

Aristotle's Conception of Moral Virtue and Its Perceptive Role

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Among Aristotelian scholars there is no disagreement that good deliberate choice (*proairesis*) requires both moral virtue (*aretê*) and practical reason (*phronêsis*).¹ But in respect to the roles performed by these two perfections there has been and still is controversy. At present scholars are tending to minimize the role of moral virtue in guaranteeing correct deliberate choice. For example, R. Gauthier and J. Jolif in their recent commentary on the *Nicomachean Ethics* have argued that moral virtue's role is merely to help keep practical reason focused on the goal and to help realize the goal in action by controlling desire.²

This tendency³ to minimize the role of moral virtue is, I think, unfortunate; and it will be the task of this paper to take a first step toward the rehabilitation of moral virtue. We shall begin by focusing our attention on two Greek verbs, *poiein* and *krinein*, which have not been adequately studied and which are important for understanding the full role of virtue in insuring correct choice. Three times in the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle makes moral virtue the subject of the verb *poiein*: moral virtue makes the goal correct (*EN* 1144A, 8), moral virtue makes the choice correct (*EN* 1144A, 20), and moral virtue makes (the agent) do the end (*EN* 1145A, 5–6). Gauthier and Jolif have felt that to say moral virtue *makes* the end correct is misleading, and looking to the text for help they found the expanded statement: moral virtue *makes* (the agent) *do* the end. They conclude that moral virtue is necessary because it controls desire and can therefore make effective the commands of practical reason.⁴

¹ I must express my great debt to Professor Glenn R. Morrow who has been a careful and helpful critic of the arguments presented in this paper.

² R. A. Gauthier et J. Y. Jolif, *L'Ethique à Nicomaque* (Louvain 1959) 2.557, 577.

³ For another example see D. J. Allan, "Aristotle's Account of the Origin of Moral Principles," *Proceedings of the Eleventh International Congress of Philosophy* 12 (1953) 120–27.

⁴ Gauthier and Jolif (above, note 2) 2.577

The method employed by these scholars is faultless, but their search for examples of *poiein* with moral virtue as subject has been unfortunately limited to the *Nicomachean Ethics*. In order to extend their search we should look to the *Eudemian Ethics*, Book 3.⁵ Aristotle asserts that courage which is a moral virtue will make the possessor endure the formidable because it is noble to do so. Therefore he will not act through ignorance, for courage rather makes (*poiei*) him judge (*krinein*) correctly (*EE* 1230A, 31). This concise assertion looks back to an earlier passage (*EE* 1229B, 21–26) which will help to make Aristotle's thought clear. The earlier passage states that cowards and rash persons are deceived because of their own characters. To the coward what is not formidable appears formidable, and what is slightly formidable appears exceedingly formidable. For the rash person appearances are reversed. But to the courageous man things appear as they really are, so that a man is not courageous if he endures the formidable through ignorance.

Taking the two passages together we can see that what courage does is to insure a correct perception of a particular situation. Courage makes (*poiei*) the possessor judge (*krinein*) a formidable situation as formidable and prevents him from acting through ignorance. Courage makes the agent perceptive or critical.

What Aristotle says about courage is a particular application of a general truth about moral virtue. It is moral virtue which makes us discern correctly the particular situation. We may illustrate the generality of this truth about moral virtue by citing another virtue. Talking about magnanimity, Aristotle says that it is laudable to judge (*krinai*) correctly great and small goods (*EE* 1232A, 32–33). The virtue concerned with each thing judges (*krinei*) correctly the greater and the smaller (*EE* 1232A, 35–36).⁶ We can conclude that virtue not only makes the possessor act (*EN* 1145A, 5–6) but also makes the possessor perceive correctly a given situation.

Before pursuing further the critical power of moral virtue, it

⁵ The role of moral virtue as stated in the *Eudemian Ethics* will be found to agree with the role as stated in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. The previously unnoticed evidence in the *Eudemian Ethics* is not evidence for a difference in doctrine between the two *Ethics*, but rather for agreement between the two *Ethics*.

