

**“What it’s like” to be a Person of Practical Wisdom:  
An Analysis of the Phenomenology of Practical Experience in Aristotle’s Ethics and  
Psychology**

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**Abstract:** This paper is an attempt to clarify the relationship between virtue ethics and the philosophy of mind by exploring the idea of practical experience in Aristotle’s ethics and psychology. A key idea in both Classical and Contemporary virtue theory is that there is a qualitative difference between the conscious experiences of virtuous and of non-virtuous agents. Virtuous agents experience the world differently. Because they are virtuous, they are attuned to morally relevant features of situations, and this makes a difference in what they choose to do. The goal of this paper is to give an account of the phenomenology of or “what it’s like” to be a virtuous agent in the context of Aristotle’s ethics and psychology. An analysis of the relevant portions of Aristotle’s accounts of psychology, ethics and desire results in the conclusion that virtuous experience consists of the appearance of irreducible dependent formal features of objects and situations, in virtue of which elements of these objects and situations are perceived as morally salient and worthy of pursuit or avoidance relative to a wished for end, in the immediate and deliberative experiences of virtuous and non-virtuous agents. While this conclusion is somewhat deflationary as an answer to the question “what is it like to be a person of practical experience?” it nevertheless establishes that Aristotle’s account of virtue and of psychology is capable of supporting the assertion that there is a qualitative difference between virtuous and non-virtuous experience.

**I. Introduction: Virtue, Mind and Aristotle**

A key idea in both Classical and contemporary virtue theory is that there is a qualitative difference between the conscious experiences of virtuous and non-virtuous agents. While this claim has some immediate plausibility, making sense of it as a philosophical claim about the nature of virtuous experience presents a number of challenges. These have to do with the apparent vagueness and subjectivism that seem to be involved in such a claim. However, the work of early twentieth century Phenomenologists such as Franz Brentano and Edmund Husserl, as well as recent work on issues related to mind by analytic philosophers such as Thomas Nagel, John Searle and David Chalmers, lends plausibility to the idea that there might be something important to say about invariant features or formal characteristics of first-person conscious

experience. If this is true for things such as the consciousness of time and intentionality, then there is no reason why it might not also be true of certain kinds of ethical experience.

The goal of this paper is to give an account of the phenomenology of or “what it’s like” to be a virtuous agent in the context of Aristotle’s ethics and psychology. While interesting in its own right, the exposition of a consistent account of this phenomena also promises to provide some support both for the thesis that contemporary virtue theory is not, as many have argued, hopelessly vague, foundationless or impractical, and also for the meta-ethical thesis put forward by G. E. M. Anscombe that a plausible account of value presupposes some account of the minds and mental faculties of valuing agents [1].

Taking ‘experience’ to include the sum total of phenomena, (perceptual, conceptual, intellectual, affective and evaluative) present to first-person conscious awareness, I will proceed by enumerating the different kinds of contents of experience, and the faculties of the soul responsible for them, that are suggested by Aristotle’s accounts of ethics and psychology. This will involve analyzing the different faculties and functions of the soul enumerated by Aristotle, especially in *De Anima*, and also taking into account phenomena that Aristotle clearly recognized, given his discussions of perception, judgment, reasoning, and moral experience in general. This procedure leads to the triangulation and identification of what I will call the *morally salient* or action-guiding features of experience, and the parts of the soul that are responsible for generating and recognizing them.

These analyses will ultimately lead to the conclusion that in the context of Aristotle’s philosophy virtuous experience consists of the appearance of irreducible dependent formal features of objects and situations, in virtue of which elements of these objects and situations are perceived as morally salient and worthy of pursuit or avoidance relative to a wished for end, in

the immediate and deliberative experiences of virtuous and non-virtuous agents. These elements are contributed by rational wish and by the passions, on the basis of how experience has been structured by the contributions of perception, prior knowledge, and the application of prior knowledge to current experience. What a subject experiences as morally salient, as well as the strength of their desires for an end, and their ability to achieve the ends that they desire will all vary from subject to subject based on their rational and emotional dispositions, which is to say, their character. The result is that it is possible to support the claim that there is a qualitative difference between the experiences of virtuous and non-virtuous agents on Aristotelian grounds.

## **II. Aristotle's Account of the Soul and the Basic Structure of Experience**

### **II.i The Soul and its Faculties**

For Aristotle there is not one kind of soul but many, corresponding to the different operations and faculties possessed by different kinds of living things. The soul is the form of a living organized body in the same way that the shape of a signet imprint is the form of a lump of wax [DA: II, 1].<sup>1</sup> With the exception of active mind [DA: III.5] the soul is not separable from the body and it is in virtue of having a soul that a living thing is alive. Aristotle's conception of the soul as a thing the possession of which distinguishes the living from the dead is thus different from the Cartesian and Brentanean notion of the mind as a thing the possession of which distinguishes the mental from the non-mental. Nevertheless, insofar as Aristotle has an account of mind it is derivative of his account of soul as it is only organisms possessing certain kinds of souls (namely "rational souls") that are capable of functions that are today considered distinctive of conscious minds.

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<sup>1</sup> Abbreviations for Aristotle's works in this paper will be as follows: *Nichomachean Ethics*: NE; *De Anima* or *On the Soul*: DA; *Posterior Analytics*: Post.An.; *Prior Analytics*: PA; *Physics*: Phys; *On the Movement of Animals*: MA; *Rhetoric*, Rhet.; *Parva Naturalia*, PN.

Aristotle maintains that there are distinct life-functions and mental faculties, each forming a different kind of soul. The simplest faculty, that of nutrition, growth and reproduction, belongs to the simplest type of living things (plants) and the souls of more complex living beings are hierarchically composed of this simplest faculty in addition to one or more other faculties. There are three kinds of soul that are dominant in Aristotle's discussion, both in *De Anima* [DA: II.3] and in the *Nicomachean Ethics* [NE: I.13]. These are the vegetative, the appetitive and the rational. The vegetative soul is found in plants and in all other living things; it is responsible for nutrition, growth and reproduction. The appetitive soul is inextricably caught up with the possession of at least some minimal capacities for sensory perception. The appetitive soul is the locus of appetitive or physical desires, passions, sensations, pleasure and pain, and is responsible for the motion of all animals that are capable of it. The rational part of the soul is responsible for thinking, knowledge and deliberation. According to Aristotle the rationality associated with the rational soul is the distinctive function and proper final end of human beings [NE: I.7].

Each kind of soul consists of a set of faculties each of which is both a state or capacity for and also capable of performing a particular activity. The soul as a whole is analogous to possessing knowledge (the state) rather than actively reflecting on knowledge (the activity), to being able to see rather than the activity of seeing and to the power to cut in a tool rather than the activity of that tool's cutting [DA II.1]. While the soul exists as a disposition for certain kinds of activity it also performs those activities under certain conditions. With the exception of the nutritive soul (and perhaps also the active intellect), each of the other faculties of the soul performs its function when acted upon or actualized by objects proper to that part of the soul. A basic tenant of Aristotle's account of the soul is stated in NE VI.1 where he says "for where objects differ in kind the part of the soul answering to each of the two is different in kind, since it

is in virtue of a certain likeness and kinship with their objects that they have the knowledge they have.” Different faculties of the soul are so constituted as to be able to recognize and respond to different objects (e.g. objects of perception, objects of thought, objects of desire, etc.). Thus the presence of an object proper to some particular faculty of the soul will actualize the functioning of that part of the soul, whether that functioning consists of perceiving, thinking or desiring.

In NE VI.1 Aristotle subdivides the rational part of the soul into a theoretical and a calculative or deliberative part. The theoretical part of the rational soul is able to think about and possess philosophical knowledge. The domain of philosophical and properly theoretical knowledge is that of things which cannot be otherwise [Pos.An.: I.2]. Theoretical knowledge involves two parts. The first is knowledge of scientific demonstrations, which are syllogisms whose premises are true, primary, immediate, better known than and prior to their conclusions [Pos.An.: I.2; NE: VI.3]. The second is knowledge of the immediately knowable and indemonstrable first premises of the sciences [Pos.An.: I.3; NE: VI.6]. It is the theoretical part of the rational soul whose activity Aristotle ultimately identifies with proper human flourishing or *Eudemonia* [NE: X.6-8].

