Aristotelian Habits

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Abstract: Aristotle emphasises the role of habituation in our acquiring moral virtues, as well as other abilities. I discuss an independently engaging problem concerning the acquisition of abilities through practice, formulated in the context of Aristotle's account of virtue development. The problem consists in a tension between two plausible claims, one [A] concerning what is required for an agent to be acting on a decision, the other [B] concerning the view a novice should have of whether they could ever possible be making the decisions required for moral development. I recommend a solution: the self-blind novice response. That solution implies that self-blindness should be pervasive among Aristotelian moral developers. And that implication is confirmed by the fact that the necessarily rare state of self-aware expertise is an important part of the Aristotelian virtue of magnanimity.

1. The paper

I will discuss a problem concerning ability acquisition which I think is both general and independently engaging. In particular I consider its application within the framework of Aristotle's account of virtue acquisition: that we acquire virtues by habituation or practice (NE 2.1 1103a17-18; NE 2.1 and 2.4 for fuller discussion); that we acquire a virtue (as we acquire some other skills, abilities or habits) "by first exercising it" (NE 2.1, 1103a31)[1].

First some preliminaries. The details of Aristotle's account of the virtues (and their acquisition) are disputed. I want as far as possible to remain neutral on contentious interpretative questions though. Problems threaten in three main areas. First, discussion of a problem framed in terms of Aristotle's account of virtue acquisition had better get that account right. Second, my discussion will focus on Aristotle's notion of decision (prohairesis) and so I had better get that notion right too. Third, virtue acquisition is a prolonged process and – intuitively – doesn't end when a child 'comes of age'. I will be interested in the later stages of that process, where someone might be fairly reflectively engaged in their own moral development. But it might seem that Aristotle doesn't allow for much in the way of mature moral development. So that seems problematic.

[1] In what follows translations typically follow Ross/Urmson 1984 (in The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation), with departures indicated. Alternative translations are Irwin 1999, Rowe 2002 (Broadie/Rowe 2002) and Taylor 2006.
What Aristotle says at NE 2.1 is that moral virtue (arête êthikê) comes about through habit (ethos: Rowe 2002 prefers "habituation"). And the title of this paper adverts to that standard translation. But I will typically talk instead about acquiring a virtue through practice, and will not often use the term 'habit' or its cognates.
What characterises acquiring a virtue or developing an ability or learning a skill... through practice is that we acquire the virtue, ability, skill... "by first exercising it" (NE 2.1, 1103a31). At NE 2.1, 1103b21-22 Aristotle gives a crisp statement of the essential feature of state-acquisition through practice: "states arise out of like activities'). I will often refer summarily to this process as one in which someone *acquires the ability to φ through φ*-ing. That formula sounds fine for lots of the examples Aristotle provides and I use – someone acquires the ability to play the flute by playing the flute, someone learns to heal by healing etc. But it doesn't fit well with our natural ways of talking about virtue acquisition. There are two points. First virtues are normally referred to by abstract nouns ('courage', 'good-humour'). But what a virtue is (as Aristotle recognises, and as the formula requires) is a state or disposition (a hexis, NE 2.5, 1106a10-12 ; see Cat 8, 8b26-9a14 for more on the notion). Second, in addition to the unwieldy reference to a virtue as a disposition to φ there is the problem of providing an easy reference for *φ*. In lots of cases of acquisition by practice *φ* stands for what it is that the ability (disposition, skill...) is an ability to do. I acquire the ability to build through building. But there is generally no non-trivial way of specifying what a virtue like courage is a disposition to do – courage is the disposition to be courageous. These two points combine to make application of the formula *acquires the ability to φ through φ*-ing to the case of the virtues sound inevitably clumsy. But the underlying point should be clear. What it means to say that courage is acquired by practice is that someone acquires the disposition to act courageously by acting courageously (NE 2.1, 1103a34-1103b2; 2.4, 1105a17-19).

How can I hope to remain neutral? The idea is that my argument will reply only on some pretty uncontentious (perhaps because loosely stated) points about Aristotle's views.

The first uncontentious point is that virtues issue in decisions, that a virtuous person will (quite often) act in ways which express a decision; that a virtue is a 'prohairetic state.[2]' So, contrast a youngster who does not yet possess some virtue and the developed person who does possess that virtue. The former will not, while the latter will (sometimes) act in ways which express decisions appropriate to that virtue. So the practice or habituation by which an agent acquires a virtue will take that person from a state in which they cannot, to a state in which they (often) do, express the appropriate decisions in action.

The second is that decision is closely connected with, and in some way involves, deliberation[3].

And the third is that there are limits on what can be deliberated about; an agent's deliberation is constrained by what that agent believes they can achieve by their own efforts; I cannot deliberate about what I know I will not succeed in doing[4].

Now a more substantive move. Since decision involves deliberation and there are constraints on deliberation there are therefore the same constraints on decision as there are on deliberation. What does that mean? I mean that if I know that, in acting in a certain way I will not be X-ing, then I cannot, in acting in that way, be expressing a decision to X. Further if expression of a decision to X in the appropriate circumstances is what is generally required for the X virtue, and I know that in acting as I am in such circumstances I am not expressing a decision to X, then I ipso facto know that I do not possess the X virtue.

Back to contentious issues in Aristotelian scholarship. The argument in this paper could do with examples. And, as is well known, Aristotle liked to use crafts as an example in talking about virtues. But there are also important differences between crafts and virtues, as Aristotle recognises, and it is a matter of debate how much weight Aristotle puts on those differences

[2] See NE 2.4 passim

[3] See NE 3.2-3 passim

[4] NE 3.3, 1112a28-30, 1112a33-34, 1112b24-28; NE 6.2, 1139b5-8; NE 6.5, 1140a30-32.