⁶ The subsequent text is difficult and perhaps corrupt. But what I have quoted is clear enough: moral virtue makes a man critical, able to discern the particular situation.

would be well to note that the verb *krinein* is not confined to a single usage by Aristotle. There is a different use which must be pointed out in order that no confusion may arise between the two uses. Because *krinein* has the general meaning to make a judgment⁷, it is used sometimes to signify a deliberate judgment and not a perceptual judgment. This is the case at *EN* 1113A, 12, where Aristotle associated *krinein* with the decision appropriate to deliberate choice.

But sometimes *krinein* signifies the judgment of appearances and does not presuppose deliberation. This use may be seen at *EN* 1113A, 30. Just as what is truly healthful appears so to the healthy man, so what is truly good appears so to the morally good man. For the morally good man judges (*krinei*) each thing correctly and in each thing the good is apparent to him. It is in this sense signifying perceptual judgment that *krinein* is used by Aristotle to describe moral virtue. A function of moral virtue is correct perceptual judgment so that a morally good man can perceive and discern correctly particular situations.

Because moral virtue enables one to judge correctly the particular situation, the morally good man will be the standard for all such judgments. In his discussion of pleasure, in Book 10 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle makes this very clear. What appears to the morally good man is really the case. If this is true, as it seems to be, then in each case the measure is moral virtue and the morally good man, *qua* such (*EN* 1176A, 17–18). It is not loquacity which stimulates Aristotle to add “*qua* such.” Rather he wishes to emphasize that it is the perfect man in one aspect only who is the measure. Every perfect man possesses both moral virtue and practical reason but it is only as a possessor of moral virtue that he is a measure. The same point is made in the third book of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. The morally good man is especially distinguished by seeing (*horan*) the truth in each thing, just as if he were a ruler (*kanôn*) and measure (*metron*) of each thing (*EN* 1113A, 32–33).

That the morally good man is called the rule and the measure suggests that he possesses some standard with which to judge the particular object or situation. The suggestion is correct, for it is the morally good man to whom the true goal or good appears

⁷ See *De an.* 432A, 16.

(*EN* 1113A, 25). Because he has a correct apprehension of the good he can judge particulars good or bad.⁸ It is noteworthy that Chapter 4, Book 3 of the *Nicomachean Ethics* begins by asking whether the goal which is the object of wish is the real or apparent good. But before the chapter is concluded Aristotle has shifted his attention from the general good to particular goods (*EN* 1113A, 29–B, 2). The shift is perfectly natural. The real good appears to the morally good man who thereby has a standard against which to judge the particular case.

We are now in a position to analyze more precisely how virtue makes the possessor judge correctly. First, it makes the good apparent. If there are several components of the good, it makes these goods apparent, supplying the virtuous man with a standard. Secondly, it controls those emotions which upset critical perception (*Somn.* 460B, 3–11; *EN* 1147B, 9–17). The courageous man does not act through ignorance (*EE* 1229B, 25–26) because he knows what kind of situation calls for brave action. He and all morally good men are like doctors who possess a standard to which they refer when judging bodies healthy or sick (*EE* 1249A, 21–22).

These functions of moral virtue are incorporated into practical deliberation. Not only does virtue control the emotions but it governs the motive force, appetite. By making the good apparent, it supplies a goal for deliberation and by making the possessor judge the particular situation it supplies a particular premise for the syllogism of deliberate choice. The morally good man must possess a goal or standard before he can deliberate correctly about actions and acquisitions (*EE* 1249A, 24–B, 1). In the case of actions, the goal may be courageous action. It is this very idea of courageous action which allows him to judge correctly a particular practical situation. Given the goal and the particular judgment, his practical reason can complete the syllogism of deliberate choice. In the case of acquisitions, the goal is the promotion of contemplation (*EE* 1249B, 16–19), and this is also the standard by which he judges and obtains a particular premise. Supplied with goal and particular premise, practical reason issues a command (*EE* 1249B, 14–15) which is the conclusion of deliberate choice. Because moral virtue is already involved in

