Apparent Circularity in Aristotle's Account of Right Action in the Nicomachean Ethics

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I The Appearance of Circularity

The appearance of explanatory circularity in the Nicomachean Ethics is positively dizzying. Here are fourteen apparitions. St. Thomas finds 'an apparent vicious circle' in the relation of right desire to what it is for the practical intellect to reach truth.1 J.D. Monan finds that in explanation of the standard for practical wisdom, phronēsis, 'the most obvious direction of Aristotle's thought is circular.'2 In connection with phronēsis Martha Nussbaum speaks of 'a problem of circularity.'3 To

1 St. Thomas Aquinas, Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics, translated by C.I Litzinger, O. P. (Chicago: Henry Regnery 1964), 546-7. Aquinas is commenting on 1139a28ff: 'Of the part which is practical and intellectual <its doing well is having> truth in agreement with right desire.'

2 J.D. Monan, Moral Knowledge and Its Methodology in Aristotle (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1968), 83-4 seems to find a number of circularities. A large one is that phronēsis eventually gets defined by itself. A smaller circle internal to the definition of phronēsis is that the notions of the right reason and of the mean are defined by mention of each other.

3 Martha Nussbaum, The Fragility of Goodness (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1986), 311. The problem is that the standpoint of the person with phronēsis, practical reasoning skill, is 'criterial of correct choice' while our account of him mentions that he makes correct choices. Nussbaum in 'Shame, Separateness, and Political Unity', in Amelie Rorty, ed., Essays on Aristotle's Ethics (Berkeley: University of California Press 1980), 424, says, 'If Aquinas was probably wrong to feel that Aristotle's appeal to the phronimos as arbiter of virtue was patently circular, still we seem unable to characterize the phronimos in a way that takes us outside of mutable human ways of thinking about practical thought.'
L.G. Greenwood, R.A. Gauthier and J-Y. Jolif, and Joseph Owens a different circle appears in the account of practical wisdom in its mention of moral virtue, whose account seems to mention practical wisdom. Owens finds another circle in that the virtues are formed by the practice of choosing to do the correct thing, while the correct thing to do is explained as what is picked out by the judgment of the virtuous man. J.L. Mackie says of Aristotle’s views about eudaimonia, virtue, right choice, the mean, and practical wisdom: ‘As guidance about what is the good life, what precisely one ought to do, or even by what standard one should try to decide what to do, this is too circular to be very helpful.’ George Grote finds circularity at the key notions of phronesis and right reason: Aristotle ‘seems to make use of each as part of the definition of the other.’ Henry Sidgwick finds circularity in that Aristotle’s account of right action is ‘to act rationally’, which means, according to Sidgwick, doing what we see to be right. There is an apparent circle in the analysis of virtue, according to Grote and John Cooper, if virtue is defined as conducing to an ultimate end consisting partially of activities done out of virtue. J.L. Ackrill finds that circularity in the account of virtue but also in the account of right action (to deon). Any of these circularities would be severe logical disorder for Aristotle.

I begin with the last mentioned apparent circle which Ackrill finds in the account of right action. Discussion of it will bear on the other apparent circularities.

In calling attention to the alleged circularity, Ackrill addresses 1138b18-34. There Aristotle says, summarizing:

Since we earlier said that one ought to choose the middle ... and the middle is as the reason, the right one, says, let us analyse this ... There is a target looking to which the one who has the reason tenses or relaxes <his bow>, and there is a certain hore <criterion, limit> of the middle-

tautology —i.e. circularity, in the principle ‘it is right to act rationally.’ I take him to be alluding partly to Aristotle’s claim that one ought to do as the right reason says. On pp. 343-4: ‘It is evident that it must be right to act reasonably ... But this statement of principles turns out to be one of those stages ... which, as far as practical guidance is concerned, are really brief circuits, leading us back to the point from which we started.’

I owe this reference to Sidgwick to Gerasimos Santas.

4 L. G. Greenwood, Aristotle: Nicomachean Ethics, Bk. VI, reprint of 1909 edition (New York: Arno Press 1973), 157, says that the claim at 1144b31 that one can’t be strictly good without practical wisdom nor have practical wisdom without moral virtue is pronounced a circular argument and therefore a difficulty to those who find it hard to credit Aristotle with such an argument.

5 R.A. Gauthier and J-Y. Jolif, L’Éthique à Nicomaque (Louvain: 1970), II, 435 state as an objection not possible to avoid that one cannot define practical wisdom or virtue without appeal to the other.

6 Joseph Owens, A History of Ancient Western Philosophy (New York: Appleton Century Crofts 1959), 357 speaks of the ‘circular dependence’ of moral virtue and practical wisdom. The same circle appears briefly to Norman Dahl, Practical Reason, Aristotle, and Weakness of the Will (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1984), 63, who refers to ‘an apparent circularity in Aristotle’s account of virtue.’ According to Dahl, ‘If virtue is defined in terms of a rule that a practically wise person would use, and a practically wise person is — just one who has virtue’, Aristotle’s definition of virtue seems to be circular. Dahl later offers a way of dispelling the appearance of circularity.

7 Owens, ibid.


10 George Grote, Aristotle, reprint of 1890 edition (New York: Arno Press 1973) mentions the first circularity involving phronesis on p. 515. On p. 517 he raises what is in effect a suspicion of circularity, calling it an “apparent incongruity”. According to Grote the standard or measure mentioned in Bk VI ch 1 for ‘the middle point which constitutes virtue’ is most naturally taken to be ‘tendency to promote happiness’. But, says Grote, ‘as he had begun by introducing the ideas of reason and virtue as media for explaining what happiness was, there would have been at least an apparent incongruity in reverting back to the latter as a means of clearing up what was obscure in the former.’ The apparent incongruity is clearly an apparent circularity.

