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Habit, Choice, and Action
Aristotle's Analysis of Ethical Virtue

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Abstract In *Creature dell'abitudine. Abito, costume, seconda natura da Aristotele alle scienze cognitive*, Marco Piazza argues that, for Aristotle, habit stabilizes human action, making it regular, albeit contingent and voluntary. Drawing on his interpretation, this article examines the relationship between habit, choice, and action in Aristotle's theory, focusing on how habit forms the basis of virtue, morally shaping human nature while preserving its contingency. To this end, it examines the formation and essence of ethical virtue, analyzes the connection between virtue and choice, and elucidates the relationship between choice and contingency.

Keywords Aristotle. Habit. Deliberation. Choice. Contingency action.

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1 Introduction

In his insightful book *Creature dell'abitudine. Abito, costume, seconda natura da Aristotele alle scienze cognitive*, Marco Piazza shows how Aristotle's idea that habit (*ethos*) is "like a nature" has exerted a lasting influence on the history of ethical thought and continues to resonate in contemporary discussions – particularly within the framework of neo-Aristotelian ethics. A prominent example of this influence can be found in the work of John McDowell, who, in the context of a moderate naturalism,[1] conceives of habits as components of a 'second nature' that grounds ethics in the "space of reasons" and human consciousness, while remaining tied to the biological dimension of the human organism. In this regard, Piazza argues that for Aristotle it is not *hexis* (disposition) but rather the process of habituation (*ethos*) that is likened to nature, insofar as it compensates for the deficiencies of the original nature. In *De Memoria et Reminiscentia*, Aristotle states that habit "comes to be like a nature",[2] emphasizing its capacity to produce a regularity that, though not necessary, stabilizes human action. In the ethical domain, this regularity is the foundation of virtue: habit brings about a stable, though not substantial, transformation of human nature, morally orienting it without negating its contingent and voluntary character.[3]

This article aims to explore precisely this aspect – namely, the relationship between habit, choice, and action in Aristotle's ethical theory. To this end, it will examine the formation and essence of ethical virtue (§ 2), analyze the connection between ethical virtue and choice (§ 3), and finally elucidate the relationship between choice and contingency (§ 4). The article therefore will show that Aristotle's theory offers a coherent reconciliation of four key dimensions of moral agency: habit, deliberation, choice, and contingency.

2 The Formation and Essence of Ethical Virtue

In the *Nicomachean Ethics* (*NE*), after providing an initial definition of the ultimate good or happiness (*eudaimonia*),[4] Aristotle proceeds to examine the nature of virtue, as part of his effort to analyze all of the components implicit in this definition.[5] The inquiry into virtue occupies

1 For an overview on naturalism see Perissinotto 2019.

2 Arist. *De mem.* 2, 452 a 29-30.

3 Piazza 2018, 23.

4 Arist. *NE* I 6 1098a 15-16: "Human good turns out to be activity of the soul according to virtue".

5 Arist. *NE* I 13 1102a 5-6. Cf. Natali 2017, 63.

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a central place in Aristotle's ethical thought and extends from Book II to Book VI. It unfolds through a series of methodical steps. Aristotle begins by distinguishing between two types of virtue: intellectual virtues, the functional excellences of the reason, which are acquired through instruction, and ethical (or moral) virtues, the functional excellences of the character, which are cultivated through habit. He states:

> Since virtue is of two kinds, intellectual and moral, intellectual virtue owes both its birth and its growth to teaching [...] whereas moral virtue comes about as a result of habit, whence also its name (*ethikē*) is one that is formed by a slight variation from the word *ethos* (habit). (Aristotle, *NE* II 1, 1103a14-18)[6]

Aristotle's focus on the mode of acquisition of virtue not only situates his position within the context of the sophistic-Socratic debate later developed by Plato, but also serves a crucial methodological function for the subsequent course of the investigation. After his brief introduction of the distinction between intellectual and ethical virtue, Aristotle concentrates on the latter, organizing the analysis into three main sections. The first deals with the formation of virtue; the second defines its nature; and the third explores the individual ethical virtues in detail. The discussion of the genesis of ethical virtue is thus presented as a necessary condition for understanding its essence.[7] This methodological priority is justified on two grounds. First, Aristotle's treatise is guided by a practical aim: knowing how to become morally excellent takes precedence over knowing what moral excellence is. Aristotle himself underscores the purpose of the inquiry in these terms:

> Since, then, the present inquiry does not aim at theoretical knowledge like the others (for we are inquiring not in order to know what virtue is, but in order to become good, since otherwise our inquiry would have been of no use), we must examine the nature of actions, namely how we ought to do them; for these determine also the nature of the states of character that are produced, as we have said. (Aristotle, *NE* II 2, 1103b26-31)

Second, a genetic analysis of ethical virtue makes it possible to isolate and examine individually all the elements involved in its

6 From here onwards I will follow the English translation of *NE* given by D.W. Ross, available in `https://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/nicomachaen.2.ii.html`. Nevertheless, I maintain the division of the chapters used by Carlo Natali in his translation of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* based on Susemihl-Apelt's edition of the text (1912^3).