⁸ Of course he may also have a correct knowledge of the bad to aid in judging a particular bad thing. But it is not necessary. For the bad can be recognized by knowing its opposite, the good, *De an.* 430B, 22–23.

deliberate choice by supplying the goal and the particular premise, there is no difficulty in seeing why action follows choice. The motive force, appetite, is controlled by virtue which is already functioning in deliberate choice. It just keeps on functioning, and appetite moves the agent to action. There is no gap between decision and action because moral virtue bridges deliberate choice and action.

Deliberate choice involves several functions of moral virtue. Indeed as a perfected state of character, moral virtue is inclusive. Aristotle has not assigned a different state of character for every function. Moral virtue unites functions, thereby contributing to the unity of character. It is because moral virtue unites these several functions that it is so important a perfected state of character.

The identity of the apparent good and the goal of deliberate choice and their mutual dependence upon moral virtue is reflected in a mixing of vocabularies. In Book 3 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Chapter 5, Aristotle asks whether each man's apparent good is not determined by nature over which he has no control. What sort of character a man has determines what appears good to him. If he is personally responsible for having this character, then he is responsible for his idea of the good. But if he is not responsible for his character, then he cannot be held responsible for actions based on a wrong idea of the good. If character is determined by nature, then those fixed states of character, virtue and vice, are equally involuntary. For the good and for the bad man the goal is apparent and is laid down by nature or in some other way. To this goal men relate whatever else they do (*EN* 1114b, 13-16):

ἀμφοῖν γὰρ ὁμοίως, τῷ ἀγαθῷ καὶ τῷ κακῷ, τὸ τέλος φύσει ἢ ὅπως δέποτε φαίνεται καὶ κείται, τὰ δὲ λοιπὰ πρὸς τοῦτο ἀναφέροντες πράττουσιν ὅπως δέποτε.

There is a real mixing of vocabularies in this passage. The morally good man knows the apparent good which appears (*φαίνεται*) to him when he wishes to make a perceptual judgment. To this standard, the apparent good, he relates (*πρὸς τοῦτο ἀναφέροντες*) the particular situations and acts accordingly. For the man making a deliberate choice the description is different. For him the goal is laid down (*κεῖται*). When other terms are related to the goal (*πρὸς τοῦτο*), he makes a decision and acts.

In the lines preceding this passage the emphasis had been on the appearance of the good or bad and on critical judgment: ὁψιν ἔχοντα ἢ κρινεῖ (*EN* 1114B, 7). But at line 1114B, 15 the word κεῖται turns our thoughts toward deliberation. At the chapter's close Aristotle seems more concerned with deliberation, for he says again that according to our character we lay down the goal: τῷ ποιοῖ τινες εἶναι τὸ τέλος τοιόνδε τιθέμεθα (*EN* 1114B, 23–24). The shift is real, but it is only a shift in point of view. When Aristotle uses the verbs κρινεῖ and φαίνεται, he is thinking of moral virtue as a critical perfection. When he uses the verbs κεῖται and τιθέμεθα, he is thinking of the same perfection, but as a perfection involved in deliberate choice.⁹

This difference in point of view is important because it helps explain why Aristotle gives two different descriptions of moral virtue. It is a *hexis* described sometimes as *proairetikê* (*EN* 1106B, 36) and sometimes as *stochastikê* (*EN* 1106B, 15–16, 1109A, 22, 30). When Aristotle thinks of moral virtue as a perfected state of character involved in deliberate choice, then he calls it *proairetikê*. When he thinks of its critical performance, he calls it *stochastikê*. The man who possesses a *hexis stochastikê* can judge the given situation. His judgment, as I have argued above, requires a standard against which to judge the particular. He possesses this standard, and the verb *stochazesthai* is often used to express “aiming at” the good. For example, Aristotle opens his *Politics* with the statement that all associations aim at (*stochazontai*) some good (*Pol.* 1252A, 4; cf. *EN* 1160A, 13). If *stochazesthai* is appropriate to express “keeping an eye on” the universal good, it is also appropriate to express a critical perception of the particular situation. In the *Rhetoric* Aristotle discusses the effect a gnomic statement can have if it catches the particular prejudice of the hearer. It is necessary, says Aristotle (*Rh.* 1395B, 10–11) that the orator hit upon (*stochazesthai*) what sorts of prejudices the audience holds. It appears that the description of moral virtue as a *hexis stochastikê* is appropriate to its critical function. The virtuous man has his eye on the good or on some standard against which he can judge the particular situation.

