficulty *must* be getting straight on the sorts of actions of which justice can be rightly predicated. In short, we want to do what we should. *But what should we do?* If we thirst, we thirst for normative knowledge.

0.6

Now there are at least two things to say in reply.

To start, the apparent difficulty just outlined takes on, by way of assumption, what I've dubbed the modern prejudice. This is because it will seem obvious that the missing piece must be normative knowledge only if our quasi-Anscombean possibilities are kept hidden from view. If there is such a thing as knowledge-dependent action, in the sense picked out by an appeal to the non-contemplative, then, so long as one's goal is action of that kind, one must come to be equipped with practical but non-normative knowledge, if there is to be action of that kind at all. This is a straightforward implication of the idea of knowledge-dependent action, and it is the point of calling Anscombean practical knowledge *constitutive* or *productive* or *creative*. Now, to be sure, when one is acting virtuously, then something like normative knowledge will be required. But admitting as much is a far cry from laying down the demand that it is *only* knowledge of this familiar kind that can be of ethical interest.

Moreover, it is available for us to point to Aristotle's repeated attempts to draw our attention to the goal of "action" as *themselves* good grounds for rejecting the idea that Aristotle must be saddled with anything close to the modern prejudice. As we shall see, the dissertation will make out various arguments for this rejection. But even

now we can raise doubts about the way our apparent difficulty handles its own texts. When Aristotle claims that his lectures seek not knowledge but action, the parallel he draws is between the man “young in years or youthful in character,” on the one hand, and the victim of *akrasia*—roughly, “weakness of will”—on the other (NE I.iii 1095a6). At first glance, what unites these two sorts of agent is that, for both of them, the *Nicomachean Ethics* will be “vain and unprofitable” (NE I.iii 1095a7). But what exactly is it that distinguishes the akratic from the virtuous, or halfway virtuous, agent? The answer, to be addressed at length below in §§2 and 3, is that the akratic fails to act on his *prohairesis*—roughly, his conception of *eudaimonia*—even though, for all that, he might in some sense know what *eudaimonia* and so virtue substantively demand. In other words, what marks the akratic, at least in the focal case, is *not* a kind of normative ignorance. Whatever else might be true of the akratic, it is neither necessary nor central that he gravely lack normative knowledge. Presumably, then, it is not a defect along that dimension that sparks Aristotle’s warning on the futility of lecturing to the “young.” If this right, there is strong reason to take Aristotle’s opening declaration about the goal of his efforts as a remark, less about the importance of normative knowledge, as about some *other* kind of knowledge, some kind *differently* essential to “action”: knowledge that, on the basis of the contrast with the akratic, we can call—and this is our third bit of terminological discipline—*prohairesis knowledge*. Already this shows the sense in which Aristotle seems far from attracted to anything like our modern prejudice about the forms of knowledge.

Indeed, as Aristotle shifts from the architectonic discussion of *eudaimonia* in NE I to a general treatment of virtue and the virtuous agent, he tells us that

since, then, the present inquiry does not aim at theoretical knowledge [*theoria*] like the others (for we are inquiring not in order to know what virtue is, but in order to become good, since otherwise our inquiry would have been of no use), we must examine the nature of actions [*praxeis*],

namely *how* we ought to do them.¹

(NE II.ii 1103b27–30)

This begins a difficult and important passage, and we shall have occasion to examine it as well as its context more thoroughly below. Here the least that can be said is that Aristotle exemplifies the kind of knowledge that is outside or only tangentially or indirectly related to his aims by referring to knowledge about virtue, and that he classifies that kind of knowledge as “theoretical,” or, alternatively, “contemplative.”² So, however inescapable “an incorrigibly contemplative conception of knowledge” might in the end be, it seems hardly compulsory for us to read into Aristotle’s thought a normative version of that conception. For he seems to set aside, not only the topic of what virtue is, but also the topic of *what* we should do, emphasizing instead *how* we should do whatever it is that we should do. Again, this already suggests that Aristotle’s main quarry is something other than normative knowledge, and that, whatever it is, it is both non-contemplative and specially essential to the kind of action that constitutes *eudaimonia*. But this suggests, too, that, where some action genuinely constitutes *eudaimonia*, there must be a special kind of practical knowledge, a species marked out by *phronēsis*: phronetic knowledge, as it is taken up in a non-contemplative register.³

At any rate, even if this is admitted, in what sense is this special kind of knowledge supposed to be non-contemplative, and so differently essential to *eudaimonia*-constituting action? This is a difficult question. At heart, it points back to the mere possibility of something other than “an incorrigibly contemplative conception of knowledge,” and so to the credentials of our modern prejudice. Answering it, at

¹ Emphasis added.

² In their edition of NE, Robert Bartlett and Susan Collins supply the latter, while Sarah Broadie and Christopher Rowe simplify theirs by giving just “theory.” See Aristotle (2011) and Aristotle (2002).

³ Recall the instruction of our second bit of terminological discipline, from §0.4.

least with respect to Aristotle, will everywhere occupy the pages that follow. Still, it should suffice to note that Aristotle himself seems to push us in the direction of taking our quasi-Anscombean possibilities seriously, insofar as his main topic is both a kind of action as well as a kind of non-normative and non-contemplative knowledge:

If, then, there is some end of the things we do [*praktōn*], which we desire for its own sake [...], and if we do not choose everything for the sake of something else [...], clearly this must be the good and the chief good. Will not knowledge [*gnōsis*] of it, then, have great influence on life? Shall we not, like archers who have a target [*skopon*] to aim at, be more likely to hit upon what we should? (NE I.ii 1094a19–25)

The natural thought is that possession of this form of knowledge relates to action in a way centrally different from the relation between action, on the one hand, and knowledge about virtue and virtuous action, on the other. What might that relation be? On the proposal here, as Aristotle himself seems to suggest, to come to know what virtue is, either in general or in any particular application, is “to survey and recognize various things” in a contemplative mode; but this seems to mean that a non-contemplative, and so practical, mode of knowledge is rather “to do” what in a different mode was merely up for surveyal and recognition.¹ It must be a form of knowledge that is constitutive or productive or creative—as we put it previously, in a non-Aristotelian idiom—in a way that normative knowledge is *not*. So the relation between action and non-contemplative knowledge seems to be—odd as it might sound—that of *identity*: insofar as Aristotle’s topic is action, that topic just *is* a distinctive kind of knowledge.²

We are now in a position to characterize a second way, at last, in which my initial

¹ See NE X.ix 1179b1, already cited.

² Where action is genuinely *eudaimonia*-constituting, we can speak *indifferently* of phronetic knowledge; and where action merely purports to be *eudaimonia*-constituting, we can nonetheless *indifferently* speak of a genuine form of knowledge: not phronetic knowledge, to be sure, but rather prohairetic knowledge.

statement of the goal of this dissertation might be misread. In stressing in §0.3 that some of Aristotle’s core ethical and political concepts fall into the quasi-Anscombean categories from §0.2, I do not mean to *deny* that Aristotle is concerned in *some* sense with supplying normative knowledge about what the various virtues demand. That would be both bizarre and foolish. Rather, in so stressing these features of Aristotle’s thought, features that I think he himself underscores, the dissertation proposes that, whatever value normative knowledge surely has, Aristotle’s *focus* is importantly on *the way we think* about what we do, and, equivalently, on *how we do* what we think we should. If this is right, how we represent our own actions figures ineliminably in his accounts of *eudaimonia*, acting virtuously, and prohairetic action.