The calculative part of the rational soul thinks about the domain of things that are but could be otherwise and of things that happen for the most part but not always [NE: VI.1; Phys.: II.5]. It is the locus of deliberation and rational wish. Rational wish is desire for the believed or actual good, while deliberation is the activity of determining the means that are necessary for attaining the end desired by rational wish. Deliberation involves both an ability to perceive action-relevant features of situations and an ability to formulate effective courses of action for achieving pre-specified ends within those situations<sup>2</sup>. It is possible to be an effective deliberator without being morally good. This occurs when the part of the calculative faculty that Aristotle

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<sup>2</sup> “Deliberation” will be discussed further in section III.1 The Nature of Virtue, below.

calls “cleverness” is well developed, either by nature or by practice. Cleverness is the skill of being able to deliberate well with regard to the achievement of any end whatsoever. Practical wisdom, on the other hand, is the excellence of the calculative part of the rational part of the soul when its deliberations are aimed specifically at ends consistent with virtue, ultimately at the end of *Eudemonia* [NE: VI.12].<sup>3</sup> For Aristotle, it is the person of Practical Wisdom who is most perfectly able to experience morally relevant features of situations, deliberate correctly about them and respond appropriately both in feeling and in action in a way that is conducive to the active achievement of *Eudemonia*.

There are two aspects of Aristotle’s account of the soul in *De Anima* that are particularly relevant to the present inquiry. The first is his theory of sensory perception, while the second is his all too brief account of passive and active intellect in the rational part of the soul.

According to Aristotle there are five and only five sensory modalities [DA: III.1]. In every case perception occurs in virtue of the sensory organ taking the form of the sensory object into itself without the matter [DA: II.5, 12]. Each sense organ has objects proper to it and the matter of the organ is uniquely constituted so as to be able to receive the form of its own perceptual objects. Each sense is able to perceive objects within a range between two contraries; white and black for sight, acute and grave for hearing, bitter and sweet for taste [DA: II.1]. Ideal perception occurs at a mean between these extremes and the sense organ is destroyed if it is exposed to stimulation too close to the extremes [DA: II.12].<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> For Aristotle *Eudemonia* consists of the ultimate good or “flourishing” for a human being, the final end towards which all other ends are subordinate. There is much debate over whether Aristotle’s conception of “*Eudemonia*” is inclusivist (involving both contemplation and the achievement of other human goods such as wealth and friendship) or whether it is intellectualist (primarily consists of the contemplative activity of the rational part of the soul). The results of this paper will be essentially the same regardless of which of these two conceptions of *Eudemonia* is adopted, and so I remain neutral on this point here.

<sup>4</sup> While the fact that sensory perception involves hitting a mean between extremes strongly suggests an analogy with Aristotle’s account of virtue as hitting a mean between extremes, it turns out that the analogy is only superficial. Aristotle’s account of virtue in NE II.6 is that it is a habituated regulative disposition governing over the passions

There are three kinds of objects of perception [DA: II.6]. The first are objects directly perceptible by a single sense, such as color, sound and flavor. The second are objects perceptible by two or more senses. For these Aristotle provides the somewhat difficult examples of movement, rest, number, figure and magnitude. The third objects of sense are called by Aristotle “incidental” objects of sense. An example of an incidental object of sense is seeing (visual perception) a white figure and also “seeing” (incidentally) the son of Diaries. “Perceiving” incidental objects of sense seems to intrinsically involve bringing knowledge gained from past experience to bear in a present perceptual situation. The example that Aristotle gives involves knowledge of a particular individual, namely the son of Diaries. However, an individual might equally well see (visual perception) a white figure and also “see” (incidentally) a rabbit. In this case it would be prior conceptual knowledge about a kind of animal (rather than about a particular individual) that would make the incidental perceiving possible. Such incidental objects of sense will be of interest in the discussion of the cognitive achievement involved in the virtuous agent’s practical experience below. Importantly, Aristotle identifies the first kind of objects of sense, objects perceivable by a single sense, as perceptual objects in the “strictest sense”.

Aristotle’s primary account of the strictly intellectual operations of the rational part of the soul is very brief in *De Anima*, taking up only three chapters [DA: III.4, 5, 6]. Since the function of perceptual organs is to perceive objects of sense, a different faculty must be present, one capable of thinking, if these objects are to be thought about. The thinking part of the mind

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(elements of the appetitive part of the soul) of an individual in such a way that they respond appropriately (first in feeling then in action) in different ethical situations. The analogy between sensory perception and passion holds because both are determinate biological functions with determinate ranges of objects that will activate them and determinate responses depending upon the nature of these objects. However, hitting the mean in perception is normal and automatic, while hitting the mean in passion and action is difficult and requires education and habituation. That perception involves hitting a mean between qualitative extremes does not mean that what the agent “sees” is also a mean between emotional extremes. Normal perception and virtuous dispositions, including practical perception, are distinct functions of the soul with only a superficial similarity.

consists of two parts. First is the passive intellect, which receives the forms, distilled for it by perception, into itself just as a writing tablet receives characters from a pen. Once the forms are present in the passive intellect they are, as it were, potentially thinkable, but another part of the rational soul is required to actually think them. This second part of the rational soul is the active intellect.<sup>5</sup> The active intellect is, according to Aristotle, the only element of any soul that is able to survive the death of the organism. Active intellect is responsible for actually thinking about the forms that have been made available to it in the passive intellect.

The picture presented so far suggests a very neat account of the way in which knowledge is acquired from experience. The form of an object is impressed upon a sensory organ, which in turn transfers or otherwise makes the form available to the passive intellect. Once the form is embedded in the passive intellect the active intellect need only attend to it and think about it in order to have complete knowledge of all of the formal information that was initially available in sense perception. Further, the perceptual and conceptual knowledge acquired of simple objects through this process is claimed by Aristotle to be free from error [DA: III.3, 6]. However, the infallibility of the knowledge acquisition process as so far described applies only to the acquisition of basic conceptual knowledge regarding objects of experience (and even this seems to require multiple experiences of the same object [Pos.An.: II.19; 16]). As soon as the mind begins making connections between its concepts and formulating scientific propositions about them or attempts to infer relationships between them, the possibility of error or falsity emerges [DA: III.6]. For Aristotle, declarative assertions about the world are not infallible and knowledge consists primarily of such declarative assertions. So the relationship of the subject to

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<sup>5</sup> There is a great deal of controversy about the exact nature and operations of the active intellect in the rational soul. The purposes of this paper require recognizing only that the active intellect plays some role in the actual inferential and contemplative activities of the rational soul, and so I ignore the other issues and controversies here.

the world, in terms of perception, judgment, and knowledge, as well as in ethical matters is by no means simple.

The structure of conscious experience or “what it’s like” to be a subject for Aristotle, will be determined by the contributions and interactions of all of the different faculties of the soul that have been discussed so far, as well as by the contributions of the specifically ethically relevant faculties of the soul, which will be discussed below. “What it’s like” to be a conscious Aristotelian subject can be determined by examining a) the faculties of the soul and the kinds of knowledge and experience that they are claimed to be responsible for, and b) Aristotle’s own discussions of various issues that confront cognitive and moral subjects. In what follows I will proceed by first analyzing the non- or a-virtuous content of conscious experience (Section II.ii), and then, using this as a basis, I will proceed to articulate what specifically virtuous or practical experience must be like, given what Aristotle says about it (in Section III).

### **II.ii The Parts of the Soul and the content of non- or a-virtuous Experience**

For Aristotle, there are essentially four factors that will determine the content of an individual’s experience at any given moment. These are i) prior knowledge, ii) the perceptual process, iii) the application of prior knowledge to the objects of perception and iv) the desires of the agent. The first three of these will be discussed in this section, while the fourth will be articulated in the account of virtuous experience proper in Section III.

Prior knowledge breaks down into two importantly different kinds. The first is theoretical knowledge in the form of concepts and categorical propositions containing them. Such knowledge will consist of both the theoretical propositions of science and the universal practical propositions that serve as the first premises of practical syllogisms. Prior theoretical knowledge will be contributed primarily by the theoretical part of the rational soul. The second

kind of prior knowledge that will influence the content of an individual's experience is knowledge of particulars. The knowledge that "I Thrasy-machus am standing in Athens, in the market place, purchasing olives from Phroneus and flirting with Sophia at precisely noon on Sunday", for example, consists primarily of knowledge of particular individuals. Knowing that Phroneus is an olive vender requires having had some kind of prior experience specifically of the individual Phroneus, and not just with olive venders in general. Knowledge of particulars, according to Aristotle, seems to be primarily the business of the calculative part of the rational part of the soul.

The perceptual process, a faculty of the sensitive part of the appetitive part of the soul, is the second major factor that will determine the content of an individual's experience. The perceptual process will occur (except in cases of malfunction or damage) exactly as described in section II.i above. The forms of the objects within range of the sensory modalities will be imprinted on the sensory organs and made available to the passive and active intellects. The contribution of sense perception is thus a relatively constant element within the experience of an individual and across the experiences of different individuals.