This interpretation is substantiated by the second book of the

⁹ For additional examples of κεῖται, see *EE* 1226B, 10, 29. For θέσθαι see *EN* 1112B, 15, *EE* 1214B, 7. In syllogistic language, one lays down or posits the middle term: *APr.* 49A, 30, 37.

Nicomachean Ethics. In Chapter 4, Aristotle distinguishes between doing a just act and doing an act justly. The latter case involves three things: knowing the particular situation,¹⁰ choosing, having an established disposition (*EN* 1105A, 31–33). Among these three, knowledge of the particular is least important. Firmness of disposition and deliberate choice are the important factors. In the following Chapter 5, Aristotle continues this emphasis. Moral virtue cannot be an emotion because we rage and fear without deliberately choosing to do so. Moral virtue on the other hand is some choice or not without choice (*EN* 1106A, 2–4).

Chapter 6, however, contains a change of emphasis from choice to the particular judgment. After discussing the trainer's knowledge concerning the diets of Milo and a novice, Aristotle draws the parallel with moral virtue. Every science performs its task well by looking toward the mean and referring its work to it (*EN* 1106B, 8–9). Since moral virtue is more accurate than any technical skill, it too, would be able to hit (*stochastikê*) the mean (*EN* 1106B, 15–16). The analogy is clear. Like the technician, the morally good man keeps his eye on a good standard to which he continually refers the particular situation. Because he possesses this good standard, he can judge the particular situation and realize the mean or the good in particular action. In the performance of this critical judgment the morally good man is not deliberating but perceiving, so that his virtue is appropriately described as *stochastikê*.

After introducing the description of virtue as *stochastikê*, Aristotle repeats it a few lines later (*EN* 1106B, 28). It is not, however, disturbing that Aristotle suddenly shifts descriptions and calls virtue *proairetikê* (*EN* 1106B, 36). Deliberation is the province of practical reason *per se*, and perception is the province of moral virtue *per se*. But the two provinces are united in deliberate choice. For practical reason must have a conception of the goal and a judgment concerning the circumstances before it can perform the syllogistic moves appropriate to it. By its critical ability and its capacity to control appetite moral virtue helps to make choice possible. Part of being *proairetikê* is to be *stochastikê*.

¹⁰ That the knowledge meant is that of the particular is shown by the parallel passage in Book 5, *EN* 1134A, 20. Trying to make precise how a man acts unjustly but is not yet unjust, Aristotle gives the example of knowing with whom one has intercourse but not acting from choice. The knowledge is of a particular woman.

Neither the goal nor the particular are objects of deliberation (*EN* 1112B, 33–1113A, 2). It is because of the apprehensions of moral virtue that practical reason knows them. Through the judgments of moral virtue, practical reason possesses both a universal premise and a particular premise. Given both premises practical reason can perform a syllogism upon them.¹¹

Aristotle nowhere in the *Ethics* says that practical reason makes the possessor judge (*krinein*) correctly, but he does say that moral virtue makes the possessor judge correctly. Properly understood moral virtue is a perfected state of character which enables the possessor to apprehend both the goal of deliberate choice and also the particular situation. Nevertheless there are passages which have been thought to contradict the view that moral virtue makes man critically perceptive. For in these passages practical reason seems to be called perception and the eye of the soul. I shall deny that there is any contradiction, not always arguing originally but recalling the work of previous scholars. In the light of abundant evidence suggesting that moral virtue makes one perceptive, the interpretations of these scholars should be reconsidered and used to deny that practical reason is perceptive.