11 John Cooper, Reason and Human Good in Aristotle (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1975), 102-4 observes that if the end is ‘an ultimate end consisting at least in part of morally virtuous activity itself’, then there is the problem that we do not have ‘an independent criterion of moral virtue’, i.e., a criterion independent of moral virtue itself. The account of moral virtue would be circular.

nesses which — being in accord with the right reason — we said are between the excess and the deficiency.

But while to say so is true, it is not at all clear ... Not only ought this to be truly said, but also <it ought to be> delimited what is the right reason and what the *horos* of this.\(^3\)

Taking the request for a *horos* to be a request for a criterion, Ackrill (1973, 24) asks: 'What then is the ultimate criterion of right action? How might disputes as to what is *kalon* (noble, good) be settled?' Offering a tentative answer on Aristotle's behalf, he then objects to it, saying, 'If the good for man is — or includes — acting in a virtuous way, we cannot explain why a certain way of acting is virtuous by saying that it promotes the good for man. Again (Ackrill 1981, 138): 'Since good ... action is what *eudaimonia* partly consists in, we cannot explain why a certain way of acting is good ... by saying that it promotes *eudaimonia*.'

I shall grant that the *Nicomachean Ethics* does clearly offer an account of right action which is similar to the one Ackrill considers in that the account contains the notion of *eudaimonia*. I shall then argue that the account is, nevertheless, not circular. The other apparent circularities also disappear.\(^4\)

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\(^3\) Translations from the *NE* are my own, unless otherwise indicated. The text used is I. Bywater's (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1959).

\(^4\) My response to the charges of circularity which I shall discuss will be different from any of the various responses of the authors cited.

Aquinas (546-7) has an answer beginning at 'Therefore we must say that the end and the means pertain to the appetitive faculty, but the end is determined for us by nature.'

Nussbaum (1986, 312) says that her circle may be 'large and interesting' rather than 'small and pernicious'. And 'Circularity by itself need not dismay us. An element of circularity is probably bound to be present in any moral theory.'

Dahl (65) offers, as a consequence of his own account of practical wisdom, 'a way of breaking into the alleged circle.'

Owens (357) recommends that we look at Aristotelian ethical doctrine not from the theoretical standpoint but rather from a practical standpoint.

Greenwood (158) answers that 'the circle is only apparent, being a merely terminological one', and that practical wisdom and virtue are related as husband and wife, in that they are what *deinotes* and natural virtue respectively become when they are put into association with each other.

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I am beginning with Ackrill's alleged circularity, which is perhaps less prominent in the literature than some, because it seems to me, if actual, the most dreadful. Although Ackrill points to Bk VI, the ground for the alleged circularity is clearly laid in Bk I. Its presence in Bk I would mean that Aristotle had doomed himself to a useless theory from the outset.

II The Plan of This Paper

The logical project of finding a non-circular explanatory arrangement for several of Aristotle's ethical notions — right action, virtuous action, the good life (*eudaimonia*), practical wisdom (*phronēsis*, practical reasoning skill and judgment) and the right reason — is the main project of this paper. The paper consists of one rather long argument with a very simple form. The argument's conclusion is that there is a non-circular arrangement of the pieces of Aristotle's theory. The argument's sole (and long) premise is the exhibition of a particular non-circular arrangement.

The non-circular arrangement cannot simply be read off from explicit statements of Aristotle's, although, since I offer it as an interpretation of Aristotle, it is constrained by the text. But it required some decisions about points not stated in the text to arrive at the arrangement.

Ackrill (1973, 24) at 'His answer remains obscure' decides that the putative account which was circular is not the correct interpretation of Aristotle.

Cooper (1975, 104) proposes an end for virtuous activity which does not consist of morally virtuous activity.

Grote proposes to correct the appearance of circularity by distinguishing the happiness which is defined via virtue and reason, namely the individual's happiness, from the happiness the tendency to promote which defines virtue, namely the happiness of society. If we carefully preserve the distinction between the happiness of the individual agent and the happiness of the Society to which he belongs we can maintain the explanation of individual happiness via virtue and reason and the explanation of virtue via the happiness of Society without engaging in circular explanation. Grote's solution to the apparent incongruity, i.e., circularity, seems ultimately unsatisfactory. Although the happiness of a particular member can of course be distinguished from the happiness of Society, it seems that eventually the happiness of individual members.
III Aristotle’s Account of Right Action in the Nicomachean Ethics: Its Overall Structure

W.D. Ross’s translation of the NE titles Book I ‘The Good for Man’. And, indeed, Aristotle begins the NE by talking about the good of actions. But it is clear that his interest in the good is secondary, derivative from his interest in the more immediately gripping question: ‘What ought I to do?’ The former interest derives from the latter in that the answer to the question ‘Ought I to do that?’ is helped along if we have an answer to the question ‘What’s the good of doing that?’ There is this connection which we ordinarily make and which Aristotle assumes: whatever one ought to do is something there is some good in doing.

Acknowledging the connection, Aristotle asks at 1094a22-4 if recognition of the best thing (Ross: ‘the chief good’) won’t have a ‘great weight for life’: knowing about it, ‘wouldn’t we more hit upon what ought to be done (to deon)?’ In so asking, Aristotle does more than acknowledge our ordinary connection between what one ought to do and the good of doing it: he makes a new connection between what one ought to do and the chief good.

In claiming such great importance for knowledge of the chief good, the questions show that the overall structure of the account of what one ought to do will be this, where two clauses each focus on the chief good:

A particular action $x$ is likely to be what ought to be done (to deon, the right thing to do) if and only if it is done by an agent who satisfies these two conditions:

Condition 1: the agent has the knowledge what is the best thing doable (=the highest of the doable goods at 1095a16-17).

Condition 2: the agent, in doing $x$, has the aim of achieving that best thing.