7 On this issue see Natali 2017, 67-8.

definition – that is, those that constitute its essential structure.

After addressing ethical virtue in both general and particular forms, Aristotle devotes a single book to discussing intellectual virtues (*NE* VI). These include: *phronēsis*, the intellectual disposition to deliberate truthfully in accordance with virtue; *technē*, the disposition to produce things in accordance with truth – that is, in accordance with the definition of the object and the principles of the respective art; *epistēmē*, the disposition to scientific demonstration; *nous*, the intellectual capacity corresponding to the understanding of first principles; and *sophia*, the intellectual disposition that unites both the understanding of first principles and the capacity to produce scientific demonstrations.

Among the intellectual virtues, the one to which Aristotle devotes the most attention is *phronēsis*. As will be shown, this is not the highest virtue, but it is the kind of intellectual excellence most closely connected to both the formation and the essence of ethical virtue. The relatively brief treatment of the intellectual virtues – despite their centrality in determining the ultimate definition of *eudaimonia* – in comparison to the extensive discussion of ethical virtue, raises a well-known and much-debated question concerning the internal coherence of Aristotle's practical philosophy. From the very beginning of the *Ethics*, the practical dimension of inquiry takes precedence over the theoretical, and it constitutes the focus of most of the analysis. Nevertheless, the life of theoretical activity according to virtue is ultimately presented by Aristotle as the highest form of human life.

Two explanations can be offered for this. The first, and most straightforward, is that the intellectual virtues – particularly those essential to the realization of the *bios theoretikos*, such as *epistēmē*, *nous*, and *sophia* – are examined in greater depth in other works that are more directly concerned with epistemological and psychological issues. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, therefore, Aristotle can afford to summarize them only insofar as they serve the purposes of ethical inquiry. The second explanation – one that will require further elaboration later – is that, despite Aristotle's preference for theoretical life, moral excellence is the form of virtue most realistically attainable by the majority of citizens. It is also the kind of excellence over which legislators, rulers, and educators – presumably the primary audience for the ethical discourse presented in the *NE* – can exert the greatest influence. Accordingly, it is the form of virtue to which Aristotle seeks to make the most substantial contribution in this context, by offering a systematic analysis of the conditions under which it becomes possible and can be fully realized.

2.1 The Elements of Ethical Virtue

In analyzing the formation of ethical virtue, Aristotle identifies three characteristic elements. First, virtue is a perfection of our nature brought about by habituation; second, virtue is closely related to pleasure and pain; third, virtue arises from knowledge, deliberate choice, and a stable disposition of character.

To begin with, Aristotle explains that ethical virtue is neither by or according to nature (*physei*) nor contrary to nature (*para physin*), but rather that human beings are naturally capable of acquiring it:

> From this it is also plain that none of the moral virtues arises in us by nature; for nothing that exists by nature can form a habit contrary to its nature. For instance the stone which by nature moves downwards cannot be habituated to move upwards, not even if one tries to train it by throwing it up ten thousand times; nor can fire be habituated to move downwards, nor can anything else that by nature behaves in one way be trained to behave in another. Neither by nature, then, nor contrary to nature do the virtues arise in us; rather we are adapted by nature to receive them, and are made perfect by habit. Again, of all the things that come to us by nature we first acquire the potentiality and later exhibit the activity (this is plain in the case of the senses; for it was not by often seeing or often hearing that we got these senses, but on the contrary we had them before we used them, and did not come to have them by using them); but the virtues we get by first exercising them, as also happens in the case of the arts as well. (Aristotle, *NE* II 1, 1103a18-32)

Virtue is not by nature for two reasons. First, if virtue were by nature, it would be impossible for a subject to become accustomed to acting contrary to their natural tendencies (just as a stone, which naturally tends to move downward, could never become accustomed to moving upward, even if we threw it in the air many times). The first explanation assumes that, for Aristotle, it is obviously possible to become virtuous in spite of one's natural tendencies. Second, by nature, one first possesses the capacity and then exercises the activity; whereas in the case of virtue, one first exercises the activity and then acquires the stable disposition to act in a particular way. Both of these explanations are likely influenced by Aristotle's physical and biological conceptions, where nature is considered the essence and form of an entity that determines the directionality of its development and, more generally, its behavior. Capacities are seen as innate functions of the living organism that are actualized through interaction with appropriate sensible objects and are temporally prior to their actualization. The fact that virtue is not by nature does

not imply, however, that there are no natural predispositions for its acquisition. In other parts of his work, namely in Book VI, common to both the *Nicomachean* and the *Eudemian Ethics* (*EE*), as well as in other books of the latter treatise, Aristotle seems to acknowledge the presence of natural traces of virtue or of a character disposition.[8]

This can also be inferred from the above passage, which states that it is in our nature to receive the virtues and that there is a perfection of nature through habit. These statements suggest that, in the case of the acquisition of virtue, there is a natural inclination toward this outcome. Aristotle's thesis, therefore, seems best understood as suggesting that nature is neither a sufficient condition for the development of virtue nor the most relevant condition.[9] From the conclusion that virtue is not by nature, it also seems to follow as a corollary that virtue cannot be against nature. Indeed, it follows from the first explanation of why virtue is not by nature that, if it were against nature, it would not be possible to acquire it. That Aristotle does not feel the need to further elaborate on this point may simply indicate that such an option is clearly contradicted by the facts: people can become virtuous despite their natural tendencies, precisely through habit, education, and conscious choice.