The third important faculty that contributes to the content of experience is the *ability* of an individual to bring prior knowledge to bear on current perception. This will consist of a) being able to recognize particular objects or situations as falling under general propositions or concepts, and b) being able to remember the identity of particular substances such as the city in which one lives, the friends one has, the laws of the land and the way home from the Acropolis. Importantly, bringing prior knowledge to bear on current perception can occur in either of two ways. The first is by an explicit act or series of acts of judgment. This occurs when an individual perceives an object, say a human form dressed in a certain way and possessing certain

features, engages in an explicit conscious search for the knowledge of who this person is, and then explicitly judges to herself, for example, “oh yes, this thing that I am now perceiving is Protagoras.” The second way in which prior knowledge is brought to bear on current experience is when it functions as what John Searle has called “the network” [38: pp. 65-71]. According to Searle, the network consists of the conceptual knowledge and frameworks within which a subject operates. It is applied automatically to most experiences that a subject has, without requiring the performance of explicit conscious acts of judgment. One example Searle uses is an individual’s resolution to run for President of the United States. For an individual’s resolution “I am going to become the next President of the United States” to be meaningful she must have prior knowledge of the existence of a complex social network of institutions and behaviors. This knowledge forms the conceptual framework within which such a subject forms her resolution, but it is not part of the content of her resolution itself.

Aristotle recognizes both of these ways in which prior knowledge can shape or structure the content of current experience. Like knowledge of particulars, the ability to apply prior knowledge to current experience seems to be primarily a function of the calculative part of the rational soul.

#### Evidence for Aristotle’s Awareness and Use of the Foregoing Distinctions

That Aristotle was aware of and made use of these distinctions in considering knowledge, perception and experience can be seen in a number of ways. First, in *Prior Analytics*, II.21 Aristotle says,

“For to know is used in three senses: it may mean either to have knowledge of the universal or to have knowledge proper to the matter in hand or to exercise such knowledge:” [PA: II.21 67b3-5]

The context of these distinctions makes it relatively clear that “knowledge of the universal” here refers to the part of prior knowledge that I have called theoretical and conceptual, while “knowledge of the matter at hand” is either the part of prior knowledge that I have called knowledge of particulars or it is perceptual knowledge *simpliciter*. “Exercise of such knowledge” here is best understood as what I have described as the act of subsuming a perceptual particular under a universal proposition or concept.

In the above quoted section of *Posterior Analytics*, Aristotle is specifically considering the possibility that an individual might have knowledge of the proposition “every mule is sterile” and yet believe (of a particular mule) that “this animal is with foal.” This situation can arise, according to Aristotle, either if the individual fails to think the propositions “every mule is sterile” and “this is a mule” together, or if he does not recognize that “this animal is a mule”. The first would be a failure to apply universal propositional knowledge to a particular case, while the second would be a failure to subsume some particular perceptual object under a general concept (i.e. the concept “mule”).

Failure to identify particulars as instances of universals is also one of the possibilities that Aristotle considers as an explanation for how it is that the *Akratic* goes wrong in NE 7.3. There he considers the possibility that an *akratic* might know the major premise of a practical syllogism, that “dry food is good for every man” but fail to recognize, when dry food is before him, either that “this is dry food” or that “I am a man”. While this does not seem to be Aristotle’s final account of *akrasia*, the type of error considered in this segment of NE 7.3 precisely involves failure to recognize one’s current perceptions as falling under one’s stock of general conceptual knowledge.

That Aristotle recognized the role played by prior knowledge of particulars in current experience can be seen in a number of ways. The most prominent is his identification, in *De Anima* II.6, of the class of objects of perception which he calls “incidental”. This is where seeing (visual perception) a white figure also involves seeing (incidentally) the son of Diareos. Incidental objects of perception are, in every case, objects that an individual is able to “see” precisely because he already has a stock of prior knowledge of particulars or universals available to him. There is nothing about the raw perceptual data in which the son of Diareos (white figure) is presented that contains the information that “this figure is the son of Diareos”. Rather, the perceiver must have already met him on some previous occasion, or have been informed in some other way as to his identity. Importantly, incidental seeing seems to involve precisely the sort of “bringing to bear” of prior knowledge to current experience that I have described in connection with Searle’s notion of the “network” above. Incidental seeing involves the immediate non-judgmental and non-inferential application of prior knowledge to current experience.

All of the distinctions discussed so far, including the contribution of desire to the content of experience that will be explained in Section III, can be found in Aristotle’s discussion of deliberation and voluntary action in *Nicomachean Ethics* Book III. It is worth taking the time to lay out the relevant details from this discussion.

In NE III.1 Aristotle points out that it is voluntary actions that are blameworthy or praiseworthy, while involuntary actions are neither of these, and will be forgiven and may also be pitiable under certain circumstances. An action is compulsory and so involuntary for Aristotle i) “When the cause is in the external circumstances and the agent contributes nothing.” [NE: 1110b2-3] or ii) when the action is done from ignorance. Aristotle distinguishes between actions done “by reason of ignorance” and actions done “in ignorance” [NE: 1110b24-1111a2].

An action is done “in ignorance” if the individual is ignorant either of what is actually in his interest or to his advantage or if the individual is lacking in universal knowledge. Drunkards, those who are carried away by rage and also the wicked tend to act in ignorance and are thus blameworthy. Three of the elements that contribute to experience that I have discussed are implicated in Aristotle’s notion of acting “in ignorance”. The first is prior knowledge of the propositional and conceptual sort. To lack either of these regarding practical action in a given situation is, according to Aristotle, blameworthy. The second two elements are suggested when Aristotle says that a person who acts “in ignorance” might be ignorant of his own advantage. This could mean either i) that he fails to bring appropriate general knowledge to bear on the situation in which he finds himself, or ii) that he fails to desire the right values or the right action in that situation. The first of these possibilities I have already discussed above as the ability to apply prior knowledge to current experience, while the second will be discussed below in terms of the contributions to experience made by desire. What is important here is simply to recognize that both play a role in Aristotle’s discussion of ethical experience and action.

Acting “by reason of ignorance”, on the other hand, involves acting with mistaken knowledge of particulars (“of the circumstances of the action and the objects with which it is concerned”). An agent can be ignorant of particulars with regard to “who he is, what he is doing, what or whom he is acting on, and sometimes also what (e.g. what instrument) he is doing it with, and to what end (e.g. he may think his act will conduce to someone’s safety), and how he is doing it (e.g. whether gently or violently)” [NE: 1111a5]. These are precisely the sorts of things that would fall under what I have described as prior knowledge of particulars and most of these would also correspond to Aristotle’s notion of “incidental objects of perception”. According to Aristotle, agents who act “by reason of ignorance” regret their actions when they learn the truth

about what they have done and it is this type of action in ignorance that counts as part of his definition of involuntary or compulsory actions. Thus acting “by reason of ignorance” is not blameworthy and will sometimes even be pitiable (as when it has terrible consequences).

The difference between acting “in ignorance” and acting “by reason of ignorance” can be seen by comparing two cases. In the first case a Greek citizen is approached by what appears to be a total stranger. The stranger explains that he is old and penniless and suggests that the Greek citizen has a special obligation to take him in and care for him for the rest of his days. While a beneficent man, this Greek citizen refuses to take on such a weighty obligation for a total stranger. Unbeknownst to the Greek citizen, however, this stranger is actually his long lost father. When this is revealed to him, the (virtuous) citizen quickly feels regret and recognizes that he does in fact have a duty to his father to care for him. This is a case of acting “by reason of ignorance”. The citizen did not know (prior knowledge of particulars) it was his father who was making the request and so his action (refusing exorbitant help to a complete stranger) is not blameworthy. Now take another Greek citizen, one who knows that the person with whom he is speaking is his father, and put him in the same situation. This individual recognizes that it is his father with whom he is dealing, but does not recognize (“see”) that he has an obligation to this person. Failure to see his obligation to his father involves either an absence of universal knowledge (regarding duties to fathers) or a failure to subsume present particulars under relevant universals (failure to “see” that this is a situation where obedience to fathers is appropriate) or a misunderstanding of what is actually virtuous in the particular situation (the absence or failure of right desire) and is, according to Aristotle an action “in ignorance” that is blameworthy for any one or for all of these reasons.

In light of the forgoing it should be clear that, for Aristotle, the content of an individual's experience will be determined at any given moment by a combination of i) prior knowledge of a) concepts and propositions, and b) of particulars, by ii) the data of perception itself and iii) by the possession and exercise on the part of the individual of an ability to subsume the particulars of sensory perception under universal propositions and concepts, either consciously as in judgment, or automatically as in the functioning of something like Searle's notion of "the network." These notions can be seen to be operating in a number of different places in Aristotle's writing and will play roles in determining the achievement or failure of practical experience.<sup>6</sup> In the next section I will consider the contribution made to the content of experience by desire. It is here that an account of the content of specifically virtuous or practical experience will emerge.