Now what might this equivalence—between thought and action—come to? In a famous passage, often cited but everywhere under-weighted, Aristotle brings out the kind of focus to which I’ve just pointed:

If the acts that are in accordance with the virtues have themselves a certain character, it does not follow that they are done justly or temperately. The agent must be in a certain condition when he does them; in the first place, he must have knowledge; secondly, he must choose [*prohairoumenos*] them for their own sakes; and, thirdly, his action must proceed from a firm and unchangeable character. These are not reckoned as conditions of the possession of the crafts, except the bare knowledge; but, as a condition of the possession of the virtues, knowledge has little or no weight, while the other conditions count not for a little but for everything.

(NE II.iv 1105a28–b3)

Aristotle’s topic is what it takes for an action to be done virtuously, and what it takes for an action to be an expression of an agent’s virtue. This is one topic, since an action is done virtuously only if its agent is virtuous. The important point for us is that Aristotle strictly *minimizes* the role that some kind of knowledge is supposed to play: it has “little or no weight.” But what kind of knowledge is this? Whatever it is, it is the kind which specially characterizes the craftsman. But this strongly

suggests that it is a kind of normative knowledge: knowledge of what one should do. Of course, in the case of the craftsman, the knowledge he possesses is that of what he should do *to produce a good product*. But the fact that Aristotle is drawing on a similarity here between the craftsman and the virtuous agent, with respect to this knowledge condition, shows that the knowledge that carries “little or no weight” in the case of the virtuous agent must be similar in form: knowledge of what he should do *to do the virtuous thing*. Of course, this should not be understood as saying that normative knowledge is inessential. Rather, it is best read as a sign that Aristotle’s focus is elsewhere: as a sign that, by his lights, normative knowledge is either not that hard to come by—as presumably part of the natural development of the normal Greek male—or perhaps not something that ethical theorizing is fit to illuminate.¹ But what “counts for everything” is a firm characterological state that applies this normative knowledge in a certain way: it brings that normative knowledge under a prohairetic conception, a conception of *eudaimonia*, in such a way as to turn virtuous action into a case of acting virtuously for its own sake. In short, the virtuous agent must represent his action *as* an instance of *eudaimonia*, and perform that action precisely because he so represents it.

In this sense, then, normative knowledge, insofar as it is a topic of Aristotle’s *Ethics* and *Politics*, figures as a kind of secondary or ancillary topic. It will figure as a kind of *equipment*—necessary for *eudaimonia*, to be be sure—but mere equipment nonetheless.

Can even this concession, such as it is, square with the emphasis I mean to place? Indeed so. For it is no part of my aim to deny that action needs equipment. I have

¹ The preceding focus on this important passage has been much helped by Vasiliou (2007). For more on why Aristotle does not much delve into what we’d call normative and applied ethics, see Burnyeat (1980) and Vasiliou (1996).

in fact stressed that homely thought. A denial of this kind is no commitment of the claim that *eudaimonia* and acting virtuously are knowledge-dependent; nor is it presupposed by the idea that prohairesis action is knowledge-dependent and in a special sense thought-sufficient. After all, it is open to hold out the view that, if action needs equipment, then so do knowledge and even thought.¹ Making out a specification of this latter claim will occupy much of what follows. But, anyway, the idea that action needs equipment should not blind us to the fact that there can be more to a satisfying account than a treatment of equipment, especially when one's topic is—as Aristotle's almost everywhere seems to be—less what *merely* puts us in a position to be *eudaimōn* as much as what *eudaimonia* itself *is*.

0.7

There is a third refinement or clarification that my initial statement near the head of §0.3 must take on. (As we've seen, the first concerns the charge that my aim is merely to defend the admittedly unexciting claim that *eudaimonia* requires knowledge about virtue; and the second concerns the charge that my aim is at odds with Aristotle's own emphasis on “action,” and not “knowledge,” as the goal of his reflections.) I began, right at the start of §0.1, with the claim that this dissertation is *centrally* concerned with Aristotle's political thought, and not just his *Ethics*. But what will a concern with our quasi-Anscombean possibilities have to do with a work as animated by the provision of virtue's “equipment” as the *Politics* surely is?

This question raises an important challenge that I hope to meet. For I said that an Anscombean construal of practical knowledge, and of its related concepts, has often been overlooked by Aristotle's commentators. But that construal has not been *entirely*

¹ See, e.g., Putnam (1975); and McDowell (1998f; 1998c).

neglected, since there has long been interest in Aristotle’s notion of “practical truth” (NE VI.ii), at least along roughly Anscombean lines: as something “that is brought about, i.e. made true, by action.”¹ That interpretation appears in Anscombe’s slim monograph on intentional action, but its influence among readers of Aristotle finds its source in her famous paper on “Thought and Action in Aristotle,” first published in 1965; it was that paper that inaugurated for contemporary Aristotle scholarship the idea of thought-dependent action.² All the same, discussions of practical truth and practical knowledge, on an Anscombean construal, have usually been confined to narrow treatments of NE VI, where Aristotle focuses on *phronēsis* as opposed to the characterological virtues that have been his topic throughout NE II–V. These discussions rarely make contact with the *general* shape of Aristotle’s ethical thought, setting aside both the question of Aristotle’s eudaimonism, as it appears in the foundational issues of NE I, as well as the question of the virtuous agent, as he is examined in NE II.³ Situating our quasi-Anscombean possibilities amid a general discussion of Aristotle’s *Ethics* will be a major goal of this dissertation.

Now what about the *Politics*? Something similar, then, deserves to be said in reply. For, if the idea of knowledge-dependent action has been kept largely hidden in discussions of Aristotle’s *Ethics*, then it is all the more absent in treatments of his more pragmatic inquiries in the *Politics*. So, again, bringing out the central importance of knowledge-dependent and even thought-sufficient action for understanding Aristotle’s

¹ Anscombe (1977, 71). As the stock of Anscombe’s *Intention* has risen, so has that of the idea of Anscombean practical truth in Aristotle, it seems. For the importance of something along Anscombe’s lines, at least for Aristotle scholarship, see Broadie and Rowe’s edition of NE (Aristotle (2002)); Lear (2004); and, most recently, Reeve (2012; 2013).

² But notable scholars, including Anthony Kenny—see Kenny (2011)—have recently challenged Anscombe’s reading of Aristotle in this area.

