Alasdair MacIntyre

AFTER VIRTUE

Third edition

After Virtue

A Study in Moral Theory

By

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TO THE MEMORY OF
MY FATHER AND HIS SISTERS AND BROTHERS

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Aristotle's Account of the Virtues

Any attempt to treat Aristotle's account of the virtues from the standpoint which I have adopted presents me with an initial problem. On the one hand he is *the* protagonist against whom I have matched the voices of liberal modernity; so that I am clearly committed to giving his own highly specific account of the virtues a central place. On the other hand I have already made it clear that I want to regard him not just as an individual theorist, but as the representative of a long tradition, as someone who articulates what a number of predecessors and successors also articulate with varying degrees of success. And to treat Aristotle as part of a tradition, even as its greatest representative, is a very unAristotelian thing to do.

Aristotle of course recognized that he had predecessors. Indeed he tried to write the history of previous philosophy is such a way that it culminated with his own thought. But he envisaged the relationship of that thought to those precedessors in terms of the replacement of *their* errors or at least partial truths by *his* comprehensively true account. From the standpoint of truth, on Aristotle's own view, once his work had been done, theirs could be discarded without loss. But to think in this way is to exclude the notion of a tradition of thought, at least as I intend it. For it is central to the conception of such a tradition that the past is never something merely to be discarded, but rather that the present is intelligible only as a commentary upon and response to the past in which the past, if necessary and if possible, is corrected and transcended, yet corrected and transcended in a way that leaves the present open to being in turn corrected and transcended by some yet more adequate future point of view. Thus the notion of a tradition embodies a very unAristotelian theory of knowledge according to which each particular theory or set of moral or scientific beliefs is intelligible and justifiable—insofar as it is justifiable—only as a member of an historical series. It is scarcely necessary to say that in such a series the later is not necessarily superior to the earlier; a tradition may cease to progress or may degenerate. But when a tradition is in good order, when progress *is* taking place, there is always a certain cumulative element to a tradition. Not everything in the present is equally liable to be overthrown in the future, and some elements of present theory or belief may be such that

it is difficult to envisage their being abandoned without the tradition as a whole being discarded. So it is for example in our present-day scientific tradition with the account of the relationship between cells and molecules in contemporary biochemistry; and so it is with Aristotle's account of some central virtues within the classical tradition.

Aristotle's importance therefore can only be specified in terms of a kind of tradition whose existence he himself did not and could not have acknowledged. And just as the absence of any sense of the specifically historical—in our sense—in Aristotle, as in other Greek thinkers, debars Aristotle from recognizing his own thought as part of a tradition, it also severely limits what he can say about narrative. Hence the task of integrating what Aristotle had to say about the virtues with the kind of thesis about the relationship between virtues and forms of narratives which I have suggested is present in epic and tragic writers has to wait—a very long wait—for successors to Aristotle whose biblical culture has educated them to think historically. Some questions central to the classical tradition can receive no answer from Aristotle himself. Nonetheless it is Aristotle whose account of the virtues decisively constitutes the classical tradition as a tradition of moral thought, firmly establishing a good deal that his poetic predecessors had only been able to assert or suggest and making the classical tradition a rational tradition, without surrendering to Plato's pessimism about the social world. Yet we ought also to note at the outset that we possess Aristotle's thought in a form which itself makes scholarly and sometimes unsettlable debate over the content of that thought unavoidable. Moreover, it has recently been argued (Kenny 1978) that it is in the *Eudemian Ethics* and not, as almost every scholar has believed, in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that Aristotle's mature positions are to be found. The debate over this contention will continue (Irwin 1980), but happily I need not enter into it. For the tradition within which I am placing Aristotle was one which made the *Nicomachean Ethics* the canonical text for Aristotle's account of the virtues.

The *Nicomachean Ethics*—dedicated to Aristotle's son Nicomachus, says Porphyry; edited by him, say others—is the most brilliant set of lecture notes ever written; and just because they are lecture notes, with all the disadvantages of occasional compression or repetition or inaccurate cross-referencing, we can almost hear in them from time to time the tone of Aristotle's spoken voice. It is magisterial and it is unique; but it is also a voice that seeks to be more than merely Aristotle's own. 'What do *we* say on such and such a topic?' is a question that he continuously asks, not 'What do *I* say?' Who is this 'we' in whose name he writes? Aristotle takes himself not to be inventing an account of the virtues, but to be articulating

an account that is implicit in the thought, utterance and action of an educated Athenian. He seeks to be the rational voice of the best citizens of the best city-state; for he holds that the city-state is the unique political form in which alone the virtues of human life can be genuinely and fully exhibited. Thus a philosophical theory of the virtues is a theory whose subject-matter is that pre-philosophical theory already implicit in and presupposed by the best contemporary practice of the virtues. This of course does not entail that practice, and the pre-philosophical theory implicit in practice are normative for philosophy necessarily has a sociological, or as Aristotle would have said, political starting-point.