### **III. Aristotle's Account of Virtue: The Contributions of Desire and of Emotion to the Content of Virtuous Experience**

Virtue, desire, motivation, ethical knowledge and ultimately practical experience and action itself are all intimately connected in Aristotle's philosophy. In this section I will begin by discussing the nature and kinds of virtue and their relationship to desire. After this I will proceed to an analysis of how virtue and subsequently ethical knowledge are acquired through habituation and education. An analysis of the role played by desire, in conjunction with the non- or a-virtuous content of experience discussed above, will require a closer consideration of the anatomy of desire itself. Of the three different kinds of desire recognized by Aristotle two of these, rational wish and the emotions, will be found to have a direct connection with virtue and so contribute directly to the content of properly virtuous practical experience. Taking the person of perfect practical wisdom and hence perfect virtue as the archetype of virtuous experience, I

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<sup>6</sup> It is noteworthy that moral agents are, for Aristotle, epistemically culpable to a high degree. The only error that is forgivable is error with regard to the particular circumstances of a situation, specifically error with regard to incidental objects of perception such as the precise nature of one's action or the precise identity of the person(s) on whom one is acting.

will discuss first deliberative or mediated and then immediate or non-deliberative practical experience. This discussion will make clear the contribution that rational wish makes to the content of practical experience. Once this is clear, the contributions of emotional desire to determining the content of practical experience and deliberation will be articulated. On the basis of this description of “what it’s like” to be a person of practical wisdom, it will be possible (in Section IV) to reach three additional conclusions about the way in which morally salient features of experience appear to virtuous individuals.

### **III.i The Nature of Virtue**

According to Aristotle, the virtue of a thing consists of that thing performing its proper function and achieving its final end well. The distinctive feature of human beings is the faculty of reason and our proper function is to exercise this faculty optimally in the activity of contemplation. Hence the good life and distinctive final end or *Eudemonia* for human beings ultimately consists in the exercise of our distinctive function, reasoning or contemplation, performed well over the course of an entire lifetime. More specifically, Aristotle defines ‘virtue’ in the following way: “Virtue...is a state of character concerned with choice, 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.” [NE: 1106b36-1107a3].

There are two important classes of virtue, intellectual virtues and moral virtues. The two major intellectual virtues are contemplation in the theoretical part of the rational soul, and practical wisdom in the calculative part of the rational soul. It is practical wisdom that is most directly related to moral actions and moral experience, and so I will focus on it here. Intellectual virtue or practical wisdom is the virtue of the calculative part of the rational part of the soul. It consists of being able to deliberate well regarding the achievement of genuine *Eudemonia*.

Practical wisdom as skill in deliberation, however, presupposes that one's rational wish consists specifically of desire for the achievement of *Eudemonia*, and not some other believed or perceived good end. Thus correct rational wish is, in a sense, constitutive of intellectual virtue, even though skill in deliberation about *Eudemonistic* ends is its defining characteristic.

Moral virtue, on the other hand, consists in the possession of dispositions or states of character in virtue of which one is capable of responding appropriately, both emotionally and in action, to the events of one's inner and outer life. It is important to emphasize that moral virtue consists specifically of states or dispositions regarding the emotions or passions, as opposed to the desires of rational wish or those of appetite. It is the passions or emotions, located in the part of the appetitive part of the soul that "listens to reason" that are the locus of the moral virtues.<sup>7</sup>

It is possible to possess some moral virtue without possessing practical wisdom, but not conversely. Further, it is impossible to *completely* possess any single moral virtue or all of the moral virtues together without also possessing practical wisdom. Regarding the relationship between the intellectual and moral virtues, Aristotle writes that "it is not possible to be good in the strict sense without practical wisdom, nor practically wise without moral virtue." [NE: 1144b30-32], and continues in the same vein "for with the presence of the one quality, practical wisdom, will be given all the virtues" [NE: 1145a1-3]. Thus practical wisdom, consisting of full knowledge of virtue and of the ability to deliberate effectively with regard to *Eudemonia*, can be acquired only after the dispositions of one's passions have all been properly habituated, so as to aim at the mean in feeling and in action. The strong thesis that full possession of one virtue entails the complete possession of the others, and that this in turn entails the possession of

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<sup>7</sup> "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." [NE, 1105b25-28]

practical wisdom itself, is often referred to as the thesis of the “unity of the virtues.” It is a distinctive feature of Aristotle’s ethical theory, one that some contemporary virtue ethicists find objectionable [5: p. 184].

### The Education of Desire and the Person of Practical Wisdom

Aristotle is clear that we are not born with virtuous dispositions in the way in which we are born with the capacity to see, requiring only the presence of objects to actualize the capacity of sight into perception. Rather, we are born with the ability to become virtuous, but we can only become virtuous through the training and habituation of our desires, repeating good actions until they become normal, ingrained and even pleasurable dispositions of our character. The fact that virtue requires habituation and training suggests the existence of a continuum, spanning from what Aristotle calls the person of “natural virtue” at one end, to the person of habituated and trained virtue in the middle, and finally approximating the ideal person of practical wisdom and full virtue on the other.<sup>8</sup>

In *Practices of Reason* C. D. C. Reeve has argued that education and habituation are to ethical knowledge what induction is to scientific knowledge [Reeve: Ch. 1 Sec. 9]. Just as it is by observation of particular individuals that we are able to generalize inductively in order to establish a universal concept or proposition, so it is by the continuous habituation and development of virtuous dispositions that we are eventually able to formulate explicit ethical knowledge. Thus we gain ethical knowledge by inspecting our developing emotional dispositions in the same way in which Hume maintained that we arrive at the idea of “necessary connection” by continuous observation of the operation of cognitive habits formed on the basis

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<sup>8</sup> The person of “natural virtue” is discussed by Aristotle in *Nicomachean Ethics* Book VI, Chapter 13. Natural virtue is simply the kind of virtue that an individual who has no knowledge of, and little training or education in ethics, is yet able to hit the mean and act virtuously, by nature, in certain domains of action and with respect to certain virtues.

of the laws of association [17:Ch. 7].<sup>9</sup> I take this to be an accurate account of Aristotle's conception of how virtue and knowledge of virtue is acquired. It has the important consequence that we are able to have true knowledge of virtue only after we are already completely or nearly completely virtuous; precisely when we no longer have much need for it. With regard to knowledge of virtue then, the "Owl of Minerva" truly does fly at dusk.

This fact about the way in which practical wisdom is acquired raises difficulties for the attempt to give an account of the content of practical experience, but it simultaneously substantiates the thesis that there is a qualitative difference in experience, not only between virtuous and non-virtuous agents, but also between agents possessing different degrees and kinds of virtue and consequent knowledge of virtue. In order to lay out as systematically and accurately as possible what the content of practical experience is, I will take the person of practical wisdom and her experience as the archetype for analysis in the rest of this paper. Persons of natural and habituated virtue, *akratics*, *enkratics* and the self-indulgent may all then be plausibly understood as resulting from so many incomplete and/or deviant permutations of the faculties and mental contents that are ideally developed in the person of practical wisdom.

#### Desire as the Motive of All Motion and Action

Virtue, for Aristotle, has to do not only with regulating the dispositions of the passions, but also, of course, with being able to choose and act well. In this section I will focus on Aristotle's conception of the relationship between desire and action. This will give final clarity to the fact that it is desire, in some or all of its forms, that is involved in determining the specifically virtuous content of practical experience. In the next section I will place this discussion in the context of deliberation and choice.

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<sup>9</sup> Which is not to suggest that Aristotle would be likely to agree with the particulars of what Hume has to say about the concept of "necessary connection."

In the final analysis it is always desire in one or all of its forms that is responsible for motion and action. In animals the connection between perception of a pleasant or painful object and pursuit or avoidance is automatic [DA: III.7, 9, 10; MA: I.7]. Even in rational beings desire is a necessary condition for action. As Aristotle says, “Reason alone moves nothing.” [NE: IV.2]. Nevertheless, there is a part of the appetitive soul that is higher and “listens to reason” [NE: I.13]. This is the part of the soul that I have already identified with the emotions, and as the locus of virtuous dispositions. Further, as has already been noted, it is possible through moral education and habituation, as well as conscientious self-discipline, to so mold one’s passions as to have them respond in a fashion that is appropriate to the pursuit of *Eudemonia* and thus to listen to and be in accordance with reason. To have such educated and disciplined passions just is what it means to be virtuous.

However, it is necessary to look at the role of desire in action a little more closely. Of specific interest is the question of the way in which desire is the final element (besides those that have already been discussed above, as non- or a-virtuous) that informs the content of experience, and ultimately of practical experience. In *On the Movement of Animals* [MA: I.6, 7] Aristotle explores the question of why it is that some kinds of thinking are followed by action, while others are not. It is in this context that he introduces the practical syllogism. The practical syllogism has as universal premise a proposition to the effect that “such and such a thing is always/sometimes/never good/bad for such and such a person”; it has as particular premise that “this is such and such a thing and I am such and such a person”; and it has an action as its conclusion. According to Aristotle an individual who recognizes both premises of the practical syllogism as true will immediately act in the way that they suggest that he should. To take the example from NE VII.3 mentioned above, if a man knows that “dry food is good for every man”

and that “this is dry food and I am a man”, then he will immediately take action and eat the dry food.