³ Rare exceptions include, famously, McDowell (1998e); and, much less famously, Lawrence (2006; 2004).

political thought will be a key mark of the bulk of what follows.¹

This should already meet with some skepticism, and for a reason I've already suggested. That is because the *Politics* seems almost *dominated* by reflections on the kinds of social and political arrangements that are supposed to promote, or inhibit, the acquisition of what I've been calling normative knowledge. And, wherever in the *Politics* that kind of topic is not Aristotle's concern, it seems that his reflections are meant to recommend differing social and political arrangements either as themselves *instantiations* of justice, or of some other virtue; or as *instruments* for the realization of some other value, like social cohesion or stability. Not even a casual reader of the *Politics* can step away without the strong impression that Aristotle appears fixated by questions far from the topic of thought-dependent action. On this view, the recurring theme is rather the question of what the *politikos*—the “statesman”—*should* do, a question whose answer belongs to what I've been calling contemplative but normative knowledge. In other words, the central orientation of the *Politics* will seem to be governed by a form of contemplative knowledge, one whose objects are normative in character: say, the kinds of laws of which justice can be rightly predicated, or the kinds of practices that promote a correct conception of virtue, or the kinds of constitutional provisions that are likely to prevent or at least temper *stasis* (roughly, “faction”). Knowledge about objects of these sorts will not easily be interpreted as non-contemplative, and so practical, in the sense of these terms I've been urging.

I accept that this strong impression is largely correct. It cannot be denied that Aristotle is indeed often animated by these kinds of objects, and by the knowledge

¹ Allen (2006) brings out the importance of the idea of Aristotelian *prohairesis* for Athenian political discourse in general. But, while she draws on that idea in a schematic way to describe the changing conceptual map of that wider form of popular discourse, I aim to show how, even in the *Ethics* and *Politics*, we are given the resources to explain *why* Athenian reflection on political life came to be so gripped by Aristotle's notion of *prohairesis* as itself a central notion of political importance. For it was already a political notion *for Aristotle*.

appropriate to them. But we have to be careful about where recognition of this fact places us. For it would be a mistake to infer that he is unconcerned with any other kind of content, or with any other kind of knowledge. On the proposal here, when Aristotle stresses these normative and contemplative topics, he is responding to the reasonable demand, which he surely must have felt, to discuss the kinds of equipment that *eudaimonia* requires. But, as I suggested above, there is no reason to presume that a focus on such equipment must exhaust what is of ethical and even political interest to Aristotle. In fact, a presumption of that kind will be at home only in a conception of *eudaimonia* that elides the distinction between a thing's *constituents* and its *preconditions*. But that is a distinction to which Aristotle everywhere draws our attention, as we shall see. So, if my proposal is right, it would be markedly out of character for Aristotle to adopt “an *incorrigibly* contemplative”—but nonetheless normative—conception of knowledge, *even* in the *Politics*.¹ In short, even the *Politics* will seem inhospitable to anything like what I've dubbed our modern prejudice.

Moreover, this dissertation's focus on knowledge-dependent action, and its related concepts, will put us in a position to re-evaluate in a surprising way the *role* played by Aristotle's political inquiries into *eudaimonia*'s equipment. For it is one thing to accept, as everyone should, that Aristotle takes contemplative but normative knowledge to be necessary for human happiness. It is another thing to claim that, when he makes, as he often does, recommendations for the improvement of social and political arrangements, his *prime* goal must be to articulate the conditions likely to produce more or less correct *conceptions* of virtuous action, as though what commonly stands in the way of *eudaimonia* must only be a severe kind of normative ignorance. On this latter view, Aristotle's main purpose throughout the *Politics*, either in criticizing

¹ Emphasis added.

or in urging various laws and social practices, is to supply a particular kind of cure for a particular kind of disease. The disease must be something like a thoroughly incorrect conception of justice, or of friendship, or of happiness itself; and the cure must be something like the kinds of laws that would bring citizens to accept, perhaps knowledgeably, some such correct conception.

There are contexts in the *Politics* in which Aristotle is clearly working in view of this latter kind of aim. And, needless to say, one possible way of being a defective regime, at least in principle, is to have, in one's leaders or one's citizens, an incorrect conception of the virtues; and one possible way of coming to have an incorrect conception of that kind is to acquire maturity under defective social and political arrangements. But it is, I think, an over-statement to claim, as the previous paragraph does, that, for Aristotle, a defective politics is *typically* marked by generally incorrect conceptions of these sorts. For, as we shall see, what usually marks a defective *polis* is simply the lack of virtue, and there are many ways for agents, whether leaders or citizens or whole *poleis*, to fall short of that standard. Lacking knowledge about virtuous action—i.e., about which particular action is, say, just or courageous—is just one possible way for an agent to be less than virtuous, and so just one way for a *polis* to count as defective. Of course, it is a famous contention of Aristotle's that becoming virtuous requires doing virtuous actions, and that the law, among other things, is often *instrumentally* necessary for the kinds of habituation that becoming virtuous requires. But, so long as there is more to being virtuous than virtuous action, or more to it than possessing a roughly correct conception of the virtues, it remains in principle open for an agent, and so a political community, to qualify as less than virtuous and as markedly defective, *despite* possession of either a roughly reliable disposition to perform virtuous actions or a more or less correct conception of the relevant kind. In short, lacking virtue need not come to a gross deficit in

normative knowledge. If this is right, then Aristotle's frequent social and political recommendations need not be read as aiming at the acquisition of such knowledge. Rather, if one lacks full-fledged virtue, then what one is missing might just be one, or both, of two forms of practical knowledge: phronetic knowledge and prohairesis knowledge.

Does Aristotle take the possibility articulated above—what remains “in principle open” to an interpreter to suggest—as typically realized in the world of actual *poleis*? Does he think that defective *poleis* are marked less by a failure of normative knowledge than by some other kind of epistemic failure? I think he does, and showing so will occupy §§3 through 5 of what follows. If the arguments of those sections are convincing, we shall come to see, then, a distinctive purpose in Aristotle's political recommendations. The disease for which Aristotle often aims to make out a cure will turn out *not* to be something along the lines of a severely incorrect conception of the virtues, or of virtue-predicates more generally; nor will it often turn out to be a grossly incorrect conception even of *eudaimonia*. Rather, if I am right, the defect that occupies Aristotle's interest at crucial moments will be a kind whose understanding must be cast in terms of thought-dependent action. It will be a defect in concept-application of a distinctive register: as practical, non-contemplative, creative. And that will be the register in which it makes sense to speak of a kind of knowledge whose possession *itself* constitutes *eudaimonia*.

But does it anyway make sense to speak in this way? Is there any hope for making out the possibility, and sheer intelligibility, of this presumably unfamiliar kind of knowledge? Is there any reason to take seriously the idea of our modern *prejudice* as such, and not as a demand of mere sanity?

A fuller, but not full, treatment of these questions will have to wait until §1 below. It will be helpful, I think, to postpone that discussion, so that we can fill out a more

explicit picture of this dissertation's major moves.

0.8

If §1 below is at least halfway successful, our quasi-Anscombean possibilities from §0.2 will have been made available to an account of intentional action. Indeed, if I am very lucky, the considerations there will bring into relief not only the intelligibility but also the plausibility of an approach along Anscombe's lines. We will have gone some way in making attractive the idea of a specifically practical, non-contemplative, and productive form of knowledge: a kind of knowledge that is somehow supposed to constitute action. So, after §1, what remains is to apply our quasi-Anscombean categories to central concepts from Aristotle's ethical and political thought. The arguments of §§0.3–0.7 have, I think, gone some small distance in that direction already. But I there spoke somewhat vaguely, or at least narrowly, about the light that our quasi-Anscombean concepts might shed on the general shape of Aristotle's reflections on political life. Over §§0.8–0.9, this Introduction closes, at long last, by specifying in a little more detail the kind of illumination I mean, and the kinds of scholarly disputes in which this dissertation seeks to intervene.

