

MORAL KNOWLEDGE AND THE ACQUISITION OF VIRTUE IN ARISTOTLE'S *NICOMACHEAN* AND *EUDEMIAN ETHICS*

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IN BOTH THE *EUDEMIAN ETHICS* AND THE *NICOMACHEAN ETHICS*, Aristotle says that the aim of ethical inquiry is a practical one;¹ we want to know what virtue is so that we may become good ourselves and thereby do well and be happy. By classifying ethical inquiry as a practical endeavor, Aristotle is rejecting a view that he attributes to Socrates according to which ethics is a kind of theoretical science. In theoretical sciences, such as geometry or astronomy, the knowledge of a particular subject matter is sought as an end in itself, and the possession of such knowledge is sufficient to make one a geometer or an astronomer. In rejecting this model Aristotle argues that the knowledge of virtue is sought not solely for itself but in order to inform praxis and in order that we become virtuous and good, not by knowing what the virtues are but by cultivating them in practice.

Merely accepting the idea that ethics is a practical enterprise in the sense outlined above, however, does not commit one to a more specific conception of the relationship between attaining a general knowledge of virtue and being able to perform the activities that are essential to cultivating virtuous states of character. The extent to which one can acquire a general knowledge of ethical matters before one has engaged in the practical affairs of life, for instance, remains an open question. In the discussion that follows, I will argue that Aristotle's views in the *Eudemian Ethics* (*EE*) leave open the possibility of a "theory first" approach to ethical development. According to this approach, it is possible to acquire general moral knowledge independently from one's experience with the practical affairs of life and to benefit from using this knowledge to shape one's subsequent activities. I will also argue, however, that Aristotle explicitly rejects this

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¹Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics* (hereafter, "*EE*") 1.5.1216b4–26; *Nicomachean Ethics* (hereafter, "*NE*") 2.2.1103b26–9.

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conception of ethics in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (*NE*) where he embraces instead what might be called an “experience first” approach to ethical development. In the *NE*, Aristotle places constant emphasis on the importance of gaining a knowledge of particulars that comes from practical experience not only in order to act well, but to be able to acquire and to benefit from a general knowledge of ethical matters. I will also suggest that this emphasis on experience results from a clarification that Aristotle makes in the *NE* of the relationship between actions, emotions, and states of character in order to avoid a puzzle or *aporia* to which the account of the acquisition of virtue in the *EE* is left open. Finally, I will suggest that the underlying reasons motivating this difference in emphasis support the view that the *NE* is later than the *EE* and that, as such, we should take the view expressed in the *NE* to represent Aristotle’s considered view on this matter.

The differences between the *EE* and the *NE* that I will discuss are subtle and for this reason they have been largely overlooked. So I want to emphasize that important questions about the role of philosophical inquiry in the development of virtue and the practical role of general moral knowledge ride on these differences. In taking a clear and unambiguous stance on these issues in the *NE*, Aristotle is explicitly ruling out answers to these questions which were perfectly consistent with the account of these issues in the *EE*. I argue below that this marks an important shift in Aristotle’s thinking.

Finally, a word of clarification is in order. In referring to the *NE* and the *EE* in what follows I mean to refer only to the books that are unique to each work. Because there is some controversy over the place of the common books (*NE* 5–7 and *EE* 4–6) my analysis of the two treatises will rely almost exclusively on material from these non-common books. I will explain my reasons for doing so near the end of the following discussion.

I

The Practical Science of Virtue. In the *EE* Aristotle tells us that Socrates did not ask how and from what virtue is produced because he took all of the virtues to be forms of knowledge and he therefore thought that one could become virtuous by attaining a knowledge of virtue just as one could become a geometer by acquiring the knowl-

edge of geometry.² When Aristotle likens ethics to the productive sciences in the *EE*, it is to this emphasis—on knowing how and from what virtue is produced—that he points:

Of the productive sciences (τῶν ποιητικῶν ἐπιστημῶν), however, the end is distinct from the science <itself> and from understanding: health is the end of medicine, good social order—or something of the sort distinct <from the science itself>—the end of political science. If something is fine, understanding it is fine also; but still, in the case of virtue, the most valuable thing is not to have knowledge of it (τί ἐστίν), but to know from what source it arises (τὸ γινώσκειν ἐκ τίνων ἐστίν).³

In the productive sciences, the knowledge of the essential nature of the end of that science is still important because, as he puts it in the *Magna Moralia*, “it is not easy to know the source and manner of its production, if one does not know what it is, any more than in the sciences.”⁴ But it is less important, from a practical point of view, than knowledge of the sources from which this end can be generated or produced. What, then, does Aristotle mean when he talks about knowing the sources from which virtue arises?

To answer this question, we must look briefly at some passages in which Aristotle distinguishes two ways in which one might claim to know the sources from which health arises. Consider the following passage from the *Metaphysics*:

With a view to action, experience seems in no way inferior to art (τέχνη), and we even see men of experience having more success than those who have theory (λόγος) but lack experience; the reason is that experience is knowledge of particulars (γνώσις τῶν καθ’ ἕκαστον) while art is of universals, and actions and productions are all concerned with the particular; for the doctor does not cure man, except incidentally (κατὰ συμβεβηκόσ), but rather Callias or Socrates or some other individual referred to in this way who happens to be a man. If, then, a man has the theory but lacks experience, and knows the universal but not the particular contained in this, he will often fail to cure: for it is the particular (τὸ καθ’ ἕκαστον) that is to be cured.⁵

² *EE* 1.5.1216b4–26.

³ *EE* 1.5.1216b17–23. For translations of the *EE* I have relied primarily on Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics Books I, II, and VIII*, trans. Michael Woods (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992).

⁴ Aristotle, *Magna Moralia* 1.1.1182a9–10.

⁵ Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1.1.981a12–24. I have relied on W. D. Ross’s translation of the *Metaphysics* in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).

Here Aristotle distinguishes two kinds of knowledge, both of which are productive. On the one hand, there is a general, scientific knowledge of health and the mechanisms through which it is sustained or attenuated. This is contrasted with the empiric's knowledge that certain particular things—eating chicken rather than beef, for instance—make one healthy. Given this very rough distinction, it appears that we can distinguish three possible ways in which one might know how health arises.⁶

In the first case, one might know how health arises in the sense that one can give an account of the systems of the body, their proper states of functioning, and the factors that can influence those states. For instance, one might know that light meats and regular exercise foster health without knowing which meats are light and which exercises are best suited to which individuals.⁷ In the second case, one might know how health arises simply because one knows that eating chicken and walking after dinner contribute to a healthy constitution. In the latter case, the empiric knows that specific prescriptions tend to make people healthy, but he cannot explain how this is so. In the former case, the theorist understands the way that certain mechanisms influence the systems of the body (light meats are less fatty and easier to digest), but he need not know which specific interventions are best at activating these mechanisms. For Aristotle, the difference here is a difference in the level of generality of an agent's knowledge. When it comes to health, the theorist has knowledge of the universal and need not necessarily know which particular things fall under those universals. This knowledge is still productive because its aims are not simply the knowledge of the nature of health for its own sake but the knowledge of health and the mechanisms by which it can be brought about. It is incomplete, however, in that it cannot actually produce health without being augmented by a knowledge of particulars. The empiric, on the other hand, has knowledge of these particulars, but because he lacks the knowledge of the universal, he cannot explain the reasons why chicken is a healthy food, say. In the third and best case, however, one possesses what we might call medical

⁶My understanding of this passage and the distinctions that follow is indebted to Daniel T. Devereux, "Particular and Universal in Aristotle's Conception of Practical Knowledge," *The Review of Metaphysics* 39, no. 3 (March 1986): 483–504.

⁷See *NE/EE* 6.7.1141b15–23.

skill. Here the empiric's knowledge of particulars is united with the scientist's knowledge of the universal, combining the knowledge of particular treatments with the explanatory knowledge of the other.⁸

The passage cited above is important because it appears to identify the knowledge of a practical science like medicine with the kind of theoretical knowledge that one could attain without a knowledge of the particulars that fall under it. In this passage, as in the parallel passage from 1141b12–23 of the common books, Aristotle points out that the empiric is more likely to heal an individual than the mere theorist because the goal of clinical practice is to cure specific individuals. But it remains to be seen how important the empiric's knowledge of particulars is for the discussion of the *EE* and the *NE*, and I will turn to this in a moment.