What is important about the doctrine of the practical syllogism is that the different premises and the conclusion are provided by a complicated interaction of different elements of the soul. The universal premise will be contributed either by the general dispositions of one’s character alone or in the case of a person of practical wisdom, by both the dispositions of character and by prior general knowledge possessed by the intellect.<sup>10</sup> The second premise is particular and has to do specifically with perception of the features of a specific situation. This will involve, to varying degrees i) the normal perceptual process, ii) prior knowledge of particulars and also iii) exercise of the ability to recognize particulars as instances of universals. However, the conclusion, an action, will only follow or result from recognition of the two premises if there is desire present. Further the desire present must be desire for precisely the good specified by the normative content of the universal premise. In other words, an individual can know with his theoretical reason that “dry food is good for every man” (because he has been told by someone, not because he has practical wisdom) and he can perceive and identify the universals involved in the truth of the proposition that “this is dry food and I am a man”, but in order for the knowledge in this situation to carry action guiding weight there must also be a desire to achieve the good promised to man by dry food. If there is no such desire (including no rational wish) then the agent simply will not see, in the situation at hand, any action guiding values. In other words, if there is no desire whatsoever on the part of the individual for dry food,

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<sup>10</sup> Recognizing that the major premise of a practical syllogism might be contributed by a disposition or virtue, without any explicit intellectual recognition of what this premise is, raises the issue of whether Aristotle’s practical syllogism should be interpreted primarily as a theoretical reconstruction of action, or as an actual account of the conscious deliberation processes of agents. While, given the richness of practical experience, I am inclined to think that the former option is more correct, this issue makes no difference to the project at hand, which is the attempt to determine what contribution desire makes to the structure of action.

then the situation is lacking certain morally salient features and either no action or some other action that the agent does have a desire to perform in the given situation will result.

At this point it should be clear both that desire is the ultimate cause and motivation for all action, and that, given the different kinds of knowledge and faculties of the soul that are involved in completing the practical syllogism, it is desire of some sort that must contribute the final element to the content of experience that will result in the experience of morally salient characteristics and hence the motivation for action.

### The Anatomy of Desire: The Kinds of Desire Related to Virtuous Experience

It is always desire that causes action. Therefore, to the extent that the content of experience is morally salient or includes morally salient qualities, and so is related to choice and action, such content must be contributed by the state of one's desires in conjunction with the already given objects of experience.<sup>11</sup> Aristotle makes a distinction between three kinds of desire: rational wish, emotion or passion, and appetitive desires. Here I will discuss each of them, and indicate which ones are related to virtue in such a way that they can be expected to play a role in determining the content of practical experience.

Of the three kinds of desire, wish, emotion and appetite, only two are related to virtue: wish and emotion. Wish is the desire for one's perceived or believed good, and is located in the calculative part of the rational part of the soul [24]. The general objects of wish will be determined by one's over-all moral world-view or moral vision. Specifically one's view about what constitutes the proper function and final end of human beings. The particular objects of wish will be determined by the way in which one's general moral world-view maps onto a particular situation. Thus if one's rational wish is for the final end of *Eudemonia*, the particular

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<sup>11</sup> Those made present to the mind by perception, prior knowledge, and the application of prior knowledge to current experience, discussed in II.ii above.

ends one chooses will always be chosen in light of the goal of a life-style aimed toward the pursuit of that end. The contribution made by rational wish to the content of practical experience will be articulated in the context of practical deliberation in section III.ii below.

Emotional desire is desire associated with the part of the appetitive or irrational soul that listens to reason. Thus, though it has to do with the pursuit or avoidance of objects of pleasure, it also involves judgment. The relationship of emotional desire to judgment is two-fold. On the one hand, all emotional desire involves some judgment, e.g. that an object, event or person is of such and such a kind, in order for the emotion to be triggered. Conversely, the existence of strong pre-standing emotions is capable of influencing experience and judgment, of causing an agent to experience a situation in a different way than she would if she were thinking in a purely rational fashion [22; PN: 460b3<sup>12</sup>; Rhet.: 1377b30-1378a3<sup>13</sup> & 1378a20-24<sup>14</sup>]. It is with regard to emotions that moral virtue is a state in which we stand well or poorly [NE: 1105b25-28], and so emotions will also play a role in determining the content of practical experience. Fully appreciating the way in which the states or dispositions of an agent's emotions contribute to the content of practical experience requires understanding the ways in which emotions can affect or alter perception and judgment, how this phenomenon fits into the structure of deliberation with regard to the end desired by rational wish, and the fact that emotions, as a kind of desire, will

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<sup>12</sup> “we are easily deceived respecting the operations of sense-perception when we are excited by emotions, and different persons according to their different emotions; for example, the coward when excited by fear, the amorous person by amorous desire; so that, with but little resemblance to go upon, the former thinks he sees his foes approaching, the latter, that he sees the object of his desire; and the more deeply one is under the influence of the emotion, the less similarity is required to give rise to these illusory impressions.” (On Dreams, 460b4-10)

<sup>13</sup> “When people are feeling friendly and placable, they think one sort of thing; when they are feeling angry or hostile, they think either something totally different or the same thing with a different intensity: when they feel friendly to the man who comes before them for judgment, they regard him as having done little wrong, if any;...” (Rhetoric, 1377b30-1378a3)

<sup>14</sup> “The emotions are all of those feelings that so change men as to affect their judgments, and that are also attended by pain or pleasure. Such are anger, pity, fear and the like, with their opposites.” (Rhetoric 1378a20-24)

lend strength to the motivation that an agent feels to pursue or avoid something in a given situation.

Appetitive desires are the purely physical and automatic sources of desire present in the part of the irrational soul that does not listen to reason. Like emotional desire, appetitive desire has to do with pleasure and pain, is concerned with pursuit and avoidance, and is directed towards particular objects. However, unlike emotion, appetitive desires neither listen to reason, nor do they affect it in any direct way. Stephen R. Leighton has provided convincing arguments that appetitive desires, such as hunger, thirst, or the need for sleep, can be suppressed or denied, but they cannot be made to go away by reasoning with them. It may be possible to talk someone out of their anger (emotion), by giving them reasons why it is unfounded, but it makes no sense to speak of trying to talk someone out of their hunger, thirst or need for sleep (appetitive desires) [22: p. 164]. While appetitive desires are related to action, they do not have to do with choice, deliberation or reason, and so are not important parts of virtue, except insofar as one must exercise one's virtues in order to regulate them. While it is likely that appetitive desires do, at least sometimes, contribute something to the content of experience, what they contribute is not specifically related to virtue, and so is not directly relevant to the question of the content of practical experience. In light of this, appetitive desire will not be discussed further in this paper.

The content of specifically practical experience that is contributed by virtue will have to do with the strength and content of one's rational wish and of one's emotions. It is possible to imagine any number of ways in which the emotions might mislead reason and rational wish [22] by mis-determining the morally salient features present in the content of practical experience. Similarly, if the perceived good that rational wish is directed towards is not actual *Eudemonia*, then it is also possible to imagine that reason will misinform the emotions, and so lead to a mis-

determination of the morally salient features of an experienced situation. However, due to the way in which genuine knowledge of virtue (practical wisdom) is acquired according to Aristotle, it is not possible for the rational wish of a fully virtuous agent for *Eudemonia* to be in any way at odds with the emotional desires of that agent. This is so because of the way in which the virtues are acquired through habituation of the emotions, and because of the fact that possession of genuine knowledge of *Eudemonia* and practical wisdom entails the possession of all of the other virtues (the unity of virtues thesis). Thus, in a person of practical wisdom the conscious rational wish for the end and the desires of the emotions in a given situation will coincide, and while they may contribute different features to the situation, the elements of the content of practical experience that appear to be morally salient will be the same for both of them. For this reason I will focus my attention first on the practical experience of deliberation, and then on the immediate (non-deliberative) experience and action that would take place for a fully virtuous agent or person of practical wisdom.

#### Further Features of Ethical Action

A last comment on the elements of ethical action is required before discussing deliberation and the structure of its experiential content. In her article “Non-Relative Virtues: An Aristotelian Approach”, Martha Nussbaum characterizes Aristotle’s procedure in theorizing about particular virtues as consisting of the following steps: a) delimit a sphere of experience and action that is characteristic of human life, b) name as a virtue what will count as choosing and responding appropriately in that sphere, and c) provide a substantive account of what choosing and responding appropriately in that sphere amount to [28: Sec. II]. The part of this description that I wish to focus on, specifically to further analyze, is a) the delimiting of a sphere of action that is characteristic of human life.