Right at the start, in §0.1, I began by quoting a famous passage from the *Politics*, for the sake of glimpsing our central topic. In a word, that topic is the sense in which Aristotle takes core features of political life to depend on our attempts to “hunt after happiness.” I shall argue, roughly, that Aristotelian *eudaimonia* just *is* a certain kind of action, and that eudaimonistic action is itself a species of a wider genus, which we can call prohairetic action: Aristotelian *praxis* in its technical sense. It will emerge that both kinds of action, whether genuinely eudaimonistic or merely prohairetic, fall variously—as exercises of non-contemplative knowledge—into our quasi-Anscombean

categories.

But there are at least two difficulties that will seem to imperil the claim that *eudaimonia* just is a certain kind of action.

On the one hand, there is the reader whom we can dub, with only a little violence, the *Aristotelian Prudentialist*.¹ This reader holds that, despite what appears to be the central thrust of NE I, Aristotle does *not* in fact take *eudaimonia* to consist in the exercise of virtue. Rather, if the Prudentialist is right, Aristotle means instead to underscore, perhaps slyly or even desperately, the gross insufficiency of virtue's exercise. That is so because Aristotle's conception of *eudaimonia* is essentially a conception of well-being, according to which well-being does not *consist* in any form of virtuous action, since it is only *generally and defeasibly promoted or produced by it*. But then there will be no place in Aristotle's ethical thought in which to locate, at least in any interesting and fundamental way, a distinctively practical and non-contemplative form of prohairetic knowledge. For, on the Prudentialist view, whatever knowledge is special to the *phronimos* is just a special kind of contemplative knowledge: knowledge about how to produce some *separate* state—being happy—a state that is not constituted by action but only produced by it. And, worse, the exercise of that knowledge will be only *generally* and *defeasibly* reliable.

Now I have just phrased the importance of the Aristotelian Prudentialist's reading as a kind of obstacle that the reading I favor must overcome. But phrasing its importance in only that way will mislead, since addressing the Prudentialist will seem to be only a bit of brush-clearing. It will be more than that, since the Prudentialist picture is itself a standard way of reading Book I of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, and

¹ As we'll see below, this kind of reader takes shape in the views of Terence Irwin and Julia Annas, and, differently and less clearly, in those of Robert Bartlett and Susan Collins. But the idea probably extends at least as far back as Prichard's incendiary paper from 1935 on "The Meaning of *Agathon* in the Ethics of Aristotle"; see Prichard (2002).

therefore of interpreting the basic shape of Aristotle's outlook. So challenging that picture plays *two* roles: while it will carve out space for the reading I favor, it will also put into place what I take to be an unfamiliar and satisfying reading of Aristotle's outlook as a whole, a reading that, as we'll see, bears significant implications even for the understanding of his political thought. For it will emerge that an Aristotelian conception of *eudaimonia* is not strictly a conception of well-being *at all*, odd as that might sound.

The Prudentialist's view will be just one key obstacle to the reading I favor. For, on the other hand, it might be wondered—by, say, the *Aristotelian Immoralist*—whether what I take to be the central thrust of NE I, i.e., that *eudaimonia* is virtuous action done virtuously, coheres with what Aristotle goes on to say about the characterological excellences that are the focus of NE II–V. For it seems that, whatever the upshot of NE I is supposed to be, it should seek to validate some specific and substantive conception of virtuous action: some determinate sort of normative knowledge. But, on this kind of reading, a problematic gap will then have to open up, if Aristotle aims to clarify eudaimonistic action in the relatively formal and abstract way I think he does. That is because, if my interpretation of eudaimonistic action is correct, it will seem intimidatingly difficult to certify substantive pieces of normative knowledge on so slim a basis.¹

But we should note that the Immoralist's gap opens up only if the conception of the virtues that Aristotle's audience takes more or less for granted—however well raised they might be—is supposed to be authenticated by the general discussion of

¹ The problems raised by the Immoralist's gap are old; they, too, appear as early as Prichard's controversial paper on Aristotle, mentioned above, but they arise in a general form most famously in Russell (1947, 185–86); and Williams (1985, Chapter 3). For contemporary scholarship, Cooper (1986) has been most important. But, as we'll see below, this point is raised by very many commentators.

eudaimonia from NE I. So one question is whether we are compelled to attribute to Aristotle the kind of aim that generates that gap; another is whether anything philosophically important is raised by Aristotle's discussion of eudaimonistic action, if Aristotle lacks that problematic aim, as I think he does. On the view I shall urge, it is precisely the idea of knowledge-dependent action that imparts ethical interest to Aristotle's foundational discussion of *eudaimonia*. For that idea will work, not to validate in some general way the credentials of some specific conception of the virtues, but to impose the salutary demand that, whatever normative conception one has, it must be such as to be integrated into one's life and action, if *eudaimonia* is to be so much as even in view. Therefore, as with the Prudentialist reading, recognizing this alternative aim of Aristotle's will help to put into place a surprising picture of his eudaimonist framework.

Both of these difficulties—as raised by the Prudentialist and the Immoralist—will be explored in §2 below. But, again, what about Aristotle's *Politics*?

In tackling a theme familiar even to the most casual reader of the *Politics*, §3 explores Aristotle's famous six-fold classification of regime-types (Pol III.vi–vii), and I shall argue that the *differentia* that Aristotle employs to distinguish so-called “correct” from “deviant” regimes has been widely misunderstood. For, contrary to most commentators, it is no part of Aristotle's programmatic discussion to claim that it is characteristic of deviant regimes that they have a grossly incorrect conception of the virtues or of virtuous action. To be sure, they lack virtue; but, as I mentioned in §0.7, there are many ways to fall short of virtue. Commentators seem to assume, however, that the defining feature of a deviant regime must be an incorrect normative conception—centrally, an incorrect conception of the “common advantage”—even though this assumption does, I argue, severe damage both to Aristotle's text and to the drift of his argument.

But the attractiveness of the misinterpretation is quite intelligible, since, as we'll see, the text and its argument, when properly construed, will appear palpably odd. That is because it is hard to see the ethical import of Aristotle's six-fold classification, if, as I show, the relevant *differentia* does not center on some failure in normative knowledge about the common advantage. However, once we put into place both the possibility and ethical importance of non-contemplative and therefore non-normative knowledge, it will, on that basis, become apparent why Aristotle's six-fold classification takes on the shape that it does. For, when our modern prejudice is exposed as such, we can readily understand the defectiveness of Aristotle's deviant regimes in terms of defects in the shape of their rulers' prohairetic actions.