In one of these passages (*EN* 1142A, 25–30) Aristotle is comparing and contrasting *nous* with *phronêsis*:

ὁ μὲν γὰρ νοῦς τῶν ὄρων, ὧν οὐκ ἔστι λόγος, ἡ δὲ τοῦ ἐσχάτου, οὐδ' οὐκ ἔστιν ἐπιστήμη ἀλλ' αἴσθησις, οὐκ ἡ τῶν ἰδίων, ἀλλ' οἷα αἰσθανόμεθα ὅτι τὸ ἐν τοῖς μαθηματικοῖς ἐσχατον τρίγωνον· στήσεται γὰρ κάκεῖ. ἀλλ' αὖτις μᾶλλον αἴσθησις ἢ φρόνησις, ἐκείνης δ' ἄλλο εἶδος.

In the nineteenth century Teichmüller forcefully argued that Aristotle conceived of a *phronetische Wahrnehmung* for which neither educated nor philosophical discourse could supply an adequate label.¹² To make clear his notion of a perceptive practical reason, Aristotle satisfied himself by stating its genus *aisthêsis* (*EN* 1142A, 27) and then by distinguishing two species of perception: particular sensation (*EN* 1142A, 27) and mathematical perception (*EN* 1142A, 28–29), neither of which can be identified with moral perception. There must remain another species (*EN* 1142A, 30) of perception, namely the *phronetische Wahrnehmung*, which supplies the minor premise of deliberate choice.

¹¹ For the possession of both premises see *EN* 1141B, 14–22, especially 1141B, 21–22.

¹² Teichmüller, *Aristotelische Forschungen* (Halle 1869) 1.253–62.

At the turn of the century Burnet argued that *φρονήσεως* should be supplied with *ἐκείνης* (*EN* 1142A, 30).¹³ He described *phronêsis* as "practical intuition." If these scholars are correct, then Aristotle recognizes two kinds of perception, neither of which is to be identified with the particular senses. One kind can be illustrated by a mathematician's perception of particular figures. The other kind is the moral perception of practical reason. Although mathematical perception is in some way more of a perception than moral perception, nevertheless *phronêsis* is a perceptive or intuitive state of character. Practical reason, not moral virtue, is the perfected state of character which enables the possessor to apprehend the particular moral situation.

An alternative view has been developed by L. H. Greenwood.¹⁴ *φρονήσεως* is not to be understood with *ἐκείνης*. Rather the demonstrative pronoun means *τῆς τῶν ἰδίων αἰσθήσεως*.¹⁵ Aristotle says that the type of perception involved in both mathematical and moral deliberation is different from the perception of the particular sensibles. It is the perception of the *sensus communis* which perceives both the ethical and the mathematical minor premise and which in ethical deliberation supplies practical reason with the minor premise. Because both practical reason and moral perception are correctly said to be concerned with the particular, one might erroneously identify the two. To avoid this Aristotle states that the perception is the operation of the *sensus communis* rather than practical reason: ἀλλ' αὐτῇ μᾶλλον αἰσθησις ἢ φρόνησις (*EN* 1142A, 29–30). For completeness' sake he adds that the perception of the *sensus communis* is different in species from that of the particular senses: ἐκείνης δ' ἄλλο εἶδος (*EN* 1142A, 30). The work of practical reason presupposes perception, but the percipient is not *phronêsis* itself.¹⁶

¹³ Burnet, *The Ethics of Aristotle* (London 1900) 274.

¹⁴ L. H. Greenwood, *Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, Book Six* (Cambridge 1909) 196–200.

¹⁵ Stewart, *Notes on the Nicomachean Ethics* (Oxford 1892) 2.77, anticipated Greenwood on this point.