Spheres of action characteristic of human life can be further broken down into i) social or personal roles that an agent does or is capable of playing, and ii) the context or domain of action in which an agent finds herself. Roles that an agent might play include those of lawyer, politician, mother, philosopher, hostess, party-guest, and many more. It is important to recognize that most agents have many different roles that they play because different roles often prescribe different, and more nuanced, standards and virtues, and so will make a difference to what is ethically important in a situation. Contexts of action, on the other hand, include the courtroom, the home, the political assembly, the battlefield, the academy, the market-place, the office, etc. Here too, different contexts of action will demand different kinds of virtuous behavior, some more and some less nuanced. Further, roles and contexts can stand in more or less complicated relationships to one another, these relationships themselves giving rise to standards of conduct that a virtuous individual must appropriately fulfill. For example, a judge in a courtroom, a military doctor treating wounded enemies on the battlefield, a politician in business or a business-person in politics. The possible combinations of roles and contexts are numerous. Aristotle seems to have recognized this, and it is the complicated nature of all these different roles and situations that makes experience and practice an essential part of the acquisition of virtue. For my purposes here it is sufficient to point out that ethical action almost always happens against a background of roles and contexts of action as just described.

### **III.ii Rational Wish and the Deliberative Content of Practical Experience**

The goal of this section, and of the next, is to articulate the contribution that rational wish makes to the content of practical experience. Action can be motivated either from within the agent (as in the agent's becoming hungry and going in search of food, or the agent's thinking that she would like to listen to a Beethoven Quartet and proceeding to place the record on the

phonograph), or by objects external to the agent (as when the agent sees something and the sight of it reminds her that she wants it, motivating action, or when the agent is confronted with a difficult social situation and has to make some kind of decision). In either of these cases, action will consist of a desire, an end that is desired, and the means that must be taken in order to achieve the desired end. In some situations, those that are either relatively simple or familiar to an agent, the means to achieving an end will be obvious or evident in such a way that no conscious thought is required other than the recognition of the situation itself in order for the agent to know specifically what to do. In such cases the existence of a desire for an end will immediately motivate action for the sake of achieving that end. This is what I will call a case of immediate or non-deliberative action. The alternative to immediate action then, is deliberation and deliberative action. Deliberation is the mental activity that is required in order to determine the means to an end in situations where there is a desire for action and for an end, but the particular steps for achieving the end are not known by the agent, but must be figured out in order to make action possible. I will address the relationship between rational wish, deliberation and the content of practical experience in this section, and the relationship of immediate action to these same things in the next.

Contexts requiring deliberation involve three elements: a rational wish for an end, the deliberative process of calculating or determining the means to the achievement of the end, and choice, “the deliberate desire of things in our power” [NE: III.3], which is the result of deliberation reaching a determinate conclusion and results in action. Aristotle maintains that deliberation is an activity carried out by the calculative part of the rational part of the soul. To deliberate is “to investigate and analyze as though...[one] were analyzing a geometrical construction” [NE: III.3], and it involves “searching for something or calculating” [NE: VI, 9].

Deliberation thus involves bringing one's stock of situational and ethical knowledge to bear on a particular situation, and attempting to determine the most effective means to the achievement of some determinate or pre-specified end in the given situation.

Although Aristotle sometimes writes as if deliberation is about means only, and never about ends, however it seems clear that there are two kinds of ends involved in his ethical philosophy, one of which will sometimes need to be deliberated about. The end that cannot be deliberated about for Aristotle is the end specified by rational wish in general as the proper activity and final good for the individual *qua* human being. It is impossible for an agent to deliberate about whether or not *Eudemonia* is her end, because it is, metaphysically speaking, impossible for it not to be, and deliberation is only about things that are within our power or possible.<sup>15</sup> However, the other kind of end, the end that is to be pursued by a specific agent in a specific context of action is, it would seem, something that can and even must be deliberated about on certain occasions. Given a general rational wish for a general end or kind of life, there is still the problem of figuring out how best to actualize or promote that end from moment to moment and from situation to situation in one's life, and this, it would seem, requires deliberation. Both C. D. C. Reeve and David Wiggins have argued persuasively for this position [32: Ch. 2; 43], maintaining that while it is impossible to deliberate about one's final end, the general content of one's rational wish, it is possible and even necessary to deliberate about what end to pursue in a particular situation in order to best contribute to the achievement of overall

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<sup>15</sup> Here I leave out any thorough consideration of individuals whose rational wish is misguided, those who have a mistaken conception of what their *telos* consists of. Since their conception is mistaken, and the hope is that they will eventually be able to correct it, or "get it right", this seems to imply that at some point deliberation about one's final end is possible. The answer to this is probably that such deliberation about one's final end is really more akin to pure philosophical speculation than it is to the more straight forward notion of deliberation in a context with regard to action, and so thinking about what one's final end is does not count as "deliberating" about it in any strict sense. However, the answer to this question is not crucial for what follows.

*Eudemonia*. Here I will limit my focus to cases of deliberation where the specific end that is to be achieved in a context has already been determined.

“What it’s like” to deliberate<sup>16</sup>

I now turn to the question of how rational wish for an end contributes to the structure of conscious practical experience; a question that I think can be best understood in the context of deliberation.

In a situation requiring deliberation, the agent has a rational wish to achieve a consciously recognized determinate end in a specific context. However, it is not as though all that the agent experiences in such situations is a desired end, a context and a question mark about the means to the end. Rather, and this is the crucial point, when an agent desires a specific end in a context, she projects that end as a goal in the context. When this occurs the goal itself will generate an array of saliences in the agent’s experience representing possible routs to the attainment of her goal, while muting out other features of the situation as either i) irrelevant, or ii) unlikely to be successful, in the pursuit of the specified goal. This “muting out” of certain options or potential saliences amounts to the goal that is desired *placing constraints* on the kind of action that can successfully reach it, in virtue of the nature of the goal and of the desire for it. Deliberation is required precisely when these alternative saliences or possibilities, along with the corresponding constraints placed on possible action by them, are insufficient as clues to help the agent determine which of them is most likely, if pursued, to lead to the accomplishment of the desired end.

Given a situation, a determinate goal and an initial set of moral saliences that are insufficient to uniquely determine the means that are required, deliberation will consist of a sort

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<sup>16</sup> I take this section to be, not a literal exegesis of Aristotle, but an elaboration of his account based on some of its fundamental features that I have already described. The inspiration for this elaboration comes most directly from the work of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Phenomenologist Alfred Schutz [36; 37].

of dialectical exploration of the possibilities for action. Imagining that a possibility or step has been taken, a good deliberator will be able to imagine also what the salencies in the situation brought about by that step will look like. Alternatively, the agent might actually begin to take action along one of the lines that are open to her, in which case new salencies and possibilities will arise at each subsequent step. The explication of *some* salencies or possibilities will quickly lead in a direction that clearly is not “towards the end”. While *others* will present themselves as explications in the right direction, the new salencies and possibilities becoming fewer and more determinate with each further explicative step towards the achievement of the goal itself (either in imagination, or in action). This process can be repeated again and again until it is determined which morally salient features are most likely to lead to success in attaining the end if acted upon.

At each point in the deliberative process, the set of salient features that appears will be determined by the goal itself, by the constraints the nature of the goal places on what means can possibly lead to its attainment, by the prior knowledge of the agent, by the personal or social role that the agent is playing, by the context of action itself and by the prior experience of the agent in deliberating about such ends in such contexts. A virtuous deliberator, a practically wise individual then, is someone who is good at the dialectical process involved in recognizing the constraints that are placed on possible action by a desired end in a context, and in efficiently and accurately selecting the appropriate salencies or possibilities, beginning with the initial determination of the end, and ending with a complete specification of the means appropriate to its achievement under the given conditions. Importantly, it is specifically rational wish or desire that is responsible, in virtue of its selecting a determinate goal, for the way in which these action- or morally-relevant salencies appear in the content of practical experience. *Thus there is an*

*element of “what it’s like” to be conscious, consisting of the appearance of action-relevant saliences or possibilities relative to a desired goal in the experience of the agent, that is specifically contributed by an agent’s rational wish and skill in deliberating, and hence by virtue itself.*