in his account of the virtues. Will it then be safe for me to appeal to craft examples as often as I do? I think the answer is yes, so long as two conditions hold. First that the deliberation involved (in whatever way) in craft decisions is subject to the same constraints as the deliberation involved (in whatever other way) in virtue decisions. Second that all that is required for the problem I will talk about is that the deliberation involved in virtue decisions be subject to the constraint that I cannot deliberate about what I know I will not succeed in doing. I think those two conditions do hold, and I hope that will be clear as I go on. So I will use the crafts as an example. But not my only example. My other favourite is the new parent developing parental virtues through practice. At one point in time people don't possess the parental virtues (they aren't parents). At a later time many do possess them. So it seems that many people do acquire parental virtues; and the most obvious way is through parenting, habituation and practice. But this type of virtue acquisition, occurring later in life and perhaps involving some reflection seems un-Aristotelian[5]. What to say? Well, if Aristotle's own conception of virtue acquisition concentrates almost entirely on virtue acquisition in the young, and cannot be adapted to accommodate virtues which are acquired by practice at a more mature stage, then for me at least it begins to lose its philosophical interest. We lead safer and more compartmentalised lives than the citizens of a Greek polis. I cannot honestly say that I have ever been in a situation which would require an exercise of Aristotelian courage, I have had an easy life. But there is of course the phenomenon of people recognising, eg as a political situation develops, that courage is increasingly called for (looming political dangers, the real possibility of a military draft, courage required in deciding whether to fight or to refuse the draft etc). What we hope is that Aristotle's – an Aristotelian – account of virtue acquisition should be able to accommodate that sort of case, even if rare for an Athenian citizen. And of course it can. There are continuities between the trials I have endured and predictable situations which will genuinely require the virtue of courage. The acquisition of the parental virtues through parenting differs from this case only in being a more striking example, since the discontinuities between not being a parent and being a parent are so much more radical than those between the annoying trials I've faced so far and situations calling for courage. But it is equally a case in which people really do acquire virtues as their lives continue.

[5] As might seem obvious from Aristotle's texts. See eg NE 2.1, 1103b24-26 "It makes no small difference, then, whether we form habits of one kind or of another from our very youth; it makes a very great difference, or rather all the difference."

2. The Problem

The problem I am interested in is this. If we conceive of practice as we have to in order for it to inculcate virtue, we are committed to two conflicting claims:

[A] If someone knows that in doing F they will not be X-ing well then their doing F cannot express a decision to X

and

[B] In acquiring the X-related virtue(s) through practice someone must often act in ways which express a decision to X while knowing that they will not succeed in X-ing well.

What is meant by the weasel phrase conceive of practice as we have to in order for it to inculcate virtue? The thought is that the 'practice' which will inculcate virtue can't remain externally driven. It might start out that way, but if the novice is eventually to be able to make decisions characteristic of the X-virtue then at some stage they have to 'give it a genuine shot', 'have a go for themselves', act authentically, as it were: what they have to do, I will claim, is make decisions for themselves. Consider the new parent. At some stage they have to act for themselves, without relying on the childcare book, webpage or friend (more than they should)[6].

So now a bit more detail on what is involved in making a decision, and acting in a way which expresses a decision. As mentioned, the important point here is that decision involves deliberation, and that deliberation involves looking for appropriate or effective ways of behaving, with something further in view. Aristotle says that a decision involves a wish (boulêsis) for some end, accompanied by deliberation about 'the things towards the ends'[7]. A decision is a certain type of desire: a deliberative desire, a rationally generated desire, an

[6] Compare the sullen parent, who isn't really on board with the childcare project at all. Mere stubborn repetition of something they've been told to do ('look, *that's* how you change a nappy') won't do anything to make them a good parent. The contrast, and the idea of 'acting authentically', should be familiar. If I am to develop the ability to play chess, I have to 'play properly' as it were: I have make moves with the aim of winning. Moving pieces in order to reproduce openings I have learned from books, or in order to impress my teacher, won't help me develop the ability to play chess. Or if a student is to become good at philosophy, then she has from the very start to approach the subject seriously, and give genuine answers to the questions she is faced with. Suppose the question for an early tutorial is whether euthanasia is permissible. A student whose aim in answering that question is accurately to reproduce points which have been made in lectures is not thereby on the road to becoming a good philosopher. What the student needs to aim at is getting to the bottom of that question.

[7] NE 3.3 1112b12 ta pros ta telê

intellectual desire[8]. A decision is a desire to perform some action which results from working out (through deliberation) that that the prospective action is the only or best way to achieve some aim. Aristotle says that a doctor does not deliberate about whether, but about how, to heal[9]. The point is that a discipline like healing (X-ing) considered in itself has an internal goal describable as healing well (X-ing well). In some cases X-ing well will come to obtaining some good product of the appropriate sort (someone builds well when they produce good houses). In other cases that will not be so – parenting well, acting well in danger, living well aren't a matter of producing anything[10]. Now insofar as someone is engaged in the discipline they do not deliberate about whether to engage in it well[11]. So the (relevant) deliberations of the doctor, builder, new parent...will have the following sort of structure: 'given that I want to build well and construct the house as designed, I need to provide support for a large roof, and therefore to build strong walls; so the walls have to be thick, and therefore I need mortar which is strong but slow to set, and slightly flexible; a good way to get that would be by mixing cement, sand and water in (roughly) these proportions; so now I need to ...'[12]. When these deliberations bring me to something which is immediately open to me, and when I act accordingly (I actually do mix cement, sand and water in the proportions optimal for mortar of the required consistency), then my action expresses a decision.

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[8] NE 6.2, 1139b4-5

[9] NE 3.3, 1112b11-15.

[10] See the contrast at NE 6.4 between making (poiêsis) and acting (praxis). Describing the internal goal of the X-activity as X-ing well is intended as a way of saying something which will capture both those (very different) cases.

[11] This doesn't involve denying either of the following two points. First, someone might deliberate about eg whether to become a builder in the first place, and about whether to preserve their skill and remain a builder (as opposed, for example, to allowing it to be lost through lack of activity). Second, a skilled builder might deliberate about whether to do some building right now rather than, for example, taking the day off. But what we have in each of those cases is deliberation about whether to pursue the internal goal of building, and such deliberation will compare the advantages and disadvantages of building (I get paid, but on the other hand it is hard work) with the advantages and disadvantages of some alternative (the weather is warm and it would be nice to lie on the beach, but on the other hand I have bills to pay) relative to some further role with its own internal goal (I am a parent, and a parent does not deliberate about whether to support his children).
Note that these remarks are intended only to support the weak claim that if I do deliberate about whether to acquire or exercise some ability, then that deliberation must be relative to some further goal which is being held fixed. I am steering clear of the much more difficult – and much discussed – question of whether it is possible to deliberate about one's ultimate goals. NE 1.4, 1095a17-22 suggests that there is an internal goal to living a human life which can be schematically characterised as being happy, living and doing well. The problems arise when we consider Aristotle's position on the question of whether and how someone can deliberate about what the pursuit of happiness or living well would be for them, either in general or in the immediate circumstances.

[12] See NE 3.3, 1112b15-19; for a case of medical deliberation Met Z 7, 1032b5-22; compare the practical syllogism at MA 7, 701a18-23.

