

Aristotle on Selfishness? Understanding the Iconoclasm of *Nicomachean Ethics* ix 8

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For if any one is constantly anxious that he himself more than any other person should do what is just, or temperate, or any thing else connected with virtue, and in short is always for gaining something honourable for himself, no one would call such a man selfish, nor blame him. And yet such a character as this would seem to be particularly selfish for he gives to himself what is most honourable and the greatest of goods, and gratifies the governing part of himself, and obeys it in everything. (*NE* ix 8.1168b23-31 Anonymous trans. 1826)

Nicomachean Ethics ix 8 makes a startling claim, the impact of which is too often muted in translation. In the forthright nineteenth-century translation quoted above, Aristotle says that the good man is ‘particularly selfish’. The word for ‘selfish’ here is *philautos*, which is more often translated ‘self-lover’ or ‘lover of self’.¹ These translations reflect the word’s etymology and thereby its relation to the chapter’s opening question of ‘whether one should love oneself or someone else most of all’. However, the etymological translations fail to capture an important fact that Aristotle himself emphasizes: *philautos*, like our ‘selfish’, is a term of reproach.²

This failure is compounded by commentators who take pains to distinguish the ‘self-love’ Aristotle endorses from ‘selfishness’.³ The effect is to make intuitive and comfortable a passage that is counterintuitive and unsettling in the original.

¹ Such etymological translations can be found in: Taylor trans. 1811, Chase trans. 1861, Peters trans. 1884, Welldon trans. 1902, Ross trans. 1915, Rackham trans. 1926, Apostle trans. 1975, Pakaluk 1998, Irwin trans. 1999, Crisp trans. 2000, Rowe 2002. Williams trans. 1876 and Browne trans. 1850 alternate between ‘selfish’ and forms of ‘self-love’, depending on whether Aristotle is explicitly trading on the term’s negative connotations. Ostwald trans. 1999 strangely renders the term ‘egoist’, which lacks the advantages of either translation, but has the disadvantages of each and some of its own besides.

² At least Aristotle tells us that it is a term of reproach (1168a30, b15). We have no clear pre-Aristotelian uses of the word, but it is unambiguously a negative term in later authors. The *LSJ* lists this chapter from Aristotle as its only example of *philautos* meaning ‘loving oneself, in good sense’. The entry continues: ‘more freq. in bad sense, *selfish*’.

³ The worst offender here is Irwin 1999, 295-297 whose translation includes the following section titles: ‘A common view condemns self-love as selfish’, and ‘The good form of self-love is unselfish, because it rests on a true view of the self.’ Annas 1988, 8 attributes to Aristotle the view that ‘when good people act in self-loving ways, the resulting competition will be just what it is to act because of the noble, in a virtuous and unselfish way’; and Lear 2004, 7n4 speaks of a ‘distinction that Aristotle himself is keen to draw between the virtuous person’s love of self and selfishness’.

The reception of the chapter among later Peripatetics reveals how alien the Greeks found Aristotle's claim that the virtuous person is '*philautos*'. Julia Annas explains:

Later thinkers just find this point too paradoxical. The author of the *Magna Moralia* has a passage which corresponds to the *Nicomachean Ethics* ix 8 quite closely, but refuses to call the virtuous person 'self-loving' (*philautos*), reserving the word for the common or garden selfish regard, and insisting that the good person should be called 'good-loving' (*philagathos*) instead. The author of the account of Peripatetic ethics which we find in Arius Didymous insists that, though virtue develops from initial self-concern, it 'is not self-loving (*philautos*) on this theory', and treats self-lovingness (*philautia*) as a vice of deficiency in friendly feeling towards others. The ordinary resonance of 'self-loving' was clearly that of *selfish* or *self-centred*, and other authors find this more of a problem than Aristotle does.⁴ (Annas 1993, 262; cf. 1988, 6)

As Annas observes, ix 8 'defends a thesis which in ordinary life everyone would reject'. The extent to which Aristotle's ethics is constrained by the opinions of 'the many and the wise' has often been exaggerated, but it is unusual for him to depart from conventional wisdom as drastically as he does here.⁵ Thus it is worth reflecting on his motivation for doing so. I will argue that his use of '*philautos*' is deliberately provocative and that it is a means of stressing an aspect of his thought that differs radically from the conventional habits of thought that give rise to the conventional meaning of the Greek word and of our word 'selfish'. In particular, I will argue that Aristotle is challenging deep-seated assumptions about what is valuable and what one's self is.