One example of this goal-oriented deliberative process, an example in keeping with Aristotle’s suggestion that for a person to deliberate is for him “to investigate and analyze as though he were analyzing a geometrical construction” [NE: III.3], is the task that Socrates sets for Meno’s servant boy in Plato’s dialogue *Meno*. Beginning with a square whose sides are 2 feet each, the area of which is thus 4 square feet, Socrates gives the boy the task of constructing a square whose area is precisely double that of the original square. This then, is the determinate goal to be sought. In terms of practical experience and deliberation, the first thing to notice is that the specification of this goal has two results. First, it sets constraints on what a possible solution can look like; the new object must be a square and be double the size of the original, but further, it must have all the properties of a square: four equal sides, four right angles, etc. Second, the goal suggests an initial array of possible paths to its solution. One of these would be to double the size of the lines composing each side of the original square. Another would be to try to determine the square root of eight (the area of the square sought) and then to construct a square whose lines were each that length. A third would be to construct a square four times the size of the original one, by drawing three more squares just like it on three of its sides, drawing the diagonals of each of these contained squares in such a way as to construct a new square within the larger square, and then identifying this new square, which is half the size of the larger square, as being double the size of each of the four original squares in the construction. After the initial array of constraints and possibilities has been generated, the next step is to select the one

most likely to lead to the achievement of the desired goal. The third possibility I have listed is, of course, the one that Socrates ultimately gets the servant boy to “recollect” and follow by his questioning. However, it is the first possibility, that of doubling the original sides of the square, that the servant boy with his imperfect understanding of geometry initially chooses.<sup>17</sup> At this point the next part of the deliberative process, the dialectical exploration of salient possible courses of action, begins. The slave boy doubles the sides of the original triangle, only to discover that he now has a triangle four times as large as the original, and twice as large as the one he is trying to construct. Two things are important here, the first is that explication of an incorrect possible course of action leads to the elimination of that course from consideration; it will no longer even appear to the slave boy that the problem is to be solved by doubling the sides. Secondly, this attempted solution leads to the recognition of a further constraint governing the actual solution, namely that the lines composing the desired triangle must be greater than two and less than four feet in length. The pursuit of an initial option then, even in its rejection, involves rendering the range of saliencies, the possible routes to a solution smaller and more determinate with regard to what they must involve. In the *Meno*, Socrates and the servant boy continue this process until the desired solution is achieved.

While the illustration just given is in a sense “cheating”, insofar as real life ethical action is nowhere near so neatly demarcated as is the mathematical activity of geometrical construction, it is nevertheless the case that the basic structure of deliberation, and the content of practical experience that is determined by rational wish for a determinate end, will be formally the same.

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<sup>17</sup> It is worth noting that this difference in approach between Socrates and the servant boy in terms of how each of them deliberates regarding the solution to the problem is a perfect example of the difference between someone who has experience and knowledge, in short virtue, in a given domain (namely Socrates), and someone who does not (the servant boy). Socrates is able to “see” the option that is most likely to succeed much more readily than the servant boy, and he also, presumably, would have been able to execute the actual construction and solution of the problem much more quickly and efficiently than the servant boy, even if the servant boy had eventually lighted on the idea of the option that Socrates took immediately.

Whether one is deliberating about how to intervene in a friend's escalating alcohol abuse, achieve a political objective, initiate a first date with someone whom they truly care about, or even about how to best resolve a difficult situation involving South American villagers, an army officer named Pedro, and unusual local customs involving guests, prisoners, firearms and celebrations, the basic formal structure of deliberative experience will be similar, in spite of its greater complexity.

### **III.iii Rational Wish and the non-Deliberative or Immediate Content of Practical Experience**

Having articulated what is involved in mediate or deliberative experience, the answer to the question of what non-deliberative or immediate practical experience and action is like is relatively straightforward. It consists of the process that has been described in the previous section, with the exception that the means to the attainment of the desired end are already recognized by the agent. In fact, they are recognized so immediately that the combination of rational wish and the context of action is sufficient to immediately initiate the action or means that are required to achieve the end that is desired. Just by looking at the context and desiring an end, the agent is able to "see" how to achieve it.

Whereas deliberative experience will involve the conscious application of prior knowledge and considerations to the objects of current experience in explicit acts of judgment, non-deliberative practical experience seems to involve the automatic application of previous knowledge to current experience along the lines that I discussed in Section II.ii above in connection with John Searle's conception of "the network" and its operation in experience. The Person of perfect practical wisdom, acting non-deliberatively, will experience morally relevant features of a situation in the way in which an individual who knows the son of Diarés will

incidentally, but automatically, perceive a white splotch as the son of Diaries (Section II.i above). The morally relevant features of the situation will immediately be experienced and initiate the appropriate response, consistent both with the agent's rational wish, and with her virtuous dispositions.

The most obvious examples of immediate practical experience and action would probably be relatively simple cases in which the nature of the situation at hand makes the appropriate course of action more or less obvious. Examples might include helping a friend who has just been injured, running to escape clear and present danger, or even shaking hands with someone upon first meeting them. On the other hand, it seems clear that the person of practical wisdom described by Aristotle will be able to act in a non-deliberative fashion in a much wider range of contexts, both personal and social. To propose a relatively apt analogy, in cases of immediate practical experience, the person of perfect practical wisdom will “dance” through the moral situation in the same way and with the same consciousness as that of a trained ballet dancer when she takes the stage and performs the first scene of Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker*. An analogy that is, perhaps, even more exact, would be to say that the person of practical wisdom confronts and acts in many situations in the same way in which a skilled jazz saxophone player accomplishes a rousing solo improvisation, not through conscious deliberation and judgments, but through a remarkable awareness of and responsiveness too the experiential salencies that are related to the accomplishment of such a task.

#### **III.iv The role of the emotions in altering perception and judgment, and in the deliberative process; the contribution of the emotions to the content of practical experience**

It now remains to discuss the contribution of the emotions to the content of practical experience. The emotions contribute to the content of practical experience in two ways. First, they play a role in how the context of action and the objects and individuals involved will themselves be interpreted, understood and judged about by the moral agent. Emotions exert an influence on judgment, and this makes a difference both in what agents experience and in how they act. The second contribution that emotions make to the content of practical experience is that, as modes of desire, they play an essential role in motivating action; thus emotional attachment to an object or end will make that object or end “appear” or be experienced as desirable and worthy of pursuit, especially if emotion and rational wish concur regarding the object or end to be pursued. I will address each of these points in turn.

In his article “Aristotle and the Emotions” Stephen R. Leighton has articulated five substantial ways in which emotions can affect the perception or judgment of an agent in the context of Aristotle’s philosophy, these are what he calls: 1) “connivance”, 2) “seduction through favor or disfavor”, 3) “seduction of perception”, 4) “seduction through pleasure or pain” and 5) “change of judgment as a constituent of emotion” [22: p. 154]. I will discuss just two of these, the second, “seduction through favor or disfavor”, and the third, “seduction of perception”.

Seduction through favor or disfavor occurs when a standing emotion, be it fear, anger, love, envy, etc. leads us to pass judgment in a manner that is biased towards the emotion we are feeling in cases in which the facts of the situation are not clear. To illustrate this, suppose that Anne feels strong indignation for her co-worker Frank. In spite of his general incompetence and social inadequacy, he has been promoted twice in the company for which they work, and is generally regarded as one of the top employees. Now, suppose that a work-related project in which a number of employees, including Frank, are involved turns out very badly, losing the

company a great deal of money and causing some scandal. Under such circumstances, Anne's strong feeling of indignation for Frank could lead her to judge that it is he who is primarily responsible for the disaster, in spite of her having insufficient knowledge of the structure of the project or the role that he played in it to be able to rationally make such a judgment. This would be an example of what Leighton calls "seduction through favor or disfavor", where an individual's strong emotional feelings will cause them to judge an uncertain situation in a manner biased in favor of their emotions. Anne's experience of the situation will then be that of a situation in which Frank's incompetence has caused a great deal of harm, and this may well make a difference in the ends that she formulates and tries to pursue.

The other case of emotions causing an alteration in judgment that I will discuss here is what Leighton calls "seduction through perception." This occurs when the expectations engendered by an agent's strong emotional state lead him to mis-perceive a situation. To illustrate this phenomenon consider John, who has finally revealed his closely guarded feelings of affection for Mary, and found them reciprocated. His feelings of joy and emotional attachment for Mary perpetually on his mind, John now finds himself regularly thinking that he "sees" Mary in public places where he has no reason to believe her to be, based on the slightest similarities to her in anonymous strangers. Here John's strong emotional state and desire to see Mary creates an expectation that influences the way in which he perceives certain individuals. This difference in his perceptions will, of course, make differences in the way that he acts on certain occasions, e.g. waving to a total stranger, only to be shaken back into reality by the look of confusion on their face as they turn towards him.

So, here we have two cases in which emotion can affect the way in which the world is experienced, and Leighton gives three more cases of a similar nature. What all of these cases

have in common is that emotions make a difference in how an individual or situation in the world is judged to be. In short, emotions play a role, along with all of the elements of non-virtuous experiential content discussed in section II.ii above, in determining how the context of action is understood.