The task, then, is to understand what Aristotle means by "the perfection of nature through habit". At the end of the passage, he proposes an analogy between virtue and art, intended to explain the nature and origin of moral excellence based on the performance excellence typical of craftsmen. Aristotle goes on to explain that virtue, like art, arises from the repetition of the same kind of actions, produces the same kind of actions from which it derives, and is corrupted by actions of a contrary quality:

> Again, it is from the same causes and by the same means that every virtue is both produced and destroyed, and similarly every art; for it is from playing the lyre that both good and bad lyre-players are produced. And the corresponding statement is true of builders and of all the rest; men will be good or bad builders as a result of building well or badly. For if this were not so, there would have been no need of a teacher, but all men would have been born good or bad at their craft. This, then, is the case with the virtues also; by doing the acts that we do in our transactions with other men we become just or unjust, and by doing the acts that we do in the presence of danger, and being habituated to feel fear or confidence,

8 Arist. *NE* VI 13, 1144b 1-5. On the case of *NE VI* see Baker 2024.

9 On the function of natural endowments in the formation of moral virtue, see Donini 1989 and 2014, and Viano 2008. On habit as a refinement of nature, see Farina 2019; Chiaradonna-Farina 2020; Morel 1997 and 2021.

> we become brave or cowardly. The same is true of appetites and feelings of anger; some men become temperate and good-tempered, others self-indulgent and irascible, by behaving in one way or the other in the appropriate circumstances. Thus, in one word, states of character arise out of like activities. This is why the activities we exhibit must be of a certain kind; it is because the states of character correspond to the differences between these. It makes no small difference, then, whether we form habits of one kind or of another from our very youth; it makes a very great difference, or rather all the difference. (Aristotle, *NE* II 1, 1103b 6-25)

The passage clearly illustrates, through examples of justice in its specific sense of fairness, courage, moderation, and gentleness, how virtue derives from habit: just as one becomes a good musician by consistently practicing one's art well, one becomes virtuous by continually practicing appropriate passions and performing actions of a certain quality – just rather than unjust, courageous rather than cowardly, moderate rather than intemperate, mild rather than aggressive.[10] From this, Aristotle concludes that the education received in early childhood is crucial to the development of excellent forms of conduct.[11]

The reference to desires and passions, as well as the importance of education, leads Aristotle to introduce a new element into his investigation, namely that ethical virtue is related to pleasure and pain.

> For moral excellence is concerned with pleasures and pains; it is on account of the pleasure that we do bad things, and on account of the pain that we abstain from noble ones. Hence we ought to have been brought up in a particular way from our very youth, as Plato says, so as both to delight in and to be pained by the things that we ought; for this is the right education. (Aristotle, *NE* II 2, 1104b9-13)

To establish a relationship between virtue and the passions, Aristotle first explains the reasons for immoral conduct, noting that inappropriate feelings of pleasure and pain lead to ignoble behaviors or prevent noble ones. He then further clarifies what he means by inappropriate feelings:

> It is by reason of pleasures and pains that men become bad, by pursuing and avoiding these—either the pleasures and pains they ought not or when they ought not or as they ought not, or by going

10 On the general issue of habituation see Burnyeat 1980; Lockwood 2013; Jimenez 2016; Leunissen 2017; Di Basilio 2021.

11 On this specific passage see Donini 2019, 11.

> wrong in one of the other similar ways that may be distinguished. (Aristotle, *NE* II 2, 1104b 21-23).

From this, Aristotle concludes, on the basis of the logical principle that the characteristics of a term between two opposites can be derived from those of the other by opposition,[12] that virtue depends on the habit of experiencing appropriate feelings of pleasure and pain – that is, for the things for which it is appropriate to have such feelings. He reiterates that such a habit is acquired through proper education. He later clarifies that the existence of inappropriate feelings, that is, when people pursue and avoid pleasures and pains inappropriately, does not imply that to be virtuous one must be apathetic. Rather, it is necessary to have feelings of the right quality. As Aristotle will explain later, passions are part of our nature.