Every activity, every enquiry, every practice aims at some good; for by 'the good' or 'a good' we mean that at which human beings characteristically aim. It is important that Aristotle's initial arguments in the *Ethics* presuppose that what G.E. Moore was to call the 'naturalistic fallacy' is not a fallacy at all and that statements about what is good—and what is just or courageous or excellent in other ways—just are a kind of factual statement. Human beings, like the members of all other species, have a specific nature; and that nature is such that they have certain aims and goals, such that they move by nature towards a specific *telos*. The good is defined in terms of their specific characteristics. Hence Aristotle's ethics, expounded as he expounds it, presupposes his metaphysical biology. Aristotle thus sets himself the task of giving an account of the good which is at once local and particular—located in and partially defined by the characteristics of the *polis*—and yet also cosmic and universal. The tension between these poles is felt throughout the argument of the *Ethics*.

What then does the good for man turn out to be? Aristotle has cogent arguments against identifying that good with money, with honor or with pleasure. He gives to it the name of *eudaimonia*—as so often there is a difficulty in translation: blessedness, happiness, prosperity. It is the state of being well and doing well in being well, of a man's being well-favored himself and in relation to the divine. But when Aristotle first gives this name to the good for man, he leaves the question of the content of *eudaimonia* largely open.

The virtues are precisely those qualities the possession of which will enable an individual to achieve *eudaimonia* and the lack of which will frustrate his movement toward that *telos*. But although it would not be incorrect to describe the exercise of virtues as a means to the end of achieving the good for man, that description is ambiguous. Aristotle does not in his writings explicitly distinguish between two different types of means-end relationship. When we speak of any happening or state or activity as a means to some other, we may on the one hand mean that the world is

as a matter of contingent fact so ordered that if you are able to bring about a happening or state or activity of the first kind, an event or state or activity of the second kind will ensue. The means and the end can each be adequately characterized without reference to the other; and a number of quite different means may be employed to achieve one and the same end. But the exercise of the virtues is not in this sense *a* means to the end of the good for man. For what constitutes the good for man is a complete human life lived at its best, and the exercise of the virtues is a necessary and central part of such a life, not a mere preparatory exercise to secure such a life. We thus cannot characterize the good for man adequately without already having made reference to the virtues. And within an Aristotelian framework the suggestion therefore that there might be some means to achieve the good for man without the exercise of the virtues makes no sense.

The immediate outcome of the exercise of a virtue is a choice which issues in right action: 'It is the correctness of the end of the purposive choice of which virtue is the cause' (1228a1, Kenny's translation, Kenny 1978) wrote Aristotle in the *Eudemian Ethics*. It does not of course follow that in the absence of the relevant virtue a right action may not be done. To understand why, consider Aristotle's answer to the question: what would someone be like who lacked to some large degree an adequate training in the virtues of character? In part this would depend on his natural traits and talents; some individuals have an inherited natural disposition to do on occasion what a particular virtue requires. But this happy gift of fortune is not to be confused with the possession of the corresponding virtue; for just because it is not informed by systematic training and by principle even such fortunate individuals will be the prey of their own emotions and desires. This victimization by one's own emotions and desires would be of more than one kind. On the one hand one would lack any means of ordering one's emotions and desires, of deciding rationally which to cultivate and encourage, which to inhibit and reduce; on the other hand on particular occasions one would lack those dispositions which enable a desire for something other than what is actually one's good to be held in check. Virtues are dispositions not only to act in particular ways, but also to feel in particular ways. To act virtuously is not, as Kant was later to think, to act against inclination; it is to act from inclination formed by the cultivation of the virtues. Moral education is an 'éducation sentimentale'.

The educated moral agent must of course know what he is doing when he judges or acts virtuously. Thus he does what is virtuous *because* it is virtuous. It is this fact that distinguishes the exercise of the virtues from the exercise of certain qualities which are not virtues, but rather simulacra of

virtues. The well-trained soldier, for instance, may do what courage would have demanded in a particular situation, but not because he is courageous but because he is well-trained or perhaps—to go beyond Aristotle's example by remembering Frederick the Great's maxim—because he is more frightened of his own officers than he is of the enemy. The genuinely virtuous agent however acts on the basis of a true and rational judgment.