To my knowledge, Annas is the only scholar to draw attention to Aristotle's controversial language. Most of the literature on the chapter is focused on the question (more central to ix 4) of whether Aristotle thinks that concern for others is motivated ultimately by self-love, and on whether or in what sense Aristotle can be said to be an egoist or else to endorse some form of altruism.

I take no position here on the issue of whether Aristotle is an egoist or about his view of the origin or justification of concern for others. However, what I say here will reflect and support the (relatively standard) interpretation of Aristotle according to which he holds that the actions an agent ought to take and those that most benefit him are identical.⁶ This position is not sufficient for ethical egoism,

⁴ The passages referenced are *Magna Moralia* ii 13-14 and Arius Didymous 125.21-126.2 and 143.14-16.

⁵ On the role of received opinions in Aristotle's ethical methodology, see Salmieri 2009 and Smith 1999.

⁶ Interpreters who hold this view include: Sidgwick 1907, 121-122, Ross 1949, 230-232, Hardie 1968, 331, Allan 1968, 331, Annas 2008, 207, Irwin 2007, 114, 125, and Lear 2004, 7. For defenses of the alternative view that what an agent ought to do sometimes involves sacrificing his own *eudai-*

because, as McDowell 1980, 386 put it, ‘we need to ask which way round this equation is to be understood’.⁷ Ethical egoism holds not merely that what is best for an agent and what it is right for him to do coincide, but also that what makes the right actions right is that they are (or result in) what is best for the agent.⁸ (Though I will not argue this here, I think Aristotle’s position on the ultimate justification of virtuous actions is ambiguous, and that it is consequently ambiguous whether he is an egoist.⁹)

Even scholars who attribute to Aristotle the thesis that the right action is always best for the agent regularly write as though Aristotle thought that virtue often requires an agent to sacrifice his own interests to those of others.¹⁰ The claim that virtue requires such sacrifices was common sense in Aristotle’s day, and it remains so today, but I will argue that Aristotle rejected it and that he did so because he disagreed with the conventional view of what constitutes a person’s interests. The importance of this disagreement to Aristotle has not been fully appreciated in the existing literature, and it explains ix 8’s iconoclastic usage of ‘*philautos*’.

I begin (in section 1) with a brief discussion of ix 8’s aporetic framing, in the course of which I consider and reject Annas’ explanation for Aristotle’s use of ‘*philautos*’. I go on (in section 2) to look briefly at some other cases of intellectuals reclaiming disparaging terms, and I draw some lessons about the nature of this intellectual technique and the common motives behind it. In section 3, I show how Aristotle’s idiosyncratic positive sense of ‘*philautos*’ and his arguments for it are connected with his rejection of ‘the many’s’ beliefs about the

monia, see Kraut 1989 and McKerlie 1991 and 1998.

⁷ On this point, see also: Sidgwick 1907, 374-375; Williams 1985, 32; Whiting 2006, 302; Annas 1993, 127, 223 and Annas 2008.

⁸ The same point applies to ‘altruism’, when this term is meant to denote an ethical principle. An ethics that maintains that right action always benefits others (or aims at doing so) is only altruistic if it holds that this feature is what qualifies the action as right. A few commentators, e.g., Engberg-Pedersen 1983, 40-50 and Irwin 1985 (cf. Madigan 1991), have argued that Aristotle’s ethics is altruistic (in this sense), because his standard of nobility (τὸ καλόν) amounts to benefitting others. I think this argument was decisively answered by Rogers 1993 and Lear 2004, 134-137 (cf. 2006, 125-127). (For a later, somewhat moderated version of Irwin’s view, see his 1999, 328-329 and 2007, 206-207.) More often, authors who ascribe ‘altruism’ to Aristotle mean simply that he endorses some non-instrumental concern for others—a sort of concern that is compatible with sophisticated forms of egoism (see, e.g., Smith 2006, 287-304).