Suppose that's a good enough explication, at least as far as it goes, of what it is for an action to express a decision. Then we are in a position to assess the plausibility of each of [A] and [B]. For if one or both of [A] and [B] were implausible, then we should conclude that the implausible one is false, in which case no interesting tension would arise between [A] and [B].

Why then should [A] seem plausible? Here is one line of argument. As mentioned, the crucial point is that decision involves deliberation, and there are constraints on what we can deliberate about – in particular, I can only deliberate about what I can achieve by my own efforts. It follows then that I cannot deliberate about what I know I will not succeed in doing. Imagine a general who wants to command his troops well and win the battle (the internal goal of his expertise in military strategy). Suppose a certain action (eg ordering the troops on the left flank to advance) does seem possible to him (eg he can communicate with them). Still, that cannot be the only action which is possible for him. For if it is possible to order the troops on the left to advance then it will also be possible to order them to retreat or to remain where they are. Why then does the general order them to advance? Presumably because he has worked out that doing so is the only or the best way of achieving the internal goal of his military activity (namely to command the troops well and win the battle). But now suppose that he knows in advance that ordering the troops on the left to advance will not be commanding well and will not lead to winning the battle. In that case the link between the action which presents itself to the general as immediately possible (ordering the advance) and the desired goal from which he has worked backwards to the action (commanding well and winning the battle) is broken, since the general takes himself to know that ordering an advance will not be commanding well and will not lead to winning the battle. And if that were the case then the general's military deliberations would never take him to the (feasible) option of ordering an advance. Now that can all be summed up by saying that if the general's performing a certain action (ordering an advance) expresses a decision to X (to command well and win the battle) then it is not also the case that the general knows that in performing that action (ordering an advance) he will not succeed in X-ing (commanding well and winning the battle). And that claim is equivalent to (it is the contrapositive of)

[A] If someone knows that in doing F they will not be X-ing well then their doing F cannot express a decision to F.

Here is another line of argument in support of [A]. Talk of an action expressing a decision to X is shorthand for a claim about the desire which motivates the action. An action which expresses a decision to X is motivated by a desire to X which results from working out through deliberation that that action is the best or only way to achieve the internal goal of X-ing – namely to X well[13]. If a certain action – for example, fastening together in a particular way this many rafters made of that type of wood – expresses a decision to build a house then what motivates the action is that agent wants to fasten together these rafters in this way because it is feasible to do so and they have worked out that doing so is what's required in order to support a roof of the type wanted for the house building project to hand, and therefore for completing the project well. Or again, if feeding the baby with this comforting food right now expresses a decision to parent well then it's feasible (there's food available) and the father has worked out that doing that is the best or only way to be a good parent.

Suppose then that the locution express a decision to X in [A] is expanded in line with that explication to give

[A1] If an agent knows that in doing F they will not be X-ing well then their doing F cannot be motivated by a desire to X which is the result of working out that doing F is the best or only way to achieve the goal of X-ing well

[A1] is more unwieldy than [A], but its plausibility is more apparent. Consider the apprentice learning to build by building and the new parent, and take two episodes in their development. The apprentice is about to contribute something to the building project, to mix the mortar for the north wall; the parent is trying to get the baby to sleep. The possibility of a certain action presents itself – add a bit more sand to the mortar, give the baby more milk. The apprentice and the parent go for it. Now there is a perspective on that episode which is distinct from that

[13] But the converse isn't true, namely that if an action is motivated by a desire to X which results from working out through deliberation that that action is the best or only way of X-ing well then that action expresses a decision to X. That cannot be right, in view of the Broadie/Anscombe point that the calculating akratic who pursues a neighbour's partner in a shrewd and intelligent fashion is not nevertheless acting on a decision – indeed, qua akratic they are acting on appetite and against their decision. That's to say that we need to be sensitive to the distinction between
(a) if an action is motivated by a desire to X which results from working out ... then that action expresses a decision to X
which is false, and
(b) if an action expresses a decision to X then it is motivated by a desire to X which results from working out ...
The second (b) is (at the least) less obviously false than (a), and is all that is required to sustain the argument which follows. Note that (b) is intended to be sufficiently loose to accommodate cases in which someone acts virtuously without immediately prior thought (NE 3.8, 1117a17-22) – perhaps make that clearer by adding a further qualification to (b) to give
(b*) if an action expresses a decision to X then either it is motivated by a desire to X which results from working out that ..., or there would be such a motivating desire were the agent to work out that ...

of the apprentice or the new parent, namely the perspective of the expert, the person who does possess the virtue which the novice is seeking to acquire through practice – in this case, the master builder or the experienced good parent. In learning to build (by building), and learning to bring up a child (by bringing up a child) each of the apprentice and parent is consciously trying to acquire the ability or virtue which they conceive of the expert as possessing. Each considers the expert's perspective as an ideal to which they aspire, and which they are seeking to attain.

Now what the novice (apprentice or parent) has in fact done is opt to add more sand to the mortar, and give the baby more milk. What should the novice's attitude be to the expert's perspective on that situation?[14] The novice wants to be able to alight on the option that the expert would alight on, and to do so in the way that the expert would – the apprentice wants to build well, the young father wants to parent well. That is exactly why they are engaged in acquiring the skills of the master builder or the virtues of the good and experienced parent. What the expert would do is to plump for the alternative which is sensitively optimised for the project at hand (eg the master builder would mix the mortar in light of an appreciation of what's required for the immediate building project, of the differences that variations in the composition of mortar make to its properties, and of how much it matters to get it right, and to what degree of accuracy, at this stage of the job; likewise mutatis mutandis for the experienced good parent). But the novice knows that whichever option they went for (adding more sand, giving the baby more milk) will not in fact have been reached in that way, by sensitive optimisation for the project at hand, and as the result of building expertise or parental virtue – because the novice knows that they are not an expert, and so knows that they don't have the expertise or virtue which would by definition inform an action which was the best option in the circumstances. To summarise: the novice wants to X well, that is, to X as the expert would; but the novice knows that she doesn't have the expertise or virtue which would inform X-ing well (since she knows she is a novice)[15]; so the novice knows that she will not X well[16]. And what [A1] says – plausibly – is that given that the novice knows that in

[14] The fact that it is this question which brings out the plausibility of [A1] is significant. For more on this see the discussion later in the paper at section 3.

[15] See later for the significance of this point.