An Aristotelian theory of the virtues does therefore presuppose a crucial distinction between what any particular individual at any particular time takes to be good for him and what is really good for him as a man. It is for the sake of achieving this latter good that we practice the virtues and we do so by making choices about means to achieve that end, means in both senses characterized earlier. Such choices demand judgment and the exercise of the virtues requires therefore a capacity to judge and to do the right thing in the right place at the right time in the right way. The exercise of such judgment is not a routinizable application of rules. Hence perhaps the most obvious and astonishing absence from Aristotle's thought for any modern reader: there is relatively little mention of rules anywhere in the *Ethics*. Moreover Aristotle takes that part of morality which is obedience to rules to be obedience to laws enacted by the city-state—if and when the city-state enacts as it ought. Such law prescribes and prohibits certain types of action absolutely and such actions are among those which a virtuous man would do or refrain from doing. Hence it is a crucial part of Aristotle's view that certain types of action are absolutely prohibited or enjoined irrespective of circumstances or consequences. Aristotle's view is teleological, but it is not consequentialist. Moreover the examples Aristotle gives of what is absolutely prohibited resemble the precepts of what is at first sight a completely different kind of moral system, that of the Jewish law. What he says about the law is very brief, although he does insist that there are natural and universal as well as conventional and local rules of justice. It seems likely that he means to insist that natural and universal justice absolutely prohibits certain types of act; but that which penalties are assigned to which offence may vary from city to city. Nonetheless what he says on this topic is so brief as to be cryptic. It therefore seems worth asking in a more general way—rather than imputing to Aristotle views that would go too far beyond what is in the text—how it might be that views such as Aristotle's on the place of the virtues in human life should require some reference to the absolute prohibitions of natural justice. And in asking this question it is worth remembering Aristotle's insistence that the virtues find their place not just in the life of the individual, but in the life of the city and that the individual is indeed intelligible only as a *politikon zôon*.

This last remark suggests that one way to elucidate the relationship be-

tween virtues on the one hand and a morality of laws on the other is to consider what would be involved in any age in founding a community to achieve a common project, to bring about some good recognized as their shared good by all those engaging in the project. As modern examples of such a project we might consider the founding and carrying forward of a school, a hospital or an art gallery; in the ancient world the characteristic examples would have been those of a religious cult or of an expedition or of a city. Those who participated in such a project would need to develop two quite different types of evaluative practice. On the one hand they would need to value—to praise as excellences—those qualities of mind and character which would contribute to the realization of their common good or goods. That is, they would need to recognize a certain set of qualities as virtues and the corresponding set of defects as vices. They would also need however to identify certain types of action as the doing or the production of harm of such an order that they destroy the bonds of community in such a way as to render the doing or achieving of good impossible in some respect at least for some time. Examples of such offences would characteristically be the taking of innocent life, theft and perjury and betrayal. The table of the virtues promulgated in such a community would teach its citizens what kinds of actions would gain them merit and honor; the table of legal offences would teach them what kinds of actions would be regarded not simply as bad, but as intolerable.

The response to such offences would have to be that of taking the person who committed them to have thereby excluded himself or herself from the community. A violation of the bonds of community by the offender has to be recognized for what it is by the community, if the community is not itself to fail. Hence the offender in one crucial sense has excluded him or herself, has by his or her own action invited punishment. Whether the exclusion were permanent—by way of execution or irrevocable exile—or temporary—by way of imprisonment or exile for a term—would depend upon the gravity of the particular offence. A broad measure of agreement on a scale of gravity of offences would be partially constitutive of such a community as would a similar broad measure of agreement on the nature and importances of the various virtues.

The need for ***both*** these types of practice arises from the fact that an individual member of such a community could fail in his role as a member of that community in two quite different ways. He could on the one hand simply fail to be good enough; that is he could be deficient in the virtues to such an extent as to render his contribution to the achievement of the community's common good negligible. But someone could fail in this way without committing any of the particular offences specified in the com-

munity's laws; indeed it might be precisely because of his vices that someone abstained from committing offences. Cowardice can be someone's reason for not committing murder; vanity and boastfulness can on occasion lead someone to tell the truth.

Conversely to fail the community by committing an offence against the law is *not* simply to fail by not being good enough. It is to fail in a quite different way. Indeed although someone who possesses the virtues to a high degree will be far less apt than others to commit grave offences, a brave and modest man may on occasion commit murder and his offence is no less and no more than the offence of a coward or a braggart. To do positive wrong is not the same as to be defective in doing or being good. Nonetheless the two kinds of failure are intimately related. For both injure the community to some degree and make its shared project less likely to be successful. An offence against the laws destroys those relationships which make common pursuit of the good possible; defective character, while it may also render someone more liable to commit offences, makes one unable to contribute to the achievement of that good without which the community's common life has no point. Both are bad because deprivations of good, but deprivations of very different kinds. So that an account of the virtues while an essential part of an account of the moral life of such a community could never be complete by itself. And Aristotle, as we have seen, recognizes that his account of the virtues has to be supplemented by some account, even if a brief one, of those types of action which are absolutely prohibited.

There is however another crucial link between the virtues and law, for knowing how to apply the law is itself possible only for someone who possesses the virtue of justice. To be just is to give each person what each deserves; and the social presuppositions of the flourishing of the virtue of justice in a community are therefore twofold: that there are rational criteria of desert and that there is socially established agreement as to what those criteria are. A great part of the assignation of goods and penalties in accordance with desert is of course rule-governed. Both the distribution of public office within the city and the retribution accorded to criminal acts are to be specified by the laws of the city. (Notice how on an Aristotelian view law and morality are not two separate realms, as they are for modernity.) But, partly because laws are general, particular cases will always arise in which it is unclear how the law is to be applied and unclear what justice demands. Thus there are bound to be occasions on which no formula is available in advance; it is on such occasions that we have to act *kata ton orthon logon* ('according to right reason', *Nicomachean Ethics* 1138b25), a phrase misleadingly translated by W.D. Ross 'in accordance