⁹ It has sometimes been argued that Aristotle’s eudaimonism is not egoistic on the grounds that egoism implies a disregard for the interests of others, or a willingness to use them as mere means. As I will show later, this argument turns on an unduly narrow view of the relations in which other values can stand to an ultimate value. Conversely, Rogers 1994, 293-294 has argued that the alternative between egoism and altruism does not apply to Aristotle because the distinction is based on the premise that morality exists to resolve conflicts of interest, whereas Aristotle does not believe that one agent’s genuine interests can conflict with another’s. This argument is unpersuasive. Even if an action I take is in everyone’s interest, surely the fact that it benefits me and the fact that it benefits others are distinguishable, and we can well ask which (if either) of these facts makes the action right.

¹⁰ Thus Annas repeats that Aristotle’s virtuous agent will ‘disregard his own interests for the sake of a friend’ (1988, 5) and ‘sacrifice his own interests for another’ (1988, 5, 8; cf. 11, 12, 13).

good and one's self. In the penultimate section (section 4), I show that opposition to these views of the many is central to Aristotle's ethical thinking and to the Socratic tradition of which he is a part, and that there is at least one other instance in which it leads him to take an iconoclastic position. I close (in section 5) with a discussion of ix 8's treatment of actions conventionally considered sacrifices.

I. The Aporetic Character of ix 8

Nicomachean Ethics ix 8 is aporetic in that it raises a question and draws on received opinion to lay out the two opposed positions, before developing Aristotle's own answer.¹¹

There is a puzzle also as to whether one should love oneself most of all or someone else. For those who prize themselves most are disparaged as selfish, as though this were shameful. Indeed the base man seems to do everything for his own sake (*χάριν*), (and the more so the more wicked he is). Thus he is reproached, e.g., for doing nothing of his own accord (*ἄφ' ἑαυτοῦ*). The decent man, by contrast, [seems to do everything] for the noble, (and the more so the better he is), and [he seems] to give up (*παρῆσιν*) what is his for the sake of a friend. However, the facts conflict with these claims, [and] not unreasonably. For it is said that we must most love him who is most a friend, and he is most a friend who most wishes good things to someone for that person's sake, even if no one is going to know; and this holds most of all of oneself in relation to oneself; so do the rest of the features by which a friend is defined. For we've said that it is from this that all friendliness towards others also extends. And the proverbs all agree: e.g., 'one soul' and 'friends' [possessions] are in common' and 'equality is friendship' and 'the knee is nearer than the shin.' For all these hold most of oneself in relation to oneself; since one is most a friend to himself, and so he should love himself most. It's no surprise that there is a puzzle as to which [view] should be followed; both are plausible. (1168a29-b12)

Annas 1988, 8 explains Aristotle's uncharacteristic choice to 'reinterpret [a] familiar notion in [a] paradoxical way' as an attempt to solve this *aporia* by reconciling the thesis (in ix 4) that good men are their own best friends 'with the basic belief that what good people do is act virtuously, because of the noble' (cf. Whiting 2006, 279). This explanation cannot be correct. Those two positions can be easily reconciled without adopting a provocatively idiosyncratic sense of '*philautos*'. Moreover, far from occupying a middle ground between opposed *endoxa*, the claim that good men are selfish is further from the received opposition to loving oneself most than are any of the received opinions in favor of being

¹¹ On the role of *aporiai* in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, see Salmieri 2009, 328-334.

one's own best friend. The opinion that had currency was that one should love oneself more than one loves anyone else, not that one should be *selfish*.

The only indication we have (in this chapter or elsewhere) that '*philautos*' might have had any currency in a positive sense is Aristotle's proposal at 1168b13-15 that we should approach the *aporia* by considering 'what each [side] means by "selfish" (τὸ φίλαυτον πῶς ἑκάτεροι λέγουσιν)'. But it is clear that Aristotle did not think that the meaning he goes on to endorse had any currency; for he tells us that *no one* would call the people who are selfish in this sense 'selfish':

If someone was always eager that he himself most of all should do just deeds or temperate deeds or deeds in accordance with any of the other virtues, and in general that he secure for himself what's noble, no one would say that he's selfish or blame him. But it would seem that such a man is more selfish [than the people who are so called] (μᾶλλον εἶναι φίλαυτος). (1168b25-28)

The positive sense of the word is evidently something that Aristotle is introducing as part of his own elaboration of the position that one should be 'one's own best friend'. And in introducing it, he makes this position more radical.