The central role here of the notion of the best thing doable (at all, in general, in total!) is to me surprising. That it should enter into an account of what action to do on any particular occasion is to me not an obvious insight: compare the thought that the conception of the best thing achievable by car trips in general should enter into my plans for a particular car trip or the thought that the best thing achievable by talking in general should enter into my plans for a particular remark. This crucial and surprising notion of the chief good, the best thing doable, has arisen from our very ordinary notion of what is the good of doing some particular thing.

It is necessary to dwell on the phrase ‘likely to be’ in the account above. It is my understanding of what 1094a24’s ‘more hit upon’ implies. The phrase significantly blunts the implications of Aristotle’s two conditions. The phrase calls attention to the imprecision and roughness Aristotle claims for his subject matter (1094b11-27 ‘for the most part’; 1095a ‘the truth roughly and in outline’, ‘things which are for the most part true’; Bk II ch 2). If one does not dwell on the phrase, there will seem to be the objection that Aristotle’s account implies that only the perfect agent, the virtuous agent, ever does the right thing, when in fact an agent not satisfying the two conditions could do what ought to be done by accident. An unqualified ‘only if’ would indeed require satisfaction of both conditions. The qualification ‘likely’ yields the lesser result that it is not likely, not reasonable to predict, though perhaps not impossible, that an agent not satisfying the two conditions will do the right thing.

The connective ‘if’ seems required by 1094a22. ‘Only if’ is less obvious. I put it in tentatively. With main structural features rendered as above, the account assesses the (likely) rightness of an action by assessing the agent — his knowledge and aim.

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15 The warnings in the NE that the subject matter can only be described in claims that are for the most part true or are not precise do not turn up in any of the undisputed books of the EE or at 1138b.

In the undisputed books of NE there are well known passages on imprecision in Bks I and II (1094b11-27; 1098a26-7; 1103b34-1105a5). 1165a12-14, concluding a discussion of imprecision, reminds us of ‘what has been said several times — statements about feelings and actions have definiteness similarly to what they are about.’

In the common books 1137b29-30 on justice concluding ‘of the indefinite the canon is indefinite’ is in the spirit of the ‘for the most part’ claims in NE I and II although it does not use that vocabulary. At EE 1227 certain claims are said to be not precise and to approximate the truth; their imprecision is, however, presented not as an inevitable feature of any discussion of the topic, but rather as a surmountable stage.
IV Six Remarks on the Account of Right Action

Remark 1. In the NE Aristotle has a practical problem he wants to solve: what is right (to deon)? what is to be done? what ought one to do? Rhetoric 1360b ff, in contrast, gives what I take to be Aristotle’s analysis of what one ought — unqualifiedly, occasion unspecified, to do:

Whatever prepares for this <happiness> or some of the parts <of it> or makes <it> more instead of less, one ought to do, but what destroys or hinders or creates the contraries <to it> <one ought> not to do.

An analysis of the sort the Rhetoric statement gives differs in kind from the two clause outline account of right action above. The two clause account is, rather, practical advice for making a decision about what to do.

Remark 2. This practical advice is not a decision procedure in the sense of a sequence of steps mechanically applicable that will definitely lead to an answer in any situation to the question ‘What to do?’ It is another sort of guidance for acting. It is thus not quite a counterexample to Mill’s claim, ‘Certainly no known ethical standard decides an action to be good or bad because it is done by a good or a bad man.’

The practical guidance, which explicitly puts conditions on the agent, does not come directly from the analysis. Directly derived practical advice would be, ‘Do what will produce happiness.’ Aristotle instead advises that, to raise the likelihood of one’s doing what one ought, one acquire certain knowledge and an aim.

Remark 3. The distinction I draw between analysis and practical guidance is similar to the distinction between analysis of valid argument and practical advice for producing good arguments. The analysis of valid argument — argument such that if its premises are true its conclusion has to be true — is no immediate help for inventing particular valid arguments. For sufficiently complicated sorts of arguments, practical advice about how to construct valid ones will not be directions which one needs no imagination or creativity to follow and which guarantee results.

Remark 4. A full statement of the conditions on the agent in the structural outline above would include many details which turn up as Aristotle’s account of the best thing achievable by action evolves in complexity and accuracy up to the quoted summary at 1138b18-34. To assess the charge of circularity it is important at least to list components which would occur in the account. I give a short list here. I supply detail later.

Condition 1 would, fully spelled out, contain Aristotle’s account of the best thing doable, achievable by action. That best thing is (Bk I ch 4) happiness, euēdaimonia, which turns out to be a certain kind of lifetime (Bk I ch 7), a lifetime of virtually done activities. Some components of the full spelling out of such a lifetime would be: the human ergon (Bk I ch 7), giving and having reasons (Bk I chs 7 and 13); emotions (Bk II ch 1); intellectual virtues (Bk VI); and moral virtues (Bk II). The definition of moral virtue at 1106b36 has the component notions of choice, the mean for us, and the right reason; 1106b36 ff also mentions the person of practical wisdom.

It will turn out that one cannot acquire the knowledge condition 1 advocates — cannot fully appreciate or see its true content — unless one has acquired those dispositions which are the human excellences or virtues one is advised to know about. 18

17 The order of occurrence in the text of the components of the notion of virtue is this. The requirement of the right reason is said at its first occurrence to be a commonplace (Bk II ch 2). Although Aristotle does not say so here, presumabley a reason for the connection of some of the virtues to emotions is that emotions can give us beliefs. (Rhetoric 1378a21-2: perhaps this is even Aristotle’s definition of an emotion?) The beliefs then become our reasons — sometimes true, sometimes false. We do not act well from reasons if our reasons are false.