First, however, I want to note that in the above passage Aristotle also seems to claim that the knowledge that constitutes medical theory is the sort of knowledge that can be taught to students independently of their knowledge of particulars. This is echoed in the following passage from the *Magna Moralia*. Aristotle has just said that one acts in accordance with right reason when the irrational part of the soul does not prevent the rational part from engaging in its own activity. After pointing out that it is not easy to specify the state in which the passions must be in order for this to be the case, he continues:

But perhaps one might raise the following sort of question also, 'If I really know these things, shall I then be happy'? For they think they must be; whereas it is not so. For none of the other sciences transmits to the learner the use and exercise, but only the faculty. So in this case also the knowing of these things does not transmit the use (for happiness is an activity, as we maintain), but the faculty, nor does happiness consist in the knowledge of what produces it, but comes from the use of these means. Now the use and exercise of these it is not the business of this treatise to impart, any more than any other science imparts the use of anything, but only the faculty.⁹

According to this passage, no other practical science imparts its use in practical applications. Rather, the study of treatises imparts the knowledge of the theoretical aspect of the practical science which must then be put into practice. This passage, therefore, supports the idea that Aristotle thinks the knowledge of the theoretical aspect of

⁸ Devereux, "Particular and Universal," 493–4.

⁹ Aristotle, *Magna Moralia* 2.10.1208a31–b2. I have relied on St. G. Stock's translation of the *Magna Moralia* in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*.

some practical sciences can be conveyed independently of an agent's experience of the particulars with which that science operates.

In this regard, the above passages are reminiscent of the distinction implicit in *Republic* 408d–e in which Socrates distinguishes two kinds of physicians, those who have learned their craft and have “had contact with the greatest number of sick bodies from childhood on,” and those who lack such experience. Although the former are more effective physicians than the latter, the implication is that one can acquire the knowledge of a practical science independently of experience with particulars, even though the latter may be essential for using the former. The idea here is that the medical intern's experience in the hospital, for instance, enables him to put into practice a form of scientific knowledge he has already acquired in the classroom. Although he may possess this scientific knowledge as a result of his classroom education, it has yet to be exercised in clinical practice in order to acquire medical skill.

By comparing the argument of the *Magna Moralia* to the study of a practical science, Aristotle implies that a work of moral philosophy can convey a kind of moral knowledge analogous to the knowledge of medical theory. It also implies that this will benefit the student of ethics in much the same way that it benefits the student of medicine: one can absorb the knowledge of moral theory independently of one's experience with particulars, and then it remains only to learn how to use or apply that knowledge in actual practice.

Is this the view that Aristotle endorses in the *EE*? I will now argue that there is no indication in the *EE* that Aristotle rejects this view and that what he does say is perfectly consistent with it. When I turn to the *NE*, however, I will argue that Aristotle's position is unambiguous and that he there goes to great length to reject this view of the role of moral theory in the acquisition of virtue.

II

Acquiring Virtue in the EE. From the opening sections of the *EE* it appears that the purpose of the inquiry is to provide a convincing account of the issues that constitute the theoretical part of ethics as a practical science. At the beginning of *EE* book 1, chapter 2, Aristotle says that “above all, and before everything else, [a person]

should settle in his own mind—neither in a hurried nor in a dilatory manner—in which human thing living well consists, and what those things are without which it cannot belong to human being.”¹⁰ The reason that this question must be put above and before everything else is that there is a good deal of controversy concerning which way of life is best and most conducive to happiness and it is the mark of extreme folly “not to order one’s life in relation to some end.”¹¹ If we want to avoid such folly, he suggests, “everyone who can live according to his own choice should adopt some goal for the fine life, whether it be honor or reputation or wealth, or cultivation—an aim that he will have in view in all his actions.”¹²

The practical aim of the *EE* is to present an account of the human good around which agents can shape their choices and activities. For this reason, although it remains important to know what sort of thing virtue is, it is of greater importance to know the sources from which it arises since we wish to be just and courageous, not simply to know what justice and courage are.¹³ Immediately after clarifying this point Aristotle says “We must try, by argument, to reach a convincing conclusion on all these questions, using as testimony and by way of example, what appears to be the case.”¹⁴ Given that the phrase “all these questions” seems to include the question of the nature and source of virtue, Aristotle seems to think that we will be able to argue to a convincing conclusion about the nature of virtue and the sources from which it arises. Equipped with such an account, it would remain only to venture forth and exploit, and perhaps perfect, this knowledge in action.

There is no indication in these passages that the nature of the subject matter under discussion in any way resists being convincingly and clearly elaborated at the general, philosophical level. Nor is it clear that there are special limitations on or conditions for a person’s being able to benefit from the results of this inquiry. In *EE* book 1, chapter 3, Aristotle does say that when it comes to happiness it is unnecessary to examine the views of children, the mentally infirm, and the many, and that what such people need is not argumentation but

¹⁰ *EE* 1.2.1214b11–13.

¹¹ *EE* 1.2.1214b10–11.

¹² *EE* 1.2.1214b7–10.

¹³ *EE* 1.5.1216b20–6.

¹⁴ *EE* 1.6.1216b26–7.

experience (πάθους) either in the form of maturity, medical treatment, or civil correction. It is unclear how broadly this caveat should be understood, however, and Aristotle does not explain the rationale that underwrites it. After all, the mentally infirm are likely to be unreliable inquirers in any practical discipline, and the problem with the many is that they “speak in an unreflective way on almost any topic,”¹⁵ especially what constitutes the best life. Similarly, it is not clear whether what the young people mentioned here lack is a significant practical experience with the affairs of life or merely a basic level of maturity that would be required for any serious inquiry.¹⁶ Nothing in this passage rules out the possibility that persons who have come of age but who lack worldly experience might not benefit from the present inquiry.

The same holds true for the rest of *EE* book 1, chapter 6. Here Aristotle amplifies the need to consider questions about the best life carefully and in a rational manner. It is not just that people hold different opinions about which way of life is best. It is important also that many attempt to support their views with a theoretical or argumentative backing. For this reason Aristotle says, “the political man also should not regard as irrelevant the inquiry that makes clear not only the *that* but also the *why*. For that way of proceeding is the philosopher’s in every discipline.”¹⁷ However, Aristotle goes on to point out that

because it appears to be the mark of the philosopher never to speak in an unconsidered fashion, but always with reason, there are some who often go undetected when they produce arguments that are foreign to the inquiry and idle. (They do this sometimes out of ignorance, sometimes out of charlatanry.) By such arguments are caught even those who are experienced and of practical ability at the hand of men who neither have nor are capable of architectonic or practical thought. This happens to them through lack of training; for it is a lack of training to be unable to distinguish, in regard to each subject, between those arguments which are appropriate to it and those which are foreign.¹⁸

At no point in these passages does Aristotle suggest that philosophical inquiry will have a difficult time making clear either the *that* or the

¹⁵ *EE* 1.3.1215a1–2.

¹⁶ In the parallel passage at *NE* 1.3.1095a2–14, there is no such ambiguity. I discuss this passage below.

¹⁷ *EE* 1.6.1216b35–7.

¹⁸ *EE* 1.6.1217a1–9.

why when it comes to ethics. Nor does he suggest that this kind of philosophical inquiry will only be useful to the political person. He says that a philosophical inquiry which clarifies both the that and the why will also be relevant to the political person, implying that it is useful for the more philosophically oriented as well. The ambition of philosophical inquiry is to make clear both the that and the why, and although it is often best to evaluate these accounts separately,¹⁹ there is no indication that there are significant prerequisites to one's being able to appreciate either account other than the proper training in philosophical argumentation. No reasons are given to indicate that Aristotle thinks that students familiar with the *Organon* will not be able fruitfully to engage and exploit the results of this kind of moral philosophy.