[16] See NE 2.4, 1105a26-30 "Again the case of the arts and that of the [virtues] are not similar; for the products of the arts have their goodness in themselves, so that it is enough that they should have a certain character, but if the acts that are in accordance with the [virtues] have themselves a certain character it does not follow that they are done justly or temperately"

doing such and such she will not be X-ing well, then her acting in that way (adding more sand, giving more milk) can't be motivated by a desire which results from an expert's deliberations about what building well or parenting well would be in these circumstances. For ex hypothesi the novice is not an expert. So the novice doesn't have a full understanding of quite why and how adjusting the consistency of the mortar or giving the baby extra milk contributes as it does to building this house well or bringing up the baby well. And since the novice doesn't have that understanding it follows that the novice hasn't alighted on the particular action by appealing to that understanding in working out what it's best to do. The novice's action can't be motivated by a deliberative desire – can't express a decision – because the novice knows that they lack the expertise required to make a decision in this situation.

Those are my arguments in support of [A]. But I may already have stumbled badly on an ambiguity in the idea that someone develops the X-virtue by acting as the expert would act. That idea covers two distinct claims regarding what someone needs to do in order to develop the X-virtue:

(1) A novice developing the X virtue needs repeatedly to perform actions which are such that the expert would in fact also decide on those actions.

(2) A novice developing the X virtue needs to make decisions in the way that the expert would make them.

The fact that these are distinct is clear from NE 5.8, and in particular 1136a3-4: "Similarly, a man is just when he acts justly by [decision] (proelomenos 'as a result of decision', 'if his decision causes him to do justice'), but he acts justly if he merely acts voluntarily". And the distinction is crucial here. My two earlier arguments for [A] relied on assuming that Aristotle's account of virtue acquisition commits him to (2). For they turned on the thought that if a novice knows that they are not an expert then they know that they will not make decisions in the way that the expert would make them. But one may doubt that Aristotle's

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It's not that the novice knows that whatever they do will be different from what the expert would have done (it might turn out that the parent gives more milk, and in fact that's exactly the thing to do). The parent is trying to develop parental virtue. and in that case – by contrast to the arts – the goodness is not just in the product. The new parent doesn't just want the results of parental virtue (the outcomes which result from decisions which manifest parental virtue) – they want parental virtue. So, in effect, the question posed is: given that you are someone who is developing the parental virtues, do you think the action you are undertaking right now is an exercise of the parental virtues, ie a decision to parent well? And the plausible answer is: no, I know it isn't an exercise of the parental virtue, because I know I don't possess the parental virtues.

account of virtue acquisition does commit him to (2) as distinct from (1)[17]. (1) is weaker than (2), and in particular is far too weak to sustain my arguments for [A]. For even if a novice knows that they are not an expert, that gives them no reason to think that the action they perform (adding more sand, giving the baby milk) is different from the action which the expert would perform, even if it is an action which has been arrived at differently from the way in which the expert would arrive at it. The new parent gives the baby more milk, and perhaps that is precisely what the expert possessing the parental virtues would have done. So if acquisition of eg parental virtue requires only (1) – as opposed to (2) – then there will be no reason to suppose that [A] is a plausible claim about an Aristotelian account of virtue acquisition.

Well, here's an argument that Aristotle should be committed to (2) over and above (1). It rests on the thought that (1) leaves the phenomenon of virtue acquisition essentially mysterious in a way that (2) does not. I start from the following:

> This is why [decision] (prohairesis) cannot exist either without thought (nous) and intellect (dianoia) or without a moral state (êthikê hexis); for good action (eupraxia) and its opposite cannot exist without a combination of intellect (dianoia) and character (ethos)
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> NE 6.2, 1139a33-35

Unsurprisingly the interpretation of this passage is disputed. But perhaps I can take from it the thought that someone who lacks a moral character of a certain type cannot make decisions

[17] This is to put it mildly. Isn't it obvious from NE 2.4, 1105b5-10 that it's (1) that Aristotle has in mind: "Action, then, are called just and temperate when they are such as the just or temperate man would do; but it is not the man who does these that is just and temperate, but the man who also does them as just and temperate men do them. It is well said, then, that it is by doing just acts that the just man is produced, and by doing temperate acts the temperate man."
And the argument which I offer is just the stubborn report that I don't see how repeatedly performing actions which *don't* express X-decisions can turn me into the sort of person who does express X-decisions.
But at least the target is a bit clearer. What's at issue here is not the desiring aspect of virtue. The question is not eg how can I come to be the sort of person who wants to behave courageously or temperately by repeatedly acting as a person who is courageous and temperate would act? There's a familiar and plausible answer to that question concerning the internalisation of the pleasures of acting virtuously. The emphasis is rather on the intellectual aspect of decision. The question is rather: how can I come to be the sort of person who is able to act in ways that express decisions, that are sensitively optimised for the situation at hand, by repeatedly acting in ways which don't express a decision, and which I don't arrive at by sensitive optimisation for the situation at hand? And perhaps it's not clear what the answer to that question is (which would be interesting).
Notice that my examples are deliberately chosen to divert attention away from the connection of habituation to the desiderative aspect of virtue, and correspondingly towards the contribution of practice to the practical insight required for virtue, since they are examples in which it is easier to imagine the desiderative component given: the new parent who naturally wants to be a good parent, and who nevertheless develops parental virtue in the Aristotelian way through practice, becoming a good parent through acts of good parenting. Likewise I assume that the apprentice wants to be a good builder, that the chess novice wants to be a good player etc.

of the appropriate sort. A courageous person can make courage-expressive decisions and act accordingly, while someone who lacks a formed character as regards courage cannot. Now a novice is precisely someone who is developing a character of a certain sort. The young person does not yet have either a courageous or a cowardly character, the new parent is not yet either a good or a bad parent. And that suggests that the novice does not act in ways that express the appropriate decisions[18]. In that case then an account of virtue acquisition needs to explain how an agent moves from repeatedly acting in ways that do not express a decision to X – ie from habituation and practice – to a condition in which they (sometimes) act in ways that do express a decision. Now consider the contrast between (1) and (2). Which of those more plausibly accommodates Aristotle's formulaic statement of his account of virtue acquisition at NE 2.1, 1103b21-22: that "states arise out of like activities" (ek tôn homoiôn hexeis ginontai)? (1) gives Aristotle reason to say that

(1*) repeatedly acting in ways that don't express a decision to X can bring one to being the sort of person whose actions do express a decision to X

whereas (2) would license

(2*) repeatedly acting in ways that do express a decision to X can bring one to being the sort of person whose actions do express a decision to X.