In §4, I shall make my way into two persistent and related problems for the interpretation of Aristotle's political thought. The first is the question of the coherence between the idealized outlook of the *Ethics* and the patently non-ideal themes of the *Politics*, especially as they arise in Pol IV–VI, the so-called “empirical books.” The second is the old question of the internal coherence of the *Politics* itself, torn as it seems between those non-ideal themes and the topic of the “*polis* of our prayers.”¹

Now there are many ways of posing these questions, and interpreters have found different sites for the seeming tension. But I shall orient my discussion in §4 in light of an unresolved dispute between Christopher Rowe and Terence Irwin. That dispute captures both of our persistent but related worries about coherence, since they both concern, roughly phrased, the point of coming to embrace a genuine and substantively correct conception of *eudaimonia*, if one is after all hardly in a position to put that conception into practice. But this is precisely the position in which the *politikos* in a defective regime finds himself. In other words, this problem puzzles over

¹ See Pol VII.iv 1325b; compare Pol IV.i 1288b, xi 1295a, VII.xiii 1332a, xv 1334a.

the relation between Aristotle's close analysis of defective regimes, on the one hand, and the kinds of reflections that apply to *non*-defective circumstances, on the other. The puzzle is what role a correct normative conception of *eudaimonia* is supposed to play in the recommendations, such as they are, that Aristotle variously makes for the improvement of defective regimes. It is nothing less than one typical form of the problem of non-ideal theory.

We can now grasp, at least in outline, one way to get out from under this kind of strain. For, if we relax our commitment to the idea that Aristotle must mean to supply anything like a normative and hence contemplative conception of *eudaimonia*, then we can equip ourselves with the view that, in urging the recommendations he does, Aristotle means to set the stage for a different kind of knowledge, a kind less normative and contemplative than practical and productive and creative. If one can come to have this kind of knowledge, then one can come to act prohairetically—i.e., to “hunt after happiness”—on the basis of whatever normative conception one might have, whether entirely correct or somewhat defective. So my proposal in §4 will be that, when Aristotle discusses the measures that are to work under a defective regime, given some defective “hypothesis” (Pol IV.i 1288b28), he mainly means to pick out those measures that are likely to enable prohairetic action of special—political—sorts.

But what is the point of enabling prohairetic action, if genuinely *phronetic* action is out of the question? If the picture of §§2 and 3 is plausible, the importance of such measures resides in the fact that prohairetic action is required for whatever share in *eudaimonia* falls to a political community. In short, the improvement of defective regimes will consist, not in the correction of their substantive conceptions of *eudaimonia* or virtuous action, but in the attainment of prohairetic knowledge, which, for all that, need not constitute full-fledged *eudaimonia*. But it will importantly satisfy the conditions on whatever share in *eudaimonia* it is open to a non-ideal

regime to attain. And, if this is right, there will be resources in Aristotle for us to address our own conception of non-ideal theory.

One salutary implication will be an overlooked thread that unites, not only the ethical with the political works, but also the *Politics* itself—a work often seen, with considerable justice, as markedly disjointed. That red thread is the concept of prohairetic action, which is patently emphasized in the *Ethics* but rarely brought out in treatments of the *Politics*. Extending Aristotle’s discussion of *prohairesis* from the ethical to the political works, and even into the latter’s “middle books”—which, as I’ve said, seem hardly at home with the idealizing assumptions that inhabit the *Ethics*—should, if I am right, point to a unifying aim that binds together Aristotle’s “philosophy of human affairs,” even if there are nonetheless other significant divergences.

This emphasis on prohairetic action as itself a concept of *political* importance will help to explain what Danielle Allen has recently and importantly discovered in the political discourse of fourth-century Athens: in the Aristotelian concept of *prohairesis*, there was an “extraordinary [...] migration of conceptual vocabulary from Athenian philosophy to politics.”¹ For we shall come to see how this migration, though extraordinary, was also quite natural, since it was, *even for Aristotle*, a concept of fundamental political significance.

Now the reader will sense a common refrain. For the guiding idea behind my descriptions of §§2–4 is the attractiveness of minimizing the role played by normative knowledge in Aristotle’s ethical and political thought, and of emphasizing instead the role that an appreciation of what I have been calling practical knowledge puts into place. I appealed to this kind of emphasis in sketching my reply to the Aristotelian

¹ Allen (2006, 183–84).

Immoralist, and I have reiterated it in outlining at least one way to bring a kind of motivated unity to Aristotle's discussion of non-ideal constitutions.

Building on these themes, the close of §4 explores in a more conjectural mode the idea of *collective action* in Aristotle. The conjecture is that, on Aristotle's lips, action that aims at the common advantage is itself a distinctive form of collective action, and that collective action of this kind is essential to the identity conditions of a *polis* itself. In short, where and only where there is collective prohairetic action is there political action and so a political agent. But what is *collective prohairetic action*? I argue that it is prohairetic action roughly similar in nature to the kind that applies in the individual case, where individual prohairetic knowledge is in view. But there is a special twist. For, if Aristotelian *praxis* just is prohairetic knowledge, then, if there is collective *praxis*, there must be a distinctively *shared* and *collective* form of practical knowledge. The idea, then, is that one respect in which defective regimes are often unstable is that they are marked by the lack of collective prohairetic action.

0.9

So much for a brief tour of this dissertation's main moves. I shall close this Introduction by picking up our shelved possibilities from §0.1, and so speak to a few wider issues that inform the background of this dissertation.

Action theory and virtue ethics. Perhaps surprisingly, one way of surveying this project's implications is to mark it as an application of certain themes from recent work in the philosophy of action. Of course, there are a few senses in which it shouldn't surprise anyone that a project on Aristotle might draw on contemporary action theory. Insofar as recent reflection on human action has been inspired—for good or ill—by the work of Anscombe, such reflection should feel palpably Aristotelian in motivation: we

can reasonably characterize her *Intention* as the fruit of a long and profound fixation on Book VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics*.¹ But that feeling is not a mere function of Anscombe’s self-conception, which was as Aristotelian as it was Wittgensteinian; that Anscombe’s approach to intentional action *presupposes* Aristotle’s own theses on practical reasoning and self-movement is becoming recognized more and more widely.²

Nor should it surprise that a work on Aristotle’s understanding of virtue should find itself associated with Anscombe’s name: everyone takes her essay on “Modern Moral Philosophy,” alongside influential papers by Philippa Foot, to have virtually inaugurated—for good or ill—the topic of virtue ethics for contemporary theorizing. And so virtue ethics seems to be marked, at least in the current environment, by its focus on particular Anscombean theses on human nature and the place of practical rationality in it.³

This project’s way of fitting into the wider family of work on virtue ethics will appear somewhat unusual, though. For, as I said, that family is largely inspired by reflection on Aristotle and on Anscombe, but in a particular way. What it has purported to gain from Aristotle is the outlook that “foundational questions in ethics are best answered in terms of an account of human nature.”⁴ What it has gained from the Anscombe of “Modern Moral Philosophy” is a bundle of two ideas. First, there is the related idea that

¹ See Lawrence (2004, 265ff.).