What Aristotle has warned us to guard against, so far, are people who reason poorly about which kind of life is best but who comport themselves with an air of authority. Without philosophical training one may not be able to see through their arguments and avoid being misled about the nature of the best life. Together, these passages seem to indicate that the results of philosophical inquiry into the nature of virtue, happiness, and the rest would be useful to the person looking to become virtuous, if for no other reason than that it would enable such a person to organize his life around the appropriate goal. Likewise, to the extent that one has been trained in the kind of philosophical reasoning that it will take to engage in such an inquiry, one will be less likely to be deceived by faulty theories or bad arguments. Nor has there been any indication that this kind of philosophical knowledge is in any way unavailable to those who pursue it while lacking a knowledge of particulars. In fact, Aristotle has claimed that the question with which this inquiry is concerned should come before all other concerns,²⁰ and he has suggested a way in which those who have practical experience would be at a disadvantage in comparison with the person equipped with a philosophical account of the good life: the former person may be more likely to be deceived by ideology or bad reasoning.

So far, Aristotle's account of ethics as a kind of practical science in the *EE* is consistent with the idea that a knowledge of moral

¹⁹ *EE* 1.6.1217a10–18.

²⁰ *EE* 1.2.1214b11–13.

universals can be imparted to others prior to or independently of experience with particulars, in a way that is analogous to learning the theoretical aspect of a practical science. I have also tried to suggest one way in which Aristotle may see having such a theoretical account as beneficial even to the inexperienced person. If we turn to Aristotle's strikingly terse and sketchy account of the nature of moral virtue and its acquisition in the *EE*, it appears to reflect this same general view. It also appears to be open to a problem that Aristotle takes great pains to avoid in the *NE*. As a result, it will be helpful to look at his account of the acquisition of virtue in the *EE* in some detail.

Aristotle begins with the general claims that (a) "the best disposition is produced by the best things," and that (b) "with each thing, the best things are done from that thing's excellence; for example, the best exertions and nourishment are those from which physical well-being results, and it is from well-being that men best exert themselves."²¹ Applying this more specifically to the case of moral virtue, he says:

(a') Virtue then, is the sort of disposition which is produced by the best processes to do with the soul (τῶν ἀρίστων περὶ ψυχὴν κινήσεων), and (b') from which are done the best functions of the soul and its best affections (τῆς ψυχῆς ἔργα καὶ πάθη); and it is by the same things that it is, in one manner, produced, and in another destroyed, and its employment has to do with the same things as those by which it is promoted and destroyed: those in relation to which it disposes things in the best way.²²

Together with (a) and (b) we may infer from this passage that the best functions and affections of the soul are the same as the best processes to do with the soul, and that engaging in such activities is both the expression of a fully virtuous character and the manner in which that character is acquired.

In the *EE*, both the best states of the soul and the best expressions of the soul are defined solely in terms of emotions.²³ In the *EE* Aristotle argues that "virtue of character is essentially a mean state in each case, and concerns certain means in pleasures and pains, and things pleasant and unpleasant."²⁴ This means that "every virtue of character has to do with pleasures and pains"²⁵ because "character traits are <qualified in a certain way> in respect of capacities for af-

²¹ *EE* 2.1.1220a22–4.

²² *EE* 2.1.1220a29–31.

fections (πάθη).²⁶ By “affections” Aristotle goes on to explain that he “means such things as anger, fear, shame, desire—in general anything which, as such, gives rise usually to perceptual pleasure and pain.”²⁷ Being able to give an account of the emotions is of central importance to the *EE* because they are part of the τί ἐστὶ of moral virtue and “it is on account of pleasures and pains that we call men bad, for pursuing or avoiding them as they should not, or those they should not.”²⁸

In *EE* book 2, chapter 3, Aristotle argues that the affections can be divided into extremes of deficiency and excess, and a mean. This allows him to make the more specific claim that “in all cases the mean relative to us is best; for that is as knowledge and rational principle prescribe. And in all cases that also produces the best state.”²⁹ After examining questions of voluntary and involuntary action, deliberation, and choice, he says:

So it follows, since virtue of character itself is a mean state and always concerned with pleasures and pains, while vice lies in excess and deficiency, and has to do with the same things as virtue, that virtue is that state of character which chooses the mean, relative to us, in things pleasant and unpleasant, all those in respect of which a man is said to have a certain sort of character according as he enjoys them or suffers pain from them.³⁰

Virtues of character are mean states of the soul concerning pleasure and pain. They arise out of habitually experiencing the mean amount of pleasure and pain, and their exercise enables the virtuous person to choose the mean in pleasure and pain.

²³ In both the *NE* and the *EE* Aristotle says that virtue is concerned with (περὶ) pleasures and pains. However, as D. J. Allan has pointed out, in the *NE* this remark “precedes and is external to the inquiry into the τί ἐστὶ of moral virtue. It has only the status of a practical rule suggested to the disciplinarian. In the Eudemian argument this assertion plays its part *during* the inquiry into the τί ἐστὶ and is incorporated in the actual definition of moral virtue”; D. J. Allan, “Quasi-Mathematical Method in the *Eudemian Ethics*,” in *Aristotle et les problèmes de méthode*, ed. Suzanne Manison (Paris: Louvain, 1961), 315. Although Allen thinks that the *EE* is probably the later work (p. 318), I will argue below that this very difference in emphasis between the two works argues against that view.

²⁴ *EE* 2.5.1222a10–13.

²⁵ *EE* 2.4.1221b37.

²⁶ *EE* 2.2.1220b7–8.

²⁷ *EE* 2.2.1220b12–15.

²⁸ *EE* 2.4.1222a1–3.

²⁹ *EE* 2.3.1220b27–30.

³⁰ *EE* 2.10.1227b5–11.

The centrality of the emotions to the account of virtue in the *EE* is significant because not only can the emotions be divided into extremes of deficiency and excess, and a mean, but the nature of the emotions and the rough limits of these divisions constitute a subject matter that can be treated in detail at the theoretical level and communicated in a practical treatise. Consider, for instance, the extended treatment of the emotions that Aristotle offers in the *Rhetoric*. There Aristotle argues that the successful rhetorician requires not only “the ability to reason logically, but also the ability to understand human character and goodness in their various forms and to understand the emotions—that is, to name them and describe them, to know their causes and the way in which they are excited.”³¹ For my present purposes it is important only that Aristotle thinks that the nature and sources of the emotions can be systematically treated in a work like the *Rhetoric*, which purports to systematize the general principles of making persuasive arguments. Certainly the general account presented there will have to be perfected by practical experience. But the discussion of the *Rhetoric* provides a clear indication that for Aristotle, the subject matter of the emotions can be meaningfully and usefully explained at the theoretical level and communicated in a practical treatise.

It is true that in the *EE* Aristotle says that although the affections can be divided into extremes and a mean, it is ultimately the mean relative to us that is best. But even here Aristotle goes on to clarify what it means to say that the mean relative to us is determined by rational principle.³² What is more, it is clear that in this passage he is attempting to offer some standard for practical decision making when he says:

So if some choice and possession of natural goods—either goods of the body or money or of friends or the other goods—will most promote the contemplation of the god, that is the best, and that is the finest limit; but whatever, whether through deficiency or excess, hinders the service and contemplation of god, is bad. Thus it is for the soul, and this is the best limit for the soul—to be aware as little as possible of the non-rational part of the soul as such. But let what has been said be enough on the limit of nobility, and what the goal is of things good without qualification.³³

³¹ Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1.2.1356a22–5.

³² *EE* 8.3.1249b and following.

³³ *EE* 8.3.1249b17–25.

There is a general consensus that in this passage Aristotle is offering a standard of practical judgment. There is no general agreement, however, on whether this standard simply covers the acquisition and use of natural goods or whether it is meant to be a standard for virtue and virtuous action more generally.

For our purposes, however, this passage is important because it attempts to articulate a standard meant to govern (at least) our interactions with natural goods, and this standard is presented at the level of generality appropriate to a practical science. That is, one can understand the content of the principle without having the experience of the particular actions that it would specify or pick out. This lends further credibility to the picture of the *EE* as an ambitious attempt to provide a substantial account of the nature of virtue and the way in which it arises, and to equip the reader with a standard of conduct designed to assist in making particular practical decisions. It may be true that one will still need considerable practical experience in order to be able to apply this knowledge successfully. But the crucial point is that the exposition of the *EE* is perfectly consistent with the view that the student of philosophy, after studying the *Organon*, could take up the inquiry of the *EE* and come away with a level of general but still practical knowledge that simply needs to be completed by his or her experience with particulars.