It is reasonable to think (isn't it?) that (2*) cleaves closer to Aristotle's formulaic statement that does (1*). To put in another way, (1*) leaves it a mystery how it is that repeatedly acting in one sort of way – a way that doesn't express a decision to X – can result in a state of character which enables one to act in a significantly different sort of way – the way that does express a decision to X. (2*) on the other hand doesn't involve that degree of mystery. (2*) requires only that we accept something, failure to recognise which is, according to Aristotle, 'the mark of a thoroughly senseless person', namely that 'it is from the exercise of activities on particular objects (tou energein peri hekasta that states of character (hai hexeis) are produced' (NE 3.5, 1114a8-9).

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[18] Does it? Consider some virtue (eg temperance). It can't be true that it is only the temperate (or the indulgent or the insensible) who make decisions, since Aristotle says that the incontinent agent acts on the basis of appetite and against (contrary to) his decision – and that may suggest that the incontinent agent makes a decision, but fails to act on it. So it's not true that its only people of settled character who make decisions.
The argument above attempts to side-step this problem by talking of the agent who acts in ways that express decisions. And clearly that akratic doesn't act in a way that accord with his decision. But this manoeuvre isn't going to work, since the continent agent does act in ways that express his decision, although he has to struggle against his appetites to do so: NE 3.2 1111b13-15 'Again, the incontinent man acts with appetite but not with [decision]; while the continent man on the contrary acts with [decision] , but not with appetite (proairoumenos *men, epithumôn d' ou*)'. And compare NE 7.1, 1145b13-14 'while the continent man, knowing that his appetities are bad, does not follow them because of his reason (dia ton logon).'

It may seem though that this cannot be a good argument, since what is required by (2) and (2*) is patently paradoxical – namely that a novice, who cannot make the appropriate decisions, comes to be someone, an expert, who can make the appropriate decisions by means of repeatedly making the appropriate decisions. But the accusation of paradox is premature. For the issue of whether there is genuine paradox here is precisely the issue of whether [A] and [B] are genuinely in conflict. As we will see, I have a suggestion about how to resolve the conflict between [A] and [B] – the so-called Blind Novice Strategy – which suggestion will also remove the appearance of paradox from (2) and (2*).

Where does this leave my arguments for [A]? The charge was that those arguments rely on an Aristotelian commitment to (2) rather than (1), whereas Aristotle is in fact committed only to (1) and not to (2). The argument of the preceding two paragraphs was intended to persuade you that an Aristotlelian should accept (2) and not just (1). If that argument was successful then perhaps my arguments for [A] and [B] also stand, but if I'm wrong about an Aristotelian commitment to (2) rather than (1) then my arguments for [A] are in trouble. I guess this is something that we can talk about in discussion – I'm not confident on what to think at present.

Further argument in support of (2) emerges when we turn from assessing the plausibility of [A] to the plausibility of [B]

[B] In acquiring the X-related virtue(s) through practice someone must often act in ways which express a decision to X while knowing that they will not succeed in X-ing well.

along with its more clumsy expansion

[B1] In acquiring the X-related virtue(s) through practice someone must often act in ways which are motivated by a desire to X which is the result of working out that doing that is the best or only way to attain the goal of X-ing, while knowing that they will not succeed in X-ing well

For one component of [B] and [B1] says exactly what (2) says: that an apprentice acquiring building skill through building has (at least sometimes) to perform actions which express a decision to build, and that the new parent acquiring parental virtues has (at least sometimes) to perform actions which express a decision to parent well. Once again, why suppose that true?

Building and parenting are extended and complex projects. In part that is why each requires skill or virtue to be performed well. Building well involves co-ordinating a wide range of sub-activities (planning foundations, erecting walls etc) and tuning the performance of each appropriately to that of the others in order to construct a house as designed. Building skill enables the trained builder to work out what is required for building well, and to connect that with something feasible and practicable in the here and now. That involves deliberative sensitivity – the ability to select and focus appropriately on the various relevant considerations (to think about the right things and to give them the right weight). The novice is trying to acquire that deliberative sensitivity, so that they can act as the expert acts and with the insight the expert has, and thereby alight on actions which are optimised for the internal goal of the project at hand – and they are doing so by practice (learning to build by building, learning to parent by parenting). Now if the novice's practice is to be successful then it must (somehow) make the apprentice aware of how it is that the differential exercise of the various sub-abilities involved in building contributes to achieving the internal goal of building skill. It is only if the apprentice becomes thus aware that she will understand how to adjust the exercise of those different sub-abilities so as to contribute to the internal goal of the project at hand. And only if she understands that will she be able to deliberate and work back from that internal goal to see what's required for exercising this particular sub-ability right now (eg mixing the sand, cement and water into mortar of the right consistency and properties for the house under construction). If the apprentice's mixing the mortar in such and such proportions were always externally motivated, say by a desire to do what the expert says, or to follow the instructions in the builder's manual, then it will not be tracking the deliberative sensitivity required to work it out for herself. At a certain stage of practice the apprentice needs to mix just this much sand, cement and water because she conceives of doing that as the best contribution to the internal goal of the project: building well. That is to say, at a certain stage of her practice the apprentice needs to start making decisions for herself rather than following instructions or guessing. For decisions are characterised by being arrived at in a certain way, and what the apprentice needs to do is to alight on feasible courses of action in that way rather than in any of the other ways in which one could alight on a course of action which merely coincides with the action which would be decided upon[19]. That gives one component

[19] Isn't this how it must appear to the novice? See NE 2.4, 1105a26-30 "Again the case of the arts and that of the [virtues] are not similar; for the products of the arts have their goodness in themselves, so that it is enough that they should have a certain character, but if the acts that are in accordance with the [virtues] have themselves a

of [B] and [B1]: in acquiring the constructive virtues (ie those of the good builder) through building an apprentice must often perform actions which express a decision to build. And likewise mutatis mutandis for the agent acquiring the parental virtues through practice

What about the other component of [B] and [B1], which says that the apprentice knows that they will not succeed in doing what it is that they need to be doing, namely performing actions which express a decision to build? What the apprentice knows is that she will not succeed in building well; that is, in building as the expert would; that is, in building in such a way as displays the right sensitivity in focusing on the right sub-tasks and tuning their performance correctly to the goal of producing a house. They know that they will not succeed in that because they know they are a novice and not an expert. Consequently they know that they lack full understanding of how and why variations in mortar consistency contribute to building a house well. And since they know that they lack that understanding they cannot draw on that understanding in order to deliberate to a particular way of mixing the mortar, and so their actions will not be an instance of building well. Again, likewise mutatis mutandis for the novice developing the parental virtues through practice.