with the right rule'. (This misreading by someone who is usually a meticulous translator of Aristotle is perhaps not unimportant; for it reflects the large and un-Aristotelian preoccupation with rules of modern moral philosophers.) What Aristotle seems to mean here can be usefully illustrated by a contemporary example. There is at the time at which I am writing a lawsuit in progress between the Wampanoag Indian tribe and the town of Mashpee, Massachusetts. The Wampanoag Indians claim that their tribal lands in the township were illegally and unconstitutionally appropriated and they are suing for their return. (The case has since been decided *against* the Wampanoag by a jury verdict notable only for its incoherence.) The claim has been quite some time coming to court and the hearings themselves will not be over soon. The party who loses in the lower court will almost certainly appeal and the process of appeal is extended. During this long period property values in Mashpee have fallen drastically and it is for the moment almost impossible to sell certain types of property at all. This creates hardship generally for homeowners and more especially for certain classes of homeowners, for example, retired people who had legitimately expected to be able to sell their property and move elsewhere, relying on the proceeds of the sale to reestablish their lives, perhaps nearer their children. What in this type of situation does justice demand? We ought to note that two rule-specified concepts of justice recently advanced by contemporary moral philosophers can give us no help at all. John Rawls argues that 'social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged . . .' (p. 302) and Robert Nozick asserts that 'the holdings of a person are just if he is entitled to them by the principles of justice in acquisition and transfer . . .' (p. 153). But the problem in Mashpee concerns a period of time in which we do not as yet know *either* who has a just title by acquisition and transfer, for precisely that is to be decided by the current legal case *or* which is the least advantaged group in Mashpee, for that will be determined as a consequence of the outcome of the case. If it goes one way, the Wampanoag will turn out to be the richest group in Mashpee, but if the other, they will remain the poorest. Nonetheless a just solution has been devised by the tribal claimants (a solution to which after an apparent initial agreement the Selectmen of Mashpee refused their assent): this is, that all properties of one acre or less on which a dwelling house stands shall be exempted from the suit. It would be difficult to represent this as in any way the application of a rule; indeed it had to be devised because no application of the rules could afford small homeowners justice. The solution is the result of rough and ready reasoning involving such considerations as the proportion of the land claimed which comprises such properties and the number of people affected if the

size of property exempted were fixed at one acre rather than more or less. To judge *kata ton orthon logon* is indeed to judge of more or less and Aristotle tries to use the notion of a mean between the more or the less to give a general characterization of the virtues: courage lies between rashness and timidity, justice between doing injustice and suffering injustice, liberality between prodigality and meanness. For each virtue therefore there are two corresponding vices. And what it is to fall into a vice cannot be adequately specified independently of circumstances: the very same action which would in one situation be liberality could in another be prodigality and in a third meanness. Hence judgment has an indispensable role in the life of the virtuous man which it does not and could not have in, for example, the life of the merely law-abiding or rule-abiding man.

A central virtue therefore is *phronêsis*. *Phronêsis* like *sôphrosunê* is originally an aristocratic term of praise. It characterizes someone who knows what is due to him, who takes pride in claiming his due. It comes to mean more generally someone who knows how to exercise judgment in particular cases. *Phronêsis* is an intellectual virtue; but it is that intellectual virtue without which none of the virtues of character can be exercised. Aristotle's distinction between these two kinds of virtue is initially made in terms of a contrast between the ways in which they are acquired; intellectual virtues are acquired through teaching, the virtues of character from habitual exercise. We become just or courageous by performing just or courageous acts; we become theoretically or practically wise as a result of systematic instruction. Nonetheless these two kinds of moral education are intimately related. As we transform our initial naturally given dispositions into virtues of character, we do so by gradually coming to exercise those dispositions *kata ton orthon logon*. The exercise of intelligence is what makes the crucial difference between a natural disposition of a certain kind and the corresponding virtue. Conversely the exercise of practical intelligence requires the presence of the virtues of character; otherwise it degenerates into or remains from the outset merely a certain cunning capacity for linking means to any end rather than to those ends which are genuine goods for man.

According to Aristotle then excellence of character and intelligence cannot be separated. Here Aristotle expresses a view characteristically at odds with that dominant in the modern world. The modern view is expressed at one level in such banalities as 'Be good, sweet maid, and let who will be clever' and at another in such profundities as Kant's distinction between the good will, the possession of which alone is both necessary and sufficient for moral worth, and what he took to be a quite distinct natural gift, that of knowing how to apply general rules to particular cases, a gift the

lack of which is called stupidity. So for Kant one can be both good and stupid; but for Aristotle stupidity of a certain kind precludes goodness. Moreover genuine practical intelligence in turn requires knowledge of the good, indeed itself requires goodness of a kind in its possessor: '. . . it is clear that a man cannot have practical intelligence unless he is good' (1144a37).