The thesis that the moral excellences are tendencies to aim at some intermediate seems to be a thesis arrived at by observation of several examples in a non-ethical area and by then making an analogy (Bk II ch 2 1104a14ff: ‘We see in the case of strength’ and ‘To gain light on things imperceptible.’) The notions of defect and excess first turn up in Bk II ch 2 and the notion of the intermediate or middle (to meson) to which they lead first turn up in Bk II ch 2. Middleness is said to be determined or delimited by a reason, which the person of practical wisdom has at 1106b36-1107a2 — the official definition of virtue. At 1138b20 the middle is as the right reason says.

There are endless amounts to ask about each bit of Aristotle’s conceptual apparatus here.

18 Practical wisdom is the true grasp of the end: 1142b34. The end that practical wisdom grasps includes the grand final end of human action, the best thing

Remark 5. The listed items are from the account of eudaimonia or human happiness up to Bk VI ch 1. There is a puzzle whether this account contradicts a later account in Bk X, where chs 7 and 8 say that the contemplative activity of nous is complete or final happiness. Those chapters would be the subject for another paper. A view of them consistent with the account of happiness up to Book VI is Cooper's (1987, 208): 'The life of the intellect that Aristotle champions is one devoted to all the human virtues but in a special degree to excellent study. It is not ... a life led in single-minded devotion to the intellectual virtues realized in such contemplation.' Cooper's view is consistent also with the statement at Politics 1334a26-34 that a life of leisure requires (in addition to philosophy) justice and temperance even more than a life of business or warfare does.

Remark 6. Our project is to examine the allegation that the advice about right action is circular. One quick defense which might suggest itself is actually not available here.

The first clause requires knowledge; the second, an aim. The first thus requires at least that the agent believe such and such. If the account characterized right action solely in terms of the agent's beliefs, whatever was mentioned after 'believes' — e.g., eudaimonia — would be embedded in a belief context, that is to say, would not properly get referred to at all. It could not, then, be the starting point for a worry about circularity.

However, this way out of the circularity objection is not available because Aristotle's conditions as formulated above do not refer merely to the agent's beliefs but to his knowledge or recognition. This means that the knowledge clause requires first, that the agent believes that p, and second, that p, where 'p' represents a complex account. The first requirement, containing 'p' embedded within the belief context, would be incapable of rendering the account circular. But the second requirement, with unembodied occurrence, could be a source of circularity, so the constituent notions mentioned in it need to be examined.

V Aristotle's Method Reconsidered

We are now in a position to examine the alleged circularity which concerns us. Following Ackrill, we can ask: does the eudaimonia we are urged to have knowledge of and to aim at to do right action partly consist in such right action? The question arises because someone may think that the notion of virtuous action which occurs on the right-hand side of our account is the very same thing as right action.

All the same, Ackrill seems to use 'good action', 'acting in a virtuous way', 'noble (kalon) thing to do', and 'right action' (what one ought to do, to doen) interchangeably. I shall draw some distinctions between 'right action' and the others. Additionally let us first distinguish between all these and 'what the virtuous agent does.' What the virtuous agent does may on occasion fail to be virtuous action or right action because, to take the simplest case, he may be deceived by someone else about what the circumstances of his action are.

Notice that strictly speaking one wants not merely to do what one ought, but to do this when one ought, as one ought, to whom one ought, and fulfilling other qualifying conditions. 1106b21-4 says that to feel anger when one ought plus a number of the other qualifications, e.g., towards whom, is 'virtue's way'. I take it that the qualifications listed represent the full range of possible qualifications, since an action done virtuously could hardly fail one of the qualifications. E.g., one could not pay back a debt justly but not to whom one ought. So if one acts virtuously, one does what one ought, when one ought, and the rest.

19 An account of right action in terms of what people believe to be such and such would be somewhat helpful if it is possible to identify people believing such and such independently of identifying right action. Moreover, were Aristotle's account of right action of this kind, in terms of belief, it would be sufficiently complicated — it definitely does not say merely that x is a right action if and only if someone believes that x is a right action — that one could not immediately charge utter implausibility.

Clearly, the bare notion of what one ought will not coincide in extension with action done virtuously, since some one of the crucial qualifications, such as when one ought, might be lacking. 1144a15 tells us that even doing what one ought plus very many of the qualifications may not yet be virtuous action. There Aristotle speaks of someone doing 'what he ought and such things as are appropriate for the good man' but not 'for the sake of the acts themselves' and thus not virtuously, in this case, not justly. What one ought and such things as are appropriate for the good man' means, I take it, 'what one ought, when one ought, to whom one ought ...'. That is, I take it that a number of qualifying phrases are to be attached, except for the phrase Aristotle explicitly excludes, 'for the sake of the act itself'. (Doing the act for its own sake is doing it not as a means to something fully other than it: perhaps it is covered elsewhere by Aristotle's phrase 'as one ought'.)

So, so far, our results are that the virtuous agent does not identical with virtuous action. Nor is either what the virtuous agent does or virtuous action identical with what one ought. Nor is either what the virtuous agent does or virtuous action identical with what one ought-including all qualifications except-for 'for its own sake'.

Because the topic of most interest is what one ought plus the full array of qualifications (perhaps including 'for its own sake' as perhaps covered by 'as one ought'), I take it that Aristotle sometimes uses 'what one ought' as elliptical for 'what one ought with the full array of qualifications'. I take it that to deon is so elliptical in the opening question which sets up the structure of inquiry in the NE: 'Shall we not more hit upon to deon?' The two clause account I take to be of to deon in this fully qualified sense.