In this section I have been arguing that there are strong indications in the *EE* that Aristotle embraces a view according to which students of ethical theory can acquire and benefit from the knowledge that is gained from the philosophical treatment of important ethical issues without having already acquired a knowledge of particulars. As I will now argue, this is a position that Aristotle takes great pains to reject in the *NE* where he repeatedly emphasizes the necessity of having practical experience with particulars, not only when it comes to being able to perform right actions but also in order to benefit from philosophical inquiry into ethics.

III

The NE on Actions, Particulars, and the Acquisition of Ethical Virtue. To begin, I want to point out that the brief account of the acquisition of virtue that we receive in the *EE* leaves itself open to the

following puzzle. On the one hand, we are told that the best of the soul's activities result from the exercise of moral virtue. On the other hand, we are told that it is by performing these very activities that moral virtue is acquired. But if the activities that are necessary to acquire virtue are the very activities that are produced by the exercise of the virtues, then it becomes unclear how one can acquire virtue if one is not already virtuous.³⁴ That is, how can one engage in the right kind of activities if these activities are themselves the result of exercising moral virtue?

Aristotle does not address this issue in the *EE*, but in *NE* book 2, chapter 4 he outlines the dilemma and offers a response in which he clarifies the relationship between actions and emotions that are virtuous and virtuous dispositions. Although actions are just when they are the sort of actions that just and temperate people would perform, a moral agent is not just or temperate simply because he performs such actions. Rather, the agent is just or temperate when he consistently performs such acts in the way in which just and temperate people do, that is, when (1) he acts knowingly, (2) he deliberately chooses the act for its own sake, and (3) the act springs from a fixed and permanent state of character.³⁵ An integral part of acquiring a virtuous character, therefore, is developing the proper affective orientation to virtuous actions.³⁶ But in the first four chapters of *NE* book 2, Aristotle is clear that we develop these affective responses by repeatedly performing the right kinds of actions. It is only by acting in dangerous situations and developing the proper reactions of fear or confidence, for instance, that we become courageous or cowardly.³⁷ The first step to becoming just and temperate, therefore, is to perform just and temperate actions.

³⁴ When Aristotle does mention virtuous action in the *EE*, it is often described as arising from the virtues or from some particular emotion. For example, Aristotle says that "the political life is concerned with noble actions (πράξεις τὰς καλὰς) and these are the actions which spring from virtue (αὐταὶ δ' εἰσὶν αἱ ἀπὸ τῆς ἀρετῆς)." See *EE* 1.4.1215b3–4, compare 1.5.1216a21, 1216b1, 2.1.1220a23–4, 2.6.1223a9–10, 3.7.1234a31–2, 8.3.1248b35–7. If noble actions are those which spring from virtue, then we may well wonder how we can acquire the virtues if in order to do so we must first perform noble actions. My point is just that remarks of this sort invite the kind of objection Aristotle considers in the *NE*.

³⁵ *NE* 2.4.1105a25–b12. See Myles F. Burnyeat, "Aristotle on Learning to Be Good," in *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*, ed. Amélie Rorty (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 69–92.

This explains Aristotle's repeated insistence in the *NE* that virtue is concerned with both actions (πράξεις) and emotions (πάθη).³⁸ In the case of justice, liberality, magnificence, and perhaps others as well, what makes a particular action appropriate need not depend on one's affective orientation to the action. Magnificence, for instance, requires knowing when and how to give the right amount of money to the right cause. Having the appropriate affective orientation to such an action may be necessary for cultivating a virtuous disposition, but it need not be part of what makes it magnificent to give this sum of money to this end on this occasion. The reason that "we have to examine matters pertaining to actions (τὰ περὶ τὰς πράξεις) and how we should act," is that "our actions determine what sort of character we develop."³⁹ In this case, one must develop the appropriate affective orientation to an instance of giving whose rightness is independent of one's affective orientation to it. To say, therefore, that virtue is a mean "on account of its ability to aim at and hit the mean (διὰ τὸ στοχαστικὴ τοῦ μέσου) in emotions (ἐν τοῖς πάθεσι) and in actions (ταῖς πράξεσιν)⁴⁰ is to say that it is able to choose and perform actions

³⁶ The role of the emotions as an index of an agent's character is brought out nicely in J. O. Urmson, "Aristotle's Doctrine of the Mean," in *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*, ed. Amélie Rorty (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 157–70. See also his *Aristotle's Ethics* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), chapter 2. However, Urmson thinks that for Aristotle "what is primarily in a mean is a settled state of character" and that it follows from Aristotle's definition of virtue as a settled state that lies in a mean that "an emotion or action is in a mean if it exhibits a settled state that is in a mean" (p. 161). While Urmson's view may fit the text of the *EE*, it does not represent the position of the *NE* where Aristotle is explicit that virtue is a mean state because it both finds and chooses the mean (see *NE* 2.6.1107a5–6, 2.6.1106b14–16, 2.9.1109a20–5). Urmson's position is criticized at length in Rosalind Hursthouse, "A False Doctrine of the Mean," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 81 (1980–1): 57–72.

³⁷ *NE* 2.1.1103b14–22.

³⁸ See *NE* 2.3.1104b13–16, 2.6.1106b15–25, 2.6.1107a4–8, 2.8.1108b18–19, 2.9.1109a20–5. As John Cooper notes, this way of putting the matter also makes room for virtues like justice which, "is a virtue of action only, with no peculiar range of emotion under its control"; John Cooper, "The 'Magna Moralia' and Aristotle's Moral Philosophy," *American Journal of Philology* 94 (1973): 346.

³⁹ *NE* 2.2.1103b25–32.

⁴⁰ See *NE* 2.9.1109a20–5. See also 2.6.1106b27–8: "virtue is a mean state in the sense that it is able to aim at and hit the mean" (μεσότης τις ἄρα ἐστὶν ἡ ἀπετὴ στοχαστικὴ γέουσα τοῦ μέσου).

that are in a mean and also to express affective responses that are in a mean.

In the *NE*, however, Aristotle also emphasizes repeatedly that actions are “in the particulars” and that these differ greatly from case to case.⁴¹ With this special emphasis on the importance of actions in the *NE* comes a shift in emphasis on the kind of knowledge it is most important for an agent to have if he hopes to become virtuous. As we will see below, in the *NE* Aristotle repeatedly emphasizes the importance of having practical experience with particulars in order to perform the right actions and, perhaps more important, in order to benefit from philosophical inquiry into ethics.

Take, for instance, Aristotle’s statement early in *NE* book 1 that the young and the immature are not fit to be students of politics. In part this is because they are led about by their passions, and Aristotle says that the study of politics will be of no use to them because the end of our inquiry is not knowledge but action (πράξις). But, at a deeper level, the young lack experience of the actions of life (ἄπειρος γὰρ τὴν κατὰ τὸν βίον πράξεων), and Aristotle says that our investigation proceeds from (ἐκ) and is concerned with (περὶ) such matters.⁴² This passage directly challenges the idea that those who have come of age but who lack practical experience will be able to engage in and benefit from philosophical moral inquiry on two fronts. On the one hand, even if the young and immature could acquire such general knowledge, it would not help them constrain and control their passions. For this, they require experience and habituation, not theory. On the other hand, the young and the immature lack the kind of practical experience which our inquiry is about and which provides the data on which the inquiry draws.

The epistemic deficits of youth and inexperience are elaborated a few pages later when Aristotle claims that “in order to be a competent student of the noble and the just, and the subject matter of politics in general, the pupil must have been well trained in his habits.”⁴³ The

⁴¹ For instance, in his discussion of “mixed” actions at *NE* 3.1.1110a9–1110b9. Aristotle says that such actions, though involuntary in themselves (καθ’ αὐτὸ) belong more to the voluntary class, for actions are among the particulars (αἱ γὰρ πράξεις ἐν τοῖς καθ’ ἕκαστα) and here the particular things are done voluntarily. He then notes that there is a good deal of variation among particulars. It is instructive to compare this with the parallel passage at *EE* 2.8.1225a2–37 where there are no such references to particulars.

⁴² *NE* 1.3.1095a3–4.

reason he gives is that “the *that* is the first principle or starting point” and the person who has been raised with good habits “either knows first principles already or can easily acquire them.”⁴⁴ The young and the immature thus suffer from two interrelated problems. First, without knowing the *that*, they will be unable fruitfully to inquire into the *why*. Second, their ability to perceive the *that* is impaired because their habits and affective dispositions have not been shaped in a way that would make them responsive to the appropriate features of the world. Without the appropriate affective dispositions, they may be unable to perceive as salient the features of a situation to which they ought to respond.