² For the perspective of Aristotle scholars, see Coope (2007). For the relation between Aristotle’s action theory and Anscombe’s, see Hornsby (2011); Ford (2011); and Stoutland (2011). For Anscombean developments of familiarly Aristotelian lines of thought, see Boyle and Lavin (2010); Boyle (2012); Lavin (2013b); Thompson (2008); McDowell (2010); and Roedl (2007, esp. Chapter 2).

³ A helpful and very recent discussion of the current state of play is by Vogler (2013); also see Hacker-Wright (2010). For slightly older treatments, see Crisp and Slote (1997); Copp and Sobel (2004); and Oakley (1996).

⁴ Vogler (2013).

philosophically there is a huge gap, at present unfillable as far as we are concerned, which needs to be filled by an account of human nature [...], and above all of human “flourishing.”¹

And, second, the virtue ethicist is to mark the fact that

most noticeably, the term “moral” itself, which we have by direct inheritance from Aristotle, just doesn’t seem to fit, in its modern sense, into an account of Aristotelian ethics. [...] Now has Aristotle got [our] idea of *moral* blame, as opposed to any other? If he has, why isn’t it more central? [...] Why doesn’t he discuss obligation in general, and [moral] obligation in particular? If someone professes to be expounding Aristotle and talks in a modern fashion about “moral” such-and-such, he must be very imperceptive if he does not constantly feel like someone whose jaws have somehow got out of alignment: the teeth don’t come together in a proper bite.²

But, if the drift of Anscombe’s second rebuke is accepted, it is odd that neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics has come to be so fundamentally concerned with conceptions of human nature. For where in the *Ethics* does Aristotle *ground* his ethical claims in some conception of human nature?³ If Anscombe’s protest points us in the direction of

¹ Anscombe (1997, 43–44) .

² Anscombe (1997, 26–27). Of course, Williams (1985) deserves just as much mention as Anscombe for querying the possibility of anything well described as an “Aristotelian moral theory.”

I don’t mean to endorse the specific content of Anscombe’s famous bit of skepticism quoted here. For nice critiques of Anscombe (and sometimes Williams) on this score, see Crisp (2004); and Everson (1998b). For convincing accounts more directly about Aristotle, see Striker (1996); Irwin (1985a); and again Everson (1998b).

³ It is uncontroversial to say that Aristotle’s ethical and political thought *involves* a conception of human nature, and of human powers of thought and action. But the controversial claim is that the relevant relation is one of *grounding*. On the contrary, I think it is best to say that Aristotle’s view *presupposes* a conception of human nature and of our natural powers. But the order of explanation works *from* the ethical *to* the essential. In short, we learn what human nature comes to, by living with ethical concepts. And that is exactly the procedure that marks Aristotle’s *Ethics* and *Politics*.

See Thompson (2004; 1998). In particular, see Thompson (2003): “The human form of life is one in which considerations of justice, for example, characterize a sound practical reason. But this is not something we properly discover from a close study of human life. It must be given to us from inside, so to speak. For our taking such thoughts as reason-giving, considered as a general, characteristic phenomenon of human intelligence, is part of what makes our species to be the sort that it is. It is part of the constitution of this peculiar structuring of a kind of animal

being scrupulous about *presuming* to find our concepts in Aristotle’s own, then one should be careful about emphasizing some form of “naturalism” as one “professes to be expounding Aristotle.” As many scholars have noted, Aristotle is entirely unforthcoming about any naturalist basis to his ethical thought.¹ It is odd, then, that so much of neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics has taken its cue from what seems to be a mere presumption.²

But what *does* appear everywhere in Aristotle’s *Ethics* and *Politics* is a rich conception of *praxis*, the kind of action that is essentially tied to *prohairesis*, which is itself essentially tied to a conception of *eudaimonia* and human excellence. For, as Aristotle repeatedly emphasizes, virtue is a type of prohairesis state.³ In short, then, neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics appears to have been looking, if not in the wrong place, then in what might be an *unpromising* one.

This dissertation hopes to point us in a more fruitful and unfamiliar direction.⁴ In-

life. That we operate with these thoughts is thus part of what makes these thoughts true. [...] [O]ur confidence in the validity of considerations of justice and other forms of practical thought must, at a certain level, be groundless.”

¹ See McDowell (1998e; 2009b); Everson (1998b; 1998a); Lawrence (2001; 1993; 1998; 2006); Nussbaum (1995); Lloyd (1996); Chappell (2005; 2009); Vasilou (1996); Gill (1990); and Striker (2006). For rival views, see Whiting (2001); Irwin (1980; 1990); and MacIntyre (1984). For a balanced way of finding a place for some form of naturalism in Aristotle’s ethical thought, see Depew (2009).”

² The most notable examples of this approach in virtue ethics are Hursthouse (1999); Kraut (2007); MacIntyre (1999); and, on at least the usual reading, Foot (2001). For a helpful antidote to the usual reading, see Thompson (2003) and Hacker-Wright (2009).

³ See NE 1106a3–4, 1105a31–32, 1105b36, 1111b5–6, 1134a1–2, 1139a22–23; EE 1222a31, 1227b2–9, 1228a24, 1230a27, 1234a23–25. See also Lawrence (2006; 2009).

⁴ In some central ways, the terrain of much of this project overlaps with that covered by Jill Frank (2005) in chapter one of her *Democracy of Distinction*; but there are deep differences. For a start, Frank articulates the value of prohairesis activity in ways that suggest that activity of this kind is itself always constitutive of the human good, without due emphasis on the ways in which prohairesis activity can itself be quite deforming, even if, as she notes, one’s character *can* be improved by further prohairesis action. I want to tread a middle path that stresses both the pitfalls and the opportunities that such activity poses, on Aristotle’s view. Second, in light of the risk of those pitfalls or dangers, I shall try to explain why Aristotle takes such risks to be worth taking—in answering the question, left unattended by Frank, whether Aristotle

deed, I think that much of what Aristotle urges concerning worldly matters of ethical improvement and political practice is guided by the way he takes his recommendations to make available the special descriptions under which a valuable—prohairesis—kind of intentional action is the kind that it is. And I think that isolating these special descriptions and their ethical importance will be helped by drawing on the distinctive voice of Anscombeans in this area.

Further, understanding Aristotle’s thought on virtue, as that is undertaken here, draws less on the Anscombe of “Modern Moral Philosophy,” with its emphasis “above all” on the concept of *human flourishing*, as on the Anscombe of *Intention*, where a concept of that kind is indeed *severed* from her account of intentional action.¹

Virtue ethics and a politics of virtue. If we are allowed to characterize an ethical theory as a form of “virtue ethics”—a deeply controversial term that unfortunately masks a vast array of divergent positions—by picking out its emphasis, not on what

took wickedness to be a likely outcome of a process of coming to organize one’s life around the deliverances of one’s *prohairesis*. If we think of Frank’s Aristotle as overly optimistic, I want to go farther, not only by explaining why Aristotle found that optimism so attractive, but also by showing how that optimism is framed by a kind of pessimism about the possibility of adopting correct conceptions of the human good. Third, and least important, I shall situate my treatment of Aristotle’s ethical thought in a markedly different interpretative tradition.