Bk II ch 4 makes a distinction between actions that on the one hand are 'in accordance with ( kata) the virtues' and are of a certain sort (pôs echêi) and actions that on the other hand are done virtuously — e.g., justly. The latter actions are 'in accordance with the virtues'; moreover, the agent meets certain requirements: he must know (what he is doing), choose the acts, and, as just noted, choose them for their own sakes. But there is also the further condition that the agent acting virtuously is 'firmly and unchangeably disposed': he acts out of a stable habit. So even what one ought when done to whom one ought etc. and for its own sake is not yet identical with action done virtuously since it may not be done out of stable habit. This non-identity is clear from, e.g., Bk II ch 9 where we learn that we can hit upon the middle (= what one ought presumably with the full array of 'ought' qualifications satisfied) after previously failing in two extreme ways to do it. Someone who has for the first time

hit upon what he ought (etc.) because of previously doing sometimes too much and sometimes too little will not yet have the fixed disposition to do what he ought (etc.); hence, he will not yet have acted virtuously.

The notion of right action satisfying all the qualifications (when, as, to whom ...) and the notion of action done virtuously are, therefore, not even coextensive. So one cannot immediately object that it is logically circular to mention the latter in an account of the former. But one can still raise a problem of circularity in another way, as follows.

There would be a circularity about Aristotle's practical advice if the very phrase being explained — 'what one ought to do', 'what is to be done', or 'right action' — though not actually visible in the explicans, occurred invisibly by being required to explain some expression which did occur openly in the explicans. So we must now ask: can Aristotle explain all the component notions in the account of the best thing doable without mention of right action? We can ask this question still about the component, virtuous action, just distinguished from right action. Even though we have found that virtuously done action is not definitionally identical with right action, the possibility that mention of right action occurs more subtly in Aristotle's definition of virtue still needs examination.

VI Response, Part One: No Circular Definitional Path Between Right Action and the Constituent Notions

The answer to the question is 'Yes'. I shall sketch an argument that although the constituent notions implicit in Aristotle's practical advice are closely related to what is right, Aristotle can explain them all without referring to what is right.

Aristotle only once explicitly says he is defining one of the crucial notions that he uses in the NE. Thus my question is not just about official definitions, but about explanations he might give in order to illuminate key notions. I have made some decisions about which statements are to

21 Topics 142a33-b6 tells us not to define 'the sun' by 'star that appears by day' since 'day' is defined via 'sun'. Presumably Aristotle recognized circularity as a flaw for other sorts of accounts besides definitional ones.
count as important illuminating explanations (and perhaps as his definitions), as opposed to merely interesting truths.

I now list items I judge particularly striking or distinctively Aristotelian notions in the account of right action. I do not list every possible locus for analysis. I precede each item in my list by a numeral or numeral plus letter to establish an order to which I later refer. The explanatory order into which I put these constituent notions, i.e., the order revealing which explains which, is only partly fixed by what Aristotle says. Partly, where Aristotle is silent, the order is of my own devising, with the goal of avoiding circularity as a guide. The order is this.

(1) The best thing doable turns out to be a well done sum of doables, i.e., (2) living well for a lifetime (to eu zên). This in turn is (3) the well done ergon, the well done typical and characteristic activity of people. The ergon is, broadly speaking, (4) acting for reasons and giving and having reasons.²² The ergon done well — acting for reasons well and giving and having reasons well — is something more, not yet fully specified in Bk I ch 7 except that Bk I ch 7 does tell us that doing the ergon well will be out of stable tendencies to do the ergon well. The notion of a stable origin is now an important ingredient of doing well. But ‘well’ will amount to more than ‘out of a stable tendency’ since the vicious act consistently, but not well. The stable tendencies to do the ergon well are the various (5) intellectual virtues and (6) moral virtues.

The question what it is to do the ergon well in the sphere of moral virtues, that is, the question what specifically are the traits which are the moral virtues Aristotle clearly treats in Bk I ch 7 and Bk II as a question we will answer through experience.²³

So far the list of components makes no overt reference to the notion we especially look for — that of what ought to be done, right action. Let us examine more closely what might be concealed in the declared definition of moral virtue at 1106b36 ff.:

‘Virtue is a habit for choice in a mean which is relative to us, determined by <> reason (and that one by which the person of practical wisdom would determine it.)’

Items crucially mentioned here are (7) choice, (8) the mean, hê mesotês, and (76) a reason, which is the reason by which the person of practical wisdom determines the mean relative to us. ‘Reason’ means ‘the right reason’, which Aristotle had mentioned previously at 1103b32 in connection with virtue and which he mentions again at 1144b26-7. Despite appearance, I do not think practical wisdom’s mention here contributes newly to the definition of virtue. I sketch my reasons later.

Aristotle says that virtue is a mean or middleness in that it is able to hit (9) the middle (to meson; 1106b27-8) in passions and actions (1109a23). The middle is what is (10) not too much or too little (1106a24-b7) of some emotion (such as fear) on the particular occasion (1106b27-8) or (11) not too much or too little on the particular occasion of some specific associated behavior such as flight or standing ground (1106b16-18). Aristotle thus explains the mean via the middle and the middle via the not too much and not too little of something specific.

It seems clear that Aristotle takes phrases such as ‘too much fear on this occasion’, ‘too much flight on this occasion’ to be primitive. Aristotle apparently asks us to recognize the application of these phrases without a general rule for doing so when he says the judgement of what the middle is requires perception, that is, the particular situation (Bk II ch 9), Aristotle admits (Bk II ch 9) that it is hard to find the middle. Yet it seems to me that the phrases ‘too much ...’ and ‘too little ...’ in application to the particular situation are not unusable primitives.²⁴ ‘Primitive’ need not mean that no more can ever be said

²² Alfonso Gomez-Lobo, ‘The Ergon Inference’, Phronësis 34 (1989) 170-84, puts it thus (179-80): ‘Actions, right or wrong, — accompanied by a logos or awareness of a propositional account of some sort which can be affirmed or denied by the agent. — They constitute our characteristic activity.’