There is no indication in the *EE* that the student of ethics will be unable to grasp its first principles without having already been raised with the right habits. But in the *NE*, Aristotle stresses that “it therefore makes no small difference whether we are trained in one set of habits or another; rather it makes a very great or, rather, it makes all the difference.”⁴⁵ In this inquiry, he says, “we have to examine matters pertaining to actions (τὰ περὶ τὰς πράξεις) and how we should act, for our actions determine what sort of character we develop, as we said before,”⁴⁶ and this holds especially true of us as children. Here, as in the *EE*, Aristotle has just noted that the end of the present study is not theoretical knowledge, and that we are investigating the nature of virtue in order that we may become good ourselves. But again, whereas the *EE* emphasizes the importance of knowing the sources from which virtue arises, the *NE* emphasizes the importance of real practical engagement with the actions of life.

The fact that our inquiry in the *NE* is concerned with matters pertaining to actions has a profound effect on the degree of precision our moral theory is able to attain. Take the following:

But let it be granted from the start that our entire account of matters of conduct is constrained to be in outline only (τύπων) and not an exact system, in accordance with our earlier remarks that philosophical theories must correspond to their subject matter, and matters of action (τὰ δ' ἐν ταῖς πράξεσι) and expediency have nothing fixed or invariable (ἔσθηκός) about them, any more than matters of health. And if this is true of the general theory of ethics (τοῦ καθόλου λόγου), still less is

⁴³ *NE* 1.4.1095b5–7.

⁴⁴ *NE* 1.4.1095b7–9.

⁴⁵ *NE* 2.1.1103b23–5.

⁴⁶ *NE* 2.2.1103b25–32.

exact precision possible in dealing with particular cases of conduct (ὁ περὶ τῶν καθ' ἕκαστα λόγος); for these fall under no science (τέχνην) or set of prescriptive rules (παραγγελίαν), but the agents must consider for themselves what is suited to the circumstances on each occasion (τὰ πρὸς τὸν καιρὸν σκοπεῖν), just as is the case with the art of medicine and navigation.⁴⁷

At no point in the *EE* does Aristotle say that the inquiry there will be limited, incomplete, or inexact in any way, and I have argued that, in fact, the *EE* is fairly sanguine about the usefulness of ethical theory without regard to an agent's knowledge of particulars. In the *NE*, however, the idea that our inquiry is constrained by its subject matter is a recurring theme.⁴⁸ Furthermore, the underlying reasons for this incompleteness are based on elements that are completely foreign to the discussion of the *EE*. Throughout the *NE* we are told that actions are "in the particulars" (αἱ γὰρ πράξεις ἐν τοῖς καθ' ἕκαστα).⁴⁹ We are also told that there is a great deal of variation in the particulars.⁵⁰ Our ethical theory is thus constrained to be inexact because it deals with matters concerning actions and there is nothing fixed or invariable about these because they are in the particulars.⁵¹ No such observations are ever made in the *EE*.

Likewise, because particular cases of conduct fall under no science or set of prescriptive rules, Aristotle tells us that the agents must consider for themselves what is suited to the circumstances on each

⁴⁷ *NE* 2.2.1104a1–10.

⁴⁸ For example, at *NE* 1.3.1094a25 Aristotle tells us that it will be useful if we can determine in outline (τύπῳ) what the supreme good is. At this point it seems that Aristotle is simply saying that having an account of the supreme good, even in outline, will help us to attain what is fitting. However, just a few lines later (1.3.1094b11–1095a13) Aristotle explains that our treatment of political science will be adequate if it achieves the amount of precision (ἀκριβέες) that is appropriate to its subject matter. Since politics is concerned with the noble and the just, and since there is a great deal of divergence and diversity (πολλὴν ἔχει διαφορὰν καὶ πλάνην) among these things, we must be content if we can present a general outline of the truth about such matters (see also 1.7.1098a20–35, 1.11.1101a27, 2.7.1107b14, 3.3.1113a13, 3.5.1114b27, 10.9.1179a34).

⁴⁹ *NE* 2.7.1107a28–32, 3.1.1110b6–7, 3.1.1110b31–1111a1, 3.1.1111a22–4.

⁵⁰ *NE* 3.1.1110b8–9.

⁵¹ This is also the reason why there is much diversity and variance (πολλὴν ἔχει διαφορὰν καὶ πλάνην) amongst matters of nobility and justice (*NE* 1.3.1094b12–16). The closest parallel to these sorts of remarks in the *EE* is the statement that there is some variation (τις διαφορὰ) amongst the ends for which we act at 2.8.1225a13–15.

occasion (τὰ πρὸς τὸν καιρὸν σκοπεῖν).⁵² Twice more before the common books, we are reminded that judgments about particular instances are not easy to define because the judgment of such matters requires perception (ἐν τῇ αἰσθήσει ἢ κρίσει).⁵³ When it comes to judging particular situations, a moral agent cannot rely solely on the instruction of a moral theory. There is too much variation among individual cases. Here the agent must rely on her own powers of judgment; she is beyond the guidance of a general theory.

Throughout the *NE* Aristotle repeatedly emphasizes the relationship between actions and particulars and the importance of cultivating one's powers of perception and judgment in order to navigate the variations that hold among particulars. The complete absence of these points from the *EE* is striking and undoubtedly significant.

IV

The Characterization of Virtue in the NE as στοχαστική τοῦ μέσου. The *NE* also reflects more deeply the importance of the individual's ability to discern and to be a competent judge of particulars in its standard description of moral virtue as στοχαστική τοῦ μέσου; virtue aims at and hits or attains the mean. When he first introduces the doctrine of the mean in the *NE*, Aristotle remarks that if it is true that virtue, like nature, is better and more precise than any of the arts, then it follows that virtue has the quality of being able to aim at and hit the mean (τοῦ μέσου ἂν εἴη στοχαστική).⁵⁴ He goes on to clarify that by virtue he means moral virtue because this is concerned with emotions (πάθη) and actions (πράξεις) and the mean in these is praised and constitutes success. So he concludes that virtue is a mean state in the sense that it is able to aim at and hit the mean (μεσότης τις ἄτα ἐστὶν ἡ ἀρετή στοχαστική γε οὐσα τοῦ μέσου).⁵⁵ Finally, near the end of book

⁵² *NE* 2.2.1104a9–10.

⁵³ *NE* 2.9.1109b20–4, 4.5.1126b2–5. This emphasis on the virtuous person's powers of judgment and perception has no parallel in the *EE*. Nor does Aristotle's statement at *NE* 2.9.1109b13–14 (compare 2.6.1106b28–33, 2.9.1109a24–30) that it is especially difficult to find the mean in particular cases (χαλεπὸν δ' ἴσως τοῦτο [that is, τοῦ μέσου τυγχάνειν] καὶ μάλιστα ἐν τοῖς καθ' ἕκαστον). I return to this point below.

⁵⁴ *NE* 2.6.1106b14–16.

⁵⁵ *NE* 2.6.1106b27–8.

2 Aristotle concludes his discussion of the doctrine of the mean with the following:

Enough has been said by now to show that moral virtue is a mean (μεσότης) and how this is so, namely, that it is a mean between two vices, one of excess and one of defect, and that it is such a mean on account of its ability to aim at and hit the mean (διὰ τὸ στοχαστικὴ τοῦ μέσου) in emotions (ἐν τοῖς πάθεσι) and in actions (ταῖς πράξεσιν).⁵⁶

The context from which these passages are taken suggests that Aristotle describes virtue as στοχαστικὴ τοῦ μέσου in order to convey the idea that it is a mark of virtue to discover (εὐρίσκειν) and adopt (αἰρεῖσθαι) the mean in both emotions and in actions.⁵⁷ It is curious, however, that in the *NE* Aristotle uses the term στοχαστικὴ to convey this idea.