3. A Solution

What to say? The problem raised by the conflict between [A] and [B] is in part a sceptical one. The dialectical pressure is generated by [B], and in particular by its focus on the following (sceptical) question addressed to the novice in the course of practice: "if you were to ask yourself, as you now perform F and thereby express a decision to X, whether your doing F does express a decision to X, what answer should you give?" The moral of the preceding section was that the novice (the building apprentice, the new parent) should answer that she knows her doing F will not express a decision to X (since she knows that she is a novice and not an expert, and so cannot have deliberated as required in order to X well as an expert would – since she knows she does not possess the virtue she aspires to acquire). But notice the presupposition of that question ('if you were to ask yourself as you now perform F'); and the support I offered for the novice's answer ('since she knows that she is a novice

certain character it does not follow that they are done justly or temperately". The parent is aiming to develop parental virtue. and in that case – by contrast to the arts – the goodness is not just in the product. The new parent doesn't just want the results of parental virtue (the outcomes which result from decisions which manifest parental virtue) – they want parental virtue.

and not an expert'). My suggestion now is that the best response to the conflict between [A] and [B] is, in effect, to deny that presupposition and remove that support. We acknowledge that if a novice asks themselves whether their acting thus and so, here and now, does manifest a decision (to X) then they should conclude that they know it doesn't. But the consequence to draw is that a novice must not ask themselves that question. Further if, as she acts, the novice makes herself aware of her novitiate status ('I am a novice and not an expert') then the sceptical question will inevitably arise. And so the novice must not be aware of her novitiate status as she acts in the course of developing the X-related virtues through practice (acquiring the X-related virtue through repeatedly X-ing well). I will refer to this as the self-blind novice response.

This response is parallel to a possible approach to sceptical problems concerning theoretical knowledge. We have certain ways of acquiring theoretical knowledge (eg if I wish to acquire knowledge of the colours of apples, then (roughly) I get hold of the apples, bring them into good light, and look at them). And there are considerations which, if I reflect on them, will logically block my acquisition of theoretical knowledge in that way. For example, if, as I hold the apple in front of my eyes, I reflect that I could be a brain in a vat – more generally, if I run through sceptical arguments to myself - then my knowledge acquisition will be blocked. What conclusion should we draw from that? Not that we should give in to these sceptical challenges to the acquisition of theoretical knowledge, but rather that we should not reflect on these sceptical challenges as we go about acquiring theoretical knowledge of the world. In the words of Bernard Williams: "reflection might destroy knowledge"[20]

The situation is much the same as regards practical knowledge. We have certain ways of acquiring practical knowledge (eg if I want to know how to build or how to parent well then I practice). Part of what that involves is acting in ways which express decisions. But there are questions which, if I reflect on them, will block that process. In order to acquire the virtues I want, I have (at some stage) to act in ways which express decisions (first component of [B]); if I know that the action I'm performing *isn't* an act of X-ing well then I can't in thus acting be expressing a decision to X; but if the question arises then I do know that the virtue-acquiring action I'm now performing isn't an act of X-ing well. The conclusion to draw is not

[20] Williams 1985/2011 pp.164, 185

that virtues aren't inculcated through practice (they obviously are[21]), but that we must not go in for those reflections (just as we must not reflect on sceptical possibilities when gathering information about the world)[22].

Notice finally where the self-blind novice response leaves us as regards the contrast mentioned earlier between these two claims regarding what is required of someone for virtue acquisition

(1) A novice developing the X virtue needs repeatedly to perform actions which are such that the expert would in fact also decide on those actions.

(2) A novice developing the X virtue needs to make decisions in the way that the expert would make them.

The earlier worry – to rehearse it here – was that while Aristotle was committed to (1), he was not committed to (2); but it was (2) that I appealed to in my argument for the plausibility of [A]; so that argument fails, and the interesting tension between [A] and [B] does not arise for an Aristotelian account of virtue acquisition. My reaction to this worry was to claim that an Aristotelian should be committed to (2) rather than (1). For endorsing (1) forces one to claim that

(1*) repeatedly acting in ways that don't express a decision to X can bring one to being the sort of person whose actions do express a decision to X

whereas adoption of (2) would instead license

(2*) repeatedly acting in ways that do express a decision to X can bring one to being the sort of person whose actions do express a decision to X.

And my argument was then that (2*) constitutes a less mysterious account of virtue acquisition than does (1*), and an account which cleaves closer to Aristotle's formulaic statement on the topic at NE 2.1, 1103b21-22: that "states arise out of like activities" (ek tôn homoiôn hexeis ginontai).

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[21] NE 3.5, 1114a8-10 "Now not to know that it is from the exercise of activities on particular objects that states of character are produced is the mark of a thoroughly senseless person"

[22] This would not be interesting if it were a point simply about human psychology - that our confidence drains away if our status as beginners is too apparent to us. But it is no more a matter of psychology than is the parallel point about theoretical knowledge. There is indeed a merely psychological point which could be made about theoretical knowledge. Suppose I am taking a multiple choice biology exam, and that as the questions come up, answers strike me. It may very well be that if I pause at every question, and ask myself how I know that's the answer, and where that answer came from, then my confidence will evaporate. But the conflict between [A] and [B] is not a matter of psychology. There is a conceptual difficulty facing anyone who seeks to develop the X-related virtue through acting in ways which express a decision to X while knowing that they will thereby not be X-ing well.

Now that may well have seemed a fishy argument at the time, if only because (2*) itself looks patently paradoxical. It appears to require that a novice, who cannot make the appropriate decisions, comes to be someone, an expert, who can make the appropriate decisions by means of repeatedly making the appropriate decisions. But with the self-blind novice strategy on the table we are now in a position – as promised - to replace (2*) by something more nuanced. For the upshot of that strategy is to insert a clause into (2*) to give

(2**) repeatedly acting in ways that do express a decision to X, so long as the question of whether they express a decision to X is not raised, can bring one to being the sort of person whose actions do express a decision to X.

Of course (2**) may seem no more attractive than (2*). But the reason it is supposed to be so is that it builds into the account of virtue acquisition what I see at the core of the response to the practically sceptical problem which drives the tension between [A] and [B]. Acting in ways that express decisions is the significant difference between the virtuous and those developing towards virtue. Aristotle is correct to say that we acquire the virtues though practice. But there is a prima facie problem which turns on the possibility of raising a certain practically sceptical problem. The conclusion is that that problem must not be raised (for conceptual reasons), and that the moral student must not be aware of their student status. And (2**) sums all that up, in making it plain that whether or not some action of mine does express a decision can rest (among other things) on whether or not I am self-aware concerning my possession of what is required in order to make a decision.