> Hence men even define the virtues as certain states of impassivity and rest; not well, however, because they speak absolutely, and do not say 'as one ought' and 'as one ought not' and 'when one ought or ought not', and the other things that may be added. (Aristotle, *NE* II 2, 1104b23-26)

What the subject acquires by habit is the disposition by which one relates well or poorly to pleasure and pain, that is, one judges correctly or incorrectly:

> There being three objects of choice and three of avoidance, the noble, the advantageous, the pleasant, and their contraries, the base, the injurious, the painful, about all of these the good man tends to go right and the bad man to go wrong, and especially about pleasure; for this is common to the animals, and also it accompanies all objects of choice; for even the noble and the advantageous appear pleasant. (Aristotle, *NE* II 2, 1104b 30-1105a1)

Having established that there is a relationship between virtue and passions, Aristotle provides three reasons why virtue is related to pleasure and pain. The first reason is that virtue pertains to passions and actions, which ultimately lead to pleasure and pain. To return to some of the examples given earlier, courage involves the agent facing dangerous situations that provoke fear and thus pain; moderation involves those desires whose satisfaction leads to sensual pleasure; and so on.

> Again, if the virtues are concerned with actions and passions, and

12 Arist. *Top*. VI 8, 114a 2-4; *Metaph*. IX 2, 1046b 8-9.

> every passion and every action is accompanied by pleasure and pain, for this reason also virtue will be concerned with pleasures and pains. (Aristotle, *NE* II 2, 1104b 13-16)

The second reason is that passions serve as educational tools, insofar as pain can be inflicted as a punishment and pleasure can be used as an incentive:

> This is also evident in the punishments imposed as a result of actions, for punishments are akin to therapies, and therapies by their nature work through opposites.

Finally, pleasure and pain reveal the presence and nature of a certain type of character trait:

> Again, as we said but lately, every state of soul has a nature relative to and concerned with the kind of things by which it tends to be made worse or better. (Aristotle, *NE* II 2 1104b 18-20)

This means that feelings of pleasure and pain reveal the state of an agent's character: a virtuous person, who acts deliberately, takes pleasure in performing noble actions.[13]

These final considerations lead to the introduction of the last essential element in the formation and definition of virtue, namely the rational element. After explaining how a habit is formed, Aristotle recognizes a potential problem that might arise, namely whether the acquisition of virtue and the virtuous behavior that follows are merely the result of mechanical repetition or a superficial adherence to a given behavioral model. Indeed, the emphasis on the recursive nature of the actions that contribute to the formation of a particular character could lead one to believe that the agent does not contribute at all to their moral progress:

> The question might be asked; what we mean by saying that we must become just by doing just acts, and temperate by doing temperate acts; for if men do just and temperate acts, they are already just and temperate, exactly as, if they do what is in accordance with the laws of grammar and of music, they are grammarians and musicians. Or is this not true even of the arts? It is possible to do something that is in accordance with the laws of grammar, either by chance or at the suggestion of another. A man will be

13 While the temperate person, who acts for the sake of the good without truly desiring it, suffers in doing so, the weak person, who, despite knowing how they should act, is driven by the desire for what seems to them to be good but is not, usually regrets their actions; finally, the vicious person enjoys the immediate pleasure of their actions, but the end toward which they are acting is a vice that is likely to cause them pain in the long run.

> a grammarian, then, only when he has both done something grammatical and done it grammatically; and this means doing it in accordance with the grammatical knowledge in himself. Again, the case of the arts and that of the virtues are not similar; for the products of the arts have their goodness in themselves, so that it is enough that they should have a certain character, but if the acts that are in accordance with the virtues have themselves a certain character it does not follow that they are done justly or temperately. The agent also must be in a certain condition when he does them; in the first place he must have knowledge, secondly he must choose the acts, and choose them for their own sakes, and thirdly his action must proceed from a firm and unchangeable character. (Aristotle, *NE* II 3, 1105a 17- 1105b 33)

This passage is significant for two reasons. First, it highlights the limitations of the analogy between art and virtue by specifying that the value of art, or its goodness, lies in the quality of the product, not in the process leading to its creation or in the agent's character. In contrast, a virtuous action is virtuous not only because of its quality, but also because of the agent's moral quality. Second, Aristotle clearly outlines the requirements that an action must meet in order to be considered virtuous. For an action to be virtuous, the agent must act consciously, make a choice, and choose the action for its own sake, acting on the basis of a stable disposition of character. For Aristotle, acting consciously means being fully aware of the circumstances surrounding the action, that is, knowing the who, what, where, by what means, to what end, and how (cf. II 4, 1111a 4-6). Making a choice means that the action has its origin in the agent, not in something external, which is to say that the virtuous action is the result of a deliberative process.[14] Furthermore, choosing an action for its own sake means not acting utilitarianly, to achieve further ends, but because the action is intrinsically beautiful and a good to be pursued for its own sake. For example, a courageous action is virtuous if it is performed for its own sake, and not to gain honors; similarly, a just action is done because it is good for the political community, not to avoid punishment. Finally, a truly virtuous action stems from a firmly established disposition of character. With this clarification, Aristotle seeks to deny that an action can be considered virtuous if it is not the result of the agent's internal moral coherence, but rather the effect of mere external adherence to a code of conduct or the incidental, unintended outcome of chance circumstances. As we shall see, the requirements set forth here help to characterize the process of acquiring virtue and, more specifically, the virtuous action

14 Aristotle's concept of 'deliberation' will be explained later.

that contributes to the formation of a stable character disposition in terms of voluntariness.