The idea that it is natural and proper to be one's own best friend evidently did have some currency. Plato discusses it in *Laws* v, where he rejects it, citing 'excessive love of ourselves' as 'the most serious vice innate in most men's souls'.¹² But there is no evidence that the people who favored loving oneself referred to people who followed this policy as being '*philautos*', and thinking that one should love oneself more than one loves anyone else is consistent with thinking that some people nonetheless love themselves excessively. Such a person would love himself not only more than he loves any other person, but also more than he loves the noble; and his self-love would be *unconditional*, rather than being contingent on his own goodness. It is this sort of person that *Magna Moralia* 1212b22-23 says is 'selfish, strictly speaking (κυρίως λέγεται φίλαυτος)'. The *Magna Moralia* can say this, even though it shares *Nicomachean Ethics* ix 8's positions that a good man loves himself more than anyone else and that someone who gives up material values for a friend can thereby secure something better for himself.

¹² Plato continues: 'It is truer to say that the cause of each and every crime we commit is precisely this excessive love of ourselves, a love which blinds us to the faults of the beloved and makes us bad judges of nobility and justice, because we believe we should honor our own ego rather than the truth. Anyone with aspirations to greatness must admire not himself and his own possessions, but acts of justice, not only when they are his own, but especially when they happen to be done by someone else. It's because of this same flaw that stupid people are always convinced of their own shrewdness, which is why we think we know everything when we are almost totally ignorant, so that thanks to not leaving to others what we don't know how to handle, we inevitably come to grief when we try to tackle it ourselves. For these reasons, then, every man must steer clear of extreme love of himself (σφόδρα φιλεῖν αὐτόν), and be loyal to his superior instead; and he mustn't be put off by shame at the thought of abandoning that "best friend"' (*Laws* 731d-732b, Saunders trans.).

This is essentially the position that Aristotle himself takes in *Politics* ii 5, where, after remarking positively on ‘love that each person feels for himself (αὐτὸν αὐτὸς ἔχει φιλίαν ἕκαστος)’, he says that

Selfishness (τὸ φιλαυτον) is justly censured. But it is not loving oneself (τὸ φιλεῖν ἑαυτόν), but rather loving oneself more than one should, just as is also the case with money-loving (φιλοχρήματον), since everyone, so to speak, loves each of these things. (1263b2-5)

On Aristotle’s view, then, the fact that ‘*philautos*’ is compounded from the words for self and love would not commit us to using it in a positive sense, even if we thought that people should love themselves a great deal. A significant number of the words formed by prefixing ‘*phil-*’ to the name of an object are pejorative even when the object in question was thought to be a proper object of strong concern. For example, the *Nicomachean Ethics* contains pejorative uses of ‘*philopater*’ (‘father-lover’, ‘daddy’s boy’), ‘*pholomythos*’ (‘story-lover’), and ‘*philotimos*’ (‘honor-loving’, ‘ambitious’), even though Aristotle thinks that fathers, honors, and stories are all appropriate objects of affection (1125b15-16, 1117b34, 1148b1). What these examples show is that, so long as one thinks it is possible to go to excess in loving oneself, it would be natural (though by no means mandatory) to reserve ‘*philautos*’ for this excessive sort of self-regard. This is the course taken in *Magna Moralia* and by Aristotle in the *Politics*.¹³ Why, then, does Aristotle take a different and more provocative course in *Nicomachean Ethics* ix 8?