²³ Compare here EE 1220a17-25. To say that virtue is the best state of the soul is true but not clear; to know that virtue is the best state of the soul is like knowing that Coriscus is the darkest one in the marketplace. This isn’t to know what Coriscus is until we get to the marketplace and see what else is there. Likewise, when we know that the virtues are the best dispositions, the dispositions to do well the human ergon, we have yet to learn, from experience, especially for the moral virtues, what traits we might have.

²⁴ My colleague John Wallace has asked me if there are finitely many of these primitives. I don’t know. Many of the examples that come to mind are descriptions of pathê — reactions, affections, emotions. Some pathê are familiar springs of action that we are used to watching for or ignoring or eradicating. On others less familiar,
to elucidate ‘too much’. Given the perceptions of the particular setting, much more might be said, for example, to explain why this is too much fear, that could not have been anticipated and covered by a general rule in advance.

The constituent notion of choice Bk VI ch 2 describes as ‘desiderative reason’ or ‘ratiocinative desire’. 1139a9-13 explains it as ‘deliberate desire of things in our own power’. Perhaps (7a) ‘desire because of (7b) deliberation with (7c) the right reason’ will almost capture it.

Deliberation is reasoning (Bk III ch 3) about what particular means, i.e., what actions, will achieve or constitute particular ends that are in our own power which are of a sort which does not always come about in the same way. I shall take the notion of deliberation in the NE as a near primitive, and not attempt to spell out the constituents, ‘ends’ and ‘means’. I say taking deliberation (including ends and means) or some other item in the list as a primitive, I mean that I think a reasonable person could grant the notion to be intelligible and acceptable without analysis at the moment in order to grasp Aristotle’s practical advice. I do not mean that one could not or that Aristotle does not ever say more about it.

Also required of choice, though not mentioned in the explicitly explanatory passages, is that choice is only of means to what one habitually acts to achieve. It is ‘not . . . without moral character (1139a17-b3).’

The description of choice as ‘ratiocinative’ (dianoëtiké) I take to be an allusion to the right reason, which the definition of virtue mentions as a constituent. The right reason is the statement that something is the middle or intermediate and hence the appropriate means to the end in view: ‘the middle is as the right reason says’ (1138b20). That is, it says what is too much or too little on the particular occasion (1109a22-9). There will be many different right reasons appropriate to many different particular settings. The account of the right reason has then reduced to the primitive notions noted earlier, e.g., ‘This is not too much or too little anger on this occasion, toward that person, on this ground, for this duration, etc.’

VII The Role of Practical Wisdom

Now turn to the role of the remark in the official definition of virtue that the reason the virtuous person acts from is the one by which the person of practical wisdom would determine the mean. First, practical wisdom is classed with states in virtue of which the soul speaks the truth (1139b15-17); it is a true state (1140b5) with a reason. So the connection of virtue with practical wisdom here can serve as emphasis that the ‘virtuous person acts for the right reason, i.e., for some true belief that something is (or is not) too much or too little which is the reason why something is (or is not) to be done. For example, the virtuous person acts or the analogue to the true reason, ‘This is not healthful — too much try food’ as opposed to the false one. This is, after all, healthful’; and is opposed to the true proposition ‘This is sweet’, which is in this instance not a reason for acting, i.e., not relevant. The notion of (12) truth will then be part of the notion of the right reason. Second, men-

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26 For an account of the right reason as the explanation why one ought to do the particular action which is compatible with the understanding of the right reason here, see section IV of S. Peterson, ‘Heres (Limit) in Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics’, Phronésis 33 (1988) 233-50. Each particular right reason will be the answer to the question ‘Why ought I to do this?’ Compare also Gomez-Lobo (180) for a compatible account of ‘according to the right reason’.

27 Gomez-Lobo (180) emphasizes that the right reason must be a true proposition. The notion of being a reason includes some requirement of relevance, as in Peterson, (239). The incontinent agent at 1147b2-3 who acts because of the (true) ‘sort of reason that this is sweet is nevertheless not acting for the right reason; his ‘sort of reason is irrelevant to why this ought to be done.'
tioning that the person of practical wisdom has the (right) reason that
the virtuous person acts from, suggests contrast with other sorts of right
reasons such as ones that theoreticians (e.g. geometricians) have. We
know from the previous account of the mean that the person of practical
wisdom who determines the mean (the disposition to choose the mid-
dles) will do so by observing what is not too much or too little on the
particular occasion. Beyond the emphasis and the suggested contrast
mention of practical wisdom gives us no further information about what
sort of thing the right reason is.

I am not complaining about Aristotle’s use of the notion of practical
wisdom here. I am simply observing that the notion of practical wisdom
does not make an explanatory addition. It is as though Aristotle had
said, ‘And by the way, let us make the further connection here of noting
that the person who has the right reason for acting in the domain of the
moral virtues is the person of practical wisdom.’

Since the mention of practical wisdom makes no explanatory addi-
tion here, I see no reason to declare it part of his official definition of
virtue. There is reason not to if it would introduce circularity into
Aristotle’s ethical theory. I take it that we have already reached Aris-
totle’s explanation of virtue in terms of the primitives — not too much
nor too little of some specific emotion or behavior on the occasion —
without it. I do not claim that the citation of ‘This is not too much fear ...
’ is utterly clear or satisfactory. But I do claim that it gives Aristotle’s
logical resting place. I take it, then, that the notion of practical wisdom
is not a definitory constituent of the notion of virtue.

Although the notion of practical wisdom does not, so I think, enter
into the definition of moral virtue, it may yet turn up as one of the
constituent notions of the statement of method if it gets mentioned in
the spelling out of component (5) — the intellectual virtues — of the
account of eudaimonia. According to Gauthier-Jolif (443), the general
definition of intellectual virtue is given in Bk VI ch 2: It is a habitual
state (genus) which (specific difference) permits one or other of the
two parts of the rational soul to tell the truth. Bk VI ch 1 mentions
two overarching intellectual virtues. I do not know if Aristotle intends
mention of them in explanation of intellectual virtue. To make the task
of avoiding circularity as challenging as possible, let us count these
overarching intellectual virtues as constituent notions in the spelling
out of living well. One is (5a) a virtue by which we contemplate variable
things. It is both intellectual and practical (1139a29-30). The other is
(5c) a virtue by which we contemplate invariable things. The virtue in
each case is (1139b12-13) the disposition by which one will most likely

arrive at (12) truths, presumably for correct reasons. The practical
intellectual virtue requires ‘truth in agreement with right desire.’