¹⁶ Greenwood's brilliant note frees us from identifying practical reason with perceptual excellence. It has not, however, explained the passage by opposing moral virtue to practical reason but rather by introducing the *sensus communis*. This introduction is correct for the perception which moral virtue makes correct is the perception of the *sensus communis*. The relation between the *sensus communis* and moral virtue is a lengthy subject which I hope to treat fully in a subsequent paper.

In a discussion concerning the relationship between cleverness and practical reason, Aristotle says that cleverness is the ability to achieve any given goal. Practical reason is not this ability but presupposes it. The difference between the two is made by moral virtue. For without moral virtue the perfected state of practical reason is not acquired by the eye of the soul: ἡ δ' ἐξίς τῷ ὀφθαλμῷ τούτῳ γίνεται τῆς ψυχῆς οὐκ ἄνευ ἀρετῆς (*EN* 1144A, 29–30). The deliberative capacity seems to be called an eye, which is a description more appropriate to moral virtue in its critical function (*EN* 1114B, 7).

The correct interpretation of this passage has been given by I. Düring.¹⁷ The τούτῳ is a signal for the reader that Aristotle is referring to that memorable passage from Plato's *Republic* (533D) where the eye of the soul (τὸ τῆς ψυχῆς ὄμμα) is sunk in a barbarian bog. Aristotle here is not concerned with an appropriate description of the deliberative capacity. Rather he disregards such considerations and introduces a reminiscence of Plato's *Republic*.¹⁸

As a final passage alleged to illustrate the perceptive power of practical reason we may consider *EN* 1140B, 7–11:

Wherefore we think that Pericles and men like him are *phronimoi*, because they are able to consider (*theôrein*) the good for themselves and for mankind; and such is our conception of master householders and politicians.

Mr. Ando translates *theôrein* (*EN* 1140B, 9–10) by the verb "to see."¹⁹ Men like Pericles are considered *phronimoi* because they are able "to see" what is good for themselves and for mankind. In connection with this passage, Mr. Ando cites *EN* 1113A, 29–B, 2, which we have discussed above. The good man correctly judges, *krinei* (*EN* 1113A, 30), and sees, *horan* (*EN* 1113A, 33), the truth in everything. Both passages are meant to concern the moral estimation of particulars by practical reason and to illustrate the importance of the *phronetische Wahrnehmung*.

The two passages, however, do not illustrate the perceptive powers of practical reason. Indeed the two passages are not so

¹⁷ "Aristotle in the *Protrepticus*," *Autour d'Aristote* (Louvain 1955) 94.

¹⁸ The likelihood of a Platonic reminiscence is increased by the suspicion that only fifteen lines below (*EN* 1144B, 9) Aristotle introduces a reminiscence of Plato's *Meno*, 88B. See Gauthier and Jolif (above, note 2) 2.554.

¹⁹ T. Ando, *Aristotle's Theory of Practical Cognition* (Kyoto 1958) 287.

similar in thought that they can be used without caution to explain one another. At *EN* 1113A, 29–33, it is the morally good man and not the man possessing practical reason who is said to judge well and to see the truth. Just as moral virtue makes the goal and universal good appear to the virtuous man, so moral virtue makes the virtuous man judge and see correctly. At *EN* 1140B, 7–11 Aristotle is not considering the good man *qua* virtuous but *qua phronimos*. Nor does he say that men like Pericles are able “to see.” He says that they are able “to study” or simply “to consider” what is good for men. This use of *theôrein* at *EN* 1140B, 9–10 is similar to that at *EN* 1140B, 11–12. To practise a craft is “to study” or “to consider” how something may be generated. Similarly the master house-holders and politicians (*EN* 1140B, 10–11) are able “to consider” the good for mankind, discovering what constitutes *eupraxia* (*EN* 1140B, 7) and how it can be realized. Whole states may benefit from this exercise of practical reason. But in any particular circumstance the individual moral agent must see and judge the situation. In this particular critical judgment he must depend upon moral virtue and not upon practical reason.