I noticed earlier that modern social practice and theory follows Kant rather than Aristotle at this point—not surprisingly. Hence those characters so essential to the dramatic scripts of modernity, the expert who matches means to ends in an evaluatively neutral way and the moral agent who is anyone and everyone not actually mentally defective, have no genuine counterpart in Aristotle's scheme or indeed within the classical tradition at all. It is indeed difficult to envisage the exaltation of bureaucratic expertise in any culture in which the connection between practical intelligence and the moral virtues is firmly established.

This connection between practical intelligence and the virtues of character is invoked by Aristotle in the course of his argument that one cannot possess any of the virtues of character in a developed form without possessing all the others. It is difficult to suppose that he seriously means 'all'—it seems obvious that someone can be genuinely brave without being socially agreeable, yet agreeableness is counted by Aristotle among the virtues, as of course is courage—but that is what he says (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1145a). Nonetheless it is easy to understand why Aristotle held that the *central* virtues are intimately related to each other. The just man does not fall into the vice of *pleonexia* which is one of the two vices corresponding to the virtue of justice. But in order to avoid *pleonexia* it is clear that one must possess *sôphrosunê*. The brave man does not fall into the vices of rashness and cowardice; but 'the rash man seems to be a braggart' and boastfulness is one of the vices relative to the virtue of truthfulness about oneself.

This interrelationship of the virtues explains why they do not provide us with a number of distinct criteria by which to judge the goodness of a particular individual, but rather with one complex measure. The application of that measure in a community whose shared aim is the realization of the human good presupposes of course a wide range of agreement in that community on goods and virtues, and it this agreement which makes possible the kind of bond between citizens which, on Aristotle's view, constitutes a *polis*. That bond is the bond of friendship and friendship is itself a virtue. The type of friendship which Aristotle has in mind is that which embodies a shared recognition of and pursuit of a good. It is this sharing which is essential and primary to the constitution of any form of community, whether that of a household or that of a city. 'Law-givers,' says

Aristotle, 'seem to make friendship a more important aim than justice' (1155a24); and the reason is clear. Justice is the virtue of rewarding desert and of repairing failures in rewarding desert within an already constituted community; friendship is required for that initial constitution.

How can we reconcile this view of Aristotle's with his assertion that one cannot have many friends of this kind? Estimates of the population of Athens in the fifth and fourth centuries vary widely, but the number of adult male citizens clearly ran into some tens of thousands. How can a population of such a size be informed by a shared vision of the good? How can friendship be the bond between them? The answer surely is by being composed of a network of small groups of friends, in Aristotle's sense of that word. We are to think then of friendship as being the sharing of all in the common project of creating and sustaining the life of the city, a sharing incorporated in the immediacy of an individual's particular friendships.

This notion of the political community as a common project is alien to the modern liberal individualist world. This is how we sometimes at least think of schools, hospitals or philanthropic organizations; but we have no conception of such a form of community concerned, as Aristotle says the *polis* is concerned, with the whole of life, not with this or that good, but with man's good as such. It is no wonder that friendship has been relegated to private life and thereby weakened in comparison to what it once was.

Friendship of course, on Aristotle's view, involves affection. But that affection arises within a relationship defined in terms of a common allegiance to and a common pursuit of goods. The affection is secondary, which is not in the least to say unimportant. In a modern perspective affection is often the central issue; our friends are said to be those whom we *like*, perhaps whom we like very much. 'Friendship' has become for the most part the name of a type of emotional state rather than of a type of social and political relationship. E.M. Forster once remarked that if it came to a choice between betraying his country and betraying his friend, he hoped that he would have the courage to betray his country. In an Aristotelian perspective anyone who can formulate such a contrast has no country, has no *polis*; he is a citizen of nowhere, an internal exile wherever he lives. Indeed from an Aristotelian point of view a modern liberal political society can appear only as a collection of citizens of nowhere who have banded together for their common protection. They possess at best that inferior form of friendship which is founded on mutual advantage. That they lack the bond of friendship is of course bound up with the self-avowed moral pluralism of such liberal societies. They have abandoned the moral unity of Aristotelianism, whether in its ancient or medieval forms.

A spokesman for the modern liberal view has of course at first sight an

easy rejoinder to Aristotelianism. Aristotle, he might argue with a good deal of cogency, simply offers too simple and too unified a view of the complexities of human good. If we look at the realities of Athenian society, let alone of Greek society as a whole or the rest of the ancient world, what we in fact find is a recognition of a diversity of values, of conflicts between goods, of the virtues not forming a simple, coherent, hierarchical unity. Aristotle's portrait is at best an idealization and his tendency is always, so it might be said, to exaggerate moral coherence and unity. So, for example, on the unity of the virtues what he has to argue about the detailed variety in interrelationships between different virtues and vices does not seem to warrant anything like his own strong conclusion about the unity and inseparability of all the virtues in the character of the good man.

