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## Dissertation

### Hunting for Happiness: Aristotle and the Good of Action

(Defended October 2013)

#### *Description:*

Recent treatments of Aristotle’s “philosophy of human affairs” seem to travel in disappointing parallel: subtle discussions of Aristotle’s ethical thought often lack explicit application to controversies over his *Politics*, and studies of the latter often presuppose tendentious positions on his ethical foundations. I here aimed to repair the breach by articulating and applying to vexed issues in the *Politics* an influential but hardly dominant family of views on his *Ethics*.

That family of views takes seriously the idea that Aristotle’s ethical and political thought is centrally a work of *practical* philosophy, in a special register. Philosophy of this kind is concerned with a technical or restricted notion of action: *praxis*, as the deliverance of one’s conception of what it would be to act well or successfully in the most stringent sense. The source of such action is what Aristotle calls *prohairesis* (roughly, “deliberate choice”); and the shape of one’s *prohairesis* is given by one’s conception of *eupraxia*—acting well in this strict sense—a conception which Aristotle identifies with a conception of *eudaimonia* (“happiness”).

(One quick way of entering into the project’s themes is therefore to wonder: “What happens to the *Politics*, if John McDowell is right about the *Ethics*?”)

The dissertation applied this emphasis on prohairesis action by defending theses from contemporary action theory—theses associated with the work of G.E.M. Anscombe and her recent followers. At heart, these views express the idea that action can itself just be a

certain distinctive form of self-knowledge.

(Therefore another quick way of getting the project into view: “What happens to Aristotle’s eudaimonism, if Anscombe is right about intentional action in general and prohairesis action in particular?”)

So my starting point was a special kind of intentional action—Aristotelian *praxis*, or, in a more metaphysical idiom, *energeia*—a kind whose agent’s intention in acting must be expressible as the deliverance of *prohairesis*: action that is the embodiment of one’s conception of *eupraxia*. It is special, since not all that we intentionally do can be intelligibly expressed as the deliverance of our conceptions of acting well. Consider cases of “weakness of will,” for sadly familiar reminders.

Recognition of the gaps between action in general and intentional action more specifically—and between intentional action and truly prohairesis action—set the stage for my reinterpretation, not only of core aspects of Aristotle’s *Ethics*, but also of central features of Aristotle’s political recommendations. The interpretation defended here centered on the claim that, for Aristotle, defective political communities are often marked, not so much by an erroneous conception of human virtue, but by defective *forms* of action, forms in which agents fail to apply certain concepts to what they do. Importantly, such failures do not hang on the *different* failure to apply concepts *correctly*: the failure to act prohairesis need not come to the failure to grasp the correct conception of human virtue or even of human happiness.

The dissertation applied the former idea of failed action to two central areas of Aristotle’s political thought.

First, it showed that what appears to be his canonical conception of the difference between “correct” and “deviant” regimes has been systematically misread by many students of the *Politics*. That misreading is owed to a *material* or *extensional* understanding of that conception, doing violence to the shape of Aristotle’s text in Book III. Instead, I argued that Aristotle’s distinction between regimes depends on the intentional structure of rulers’ actions: a regime’s status as deviant is a function of the concepts its rulers apply, or fail to apply, to what they do. In a word, constitutional correctness hangs on rulers’ practical self-understanding. This suggests that Aristotle’s focus lies, not on substantive conceptions of human virtue, but on the motivational tendencies of human agents, whatever their notions of human excellence.

The second area of the *Politics* illuminated by the dissertation is Aristotle’s controversial endorsement of the stability even of defective regimes, from Book IV. Here I argued that Aristotle thinks defective regimes can sometimes be brought to approximate a form

of correctness, and it is this kind of approximation that makes intelligible the sort of political stability that Aristotle urges. A defective regime can owe its defectiveness to materially or substantively incorrect conceptions of *eudaimonia* and virtue, but whatever “correctness” it has is owed to the formally correct intentional structures that constitute its actions. A regime’s disposition to put into place such structures enables its piecemeal applications of its materially correct ethical conceptions to constitute some share in *eudaimonia*, even if its applications are generally and substantively defective, from an ethical point of view. The middle space occupied by a materially defective but formally correct regime allows Aristotle to avoid the quasi-Machiavellian image that is often imputed to him.

The dissertation also formed a background against which further reflection in “virtue ethics” and even “virtue politics” can be conducted. On the Aristotelian picture presented here, inquiry into the ethics and politics of virtue abstracts from substantive talk about what constitutes truly virtuous forms of human action, in order to shift attention to the ways in which individual and collective action can come to express conceptions of virtue, whether or not those conceptions are genuine.

This makes available an interesting and attractive sense in which we, alongside Aristotle, can come to count as engaged in a sort of virtue politics: if virtue ethics is animated by reflection on the conditions necessary for an agent to be capable of virtue, then virtue politics is concerned to articulate, and to foster, the conditions necessary for political communities to be so capable. Of course, these latter conditions will include knowledge of (say) the demands of justice. But a condition just as necessary is the disposition to act prohairetically: the disposition to act in the light of one’s conception of justice, even if that conception is substantively defective. For a world in which the demands of justice are in some sense satisfied might not be a world in which justice is ever expressed. If Aristotle is right—in the way I have read him—there is a crucial sense in which there is nothing either good or human about such a world.

*Outline:*

The dissertation’s lengthy Introduction sets out an Anscombean frame for the subsequent exegetical treatment, and also discusses that treatment’s implications for virtue-political reflection.

Chapter 1 articulates and defends Anscombe’s characteristic theses in action theory, in order to make at least facially plausible the idea of intentional action as specially thought-dependent.

Chapter 2 finds that idea in Aristotle’s eudaimonism, according to which human happiness

requires distinctive acts of self-understanding: distinctively practical deployments of concept-application. That chapter also argues against common readings of Aristotle's *Ethics*, readings which in various ways illicitly saddle Aristotle with familiar sorts of non-ethical "prudentialism."

Chapter 3 turns to the *Politics*; it urges the neglected view according to which a regime's "correctness" hangs on political rulers' practical self-understanding, not on what we might gloss as substantive knowledge of the human good. It thus follows that a deviant regime can be marked by the possession of such knowledge, while its correct counterparts can be marked by lacking it.

Continuing with the *Politics*, Chapter 4 then examines Aristotle's puzzling recommendations for the "stability" and "preservation" even of defective regimes. Here I argue that careful attention to the terminology of *akrasia* (roughly, "weakness of will")—terminology everywhere overlooked by readers of the *Politics*—puts into place a number of striking results. First, regimes that typically count as defective or deviant can, for all that, come to count as correct or upright, in the way Chapter 3 has suggested. This is because constitutional correctness, in this sense, is a function of *aiming*—in acts of practical self-understanding—at the "common advantage." So, for instance, democracies can constitute correct regimes, insofar as Aristotle's discussion from Book III of the *Politics* is concerned: while they might be typically incorrect, they are not essentially so. Second, Aristotle's political deployments of the idea of *akrasia* show that his insistence on stability and preservation is best understood as an ethical concern with the conditions necessary for the expression of civic virtue. Third, this ethical concern brings coherence and unity to Aristotle's political thought, despite the shift that commentators frequently find in the so-called "empirical books" of the *Politics*. And so "developmental" and "quasi-Machiavellian" readings can be set aside as needless accretions. Fourth, the notion of political *akrasia* makes available an intriguing and attractive conception of collective action, one according to which collective eudaimonia hangs on individual agents' practical thought about the communities of which they take themselves to be parts.