4. Exceptional Virtue

How does any of this connect with anything we might expect to find in Aristotle? The tension between [A] and [B] arises for those engaged in development (moral or otherwise) through practice – acquiring the virtue which enables one to X well through repeatedly X-ing well. But how common are moral developers in the Aristotelian ethical scheme? Again this is contested, and I claim no decisive contribution to the debate. But there are those who advocate a ‘realistic’ reading of Aristotle’s treatment of the virtues, in contrast to the

widespread 'idealising' approaches[23] according to which the virtuous agent[24] is a practically unattainable paragon – a person who, for example, never voluntarily performs a bad action[25], and who always and in every situation thinks of and prefers what virtue requires[26]. These more 'realistic' interpretations seek to accommodate texts in which Aristotle talks about virtuous agents in graded terms, much more familiar from our experience of the ways in which moral virtue shows up in the complexities of human life; and texts in which he appears to countenance ethical development[27]. Further, someone taking a 'realistic' as opposed to 'idealising' approach to Aristotle's characterisation of the virtuous agent and the (different?) virtues would think that moral development might be common among virtuous people; and therefore that refraining from explicit ethical self-assessment, as recommended by the self-blind novice response, should be pervasive in the lives of those Aristotelian agents who are 'ordinarily' virtuous.

But on any reading of Aristotle's account of the virtues there certainly is a type who can face the sceptical question "if you were to ask yourself as you now perform F and thereby express a decision to X, whether your doing F does express a decision to X, what answer should you give?" This is the person who possesses the Aristotelian virtue of magnanimity

[23] The terminology of an 'idealization interpretation' as contrasted with a 'realistic interpretation' is due to Curzer 2005.

[24] A monolith, if we emphasise opaque claims such as (i) it is not possible to possess any individual virtue without possessing phronêsis, and (ii) possession of phronêsis brings possession of every other moral virtue. See NE 6.13, 1144b30-1145a6.

[25] NE 4.9, 1128b28-29

[26] NE 1.10, 1100b18-20

[27] See for example NE 10.3 1173a18-21 where Aristotle refers to "justice and the other [virtues] in respect of which we plainly say that people of a certain character are so more or less, and act more or less in accordance with these [virtues]; for people may be more just or brave, and it is possible also to act justly or temperately more or less". Or this optimistic remark on the prodigal agent at NE 4.1, 1121a20-27: "For he (sc the prodigal) is easily cured by age and by poverty, and thus he may move towards the middle state. For he has the characteristics of the liberal man, since he both gives and refrains from taking, though he does neither of these in the right manner or well. Therefore if he were brought to do so by habituation or in some other way, he would be liberal; for he will then give to the right people, and will not take from the wrong sources. That is why he thought not have not a bad character; it is not the mark of a wicked or ignoble man to go to excess in giving and not taking, but only of a foolish one."
Prodigality is the vice of excess which corresponds to the virtue of liberality, on which see NE 4.1 passim. According to Aristotle there is something paradoxical about the prodigal's character. She gives away her money far too easily, but is also careless about trying to get money from others. So it's just a fact of life that such prodigals are likely simply to run out of resources. His point in the passage quoted is that while prodigality is a vice, prodigals are 'in no small degree better' (1121a20) than the mean and stingy (1121a11-29).

(megalopsychia)[28]. For this virtue is unique in Aristotle's catalogue in that it is characterised in terms of two components, one of which comprises awareness of the other[29]. On the one hand there is the exceptional degree of virtue possessed by the magnanimous agent; on the other there is the magnanimous agent's correct self-evaluation, that she does indeed possess virtue to this exceptional degree[30]. The magnanimous agent is the "best (man)"[31] and knows it.

Consider now what follows from Aristotle's views about what would be involved in being the best and knowing it. It helps here to take Aristotle's discussion of magnanimity within the broader context of the first four chapters of NE 4. There are four topics: Liberality (4.1), Magnificence (4.2), Magnanimity (megalopsychia) (4.3), a nameless virtue (4.4). These four virtues display a pattern[32]. They fall into two pairs. First liberality and magnificence, second magnanimity and the nameless virtue. In each case one of the pairs is a large scale cognate of the other[33]. Liberality is the virtue which concerns the right attitude to wealth (something

[28] From here on I follow Irwin 1999 in translating megalopsychia as 'magnanimity'. This is a departure from the ROT, in which Ross/Urmson 1984 have 'pride'; but that has slightly negative connotations. Rowe 2002 and Taylor 2006 both opt for 'greatness of soul' which displays the structure of the Greek term wonderfully but is a little unwieldy, particularly given the absence of a natural cognate English term corresponding to the adjective 'magnanimous'.
For recent discussions of magnanimity see the commentaries of Irwin 1999, Broadie 2002 and Taylor 2006, and for greater detail Hardie 1978, Sherman 1988, Curzer 1990, Curzer 1991, Bae 2003, Stover and Polansky 2003, Pakaluk 2004 and Russell 2012.

[29] For the point about uniqueness see Taylor 2006, 217. Notice that magnanimity differs significantly in this respect from truthfulness, the nameless virtue of NE 4.7, which is the mean between boastfulness and mock-modesty; the person possessing that virtue is "truthful both in life and word owning to what he has, and neither more nor less" (1127a23-26). Truthfulness does indeed involve an awareness of something (ie one's worth), but what it requires awareness of (eg one's courageous and temperate behaviour) isn't itself part of the virtue of truthfulness. Magnanimity by contrast involves reflexive self-awareness. Being magnanimous in itself involves being aware that one is magnanimous. It shouldn't be surprising that magnanimity in unique in this regard though. The reason is that magnanimity concerns dealing correctly with honour, which requires one to recognise deserved honour, which takes one to virtue as the subject matter for magnanimity. There is no object for a virtue other than honour which would lead so directly to virtue itself as an object. I can have great wealth, and recognise that I have great wealth, without having a view about my own state of character (my virtues). What I *can't* have, in the absence of a view about my virtues, is a correct attitude to honour.

[30] NE 4.3, 1123b1-2, 13-15, 26-30

[31] NE 4.3, 1123b27 aristos. It's not essential to the virtue of magnanimity that there be a single 'most virtuous' agent as it were. It's more that the magnanimous agent has no better to get. She is as good as it can be with humans (or whatever kind). And there's nothing necessarily elitist about that, because it's not necessarily false that all humans could attain the acme (though given lots of facts about the world, in fact not all humans can realistically attain the acme).