2.2 The Definition of Ethical Virtue

Having completed his analysis of the conditions necessary for the realization of virtue, Aristotle can now proceed to consider its essence.[15] In order to define what ethical virtue is, he first attempts to determine its general category. Having already established that by "virtue" he means a characteristic proper to the activity of the human soul par excellence – and thus that virtue is a quality of the soul – Aristotle continues his investigation by identifying three types of qualities present in the soul: *pathos* (passion), *dynamis* (capacity), and *hexis* (state or disposition).

> Next, we must consider what virtue is. Since things that are found in the soul are of three kinds—passions, faculties, states of character, virtue must be one of these. By passions I mean appetite, anger, fear, confidence, envy, joy, friendly feeling, hatred, longing, emulation, pity, and in general the feelings that are accompanied by pleasure or pain; by faculties the things in virtue of which we are said to be capable of feeling these, e.g. of becoming angry or being pained or feeling pity; by states of character the things in virtue of which we stand well or badly with reference to the passions, e.g. with reference to anger we stand badly if we feel it violently or too weakly, and well if we feel it moderately; and similarly with reference to the other passions. Now neither the virtues nor the vices are passions, because we are not called good or bad on the ground of our passions, but are so called on the ground of our virtues and our vices, and because we are neither praised nor blamed for our passions (for the man who feels fear or anger is not praised, nor is the man who simply feels anger blamed, but the man who feels it in a certain way), but for our virtues and our vices we are praised or blamed. Again, we feel anger and fear without choice, but the virtues are modes of choice or involve choice. Further, in respect of the passions we are said to be moved, but in respect of the virtues and the vices we are said not to be moved but to be disposed in a particular way. For these reasons also they are not faculties; for we are neither called good nor bad, nor praised nor blamed, for the simple capacity of feeling the passions; again, we have the faculties by nature, but

15 For a more detailed discussion, see Natali 2017, 72-81, whose analysis is here summarized in broad terms.

> we are not made good or bad by nature; we have spoken of this before. If, then, the virtues are neither passions nor faculties, all that remains is that they should be states of character. (Aristotle, *NE* II 4, 1105b19-1106a4)

In the first place, ethical virtue cannot be identified as a *pathos*. By *pathos*, Aristotle refers specifically to a passion or affection – one of the psychophysical *accidents* (*sumbebēkota*) of the living organism[16] – such as desire, anger, fear, confidence, envy, joy, affection, hatred, craving, jealousy, pity, and, more generally, any condition accompanied by pleasure or pain.[17] According to Aristotle, while individuals can be praised or blamed for their virtues and vices, they are not subject to moral evaluation – either as excellent or base – merely for experiencing passions. Moreover, while passions are not subject to choice, virtue, as previously discussed, inherently involves choice, or at the very least cannot be acquired independently of it. Nor is ethical virtue to be understood as a *dynamis*, that is, as the capacity to experience the aforementioned passions. This is so for two reasons: first, because one is not judged morally good or bad on the basis of a natural capacity to feel emotions; second, because, as Aristotle has already clarified, capacities exist prior to their exercise, whereas virtue emerges through repeated exercise. The fact that praise and blame are ascribed to virtues and vices – that is, that they are subject to socially reactive practices – entails, for Aristotle, that virtue and vice are voluntary. In other words, unlike *pathē* and faculties, whose principle lies in nature, virtue originates in the agent – that is, in choice. As will be examined more fully later, this consideration prompts Aristotle to introduce a digression in the structure of the *Ethics*: after defining ethical virtue and before analyzing the individual virtues, he returns to the theme of voluntariness in greater depth. Having ruled out that virtue can be a quality of the soul in the sense of either a *pathos* or *dynamis*, it follows that virtue must be a *hexis* – that is, a stable disposition of character, a habitus, in virtue of which one behaves well or badly in relation to the passions.

Having clarified the general category to which virtue belongs, the next step is to better understand what kind of *hexis* it is – that is, to identify its specific difference.

> Thus, we have stated what virtue is in respect of its genus. We

16 Mingucci 2015, 55-112.

17 As rightly suggested by one of the anonymous referee, whom I thank, in relation to this topic and to Aristotle's definition and examples of *pathos*, see Oksenberg Rorty 1984.

> must, however, not only describe virtue as a state of character, but also say what sort of state it is. We may remark, then, that every virtue or excellence both brings into good condition the thing of which it is the excellence and makes the work of that thing be done well; e.g. the excellence of the eye makes both the eye and its work good; for it is by the excellence of the eye that we see well. Similarly, the excellence of the horse makes a horse both good in itself and good at running and at carrying its rider and at awaiting the attack of the enemy. Therefore, if this is true in every case, the virtue of man also will be the state of character which makes a man good and which makes him do his own work well. How this is to happen we have stated already, but it will be made plain also by the following consideration of the specific nature of virtue. In everything that is continuous and divisible it is possible to take more, less, or an equal amount, and that either in terms of the thing itself or relatively to us; and the equal is an intermediate between excess and defect. By the intermediate in the object, I mean that which is equidistant from each of the extremes, which is one and the same for all men; by the intermediate relatively to us that which is neither too much nor too little—and this is not one, nor the same for all. (Aristotle, *NE* II 5, 1106a 14-32)