A στόχος can be an aim or shot, or it can be a guess or conjecture. The verb στοχάζομαι has an interesting range of meanings: to aim or shoot at, to seek after, guess, surmise, or conjecture. Both Plato and Aristotle frequently use this verb in the sense of aiming at a goal. Similarly, the adjective στοχαστικός can mean good at aiming, able to hit, good at guessing, shrewd, sagacious.⁵⁸ It is from this word that we get our term “stochastic,” and like its modern counterpart, the Greek term is often used to indicate that something is not scientific or easily calculable. In Plato, the adjective στοχαστικός is twice used to describe an undertaking or practice as unscientific and to distinguish it from legitimate crafts. The first passage occurs in the *Gorgias*. When Socrates claims that rhetoric is not a craft (τέχνη) Polus asks him what he takes it to be. At 462c Socrates replies that it is a sort of routine (ἐμπειρίαν) which produces gratification and pleasure. At 463a Socrates says

Well then, Gorgias, I think there's a practice that's not craftlike, but one that a mind given to hunches (στοχαστικῆς) takes to, a mind that's bold

⁵⁶ *NE* 2.9.1109a20–5.

⁵⁷ Compare *NE* 2.6.1107a5–6.

⁵⁸ Although the *Definitions* is a spurious Platonic work it dates from roughly the same period. There shrewdness is defined as cleverness of the soul according to which the person possessing this quality is στοχαστικός with respect to anything he requires (412e4). Similarly, cleverness is defined as a disposition according to which the person possessing this quality is στοχαστικός of their own ends (413a8). In both cases the term is associated with an agent's ability to achieve a desired end through a kind of improvisation and learned ability.

(ἀνδρείας) and naturally clever at dealing with people. I call it flattery, basically. I think that this practice has many other parts as well, and pastry baking, too, is one of them. This part *seems* to be a craft, but in my account of it it isn't a craft but a routine and a knack (ἐμπειρία καὶ τριβή). I call oratory part of this, too, along with cosmetics and sophistry. These are four parts, and they're directed to four objects.⁵⁹

Cookery is a form of flattery and is base because it aims at (στοχάζεται) what is pleasant without consideration for what is best. Socrates denies that it is a craft (τέχνη), claiming instead that it is a routine (ἐμπειρίαν) on the grounds that "it has no account (λόγον) of the nature of whatever things it applies or of that to which it applies them,⁶⁰ so that it's unable to state the cause (αἰτίαν) of each thing. And I would not call anything which lacks such an account (ἄλογον πρῶγμα) a craft."⁶¹

A somewhat different distinction is drawn in the *Philebus*.

Socrates: If you were to subtract the elements of numbering, measuring, and weighing from any craft, the remainder will be, so to speak, poor or negligible (φαῦλον).

Protarchus: Negligible indeed.

Socrates: For after doing so, what you would have left would be conjecture, the exercise of your senses on a basis of experience (ἐμπειρία) and a certain knack (τινὶ τριβῇ), involving that ability to hit one's goal (στοχαστικῆς), which many people commonly give the title of art or craft, when it has consolidated its position through diligent practice.⁶²

As his first example, Socrates mentions the way in which harmonies can be adjusted in music: not by measurement, but by the musician's ingrained ability to reckon out (μελέτης στοχασμῶ) these sorts of things. But he then goes on to say that even crafts such as medicine, agriculture, navigation, and military science contain such elements.⁶³ In both cases, the adjective στοχαστικός is connected with those abilities which rest not on propositional or mathematical knowledge but

⁵⁹ This translation is taken from *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997).

⁶⁰ This is a particularly difficult passage to translate. Zeyl's translation in the Cooper volume reads "it has no account of the nature of whatever things it applies by which it applies them." I have altered the translation here following Dodds for the sake of clarity.

⁶¹ *Gorgias* 465a.

⁶² *Philebus* 55e.

⁶³ *Philebus* 56b.

on a kind of know-how which is itself the product of practical experience. For Plato, such elements are irrational, and those who possess these skills cannot give an account of their achievements in the way that a craftsman can explain in rigorous detail why she does what she does.

By describing virtue as *στοχασρινή τοῦ μέσου*, Aristotle is exploiting the nontechnical or nonscientific connotations of *στοχαστικὸς*.⁶⁴ However, he eschews the idea that such abilities are irrational. For confirmation of this, however, we have to turn to a passage from the common books. There Aristotle says that it is the mark of the practically wise person to be good at deliberating in general and that:

a man good at deliberating in general is someone who, in accordance with reasoning is able to aim at and hit (*στοχαστικὸς κατὰ τὸν λογισμὸν*) the best of the practical things for man. Nor is practical wisdom knowledge of the universal alone, but it also requires knowledge of the particulars (*τὰ καθ' ἕκαστα γνωρίζειν*), for it is concerned with action and action deals with particulars (*τὰ καθ' ἕκαστα*). This is why those who are ignorant of general principles are sometimes more successful in action than those who know them; for instance if someone knows that light meat is easily digested and thus wholesome, but is ignorant of which kinds of meat are light, he will not produce health, but someone who merely knows that chicken is wholesome will. Men of experience (*οἱ ἔμπειροι*) are more successful in other matters as well. Since practical wisdom is concerned with action one requires knowledge of both [the particular and the universal] but of particulars even more so.⁶⁵

The phrase “*στοχαστικὸς κατὰ τὸν λογισμὸν*” is a clear indication that the process of reaching such a decision is not irrational. The skilled deliberator succeeds in attaining the best of the practical things for man because his deliberation is informed by his long practical experience and know-how. These deliberations are marked by a kind of ingenuity and creativity which has been acquired over time and which resists easy general encapsulation.⁶⁶ Although this is an ability that one has to acquire through practice and experience, it is still a rational way of proceeding.

⁶⁴ Aristotle's treatment of the role of experience in practical sciences at *Metaphysics* 1.1.981a1–24 seems to support this, as does the favorable way Aristotle refers to Polus' comments in the section of the *Gorgias* just mentioned.

⁶⁵ *NE/EE* 6.7.1141b12–23.

The above passage ties together a number of the themes that are emphasized throughout the *NE* but which are not even mentioned in the *EE*.⁶⁷ Aristotle says that knowledge of particulars is more important for success in action than knowledge of universals, and in doing so he points out that the practically wise resemble men of experience much more than theoreticians. He returns to this thought a few lines later when he says that although the young may become expert geometers and mathematicians, they cannot be practically wise. The reason is that practical wisdom is concerned not only with universals, “but also with particulars (τὰ καθ’ ἕκαστα) which become known through experience (γνώριμα ἐξ ἐμπειρίας), but a young man does not have experience as experience takes many years to acquire.”⁶⁸ The claim that the young cannot be practically wise because they lack experience with particulars and because they are led on by their passions serves as a further elaboration of some reasons why the young and the immature are excluded from the audience in *NE* book 1. Success in action crucially requires knowledge of particulars. This knowledge, however, requires experience in the actions of life, the sort of experience that perfects an agent’s own powers of moral judgment.

⁶⁶ This use of the verb στοχάζομαι is mentioned in Werner Jaeger, “Aristotle’s Use of Medicine As Model of Method in His Ethics,” *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 77 (1957): 56. It is also linked to improvisation and the ability to adapt to novel situations by Martha Nussbaum in *Love’s Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 71, and Nancy Sherman, *The Fabric of Character* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 25.

⁶⁷ I take Aristotle’s description of virtue as στοχαστική τοῦ μέσου, his remarks about the importance of particulars, the fact that actions are among the particulars, and that the judgment of particulars requires perception (each of which is discussed above) to be strong indications that the noncommon books of the *NE* also contain the view that knowledge of the universal is secondary in importance to knowledge of particulars. I also take this to be the sense in which the passage at 6.7.1141b12–23 is an elaboration of themes which pervade the noncommon books of the *NE*. Since these themes are absent from the noncommon books of the *EE*, I will argue below that this supports the view that this portion of the common books underwent extensive revision when it was incorporated in the *NE*.

⁶⁸ *NE* 6.8.1142a14–16. Compare 6.8.1142a13–25, 6.11.1143b12–14.

V

A Difference in Emphasis. In the *NE* Aristotle insists throughout that when it comes to acquiring virtue, it is crucially important, more important than the knowledge of universals, to have practical experience in the actions of life. Those who know the particulars have a better chance of acting well than those who simply know the universal, and the acquisition of virtue begins with the performance of the right actions. Because there is no science or set of prescriptive rules which can fully account for the variation that exists among particular practical situations, Aristotle places a great emphasis on the importance of experience and the development of an agent's abilities to judge such matters for himself. Without the proper practical experience and without the training of one's affective dispositions that comes from this experience, moral theories have little or no practical value.