With this last particular charge it is perhaps, as I have already suggested, difficult to disagree. But it is worth asking why Aristotle should in this particular case have insisted on what seems to be, even from his own point of view, an unnecessarily strong conclusion. Aristotle's belief in the unity of the virtues is one of the few parts of his moral philosophy which he inherits directly from Plato. As with Plato, the belief is one aspect of an hostility to and denial of conflict either within the life of the individual good man or in that of the good city. Both Plato and Aristotle treat conflict as an evil and Aristotle treats it as an eliminable evil. The virtues are all in harmony with each other and the harmony of individual character is reproduced in the harmony of the state. Civil war is the worst of evils. For Aristotle, as for Plato, the good life for man is itself single and unitary, compounded of a hierarchy of goods.

It follows that conflict is simply the result either of flaws of character in individuals or of unintelligent political arrangements. This has consequences not only for Aristotle's politics, but also for his poetics and even his theory of knowledge. In all three the *agôn* has been displaced from its Homeric centrality. Just as conflict is not central to a city's life, but is reduced to a threat to that life, so tragedy as understood by Aristotle cannot come near the Homeric insight that tragic conflict is the essential human condition—the tragic hero on Aristotle's view fails because of his own flaw, not because the human situation is sometimes irremediably tragic—and dialectic is no longer the road to truth, but for the most part only a semi-formal procedure ancillary to enquiry. Where Socrates argued dialectically with particular individuals and Plato wrote dialogues, Aristotle therefore produces expository lectures and treatises. There is naturally enough a corresponding striking contrast between the Aristotelian standpoint on theology and either that of Aeschylus or of Sophocles; for Aris-

totle that particular appeal to the divine which in both Aeschylus and Sophocles signals the recognition of tragic impasse can have made no realistic sense. The impersonal unchanging divinity of which Aristotle speaks, the metaphysical contemplation of which furnishes man with his specific and ultimate *telos*, can itself take no interest in the merely human, let alone in the dilemmatic; it is nothing other than thought timelessly thinking itself and conscious of nothing but itself.

Since such contemplation is the ultimate human *telos*, the essential final and completing ingredient in the life of the man who is *eudaimôn*, there is a certain tension between Aristotle's view of man as essentially political and his view of man as essentially metaphysical. To become *eudaimôn* material prerequisites and social prerequisites are necessary. The household and the city-state make the metaphysical human project possible; but the goods which they provide are, although necessary, and although themselves part of that whole human life, subordinate from the metaphysical standpoint. Nonetheless in many passages where Aristotle discusses individual virtues, the notion that their possession and practice is in the end subordinate to metaphysical contemplation would seem oddly out of place. (For an excellent discussion of the issues, see Ackrill 1974 and Clark 1979). Consider for example once again Aristotle's discussion of friendship.

Aristotle, probably responding to Plato's discussion of friendship in the *Lysis*, distinguishes three kinds of friendship: that which derives from mutual utility, that which derives from mutual pleasure and that which derives from a shared concern for goods which are the goods of both and therefore exclusively of neither. It is, as I have already had occasion to emphasize, the third which is genuine friendship and which provides the paradigm for the relationship between husband and wife in the household as well as for that between citizen and citizen in the *polis*. Thus the good man's final achieved self-sufficiency in his contemplation of timeless reason does not entail that the good man does not need friends, just as it does not entail that he does not need a certain level of material prosperity. Correspondingly a city founded on justice and friendship can only be the best kind of city if it enables its citizens to enjoy the life of metaphysical contemplation.

Within this metaphysical and social structure what is the place of liberty? It is crucial to the structure of Aristotle's extended argument that the virtues are unavailable to slaves or to barbarians and so therefore is the good for man. What is a barbarian? Not merely a non-Greek (whose language sounds to Hellenic ears like 'ba, ba, ba') but someone who lacks a *polis* and thereby shows—on Aristotle's view—that he is incapable of

political relationships. What are political relationships? The relationships of free men to each other, that is the relationships between those members of a community who both rule and are ruled over. The free self is simultaneously political subject and political sovereign. Thus to be involved in political relationships entails freedom from any position that is mere subjection. Freedom is the presupposition of the exercise of the virtues and the achievement of the good.

With this part of Aristotle's conclusion we need not quarrel. What is likely to affront us—and rightly—is Aristotle's writing off of non-Greeks, barbarians and slaves, as not merely not possessing political relationships, but as incapable of them. With this we may couple his view that only the affluent and those of high status can achieve certain key virtues, those of munificence and of magnanimity; craftsmen and tradesmen constitute an inferior class, even if they are not slaves. Hence the peculiar excellences of the exercise of craft skill and manual labor are invisible from the standpoint of Aristotle's catalogue of the virtues.