First, ethical virtue is a stable disposition of character that enables the agent to act in the best possible way – that is, it is a form of functional or performative excellence. Second, virtue is defined as a mean (*mesotēs*) between two opposing extremes. However, Aristotle distinguishes between two types of mean: the mean in itself (*kata to pragma*) and the mean relative to us (*pros hēmas*). The mean in itself is the objective mean, determined mathematically with respect to the object – for instance, given the numbers 2 and 10, the mean is 6. The mean relative to us, on the other hand, is a subjective mean, determined with respect to the agent's particular condition or needs – for example, the moderate amount of food for an individual will depend on their caloric requirements.

Of these two, ethical virtue is a mean relative to us. This, in line with what has been stated, seems to imply two main points for Aristotle. First, virtue is that stable disposition of character which, for each agent, corresponds to a psychological state that lies intermediate between two excessive and opposing states. For example, courage is the mean between cowardice and rashness. Second, virtue is that disposition by which one responds well to passions – that is, by which one performs virtuous actions in emotionally charged situations, and does so on the basis of choice (*prohairesis*).[18]

18 Brown 2014.

A virtuous action is an action characterized by a specific qualitative excellence. As such, it can be understood by analogy to a color that lies within a continuous gradation between two opposing extremes. Courageous action, for example, occupies a position between cowardly and rash action. Virtue, then, is also a mean in the sense that it leads the agent, in any given circumstance, to choose the action that is qualitatively intermediate. Courage, therefore, will be a stable disposition of character by which the agent consistently chooses, within a spectrum bounded by cowardice at one end and rashness at the other, the action that is truly courageous. Having thus clarified what specific type of *hexis* virtue is, Aristotle is now in a position to provide a formal definition of ethical virtue.

> Virtue, then, is a state of character concerned with choice (*proairetikē*), lying in a mean, i.e. the mean relative to us, this being determined by a rational principle, and by that principle by which the man of practical wisdom would determine it. Now it is a mean between two vices, that which depends on excess and that which depends on defect. (Aristotle, *NE* II 6, 1106b36-1107a3)

This definition incorporates all the elements previously discussed. First, ethical virtue is a *hexis* – a stable disposition of character by which the agent relates appropriately to the passions, formed by the repeated performance of actions marked by a certain qualitative excellence. More precisely, virtue is a mean relative to us between two opposing extremes, each of which is a vice in itself. Second, virtue concerns choice. This means, above all, that virtue is the result of a choice: the mean that defines virtue is rationally determined, in the manner in which it would be determined by a person of practical wisdom (*phronimos*).

Two aspects of this clarification are worth highlighting. First, virtue is determined by rational deliberation. Second, in the rational process by which virtuous action is determined, the agent can refer to the example of a wise person. This implies that virtue is grounded in deliberation in accordance with truth, and that such deliberation can be guided by an external model of rationality without undermining the moral agent's autonomy.

Furthermore, virtue concerns choice in another sense: it gives rise to choice. To fully understand this claim, it is necessary to examine further the relationship between ethical virtue, practical wisdom, deliberation, and choice.

3 Virtue and Deliberate Choice

In Aristotelian ethics, *prohairesis* – deliberate choice – is understood as the outcome of a rational process of deliberation. For Aristotle, deliberation entails the investigation of the most appropriate means, given a specific context, to achieve a particular end. A means is deemed appropriate when it aligns with the intended end and is also perceived as desirable by the deliberating agent. Conceptually, such deliberation can be analyzed through the structure of a practical syllogism, in which the major premise (P1) articulates the end of the action, the minor premise (P2) specifies one of the feasible means to realize that end, and the conclusion (C) corresponds to the agent's choice of action.[19] An illustrative example is as follows:

- P1: Digestion promotes health;
- P2: Walking aids digestion;
- C: Therefore, walk.[20]

Here, the major premise defines the *telos* – health – as concretely instantiated in a particular situation. The minor premise identifies a specific means for realizing that *telos*, and the conclusion constitutes the practical resolution: the decision to act. The pivotal component of the deliberative process is P2, which operationalizes the relationship between means and end. For the deliberation to result in effective action – that is, for the agent to carry out the choice made – the means chosen must be both rationally suitable and subjectively desirable. As Aristotle maintains, no action occurs in the absence of desire, which he regards as the fundamental impetus of agency. Suppose, for example, that walking is not desirable for a given agent. Other means conducive to digestion, such as drinking herbal tea or a digestif, might be considered. However, not all available means are equally suited to the higher end of health: while a digestif may aid digestion, it is not necessarily beneficial to health. By contrast, herbal tea may be both healthful and desirable, thereby constituting a valid alternative to walking.