In the *EE* by contrast, Aristotle does not suggest that our general account of ethics suffers from any of these limitations. Nor is there the suggestion that the experience and knowledge of particulars are necessary for the conduct of this kind of inquiry. In fact, this stress on the importance of particulars is strikingly absent from the *EE*. As a result, the account of moral inquiry that we find in the *EE* is perfectly consistent with the idea that ethical theory can be studied in the abstract and transmitted to those who lack substantive practical experience with ethical issues in the way that the scientific aspect of a practical science of medicine can be studied in the abstract and transmitted to new medical students. This is not to say that in the *EE* Aristotle thinks that such a person will not need to acquire the knowledge of particulars through experience in the actions of life. It is to say that in the *EE* there is no indication that this practical experience is necessary in order to acquire and then exploit a kind of moral knowledge analogous to the theoretical part of medical knowledge.⁶⁹

The use of the medical metaphor in this context is particularly appropriate in that Jaeger has argued that Aristotle uses medicine as a model of his method of ethics in the *NE* in order to stress the ways in which "both the art of the physician and that of the ethical philosopher always deals with individual situations and with practical actions."⁷⁰ Jaeger does not explicitly analyze the role of medicine in the *EE*, but he concludes his discussion with the comment that although

the *EE* is less polished, it “contains the living breath of Aristotle’s thought.”⁷¹ He claims that many of the passages in which medicine is mentioned in the *NE* have parallels in the *EE* and that the latter work contains references to medicine in places where there is no mention in the former. The implication, if not the explicit point, is that there does not seem to be a substantive difference between the role of the medical model in the two treatises. However, a careful look at the use of medicine in the two treatises does reveal some subtle but very important differences.

As an example, consider the following. In criticizing the idea that knowledge of the form of the good would have any practical value in the *EE*, Aristotle points out that “medical science does not study how to bring about just any attribute but how to bring about health, and likewise for each of the other arts.”⁷² The same thought is expressed in the *NE* but with an important variation. Aristotle says “in fact, it does not seem that the physician studies health in the abstract. Instead, he studies the health of the human being, in fact, of an individual human being, for it is the particular person (καθ’ ἑκάστων) that he cures.”⁷³ Both passages occur in the same general context, and both make the same basic contribution to the argument against the practical relevance of the form of the good. However, the passage in the *EE* could easily be a description of the aims of medical science. Just as medical science studies how to bring about health in human beings, so ethical theory deals with the nature of the best life for human beings and the means by which it can be attained. The passage in the *NE*, by contrast, refers explicitly to medical skill. The person who means to treat the individual human being does not simply study the nature of

⁶⁹ This suggests that although Aristotle in the *EE* disagrees with Plato concerning the kind of knowledge one must possess in order to become virtuous, he may still agree with the general claim that if we are to avoid suffering wrong or to avoid wrongdoing ourselves, “we must equip ourselves with a certain power and art (δυναμὴν τινα καὶ τέχνην)”; *Gorgias* 509d–510a. Compare *Protagoras* 357a–b. This is not to claim that Aristotle thinks there is a craft of virtue, but that a necessary condition for acting well is the possession of some sort of general, theoretical knowledge. This would support the view of Jaeger and Rowe that in the *EE* Aristotle has not fully distanced himself from certain Platonic doctrines.

⁷⁰ Jaeger, “Aristotle’s Use of Medicine,” 54.

⁷¹ Jaeger, “Aristotle’s Use of Medicine,” 60.

⁷² *EE* 1.8.1218b1–4.

⁷³ *NE* 1.6.1097a11–13.

health and its causes; she studies individual instances of sickness and the means used to ameliorate it.

For Jaeger, both medicine and navigation are normative sciences, “and in applying their methods both have to deal directly with the individual situation that modifies the general λόγος.”⁷⁴ The difference between the emphasis in the *EE* and the *NE* can be summed up by saying that in the former work, Aristotle appears to treat the study of ethics as analogous to the study of medical science: after acquiring the λόγος one must simply apply it to particular situations. In the *NE*, however, Aristotle thinks the universals of which ethical theory treats are so dependent on the contingencies and intricacies of individual cases that the knowledge of the untutored empiric is more important than the knowledge of the inexperienced theorist. Because the empiric can often cure specific individuals, the knowledge he possesses is closer to that of medical skill than is the knowledge of the scientist. For this reason, when it comes to acquiring virtue, Aristotle stresses the importance of the knowledge of particulars in the *NE* as necessary for the acquisition of the right theoretical account.⁷⁵

In the *EE*, Aristotle is worried that we will fail to organize our lives around the proper ends if we lack an understanding of the best life. Without such an account we can be misled before we even get the chance to engage in practical life. It is doubtful that Aristotle lets this worry go in the *NE*. After all, he still thinks that we need both the knowledge of the universal as well as the knowledge of particulars. But in the *NE* Aristotle is worried that without properly habituating our affections and desires, this sort of philosophical inquiry will not

⁷⁴ Jaeger, “Aristotle’s Use of Medicine,” 56. See also *NE* 2.2.1104a1–10.

⁷⁵ Jaeger mentions the way that both the practice of medicine and ethics requires perception (αἴσθησις) because in both cases there is no absolute measure, number, or weight because there is nothing stable in matters of health. See Jaeger, “Aristotle’s Use of Medicine,” 56. He cites *De vetere medicina*, ch. 9, and refers the reader to *Diokles von Karystos: die griechische Medizin und die Schule des Aristoteles* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1938), 46. He also claims that the use of στοιχάζομαι in the *NE* is also used by the Hippocratic writer of the *De vetere medicina* in order to bring out that “there is no general rule, no absolute measure or number, that tells him exactly what to do in every case or at every moment, but he must aim at that which is fitting for the nature of his patient” (p. 58). Some of Aristotle’s appeals to medicine in the *NE* are meant to highlight the importance of particulars and the agent’s abilities to deal with them effectively. As noted above, these elements are absent from the discussion of virtue and the doctrine of the mean in the *EE*.

be of any use to us anyway. Because we shape and gain control over our passions by acting in certain ways in particular situations, we must first engage in the right kinds of actions before we can develop the right kinds of desires and affections. This means that we need the knowledge of the empiric before we can gain the knowledge of the theorist. Otherwise, we will be led off by our passions and either fail to gain the scientist's knowledge or fail to reap any benefit from it.

VI

On the Chronology of the EE and the NE. In the preceding sections, I have argued that in the *NE* Aristotle takes special care to explain the relationship between the performance of certain actions, the development of the right kind of affective responses, and the development of moral virtue. I have also argued that it is because of the role that performing the right kinds of actions plays in the development of virtue that Aristotle is led to reflect on some of the limits of ethical theory. Actions are among the particulars, and this limits the work that the knowledge of universals can accomplish when it comes to the acquisition of virtue. I have also argued that Aristotle's account of the development of moral virtue in the *EE* is much more schematic and leaves the complexities of these relationships underdeveloped.

If we assume that the *NE* is the earlier work, then it becomes especially difficult to understand why Aristotle would leave behind the detailed and perspicuous treatment of these issues in the first four chapters of *NE* book 2 for the comparatively cryptic treatment they receive in the *EE*. After all, the relationship between actions and emotions and their role in the development of moral virtue are important issues, and it is difficult to understand why Aristotle would avoid clarifying these relationships in the later work. In *NE* book 2, chapter 4 Aristotle raises and then dissolves a potential problem for his discussion of the acquisition of moral virtue. Why would he not only fail to mention this problem but then go on to discuss the acquisition of moral virtue in a way that invites this very objection in a later work? For this reason, I suggest we follow Aristotle's advice that "in general, old things have been less fully worked out than newer ones";⁷⁶ the more carefully worked out treatment of these issues in the *NE* should

⁷⁶ *Politics* 2.10.1271b24–5.

be seen as expressing Aristotle's later views and as clarifying and responding to problems to which the *EE* is vulnerable.