¹ Anscombe (1997, 44); and see her (2000, §39), where the idea of a “principal aim” in one’s life is explicitly set aside as outside the concerns of action theory: “But when a man aims at health or pleasure, then the enquiry ‘What’s the good of it?’ is not a sensible one. As for reasons against a man’s making one of them his principal aim; and whether there are orders of human goods, e.g., whether some are greater than others, and whether if this is so a man need ever prefer the greater to the less, and on pain of what; this question would belong to ethics, if there is such a science.” On this point, Gavin Lawrence’s description is helpful: “One may be leery of the inclination to build in more structure—to suppose that it is for a human always to act with some one end in view—sensing in this a wishfulness to secure ethics by writing it into philosophy” (Lawrence (2004, 292)). Some might take such “wishfulness” to be the special trait of Kantianism, for which the concept of agency somehow yields the correct conception of morality. Anscombe’s eschewal of ethical “science” in *Intention* is best read, I think, as a form of resistance to the Kantian hope. On the approach taken here, we are not to build ethics into action, as though a correct account of ethics somehow *follows* from action theory; rather, we are to see a distinctive *place* for ethics once a clear conception of action is in view. This placement need not be a kind of “grounding.”

must be true of an action for it to be morally permissible, but on what must be true of an agent for her actions to manifest her character, then what follows is an inquiry into one surprising sense in which Aristotle's political thought is a form of "virtue politics." That is the sense in which Aristotle is concerned to articulate what must be true of a political agent—whether seen as a citizen or even as a *polis* more generally—for its actions to express its character. But we are entitled to wonder whether *expressions of character* are of much ethical and political interest. This dissertation as a whole seeks to make out a reply.

Of course, the idea that, since Aristotle's ethics is obviously an ethics of virtue, his politics must be one of virtue, too, should come as no surprise: the claim that the role of politics is to make us as virtuous as possible is one of Aristotle's commonest refrains throughout his "philosophy of human affairs." But the idea must be treated with care. Although everyone agrees that Aristotle's approach is *in some sense* a kind of virtue ethics, considerable controversy breaks out over how to make out the description. Needless to say, the controversy is fueled by disputes concerning both the basic shape of Aristotle's ethical thought as well as what it means, anyway, for an ethical theory to count as a form of virtue ethics. The problem is then compounded, if one speaks of a "virtue politics," unless one means only the uninteresting—not to say correct—idea that our political institutions should aim at making us virtuous.

As I've said, this project hopes to draw on recent work on intentional action in order to make out a way of understanding Aristotle's ethics as a distinctive form of virtue ethics. But another unfamiliar theme of this dissertation is the idea that Aristotle's *political* thought can be illuminated by the connections that link his ethical theory to Anscombe's work on intentional action. To be sure, the unfamiliarity can be explained both by the relative inattention that the *Politics* enjoys among professional philosophers and by the distance that separates recent reflection in ac-

tion theory from the concerns that animate those political theorists who are likely to concentrate on Aristotle's political thought. This project aims to go some way in spanning that distance by showing how even the *Politics*—itself concerned with institutional questions much less abstract than the rare air of philosophical accounts of practical reasoning—is *also* centrally motivated by Aristotle's thinking on the ethical value of a certain kind or form of intentional action: prohairesis. On my view, characterizing prohairesis so as to bring out its *political* interest can be perspicuously illuminated by claims and strategies familiar from the kind of action theory that stands in what we can only now begin to call the Anscombean tradition.

What is the shape of that kind of political interest? This dissertation means to present a philosophically and textually attractive interpretation of the core of Aristotle's ethical theory, and on that basis to resolve some profoundly puzzling aspects of his political thought. But this attempt at resolution seeks to supply more than an attractive answer to particular disputes over Aristotle's *Politics*. It also seeks to clarify an interesting sense in which Aristotle can be a resource for future reflection on the demands we should impose on our political arrangements, and about the demands we should place on the shape of our discourse about politics. We can then isolate a provocative picture of what it might mean, at any rate, to talk of an Aristotelian virtue politics.

The way that this dissertation supplies such a picture might not be hard to tell. As I've stressed throughout this Introduction, the orientation favored here is to shift our attention away from tying *eudaimonia* to a correct conception of the virtues, and towards its relation to a special conception of action. For what stands in the way of ethical excellence, and *eudaimonia*, is not primarily some failure in normative knowledge; rather, it is a kind of misalignment or incoherence that obtains between our conception of the virtues and the intentions with which we act. Restoring the

needed alignment comes to a kind of concept-application, a kind of thought. But it is specially a kind of thought that applies concepts to oneself *as an agent in the course of acting*, where the application of concepts *also* purports to be the *realization* of them.

How will this apply to a form of virtue politics? There are at least two ways of running with the thought.

On the first possibility, if we, like Aristotle, attach significant value to prohairetic action, even if that action is informed by an incorrect conception of *eudaimonia*, or of the virtues, then there is a constraint that applies to our favored social and political arrangements. For, if it is likely that cooperation with those arrangements will work to undermine a community's disposition to act prohairetically, there is reason to reconsider them. And that is so, even if the arrangements stand endorsed by genuine deliverances of normative knowledge. The idea here is that, when a widespread *practical* commitment to, and appreciation of, say, genuine justice is out of the question, there is reason to trade on the demands of justice, so conceived, for the sake of prohairetic action: in this case, action informed by a widespread appreciation of something *less* than justice. So we can conceive of a "virtue politics" as a kind of non-ideal theory, one which emphasizes that, in cases where full-fledged virtue is beyond our reach, our political life should nonetheless come to count as an expression of a community's conception of virtue—its character—even if that expression and that life remain substantively defective.¹

An outlook of this kind can be easily seen in Aristotle's conservative or quietist reluctance to undertake the radical reform of those social practices and legal institutions characteristic of defective regimes.² And it can be seen, if §3 is right, in

¹ A somewhat ambiguous form of this approach is given by Hursthouse (1990).

² See, e.g., Pol II.viii, III.xi, IV.i and viii, VIII.i.

Aristotle's treatment of defective regimes more generally.

Of course, this somewhat pessimistic form of non-ideal theory will seem attractive only where a *severely* defective conception of virtue is also out of the question. For enabling prohairetic action, if that action is governed by a grossly incorrect conception of the virtues, will only be to counsel forms of wickedness.¹ But we might think, as Aristotle does, that it is a relatively rare thing for whole communities to be beset with dispositions to wickedness. For it belongs to human nature, in the course of its typical, and non-“savage” (NE VII.v), development, to be characterized by the so-called “natural excellences” (NE VI.xiii): to be

well-disposed, by the canons, or norms, of the species in question: so that it enjoys and disenjoys what it naturally [i.e., merely naturally, not practically rationally] should (the naturally correct things—that is, it has and pursues the right natural ends), and enjoys and disenjoys in the manner it naturally should and at the time it naturally should, and so on.²

Now it must be admitted, though, that the natural excellences are unstable and often insensitive to the subtle requirements that human life places on human action. They can be overturned by various forms of human acculturation, and by radically defective social and political practices. All the same, it is important that, when Aristotle discusses full-fledged virtue, his contrast is, as we shall see, usually an agent who is a good long way towards it, with the idea of the truly wicked man brought in only as a kind of *theoretical* foil.³ So we can reasonably limit the scope of this form of “virtue politics” to a substantial and meaningful—but not exhaustive—range of non-ideal circumstances, depending on our own levels of optimism.