The capacity to engage in correct deliberation – defined as reasoning that is directed toward truth, oriented by the good, and concerned with the appropriate means for achieving it – represents a distinctive excellence of practical reason: *phronesis*, or practical wisdom. This disposition is to be distinguished from mere technical skill (*deinotēs*), which involves identifying effective means to achieve any end, irrespective of its moral value. For Aristotle, *phronesis* is inseparable from ethical virtue: whereas virtue determines the end

19 For a deep analysis of the structure of practical syllogism, see Natali 2001, 63-109.

20 The example comes from Arist., *An. Po.* 94b 8-23. See Natali 2001, 82-84.

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of an action, practical wisdom is the rational faculty that discerns the most fitting means by which the good can be realized.[21]

This allows us to clarify in what sense virtue is both the outcome and the origin of choice. It has been stated that ethical virtue is formed not only by the mechanical repetition of actions of a certain quality, but also by the fact that the agent actively chooses such actions. Therefore, starting from a good character disposition, whether due to natural temperament or proper upbringing, the agent contributes to the rational formation of virtue by deliberating on the appropriate means for achieving the good in each situation. To do so, as the definition indicates, the agent may also be inspired by the reasoning of the wise person. Once ethical virtue is acquired, it will determine the end of the action, that is, the major premise or principle of the practical syllogism. In this sense, ethical virtue will be capable of producing choices. For example, the virtue of courage is formed by courageous actions chosen for their own sake, and it in turn produces courageous choices, insofar as it establishes the end for which one should act in each circumstance.

The complex relationship between virtue, deliberation, and choice leads Aristotle to reflect on the nature of the actions that underlie the formation of character, as well as those actions that arise from a stable disposition. Indeed, part of his inquiry is aimed at establishing that agents are responsible for their actions and for the formation of their habitual states, whether virtuous or vicious. He therefore outlines the conditions under which an action can be considered voluntary or involuntary (Arist. *NE* III 1-3, 1109b 30-1111b3). Involuntary actions are those performed under force or violence, that is, actions caused by an external source, or those performed out of ignorance, meaning that the agent is unaware of the relevant circumstances. Voluntary actions, on the other hand, are those in which the principle and cause reside within the acting subject, and the agent is aware of the circumstances. In the case of non-rational living beings, such as animals and children, this principle and cause can be identified with the desiring impulse. As for rational human beings, voluntary actions are those that involve a choice, either actual or potential. In addition to voluntary and involuntary actions, there are non-voluntary actions – those that are performed out of ignorance but are not accompanied by pain – and mixed actions – those that may also have an external principle and cause, but to whose realization the agent can still contribute, for example by revising their plans in response to externally induced circumstances. [22]

21 On *phronesis* see in particular Natali 2001 and Coope 2012.

22 On non-voluntary and mixed actions see now Farina 2024, 88, 102-3 (non-voluntary actions) and 92 (mixed actions).

In this discussion, Aristotle's aim is to assert, possibly in contrast to a limited and misleading interpretation of Socratic intellectualism, that an agent is responsible for their habitual states, whether good or bad, as well as for the actions that contribute to their formation and those that derive from them.[23] However, scholars have raised various concerns about the coherence and effectiveness of Aristotle's explanation. Specifically, the question has been raised whether the philosopher is really able to justify the claim that action originates from the agent within a theoretical framework that, on one hand, conceives of choice as the outcome of a rational process already teleologically determined by the habitual state and limited to the search for the suitable means to achieve the given end and, on the other hand, treats the habitual state as the result of environmental and educational factors and as unidirectional.

In this regard, scholarship has been divided.[24] Some argue that Aristotle is a determinist, insofar as action is ultimately the result of a habitual state over which the agent does not exercise full control, and which conditions their choices.[25] Others maintain that, given Aristotle's complex causal theory, his philosophy of action cannot be reduced to a form of modern determinism, arguing that choice – understood as the form of action ultimately traceable to the subject – represents its original principle.[26] At this point, without attempting to interpret Aristotle's practical philosophy retrospectively on the basis of contemporary philosophical sensibilities or extrinsic categories, it is sufficient to note that Aristotle probably contributed to the emergence and development of what, at a much later stage in the history of philosophy, would be called the 'Free Will Problem'. He did so by clearly raising the question of the principle and origin of actions and habitual states, by attempting to define the nature and function of choice in human praxis, and ultimately by establishing a link between choice and contingency.

23 As one of the anonymous referee, whom I thank, notices "Socratic intellectualism closely connects (or, on a strong reading, identifies) moral evil with ignorance, but one may hardly claim that this entails the complete denial of human responsibility".

24 For an overview of the debate, see Natali 2014.

25 Among others, Bobzien 2014. Donini 1989 and 2014 attribute a form of moderate determinism to Aristotle.

26 Chiaradonna, Farina 2020, 33-4; Natali 2004.

4 Choice and Contingency

In this regard, it is worth recalling Chapter 6 of Book II of the *Eudemian Ethics* (*EE*), where, after providing the definition of ethical virtue, Aristotle shifts his inquiry to exploring the conditions under which virtue is morally praiseworthy. In particular, he seeks to clarify that virtue must be voluntary and produce choice. To achieve this, he reflects on what it means for humans, uniquely among animals, to be the principle of a particular kind of movement – namely, action.