The differences between the *EE* and the *NE* that I have been focusing on here also allow us to speculate on the way the common books may have differed when they appeared in the *EE*. In order to see how this is so, it will be helpful to entertain a possible objection to my view. In the above discussion I have relied almost entirely on evidence taken from the undisputed books of the *EE* and the *NE*. One might nevertheless object that in the *EE* Aristotle makes a sharper separation between his discussions of the moral and the intellectual virtues than he does in the *NE*.⁷⁷ There are thus no references to the importance of particulars in the books unique to the *EE* because that discussion is put off until the discussion of the intellectual virtues in the common books. If Aristotle has made a clean separation of the contributions of the moral and the intellectual virtues in the *EE*, then it would be reasonable to expect that the discussion of the common books would bring in the appropriate emphasis on particulars and the role of experience in moral enquiry.

To begin, this objection does not address the points I have made concerning the differences between the account of the acquisition of virtue in the *EE* and the *NE*. But we might also add the following points which will help us to make our purely speculative conjecture about the shape of the common books as they appeared in the earlier text. For example, why are there no remarks in the *EE* about the inability of the young and immature to engage in this kind of inquiry? It is not as if there is no context in which such remarks would be appropriate. After all, Aristotle does limit the sorts of views he will entertain in the *EE*,⁷⁸ and he is critical of those who lack philosophical training.⁷⁹ Also, why not caution his reader about the limits of moral theory as he does in the *NE*? Surely he could say that our discussion of practical matters is going to be limited without explaining why until the discussion of the intellectual virtues. In the same way, it is not

⁷⁷ For example, Rowe points out that the *NE* "often anticipates points and distinctions which are formally developed only later, something of which the *EE* is almost entirely innocent"; C. J. Rowe, "The Eudemian and Nicomachean Ethics: A Study of Aristotle's Thought," *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society*, supplement no. 3 (1971): 14.

⁷⁸ *EE* 1.3.1214b28–1215a8.

⁷⁹ *EE* 1.6.1217a1–9.

clear why Aristotle would avoid highlighting the importance of particulars in the *EE* even if the explanation of their importance were not forthcoming until the common books. As it stands, the discussion of practical wisdom in *NE* book 6 of the common books explains and clarifies argumentative threads that run throughout the *NE* and which are strikingly absent from the *EE*.

Now, it has been argued recently that the exposition and the philosophical content of the *Magna Moralia* display deeper affinities with the exposition and content of the *EE* than the *NE*. For this reason Cooper has speculated that the *Magna Moralia* consists of the notes of a student who attended Aristotle's lectures around the time at which he was working on the *EE*.⁸⁰ It is interesting to note that the discussion of the intellectual virtues in the *Magna Moralia* does not mention the importance of the knowledge of particulars gained through practical experience as does *NE* book 6 of the common books. If Cooper's suggestion is correct, then this is further evidence that the *EE* is the earlier text. When Aristotle finally set to writing the *NE*, the common books underwent various degrees of revision.⁸¹ This discussion of the intellectual virtues in the *Magna Moralia* may also suggest that the themes I have been tracing throughout the *NE* and which appear in *NE* book 6 either did not appear in the common books as they appeared in the *EE* or did appear there but in an attenuated form.⁸²

Admittedly, these remarks are speculative at best. But they should stand as signals of caution when it comes to relying too much on work from the common books when comparing and contrasting Aristotle's thinking in the books that are distinctive of the *EE* and the *NE*. Because we cannot say what the common books looked like

⁸⁰ See Cooper, "The 'Magna Moralia,'" 335–6.

⁸¹ This view of the relationship between the common books and the two treatises is defended by scholars such as Gauthier-Jolif, Dirlmeier, C. J. Rowe, John Cooper, and Terence Irwin. Anthony Kenny in *The Aristotelian Ethics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978) has recently challenged this view, claiming instead that the common books as we have them belong exclusively to the *EE*. However, see for example, Cooper's review of *The Aristotelian Ethics*, in *Nous* 15 (1981): 381–92, especially 387–92; also see Irwin's review in *The Journal of Philosophy* 77 (1980): 338–54.

⁸² Rowe, "The Eudemian and Nicomachean Ethics," 109–14 has even gone so far as to claim that unlike *NE* books 5 and 7 which first appeared in the *EE* and were later revised for the *NE*, *NE* book 6 was written exclusively for the *NE* and did not originally appear in the *EE*.

when they appeared in the earlier text, and because we cannot say to what extent they may have been revised in light of new developments in Aristotle's ethical thought, it is best to proceed in such comparisons as I have done, relying as much as possible on the books that are distinctive to each treatise.

VII

Broader Implications for Aristotle's Conception of Ethical Theory. In the *EE* Aristotle shows much more concern for the ways in which the affections and states of character lie in a mean than he does for the way in which actions lie in a mean. I have offered a partial explanation of why this is the case. In the *EE* Aristotle is happy to conduct his discussion of moral virtue at the level of universal statements about the nature of virtue and the ways in which it is produced. In the *NE*, however, Aristotle places a greater emphasis on the ways in which actions lie in a mean, in part because it is by performing actions that are in a mean that we develop emotional responses that are in a mean and thereby develop mean character states. In conclusion, I want to bring out one last way in which this shift in emphasis affects the discussion of virtue in the *NE*.

In the *EE* we are told that in all things the mean relative to us is best,⁸³ but we are not told what it means for the mean to be relative to us. In the *NE*, however, Aristotle gives a prolonged discussion of this matter. He says that with respect to a given action or emotion as such, there is no single fixed point that is always right ([μέσου τὸ] ρὸς ἡμᾶς δὲ . . . τοῦτο δ' οὐκ ἔν).⁸⁴ With respect to some action or emotion taken in the abstract, there is no point or amount which is always the best point or amount. We cannot say how angry one should be, or how much money one should give, outside of the context of some particular situation. The mean with respect to anger is not one, then, in the sense that it will sometimes be right to feel very little anger and sometimes it will be right to feel a greater amount depending on the

⁸³ *EE* 2.3.1220b27.

⁸⁴ *NE* 2.6.1106a29–32. This should not be taken to mean that the mean relative to us cannot be a precise point. For example, see 2.6.1106b14–15, where we are told that virtue is better and more precise than any of the arts. Whether or not the mean is a range or a precise point will vary from case to case.

salient features of the given situation. In part, this is why the mean relative to us is not the same for everyone (οὐδὲ ταὐτὸν πᾶσιν).⁸⁵ Another part of the reason we cannot specify the mean with respect to some action or emotion in the abstract is that the mean may vary according to the agent involved. Because of my particular skills and abilities, social status, and relationship to the people involved, say, a greater donation of money or display of anger might be called for on my part than would be the case for an agent with different characteristics. So, determining the mean in any particular situation requires, on the one hand, the ability accurately to understand the practical context in which one is situated and, on the other hand, a certain amount of self-knowledge.⁸⁶ To the extent that self-knowledge is only acquired over time, and partly through reflecting on our own conduct, it represents a further respect in which those who lack practical experience in the actions of life will fail to benefit from theorizing.

For all of these reasons Aristotle says that it is difficult to find the mean, especially in particular cases (χαλεπὸν δ' ἴσως τοῦτο [that is, τοῦ μέσου τυγχάνειν] καὶ μάλιστα ἐν τοῖς καθ' ἕκαστον).⁸⁷ The idea that the mean is difficult to find has no parallel in the discussion of the doctrine of the mean in the *EE*. But this should not be surprising. I have been arguing that the underlying reasons supporting this claim are also either missing from or are severely underdeveloped in the *EE* and that this insistence on the importance of particulars in the *NE* indicates a clearer, less ambiguous conception of the role of ethical theory in the acquisition of moral virtue. In the *NE*, if we are to become virtuous, we must undertake to become στοχαστική τοῦ μέσου in our actions and emotions. Not only does this mean that we have to become good at hitting the mean in our actions and emotions; it means that in order to do this, we must acquire a knowledge of particulars gained from an involvement in the actions of life. It means that even if Aristotle can show us the goal at which we are aiming, we must attend to the particulars around us and learn by doing if we are going to understand that goal and, ultimately, achieve it.

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⁸⁵ *NE* 2.6.1106a32.

⁸⁶ For example, *NE* 2.9.1109b1–2.

⁸⁷ *NE* 2.9.1109b14. Compare 2.6.1106b28–33, 2.9.1109a24–30.