II. Radicalism and the Reclaiming of Words

Pointedly rejecting or seeking to replace the conventional usage of a term is a tactic used by thinkers who want to challenge an entrenched belief that underlies the usage and that they think exerts a pernicious influence on ordinary thinking. Contemporary examples of this tactic can be found in the efforts of feminists to alter linguistic structures that they think are subtly oppressive (e.g., the use of generic masculine pronouns) or that call attention to gender in contexts where it is irrelevant (e.g., the gender distinctions in job titles marked by the suffixes -or and -ess). Of particular interest for our purposes are cases of ‘reclaiming’ terms of abuse or derision. It will be instructive to consider an example.

Eastman and Hardy 2009 observe that ‘In most of the world, “slut” is a highly offensive term, used to describe a woman who is sexually voracious, indiscriminate, and shameful.’ In *The Ethical Slut*, they ‘reclaim’ the word as ‘a term of approval’ denoting ‘a person of any gender who celebrates sexuality according to the radical proposition that sex is nice and pleasure is good for you’. The conventional and reclaimed senses of ‘slut’ differ not only in connotation but also in

¹³ In *Rhetoric* i 13.1389b35-37 Aristotle takes a somewhat different position. He describes being ‘more selfish than one should’ as a form of small-mindedness (μικροψυχία) that leads people to be more concerned with preserving their lives than with doing what is noble. Here ‘*philautos*’ seems to name not an excess but a trait that can be excessive.

their extensions. Sluts in the reclaimed sense of the term need not be female, are not typically shameful or indiscriminate, and need not even have many sexual partners: ‘Sluts may choose to have solo sex or to get cozy with the Fifth Fleet.’ However, the two senses of the term are not merely homonymous. They share a core of meaning: a slut is someone who is enthusiastically sexual in disregard of any cultural norms to the contrary.¹⁴ The reclaimers think that the conventional sense of ‘slut’ interprets this enthusiasm in light of the ‘sex negative’ premises that sex is dangerous, sexual desire is wrong, and male and female sexual desire are fundamentally different. By using ‘slut’ in a pointedly different manner, the reclaimers expose these tacit premises and counter them with a ‘sex positive’ view (Easton and Hardy 2009, 4; cf. 276).¹⁵

Such cases of ‘reclaiming’ disparaging words always involve severing some core meaning from ubiquitous premises that the reclaimer rejects, and I will argue in the next section that we see this pattern with Aristotle’s idiosyncratic sense of *philautos*. However, there is an important respect in which what Aristotle does is unlike these cases. Reclaiming is almost always a response to a (real or perceived) injustice against those branded with the term. We can see this motive in the case of ‘slut’, in the reclaiming of the word ‘queer’ by members of the LGBT community, and in acts of reclamation by racial minorities.

There have been several thinkers who have tried to reclaim the term ‘selfish’ for such reasons. Stirner and Nietzsche both made provocative statements in praise of ‘selfishness’ (*Eigennützigkeit*, *Selbstsucht*) as a means of rebelling against an entrenched altruistic morality that they thought led to the disparagement of themselves or of people and traits that they admired (Stirner 1882, 330-373 [Leopold 1995, 282-320]; Nietzsche 1908, II.9-10 [Kauffman 1989, 253-258]; 1883-1885, I.1, III.2 [Del Caro and Pippin 2006, 56, 150-153]). An even more dramatic case is that of Rand 1964, vii, who advocated the ‘virtue of selfishness’, in part as a rebuke to a culture the entrenched altruism of which led (among other evils) to the ‘persecution’ of entrepreneurs for traits she considered virtues. Despite some important differences in their positions, all three thinkers are radicals who reclaim ‘selfish’ as a means of opposing a morality of self-denial and defending at least some of the people or traits that are commonly condemned as selfish.

This specific motivation could not have been Aristotle’s; for, as we have seen, he thought that ‘no one would say that [the virtuous man] is selfish or blame him for it’. However, though Aristotle does not think that the standard usage of ‘self-

¹⁴ One might wonder in this case (and in the case of other reclaimings) whether this core of meaning is sufficient to make the reclaimed word stand for the same concept as it does in its conventional usage. It may be that this question should be answered differently in the case of different reclaimings. Nothing I go on to say turns on answering it in one way rather than another, so long as it is clear that the concepts are at least importantly related even if they are not identical.