The passage is complex, both textually and conceptually,[27] and here we will limit ourselves to outlining its general framework. Aristotle begins by asserting that living substances are by nature principles of some kind (*EE* II 6, 1222b 15-16). The term 'nature' here refers to the internal aspect through which a substance undergoes change, or the set of its essential properties and vital functions. Aristotle argues, for example, that every substance, by virtue of its nature, generates products of the same kind (1222b 16-18). Among living substances, human being alone is the principle of action (1222b 18-20).

At this point, Aristotle introduces a distinction between *kuriai* (dominant) principles and immobile principles. The *kuriai* principles are principles of motion or moving causes. Among these, some are more *kuriai* than others. The *archai kuriai* in the strictest sense are those that, in addition to being moving causes, also produce results that could not occur otherwise. Aristotle exemplifies this type of principle with the divine being, most likely referring to the Platonic Demiurge, whose goodness is described in the *Timaeus* (29e-30a) as the highest *kuria* principle of generation and order (1222b 20-23).

From the example provided, it can be inferred that a dominant principle is not only something that initiates change, but also something that qualifies and directs it.

The *immobile principles*, on the other hand, are exemplified by the premises of a demonstration in which the dominant or properly moving function is absent. These principles are discussed by analogy with the other principles, using terminology reminiscent of the language of physics. For example, it is said that from a premise or hypothesis, a conclusion *gignetai* (comes into being), and that in order to change the conclusion, one must change the premise and demonstrate the new conclusion from the new premise (1222b 23-28). Aristotle will use the analogy with *immobile principles* of a mathematical demonstrative type to establish a parallel between the operation of the *kuriai* principles and mathematical hypotheses (1222b 29-31).

27 On this passage, see especially Broadie 1991; Donini 1999; Kenny 1979 and 2011; Meyer 2011; Rowe 2023; Simpson 2013; Woods 1992.

The introduction of both *kuriai* principles in the strict sense, exemplified by the divine principle, and the immobile principles helps to characterize human being as a principle of motion: the human being, like a god, is a dominant principle, meaning that it is from him that motion derives and by virtue of which motion is qualified in a particular way. Unlike the divine principle, however, the human being is not the principle of things that cannot be otherwise than they are, but of things that could be otherwise than they are – that is, of contingent things whose occurrence depends on whether the agent acts or refrains from acting (*eph'autoi*).

The comparison with mathematical premises serves to highlight that, unlike mathematical conclusions, which not only necessarily follow from the principle but are also necessary because of a necessary property of the principle itself, human actions are contingent. In other words, human actions derive from a principle that is itself contingent because of a mutable property (1222b 31-41). Aristotle seems to suggest that this mutable property is, in fact, choice (*prohairesis*) (1223a 9-23).

From this chapter of the *EE* it can be inferred that the human being is a principle in the sense that he is both the efficient and formal first cause of action in a way that depends on whether he acts or refrains from acting. Thus, given a choice, action necessarily follows, but the choice itself is not necessary.[28]

The problem that arises at this point, however, is whether and how the contingency of choice as outlined in the *EE*, which finds no counterpart in Aristotle's other works, is compatible with the decision-making model described in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (*NE*). Within the framework of the *NE*, which was perhaps intended for a broader audience and focused more on the moral training necessary and complementary to the political education of each citizen, Aristotle may have emphasized more the recursive elements, the coherence, and the stabilization of human behavior, omitting an analysis that, in addition to emphasizing the contingent aspect, relied on complex and technical philosophical doctrines. This does not mean, however, that Aristotle abandoned the attempt to reconcile moral habit, deliberation, choice, and contingency within a single theory.

At least four levels of his account reveal how this particular conjunction is realized: first, at the beginning of the formation of ethical virtue, choice contributes to the determination of the quality of habit; second the search for the most appropriate means to

28 For further analysis of Aristotle, *EE* II 6, see also Farina 2024, 17-29. As for me, I presented the chapter during the Aristotelian Symposium devoted to the *Eudemian Ethics* II in 2017 and refer to that text for a more detailed and in-depth analysis (F. Masi, *The controlling principle of action. Aristotle,* Eudemian Ethics *II 6*)

achieve the goal in any practical circumstance opens up a range of possibilities; third it is up to the agent to do or not to do the things over which he exercises deliberation and actions belong to entities that may be otherwise than they are, and finally the kind of mean in which virtuous action consists is not a mathematical point but a segment – within certain variable limits – of a continuum bounded by two opposing extremes.

In light of this analysis, it can be suggested that, although virtue, once acquired, becomes a kind of moral instinct capable of determining qualitatively coherent choices,[29] virtuous action, far from being the result of automatic or thoughtless behavior, is the outcome of a choice that is at once voluntary, deliberate, and contingent.

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29 Frede 2014, 49; Farina 2019, 39-43; Chiaradonna, Farina 2020, 33.

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