On the second possibility, there is a slightly less pessimistic way of conceiving of ethical and political improvement. For, if some favored social and political reform

¹ See NE V.viii 1135b26–36a8.

² Lawrence (2011a, 254).

³ See, e.g., NE II.viii–ix.

will undermine a community's prohairetic dispositions, then one way out from this unfortunate circumstance is to satisfy the demand that it be complemented by *further* arrangements, those whose aim is in a special and narrow sense *educative*.¹ The idea here is that it is an important and sometimes crucial goal, not merely to put into place those laws and practices that are themselves, say, just, but also to enable a political community's prohairetic motivations to cohere with conformity to those laws and practices. In short, virtuous action is not enough, even if it could be widely achieved; what remains is to turn virtuous action into cases of acting virtuously. And that just is to respond to the demand to aim at phronetic knowledge, not just normative knowledge.

But, again, what if a correct conception of the virtues is not already in place? Must we settle for injustice, for the sake of prohairetic action?

Not necessarily. For responding to the demand to enable prohairetic action can spark in a salutary way the process of revising a community's incorrect conceptions of the virtues, including justice. This is because coming to act prohairetically can be itself a real struggle, with significant risks to one's seemingly settled views of the virtues. Now how is this?

As I've said, prohairetic knowledge comes to a kind of concept-application that also aims at *realizing* the concept that one is applying. This twin feature of Anscombean practical thought—that it aims to “cause what it understands”—underscores an important feature of *all* concept-application: revising our ways of applying concepts is *equally* a kind of motivational *reform*, since the application of concepts is itself a substantial kind of commitment. It is no easy task to revise in some radical way our conception of what it means to apply some concept correctly. This is so, not just

¹ See, e.g., Pol II.viii 1269a12 ff., IV.i 1288b21–89a13.

because a correct understanding of some concept can be hard to get a hold of, but because, in coming to accept even an incorrect conception, we are *binding* ourselves to a way of proceeding:

To learn the meaning of a word is to acquire an understanding that obliges us subsequently—if we have occasion to deploy the concept in question—to judge and speak in certain determinate ways, on pain of failure to obey the dictates of the meaning we have grasped.¹

Now this so-called “contractual” aspect of concept-application is a feature of *all* thought.² But, in specifically *practical* and further *prohairetic* and putatively *phronetic* thought, this aspect is made the locus of urgent interest. For it is one thing, say, to come to apply the concept *cardinal*, as picking out such-and-such a bird, a concept whose correctness in application stands apart from whatever applications one goes on to make: if such-and-such a bird is a cardinal, it is so independently of one’s purported ratification. But it is another thing, as it is in practical, prohairetic, and putatively phronetic thought, to *put into place* the reality—the fact—that governs whether one is living well. Recall that, when one acts prohairetically, one is both applying and purporting to *realize* distinctive concepts in one’s own actions: *eudaimonia* and, equally, *acting virtuously*. This requires considerable introspection and self-examination; and an error along this dimension is not merely to get some fact about, say, cardinals wrong. It is to spoil oneself as an agent.

But this means that, when one has a defective conception of virtue, a kind of challenge will be issued, if one comes to feel the demand to act prohairetically: putting that defective conception into practice can conflict with one’s practical conception of what it means *hic et nunc* to act well. The idea here is that, if we have an incorrect conception of virtue, acting in its light can unsettle our attachment to that incorrect

¹ McDowell (1998i, 221). See also his (1998h).

² McDowell (1998i, 221).

conception, because doing so can fail, in our thought at the moment of acting, to cohere with our conception of what it means to instantiate *eudaimonia*.

For instance, we might in the abstract be attracted to the thought that justice consists in dominating others, fleecing the weak, or spoiling the hopes of the humble. But, when we apply this thought to our own actions, it can be difficult to come to see ourselves as instantiating *eudaimonia*, of course as we conceive it, in actions of that kind. For “people of the most horrible principles know quite well how to cry out against injustice and lying and treachery, say, when their enemies are guilty of them. So they in fact know quite a lot.”¹ Even those with an incorrect conception of justice probably possess a partially *correct* conception of that kind—so long as they aren’t entirely wicked. And so they will have at least a partially correct conception of what constitutes *eudaimonia*. But feeling the demand to act prohairetically is to feel the demand to bring unity, not only to one’s conception of the virtues, but also to one’s conception of *eudaimonia* and to one’s conception of *what one is doing*. In short, so long as one is not thoroughly wicked, whatever wickedness one possesses will be held subject to one’s partially correct conception of acting well. But it is easy to overlook whatever incoherence there is, if one fails to think of one’s action in a certain light: if one fails to scrutinize what one is doing as a case of acting well.

The presumption here is that, if one is not thoroughly wicked, it is a substantial challenge to bring one’s own prohairetic actions under an incorrect conception of, say, justice. This is because, if one is acting prohairetically, one must come to represent what one is doing as an *instantiation* of justice, and of acting well in general (*haplos*). But representing one’s actions in this way brings in its train one’s entire conception of justice, in all its parts, some correct and some incorrect. The challenge, then, will

¹ Anscombe (2008, 95).

be to represent one's unjust action—say, stealing from the weak and vulnerable—as a case of acting justly, a challenge whose difficulty is put into place by one's inchoate and partially correct conception of what justice comes to.

In other words, the Aristotelian presumption is that, when one acts unjustly, the likely cause is a kind of *inattention* to what one is doing, a kind of *unseriousness* that allows one to side-step the demand to subject one's own action to a particular kind of representation: the thought that, in acting in this way, one really is being *eudaimōn*, really acting justly, really acting virtuously, without qualification (*haplos*). On this view, unjust action is often owed to a failure of prohairetic knowledge. It is a failure to think of oneself, as one acts, as *spoudaios*—one of Aristotle's favorite terms—in an interesting and double-barreled sense. For being a *spoudaios* agent is not only to be a perfectly virtuous agent; it is also to be—as the wider Greek conception has it—a thoroughly *serious* one. And it may be that the best, or only, way of coming to be perfectly virtuous, or even moderately so, is to become disposed to the kind of serious reflection that prohairetic action demands.

A politics of virtue, then, is given by a political perspective from which the prime consideration is whether a community's actions, institutions, and wider arrangements can come to count as expressions of its prohairetic character. Of course, such expressions might be unjust, or less than just. But it is not altogether implausible to hold, as Aristotle supposes, that whatever justice falls to an agent to possess must, as our epigraphs suggest, come in the end from a commitment, however imperfect, to “live according to one's own *prohairesis*,” in order to “realize one's ideal of life,” and so make that life into a human one: into the kind of life only a human could live.¹

¹ See Lawrence (2009, 419): Prohairetic action “is strictly *human* action—the *form of life* and *life-activity* that constitutes the function of the human in the adult perfection of its nature.”