¹⁵ In using of Eastman and Hardy 2009 as an example of radicals reclaiming a word, I do not mean to endorse their usage of ‘slut’ or their radically non-judgmental sexual ethics. Their position is not the only alternative to the ‘sex negative’ premises they reject.

ish' involves unjustly disparaging admirable people or traits, I will argue that he does share a more general motivation with the reclaimers we have been discussing. He thinks that the conventional usage of *'philautos'* expresses and reinforces an entrenched false belief that is indicative of—indeed, partially constitutive of—a less than virtuous character.

III. Aristotle's Sense of 'Selfish' vs. The Many's View of the Good

The conventional belief to which Aristotle objects can be seen in the following passage:

Those who treat it as a reproach call selfish those who apportion the most to themselves in wealth and honors and bodily pleasures; for the many desire and are eager for these things, as if they were the best things (ὡς ἄριστα ὄντα); that's why they're also fought over. Those who are greedy for these things gratify their appetites and in general their feelings and the irrational [part] of their souls. The many are this way, and that's why the epithet has come about from the ordinary type (τοῦ πολλοῦ), which is base. It is just, then, to reproach those who are selfish in this way. It's not unclear that it is those who apportion these things to themselves that the many are wont to call selfish. (1168b15-25)

Here we find an analysis of the many's thinking. They operate on the (often implicit) premise that wealth, honors, and bodily pleasures are the best things. That the many have this view of what is best is a theme running through Aristotle's ethical writings. The *Nicomachean Ethics* first voices it in i 4, where Aristotle tells us that the many think that the chief good, happiness, is 'something obvious and evident like pleasure, wealth, or honor—with different people thinking that it's different things' (1095a22-23).¹⁶

This premise or attitude accounts for the many's eagerness for these goods, which leads to conflicts over them. In the face of such conflicts, eagerness for the goods leads people to be unjust, apportioning to themselves more of the goods than they deserve. More generally, it leads the many to be vicious, pursuing the relevant goods at the expense of what would be noble. This is the phenomenon that people have in mind when they say that 'the base man does everything for his own advantage (and the more so the more wicked he is)' (1128a31-32). However, the diagnosis of wickedness as stemming from an inordinate concern for the self (whether we call this 'selfishness' or 'self-love') reflects the many's premise that the ends sought in such vicious actions are (or are reasonably thought to be) best for oneself. The many use the word 'selfish' for someone who goes to great lengths to secure external and bodily goods for himself, because the many share

¹⁶ He continues: 'In fact, often the same person thinks it's different ones: when he gets sick, it's health; when poor, it's wealth; and when they are conscious of their ignorance, they are awed by anyone who speaks of something grand and above them' (1095a23-26).

the ‘selfish’ man’s premise that the goods he is pursuing are the best goods. It is this premise that leads the many to regard selfishness as bad, when they observe the destructive results of this ‘selfish’ action.¹⁷

If the role of the many’s premise in the description of unjust people as ‘selfish’ is unclear, it may help to consider two different ways in which someone might be criticized for a devotion to elimination diets. One critic might describe the dieter as ‘obsessed with’ or ‘fanatical about’ his health. Notice that this criticism tacitly endorses the dieter’s belief that elimination diets are healthy—at the very least, the criticism draws attention away from any questions about the truth or rationality of his beliefs about nutrition; it focuses instead on the lengths to which the dieter is willing to go to secure his health. A second critic might object that there is no medical basis for the view that elimination diets are healthy, and considerable evidence to the contrary. According to the second critic, the dieter’s problem is not that he is over-concerned with health, but that he holds and acts on crack-pot theories about health.

The many’s perspective on the people conventionally called ‘selfish’ is analogous to the first critic’s perspective on the dieter, and Aristotle’s position is analogous to the second critic’s. Aristotle and the many agree that thieves and the like are contemptible, but they disagree as to why, and Aristotle thinks that the many’s reasons (as expressed in the conventional criticism of such people as ‘selfish’) stem from and reinforce the very falsehood that motivates the contemptible behavior.