This blindness of Aristotle's was not of course private to Aristotle; it was part of the general, although not universal, blindness of his culture. It is intimately connected with another form of limitation. Aristotle writes as if barbarians and Greeks both had fixed natures and in so viewing them he brings home to us once again the ahistorical character of his understanding of human nature. Individuals as members of a species have a *telos*, but there is no history of the *polis* or of Greece or of mankind moving towards a *telos*. History indeed is not a reputable form of enquiry—less philosophical than poetry because it aspires genuinely to deal with individuals, whereas even poetry, on Aristotle's view, deals with types. Aristotle was well aware that the kind of knowledge which he takes to be genuinely scientific, to constitute *epistêmê*—knowledge of essential natures grasped through universal necessary truths, logically derivable from certain first principles—cannot characteristically be had of human affairs at all. He knew that the appropriate generalizations are ones which hold only *epi to polu* ('for the most part') and what he says about *them* agrees with what I asserted earlier about the generalizations of the modern social scientist. But in spite of this recognition he apparently felt no need to pursue the question of their character further. This is presumably the source of the paradox that Aristotle who saw the forms of social life of the city-state as normative for essential human nature was himself a servant of that Macedonian royal power which destroyed the city-state as a free society. Aristotle did not understand the transience of the *polis* because he had little or no understanding of historicity in general. Thus a whole range of ques-

tions cannot arise for him including those which concern the ways in which men might pass from being slaves or barbarians to being citizens of a *polis*. Some men just *are* slaves 'by nature', on Aristotle's view.

Yet it remains true that these limitations in Aristotle's account of the virtues do not necessarily injure his general scheme for understanding the place of the virtues in human life, let alone deform his multitude of more particular insights. Two of these deserve particular emphasis in any account of the virtues. The first concerns the place of enjoyment in human life. Aristotle's characterization of enjoyment as supervening upon successful activity enables us to understand *both* why it is plausible to treat enjoyment—or pleasure or happiness—as the *telos* of human life *and* why nonetheless this would be a mistake. The enjoyment which Aristotle identifies is that which characteristically accompanies the achievement of excellence in activity. Such activity may be of very different kinds: the writing or translation of poetry, the playing of games, the carrying through of some complex social project. And what counts as excellence will always be relative to the standards of performance for people like us so far. Hence generally to seek to excel is to aim at doing that which will be enjoyable, and it is natural to conclude that we seek to do that which will give us pleasure and so that enjoyment or pleasure or happiness is the *telos* of our activity. But it is important to note that the very same Aristotelian considerations which lead us towards this conclusion debar us from accepting any view which treats enjoyment or pleasure or happiness as a criterion for guiding our actions. Just because enjoyment of a highly specific kind—I emphasized both the specific and the heterogeneous character of enjoyment earlier when I was discussing Benthamite utilitarianism—supervenes upon each different type of successfully achieved activity, the enjoyment of itself provides us with no good reason for embarking upon one type of activity rather than another.

Moreover what *I* particularly enjoy will of course depend upon what sort of person I am, and what sort of person I am is of course a matter of my virtues and vices. After the expulsion of Aristotelianism from our culture there was a period in the eighteenth century when it was a commonplace to suggest—on tombstones as well as in philosophical works—that the virtues are nothing but those qualities which we happen to find generally pleasant or useful. The oddity of this suggestion lies in the fact that what we find generally pleasant or useful will depend on what virtues are generally possessed and cultivated in our community. Hence the virtues cannot be defined or identified in terms of the pleasant or useful. To this it may be replied that surely there are qualities which are useful or pleasant to human beings *qua* members of a particular biological species

with a particular kind of environment. The standard of utility or pleasure is set by man *qua* animal, man prior to and without any particular culture. But man without culture is a myth. Our biological nature certainly places constraints on all cultural possibility; but man who has nothing but a biological nature is a creature of whom we know nothing. It is only man with practical intelligence—and that, as we have seen, is intelligence informed by virtues—whom we actively meet in history. And it is on the nature of practical reasoning that Aristotle provides another discussion which is crucially relevant to the character of the virtues.

Aristotle's account of practical reasoning is in essentials surely right. It has a number of key features. The first is that Aristotle takes the conclusion to a practical syllogism to be a particular kind of action. The notion that an argument can terminate in an action of course offends Humean and post-Humean philosophical prejudices, according to which only statements (or, in some particularly barbarous versions, sentences) can have truth-values and enter into those relationships of consistency and inconsistency which partially define deductive argument. But statements themselves only possess these characteristics in virtue of their capacity to express beliefs; and actions can of course express beliefs as certainly, although not always as clearly and unambiguously, as utterances can. It is because and only because of this that we can be puzzled by the inconsistency between a given agent's actions and his statements. We should be puzzled for example by someone of whom we knew three things: first that he wanted to keep healthy, secondly that he had sincerely asserted *both* that to get cold and wet could be bad for his health *and* that the only way to keep warm and dry in winter was to wear his overcoat, and thirdly that he habitually in winter went out without his overcoat. For his action appears to express a belief inconsistent with his other expressed beliefs. Were anyone systematically inconsistent in this way, he or she would soon become unintelligible to those around them. We should not know how to respond to them, for we could no longer hope to identify either what they were doing or what they meant by what they said or both. Thus Aristotle's account of the practical syllogism can be construed as providing a statement of necessary conditions for intelligible human action and as doing so in a way that must hold for any recognizably human culture.