[32] NE 4.4, 1125b 1-6

[33] 'Large scale' is used as a term of art, following the literature (eg Gardiner 2001). 'Cognate to' is novel terminology. It is intended to be taken as neutrally as possible as regards the vexed question of what the relation

commonly pursued as a good). Magnificence is the virtue which disposes one correctly towards great wealth (wealth on the large scale)[34]. Another very general good pursued by human beings is honour: being perceived by others as one merits, deserved good reputation[35]. And there are a pair of virtues which dispose one correctly towards small scale and large scale honours. The former is the nameless virtue of NE 4.4, the latter is magnanimity. Aristotle turns first in NE 4.3 to the large scale cognate. He starts by working out the content of a virtue which disposes us well as regards the greatest honours. Honour is noble only if it is deserved or merited[36]. So the magnanimous agent is someone who deserves the greatest honours. In that case she must be someone of the greatest virtue, since what merits honour is precisely virtue[37] (what good person would want to be honoured by the vicious?) The virtue of magnanimity disposes one well towards being someone of the greatest virtue. How could someone go wrong in regard to this issue? Aristotle's thought is that one might not recognise that one is of the greatest virtue. There are two ways in which that non-recognition could be

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is between eg generosity and magnificence. There is considerable debate about whether Aristotle can count eg generosity and magnificence as distinct virtues (Irwin 1988, Kraut 1988, Halper 1999, Gardiner 2001, Pakaluk 2002, Drefcinski 2006).

[34] NE 2.7 1107b18-19

[35] NE 1.5, 1095b22-1096a4.

[36] NE 4.3 1123b1-2: the magnanimous person "thinks himself worthy of great things, being worthy of great things"; and 1123b16 "he deserves and claims great things". See also NE 1.4, 1095b26-31: it is this point about honour which puts paid to the life of honour as an account of happiness.

[37] One might form the impression that what is essential to magnanimity is the undertaking of grand projects, of a scale which would be beyond most people (NE 4.3, 1124b22-26), due to their lacking the resources and power to instigate and carry through grand projects. And that impression might be reinforced by Aristotle's remarks on the contribution made by "goods of fortune" to magnanimity (NE 4.3, 1124a23-28). But the impression should be resisted. Aristotle's views on the magnanimous agent's attitude to wealth and power are nuanced. He doesn't deny that people will in fact honour the wealth and power of a magnanimous person, if the person is indeed – as they may often be – wealthy and powerful. Indeed, since Aristotle thinks that virtue typically brings success and happiness, it is perhaps only to be expected that the magnanimous will in fact be wealthy and powerful. But even when the magnanimous are wealthy and powerful it is not the possession of wealth and power which makes them deserving of honour, but rather their virtue (NE 4.3, 1224a26-28). Indeed wealth and power are not essential to magnanimity, for the magnanimous agent's virtue enables her to take the right attitude to wealth and power – to use them well if possessed (NE 4.3, 1124b1-2), but to take the appropriate attitude to their absence (NE 4.3, 1124a11-19). And it seems that Aristotle would count Socrates as a magnanimous person, although he was neither wealthy nor powerful – although that point has to be extracted from an example in Posterior Analytics 2.13, 97b16-24. (The point in Posterior Analytics 2.13 is this. Suppose you want to enquire what F is; then gather together a group of F items, and see what they have in common; and then gather another group of F items; if there is nothing further common to the first and the second F group then F will not be a unified kind, and there will be two types of F. Aristotle's example takes Alcibiades, Achilles and Ajax as magnanimous (in virtue of their intolerance of insults); and then Lysander and Socrates as magnanimous (in virtue of their indifference to good and bad fortune). If there were nothing in common between intolerance of insults and indifference to fortune then there would be two types of magnanimity. But there is no sign in NE 4.3 (the canonical treatment of magnanimity) of the virtue being this bifurcated. So we can conclude that Aristotle takes Socrates to be magnanimous).

manifest. Someone might think that they are of the greatest virtue when in fact they're not (the over-estimator, the 'vain' person); or someone might not think they are of the greatest virtue when in fact they are (the under-estimator, the 'unduly humble' person)[38]. Correspondingly the core of the magnanimous person's virtue is that they correctly estimate that they are of the greatest virtue. Since the magnanimous agent is of the greatest virtue then they are unimprovable, the acme of moral development. And since the magnanimous agent is aware that they are of the greatest virtue (as they must be, given that they are able correctly to estimate themselves of the greatest virtue), they know they are unimprovable. The magnanimous agent is aware that moral development is neither required nor possible. The magnanimous agent is someone for whom the conflict between [A] and [B] poses no threat, since they can confidently answer the sceptical question "are you, in your current X-ing, X-ing well?" in the positive ('yes, as well as it can be done'). The self-awareness of the magnanimous agent is a dual to the self-blindness required of the novice by the conflict between [A] and [B]. The magnanimous agent could know, should she care to think about it, that her each and every action really is an expression of virtue; there would be no conceptual difficulty should there be an inner voice of self-congratulation accompanying her actions. But most agents in the Aristotelian scheme are not magnanimous. They are, at a practicable best, virtuous. They do (and should) recognise that there are greater lives than their own. They are vulnerable to the tension between [A] and [B]. The best response to that tension, for someone for whom moral development is a possibility, is to ignore the corrosive sceptical question by which it is generated: does this (virtue developing) act of X-ing express a decision to X? Of course that is not in everyday activity a difficult question to ignore. Perhaps that is part of the reason why Aristotle finds it difficult to offer anything particularly definitive of the nameless virtue (NE 4.4) which stands to magnanimity (NE 4.3) as liberality (NE 4.1) stands to magnificence (NE 4.2)[39].

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[38] NE 4.3, 1125a16-18: the vice of excess is being vain, that of deficit being 'unduly humble.. It is striking that Aristotle refers to each as lacking in self-knowledge. The unduly humble person seems 'also not to know himself (*kai agnoein d' heauton*) 1125a21-22; and vain people are 'fools and ignorant of themselves, and that manifestly' (*êlithioi kai heautous agnoountes , kai taut' epiphanôs*) 1125a27-28. Talk of self-ignorance is not common in Aristotle's catalogue of the virtues (NE 3.6-4.9). In particular, there is no reference to self-ignorance in NE 4.7's characterisation of those who are boastful and those who are mock-modest . The boastful man of NE 4.7 makes excessive claims, the mock-modest man makes insufficiently strong claims; the truthful man neither exaggerates nor understates the worth or significance of his actions. But given that the truthful man is not, as such, magnanimous, his self-estimate should be limited; at the very least he should realise that human life holds greater honours than those to which he can possibly lay claim; he should be aware that there are human lives better than his (eg the lives of those who deserve the merits to which the boastful wrongfully lay claim). By contrast the magnanimous person knows himself to be morally unimprovable.

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