Perhaps practical wisdom is the same as (5a). Practical wisdom is at
least one of the excellences included under the overarching heading of
excellence in thinking about variable things. Let us for the moment count
(5b) practical wisdom separately.

An insight at 1140a28ff leads to what is a plausible candidate for
Aristotle’s official account of practical wisdom at 1140b4-6. At a28ff
Aristotle points out that we say that people are practically wise in some
specific matter when they calculate well with regard to some good end
that is not the province of a particular art. An example of such a good
(spondatos: serious) end would be a specific end proposed by some
virtue.28 Taking courage as an example of a virtue, we would say that a
person is practically wise in a particular respect if he could calculate well
what would achieve the end of responding appropriately to fear and to
the fearful in a certain situation. The official account of phronēsis which
makes use of this insight at 1140b4-6 is.29

It remains, then, that it is a true practical disposition with a reason
concerning the things good and bad for man.

That is to say at least that it is the disposition to figure out and carry
out the means which will achieve the things that are good for man and
avoid the things that are bad for man, i.e., specific virtuous and vicious
activities. The account is put similarly at 1140b20-1, with ‘concerning
the human goods.’ It is significant that 1140b4-6 uses the plural, ‘the

28 Gauthier-Jolif (470-1), also understand this to be the sort of example Aristotle has
in mind.

29 St. Thomas also (558) takes this to be the definition of practical wisdom.

1140a25-8 says that it is ‘a mark of a man of practical wisdom’ that he is able ‘to
deliberate well about’, i.e., find out the truth about, what will conduce to ‘living
well in general.’ If we took this remark to be explanation of practical wisdom it
would fend an initial appearance of circularity to the account we have so far
sketched of living well, since that account would make mention of practical wisdom
defined as the ability to deliberate about what would conduce to living well.
Though ‘living well’ occurs within a psychological context — ‘deliberate well
about’—, perhaps ‘deliberate well that p’, like ‘know’ has a component requiring
direct reference. However, this puzzle need not detain us if 1140a25-8 is not, as we
have supposed it is not, Aristotle’s explanation of practical wisdom.
human goods.' These human goods would be the various good ends proposed by specific virtues. Aristotle is then characterizing practical wisdom in relation to the several specific good ends of (6) moral virtues. As noted earlier, exactly what these specific good ends are we will learn through experience.

If we discover after investigation that courage is one of the human virtues, phronēsis then requires an understanding of acting courageously. The person of practical wisdom will be able to say, for the right reason, what means conduce to e.g. acting courageously. The reason that the person of practical wisdom has is the same as the one the person of virtue acts because of. For example, the reason may have the form: 'This is what counts as not too much or too little fear or too much or too little flight in this situation.'

On my understanding the definition of practical wisdom mentions specific virtues, in referring to their various ends; but Aristotle's avowed definition of virtue does not mention practical wisdom.

VIII Response, Part Two:
On the Logical Order of the Constituent Notions

The removal of the worry that practical wisdom and virtue are circularly defined by reference to each other calls attention to a general concern.

Our beginning project was to argue that the notion of right action explicates is not somehow an ingredient in its own explication. The result of sections V, VI, and VII is that it is not. But the fourteen allegations of §I raise many other questions whether circularly defined notions occur in the NE.

We must still ask for each of the constituent notions other than practical wisdom and virtue, for which the answer was positive, which occur in the statement of method: can Aristotle either explain it non-circularly or introduce it as primitive? I.e., is it possible to present the many notions from the statement of method—eighteen at last count—in some explanatory order which is not circular?

The answer, I believe, is 'Yes'. The explanatory order into which I would put many of the items from the NE is given by the numerals, some with attached letters, used above. The numerals indicate a non-circular explanatory sequence for the key notions in Aristotle's practical guidance for right action. Later notions in the sequence explain earlier non-primitive ones. Earlier ones do not explain later ones. It may of course turn out that there are strong equivalences among statements which mention items at various places in the sequence. For example, there is apparently a strong equivalence between the claim that someone has practical wisdom and the claim that he has virtue. But strong equivalence is not circular explanation.

The primitive items in this non-circular arrangement of components, that is, items not further fully analyzed in the NE, seem to me to be (4) having and acting for reasons, (5a) thinking well about variable things, (5c) thinking well about invariable things, (7a) desire, (7b) deliberation, (10) not too much or too little of various specific emotions, (11) not too much or too little of various specific emotion-associated behavior, and (12) truth. My arrangement is tentative; I acknowledge that there might be alternative ways of arranging the pieces of Aristotle's ethical theory. For the arrangement I give I offer the strong reason that it permits none of the circular definitional paths alleged in §I and, so far as I can see, no others.

IX What Is the Connection Between Virtuous Action and Right Action?

It is still worth asking what we are to make of the explicit connections Aristotle does make between what one ought to do and other notions: action done virtuously, the intermediate, the right reason, choice. Aristotle must intend these connections as some sort of elucidation. How, without creating circularity, can the notion of what one ought illuminate the very notions which illuminate it in Aristotle's practical advice? For example, 1106b19-24 says:

To get angry ... to feel pity ... when one ought and about what and towards whom, and for the sake of what, and as one ought, is intermediate and best — just exactly what is virtue's way.