As noted in section III.ii on deliberation, the end that an agent aims at in general (her final end) will be determined by rational wish, while the particular end that an agent pursues at any given time will depend on the social role of the agent and the particular situation in which the agent finds herself. Further, I have followed Reeve and Wiggins in maintaining that deliberation in a context can be either deliberation about what particular end should be pursued in that context, or deliberation about the means to attaining a particular end, once such an end has been determined. Now, from this it should be clear that the agent's determination of the context of action, her understanding of what the context is, must come prior to her determination of the particular end to be pursued in that context, which in turn must come prior to her deliberation about the means to the attainment of that end. Since an agent's emotions play a role in determining how a context of action is interpreted by an agent, which in turn determines what end the agent will pursue and how she will pursue it, it is clear that the first part of the contribution of emotion to the content of practical experience comes specifically in the role that it plays in aiding or inhibiting the agent's judgment in properly interpreting the context of action. If an agent's emotions are mis-directed (attached to the wrong kinds of things) or too strongly or too weakly disposed (not habituated to the mean), then an agent will mis-interpret the context of action, and so will have a qualitatively different experience of it than they would have if their emotions were differently disposed. This is just to say that virtuous individuals, whose passions have been habituated to respond appropriately in a wide array of situations, will be more likely to

properly interpret the nature of the situations in which they find themselves than will other kinds of agents.

The second contribution that emotion makes to the content of practical experience becomes clear if it is born in mind that desire is, according to Aristotle, the source of all movement and action, and that emotion is a kind of desire. To put the point simply, the *wish* for goodness and the *love* of goodness are not the same thing. In the person of practical wisdom, whose rational wish is for genuine *Eudemonia* and who, in virtue of being practically wise, also has emotional dispositions that are all perfectly aimed at the mean, as well as knowledge of what this mean is, the rational wish for the good and the emotional love of the good will always coincide. However, it is equally possible to imagine rational wish (for the perceived good) and emotional desire (be it love, anger, fear, etc.) coming apart and being at odds with one another, as occurs, perhaps, in the case of the *akratic*.

The idea of a split in the desires, rational wish seeking one thing and the emotions seeking something else, suggests the possibility of a disunity in the interpretation of experience and motivation to act on the part of an agent. In such a case, the agent would experience a feeling of being torn, both about how to interpret her situation, and how to act within it. Whichever of the desires wins out in this conflict, the motivation to act on the part of the agent will be less strong, clear and resolute than it would be if the agent's rational wish and emotional desire were unified. *Thus, in a person of practical wisdom the emotions contribute to the unity of practical experience, lending an added halo of desirability to the objects and ends already chosen on the basis of rational wish, and a more solid motivation for their attainment in the consciousness of the agent.* To put it simply, the good, in particular and in general, that has been determined by rational wish and deliberation, will be experienced as *more desirable*, if the

emotions are also attuned to it and desire it, than it otherwise would, and this too is a contribution made by emotion, the desiring part of the appetitive part of the soul (the part that “listens to reason”), to the content of practical experience.

#### **IV. The Nature of the Content of Practical Experience: “what it’s like” to be virtuous**

##### **IV.i Summary of the Nature of the Content of Practical Experience; Three Additional Characteristics of Morally Salient features of experience**

At this point there are some conclusions that can be drawn about the nature of the content of practical experience. Prior theoretical and conceptual knowledge, as well as prior knowledge of particulars, the perceptual process and the ability to apply previous knowledge to current perceptions will all play a role in determining the content of experience in general, and the presence or absence of any of these things will make a difference to the way in which specifically practical experience occurs. The content of practical experience itself is contributed by *rational wish* and by the *emotions* on the basis of the perceptual and cognitive elements that are contributed by the other faculties of the soul to experience. Rational wish determines the over-arching end or goal for which the agent acts, the perceived good, while emotions will color the content of experience in terms of pain and pleasure and pursuit and avoidance. While rational wish and emotional desire may conflict in any number of ways, there will be no conflict in the case of the fully virtuous or practically wise agent that I have focused my attention on in this paper. I have discussed at some length how the goal desired by rational wish structures the experience of a situation in terms of potential paths to and constraints on its achievement in the case of deliberation, and how this same process occurs more or less automatically in the case of non-deliberative or immediate practical experience. Exactly which features will be morally salient for an agent will depend, not only on rational wish and emotion, but also on the role the

agent believes herself to be playing, and the domain of human concern or action that the agent finds herself in.

While these descriptions and analyses fall short of what might be hoped, it should be clear at this point that Aristotle's position that there is a qualitative difference between the conscious experiences of virtuous and non-virtuous agents is not an unsubstantiated one. There is space in the structure of practical experience as he seems to have conceived of it for the experience of morally salient features, features that will appear differently to different agents based on their character and moral knowledge. Further, Aristotle's account of virtue and of the faculties of the soul in his psychology assigns the production of such features of experience to specific faculties of the soul, their operation and interaction.

Beyond what is present in Aristotle's account of virtue and psychology, I think that there are at least three more conclusions that can be drawn about the nature of the content of specifically practical experience: morally salient features of experience are *dependent*, *irreducible* and *formal* in nature. I will briefly discuss each of these in turn.

First, all morally salient features of the content of practical experience will present themselves to the consciousness of any moral agent as dependent, either on determinate objects and properties present in experience, or on the situation being experienced as a whole. In this respect they are somewhat like secondary qualities such as color, taste and sound, which are traditionally considered to be different from but, in general, dependent on the more basic primary properties of objects, both in experience and in reality. However, morally salient features are experienced as more completely dependent on other properties<sup>18</sup> than are secondary qualities. Unlike color or sound, where it seems possible to imagine an experience of these qualities

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<sup>18</sup> Notably, morally salient features are experienced as inhering in or surrounding both primary and secondary qualities of objects.

completely by themselves and independent of any experientially observable substrates, morally relevant features will always be features *of* objects, situations and possibilities. Thus in the account of practical experience sketched above, there does not seem to be any room for what might be called “pure” experiences of value. Not even in the laboratory does it seem possible to create the experience of an “undifferentiated expanse of moral saliency” in a subject in the way that say, the experience of an undifferentiated expanse of green light might be presented to the eyes. It seems clear that every experience of a desirable object or course of action presupposes the experience of substances and their properties to be desired, or of situations within which to act, and would not be possible if these were not present in experience.

Second, at least as phenomena of consciousness, morally salient features of objects and situations are experienced as irreducible. To say this is simply to say that a complete description of the content of experience in terms of the substances, accidents and relations amongst them in a situation would not be enough to determine which objects or features of the experienced situation were morally salient or action guiding for an agent. It is only when the goals, emotions, social roles of the agent and the moral or social context in which action is to occur have been taken into account that the experienced saliencies in a situation will have been completely described. And even this case will depend in part on the contribution of the particular agent’s virtues and knowledge. To the agent, morally salient phenomena will always appear to be dependent on, but distinct from the objects and situations in which they inhere.

Finally, it seems clear that the morally salient features present in the content of practical experience must ultimately be formal in nature. By this I mean that they are experienced in every case in which desires and values are experienced, and yet there is nothing materially the same about their appearance, such that it would be possible to say something like “morally

salient features of situations always look green”. The reason for this, essentially, is the heterogeneity of the class of morally salient objects and features of situations. Practical experience clearly gives rise to moral saliences in a wide range of domains of action, including the political, the social, the aesthetic, and the intellectual, to name just a few of the more general genre that moral agents confront. Insofar as these domains and objects differ in almost every respect, other than being contexts of action, it is difficult to point to a phenomenologically describable feature of moral saliences in any of these situations that is common, apart from the presence of an agent with goals and desires, and the fact that these features do appear as irreducible dependent features of the objects and situations in which they are experienced. Moral saliency or relevance to the achievement of a desired end seem to attach themselves to objects and situations like halos, illuminating what is important, relevant or desirable, but not themselves being constituted by anything further.

#### **IV.ii Conclusion**

To summarize, the answer to the question “what is it like” to be a person of practical wisdom is: practical experience consists of the appearance of irreducible dependent formal features of objects and situations, in virtue of which elements of these objects and situations are perceived as morally salient and worthy of pursuit or avoidance relative to a wished for end, in the immediate and deliberative experiences of virtuous and non-virtuous agents. These elements are contributed by rational wish and by the passions, on the basis of how experience has been structured by the contributions of perception, prior knowledge, and the application of prior knowledge to current experience. What a subject experiences as morally salient, as well as the strength of their desires for an end, and their ability to achieve ends will all vary from subject to subject based on their rational and emotional dispositions, which is to say, their character.

While this conclusion is somewhat deflationary,<sup>19</sup> it does establish that Aristotle's account of virtue and psychology is capable of supporting the assertion that there is a qualitative difference between virtuous and non-virtuous experience. Insofar as this is the case, the existence of a coherent account of "what it's like" to be a virtuous agent in Aristotle simultaneously lends credibility both to the thesis that virtue ethics need not be a systematically vague or foundationless ethical position, and that systematic investigations in the philosophy of mind are closely related to the possibility of serious progress in moral and ethical theory in general.

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<sup>19</sup> At least for those who were hoping that virtuous experience would have some kind of intense and never-before dreamed of phenomenology akin to religious experiences or near death experiences.

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