Practical reasoning then has, on Aristotle's view, four essential elements. There are first of all the wants and goals of the agent, presupposed by but not expressed in, his reasoning. Without these there would be no context for the reasoning, and the major and minor premises could not adequately determine what kind of thing the agent is to do. The second element is the major premise, an assertion to the effect that doing or having or seek-

ing such-and-such is the type of thing that is good for or needed by a so-and-so (where the agent uttering the syllogism falls under the latter description). The third element is the minor premise wherein the agent, relying on a perceptual judgment, asserts that this is an instance or occasion of the requisite kind. The conclusion, as I already said, is the action.

This account returns us to the question of the relationship between practical intelligence and the virtues. For the judgments which provide the agent's practical reasoning with premises will include judgments as to what it is good for someone like him to do and to be; and an agent's capacity to make and to act upon such judgments will depend upon what intellectual and moral virtues and vices compose his or her character. The precise nature of this connection could only be elucidated by a fuller account of practical reasoning than Aristotle gives us; his account is notably elliptical and in need of paraphrase and interpretation. But he says quite enough to show us how, from an Aristotelian standpoint, reason cannot be the servant of the passions. For the education of the passions into conformity with pursuit of what theoretical reasoning identifies as the *telos* and practical reasoning as the right action to do in each particular time and place is what ethics is about.

We have in the course of this account identified a number of points at which Aristotle's account of the virtues can be seriously put in question. Some of these concern parts of Aristotle's theory which not only have to be rejected, but whose rejection need not carry any large implications for our attitudes to his overall theory. So it is, I have suggested, with Aristotle's indefensible defence of slavery. But in at least three areas questions arise which, unless they can be answered satisfactorily, endanger the whole Aristotelian structure. The first of these concerns the way in which Aristotle's teleology presupposes his metaphysical biology. If we reject that biology, as we must, is there any way in which that teleology can be preserved?

Some modern moral philosophers who are deeply sympathetic to Aristotle's account of the virtues have seen no problem here. It has been argued that all we need to provide in order to justify an account of the virtues and vices is some very general account of what human flourishing and well-being consists in. The virtues can then be adequately characterized as those qualities necessary to promote such flourishing and well-being, because, whatever our disagreements in detail on *that* subject, we ought to be able to agree rationally on what is a virtue and what a vice. This view ignores the place in our cultural history of deep conflicts over what human flourishing and well-being do consist in and the way in which rival and incompatible beliefs on that topic beget rival and incompatible tables of the vir-

tues. Aristotle and Nietzsche, Hume and the New Testament are names which represent polar oppositions on these matters. Hence any adequate teleological account must provide us with some clear and defensible account of the *telos*; and any adequate generally Aristotelian account must supply a teleological account which can replace Aristotle's metaphysical biology.

A second area of questioning concerns the relationship of ethics to the structure of the *polis*. If a good deal of the detail of Aristotle's account of the virtues presupposes the now-long-vanished context of the social relationships of the ancient city-state, how can Aristotelianism be formulated so as to be a moral presence in a world in which there are no city-states? Or to put matters in another way: is it possible to be an Aristotelian and yet to view the city-state in an historical perspective as only one—even if a very important one—in a series of social and political forms in and through which the kind of self which can exemplify the virtues can be found and educated and in which that self can find its arena?

Thirdly there are the questions posed by Aristotle's inheritance of Plato's belief in the unity and harmony of both the individual soul and the city-state and Aristotle's consequent perception of conflict as something to be avoided or managed. The problem which I am raising is best stated initially in terms of a confrontation between Aristotle and Sophocles. For Aristotle, as I have already suggested, the tragic form of narrative is enacted when and only when we have a hero with a flaw, a flaw in practical intelligence which springs from inadequate possession or exercise of some virtue. In a world in which everyone is good enough therefore there would be no tragic hero to be portrayed. Aristotle clearly derives this view partly from his moral psychology, but partly from his own reading of tragic drama and especially of *Oedipus Rex*. Yet, if my earlier account of Sophocles is correct, Aristotle's moral psychology has led him to misread Sophocles. For the conflicts of tragedy certainly may *in part* take the form that they do because of the flaws in Antigone and Creon, Odysseus and Philoctetes; but what constitutes those individuals' *tragic* opposition and conflict is the conflict of good with good embodied in their encounter prior to and independent of *any* individual characteristics; and to this aspect of tragedy Aristotle in the *Poetics* is and has to be blind. The absence of this view of the centrality of opposition and conflict in human life conceals from Aristotle also one important source of human learning about and one important milieu of human practice of the virtues.

The great Australian philosopher John Anderson urged us 'not to ask of a social institution: "What end or purpose does it serve?" but rather, "Of what conflicts is it the scene?" ' (Passmore 1962, p. xxii). If Aristotle had

asked this question both of the *polis* and of the individual agent, he would have had an additional resource for understanding the teleological character of both the virtues and the social forms which provide them with a context. For it was Anderson's insight—a Sophoclean insight—that it is through conflict and sometimes only through conflict that we learn what our ends and purposes are.