The passage does not use 'what one ought', i.e., 'what is right'. It lists only when and about what and towards whom and for the sake of what

30 Contra Robert B. Louden, 'On Some Vices of Virtue Ethics', American Philosophical Quarterly 21 (1984) 227-36, the notion of virtue is not a primitive element in Aristotle's theory. Louden's overall point, that the notion of virtue is used in the analysis of right action, stands, however.
and as one ought. But this is presumably because what one ought in the specific cases envisaged is already specified as to get angry, to feel pity and the like. So I will suppose (that the passage claims some strong kind of connection between what one ought (when, as ... ) and action done virtuously.

'Just exactly what' (proter) is in some settings a sign of definitional connection. Despite this emphatic expression, I do not think the passage tries to define 'what is done virtuously' by the phrase 'what one ought (etc.). Of what use then is the claim of strong connection?

I take it that such passages use the phrase 'as one ought' and its like as mere schematic indicators: in such passages the phrases have no content of their own. They are to be replaced on the occasion of action by talk of some specific behavior of the sort inspired by some specific virtue and by talk of some specific setting appreciated by those of a certain virtue. The intermediate is as one ought in the sense that what one ought (etc.) will turn out on the particular occasion to be some specific intermediate action — e.g., displaying not too much or too little anger. When, as, etc. one ought is virtue's way in that on the particular occasion what one ought will be specific behavior inspired by some specific virtue in some specific setting appreciated by those with a certain virtue. The phrase 'when one ought' and its like are a sign that the account of what is to be done, the right reason, the statement that this is not too soon, not too late, not too much ... will need to wait for the particular occasion of doing to be said. The schematic phrase 'when one ought' and its like do not make an analytic contribution of their own to our understanding of virtue. Hence the claim at 1106 is not a sign of circular definition.

In the same way one might say, indicating schematically a strong connection, that the skilled doctor does his excellent doctoring when he ought, as he ought, ... . Although to say this would not be wholly illuminating, it would have point. The point would be that at the particular time there will be a specific reason why this time was 'when one ought', because, for example, the patient had reached such and such a point of feverishness.

Similarly for other notions closely linked with 'ought'. E.g., when Aristotle says (1125b26-32) that good temper, the middle habit, is that in virtue of which one feels anger toward whom one ought, for what one ought, in the way one ought (and all other such qualifications), the remark is not analysis of the middle. It is schematic indication that there will be a specific account why, on the occasion of acting, this is the intermediate. The right reason, which picks out the intermediate (1138b20), will give this account.

X Summary

I distinguish four points. First (§V), the notion of what one ought to do or what is right to do does not occur in Aristotle's practical advice how to do it. Rather, the different though closely related notion of acting virtuously occurs. Second (§VI), each notion crucially used in Aristotle's definition of 'moral virtue' can itself be explained without use of the notion of what one ought. Similarly for the other components of Aristotle's practical advice. In the logical arrangement so far given, prominent undefined or primitive notions are 'too much fear on this occasion', 'too much flight on this occasion', and the like. Third (§VIII), the many notions which occur in Aristotle's fully unfolded practical advice can be arranged in an explanatory sequence which has no obvious circularity. The sequence is in its own way rather dizzying but not because of circularity. Fourth (§IX), when Aristotle makes close connections between 'ought' and virtue as at 1106b21-4, there is no reason to suppose that he there offers 'ought' as something with informative content of its own which will elucidate virtue or the middle. Rather, in a schematic way he points out the specificity of what it is appropriate to say to explain why an action is virtuously done or intermediate.

The first three points establish that Aristotle's practical advice is not, so far, blatantly circular.

The fourth point reaffirms that Aristotle has not given us a single crisp explanatory answer to 'What makes something the right action?' or 'Why is this action the right one?' From Aristotle's allusions to the differences among particulars we gather that there will be no short thing plausibly describable as a single answer that will be appropriate response to 'Why?' Compare 1096b23-4 on 'Why are honor, wisdom, and pleasure good?'. 'Of honor, wisdom, and pleasure, just in respect of their goodness, the accounts are distinct and diverse.' (Ross' translation) 'Why is getting just that angry at this time right?' can only be answered in the particular setting with specific remarks about anger in that particular setting.31 And

31 Compare Ackrill's wish for a general answer to 'What makes something the right action?' with Dorothea Brooke's question in ch 3 of George Eliot's Middlemarch,
sometimes the answer will surprise the agent in a position to give the answer.\textsuperscript{32}

Aristotle’s theory as sketched above can meet another objection in addition to the initial objection of circularity with which we started. Though Aristotle has not given just one short answer to the question, ‘What makes something the right action?’ it would be wrong to say, in reproach, that therefore the person Aristotle envisages as having practical wisdom ‘will “see” what is the best thing to do in the circumstances without necessarily being able to explain why it is best’ (Ackrill 1981, 138).\textsuperscript{33} Indeed there is not something that the person of practical wisdom will be able to say to explain every choice. But for every choice, there is something, perhaps new and unexpected, that the person of practical wisdom will be able to say to explain it.\textsuperscript{34}

\textsuperscript{32} Martha Nussbaum, ‘Reply to Richard Wollheim, Patrick Gardiner, and Hilary Putnam’, \textit{New Literary History} 15 (1983) 200-8, 206, refers to ‘the view (defended, I believe, by Aristotle) that ethical experience is an ongoing adventure in which genuine surprise … <is> possible.’

\textsuperscript{33} Similarly Louden (1984), 70. Also perhaps Monan, 89, ‘The \textit{phronēsis} — alone is able to see the incommunicable truth which is in accord with his right desire.’

\textsuperscript{34} At \textit{EE} 1247a14ff \textit{phronēsis} has a reason why it acts; those with \textit{phronēsis} are contrasted with those who cannot say why they do the right thing. At 1247b27 those not having the reason (something to say to explain) can’t teach.

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