Aristotle describes the relevant people theory-neutrally as ‘those who apportion the most to themselves in wealth and honors and bodily pleasures’. That these are the very people whom ‘the many are wont to call selfish’ is confirmed by the observation that no one would apply the term to ‘someone who was always eager that he himself most of all should act justly or temperately or in accordance with any of the other virtues, and in general that he secure for himself what’s noble’. Aristotle begins his alternative account of selfishness with the remark that, nevertheless, ‘it would seem that such a man is more selfish’ than the other.

At any rate, he apportions to himself what is noblest and best of all, and he gratifies the most authoritative [part] of himself, obeying it in all things. Just as a city seems to be most of all what’s most authoritative, and so too with all other systems, so too with a man; thus most selfish of all is he who prizes and gratifies this. And one is said to be in control or out of control from his mind’s having or not having control, as this is what

¹⁷ Pakaluk 1998, 192 writes that it is ‘not clear’ which of two explanations of the common usage Aristotle is giving here: ‘(1) bad self-love is...the most natural referent of the term, because instances of that sort are always available or evident’ or ‘(2) people tend to identify self-love with the sort of love they have for themselves, and thus, since most people have the bad sort, most people will use the word in this way’. The interpretation I have given of the passage is distinct from both of Pakaluk’s, though it is closer to his second.

each [of us] is. And what is performed in accordance with reason most of all seems to be one's own and voluntary. So it's not unclear that this, or this most of all, is what each [of us] is, and that this is what the decent man prizes most of all. That's why he will be the most selfish of all, in accordance with another form than [the one that is] reproached; and he's as different [from the reproached form] as a life in accordance with reason is from one in accordance with feeling, and as desiring what's noble is from desiring what seems advantageous. (1168b28-69a6)

Aristotle's procedure here reflects his analysis of conventional thinking on this issue (i.e., of the many's position). Earlier he attributed the many's characterization of thieves and the like as '*philautos*' to the many's premise that the best things were obvious values like wealth and pleasure. This premise yields the relevant linguistic behavior only when combined with a basic sense of '*philautos*', on which it means something like 'apportioning to (or securing for) oneself what is best'. If one retains this core meaning but replaces the many's premise with the contrary position that noble or virtuous activity is best, one arrives at the conclusion that the virtuous man (who apportions the noble to himself) is more selfish than the vicious (who forgoes the noble in favor of external or bodily goods).

Thus, the first clause in the passage quoted above provides one justification for the conclusion that the virtuous person is more selfish than the vicious. The passage goes on to give a second, related justification. In addition to being mistaken about what is best, the many make a corresponding error about the self: they identify themselves with those aspects (chiefly appetite) that are gratified by external and bodily goods. By contrast Aristotle argues that one is (or is most of all) one's mind (*nous*) and that this is gratified by what is noble.¹⁸ If to be selfish is to apportion what is best to oneself, describing a thief as 'selfish' is mistaken not only because it assumes that the money he appropriates is better than the values (such as being just) he forgoes by his action, but also in that it assumes that his *self* is that which is gratified by the money rather than that which would be gratified by just actions. Both because acting justly is better than money, and because someone's mind is more his *self* than his appetites, the person who chooses justice (to gratify his mind) over money (to gratify his appetites) is acting more *selfishly*, for he is apportioning what is truly better to that which is more

¹⁸ Aristotle is picking up here on a point first articulated in *NE* ix 4: 'For [the outstanding man] agrees (ὁμογνωμονεῖν) with himself and desires the same things with his whole soul; and so he wishes goods and apparent [goods] for himself, and he does [good things] (for the good man's role is to work [διαπονεῖν] good things) for his own sake; for [he does it for] the sake of his reason (διανοητικῶς) and this is what each [of us] seems to be; and he wishes for himself to live and be preserved—and [he wishes this] most of all for his intellect (μάλιστα τοῦτο ὃ φρονεῖ). For existing is a good thing for the outstanding man, and each [person] wishes good things for himself, and does not choose to become someone else, even if the [person] who comes to be would have everything (for, as it is, the god has good things); rather one chooses to have [good things] while being what one is, and each of us seems to be his mind (τὸ νοοῦν), or this most of all' (1166a13-23).

truly his self.¹⁹

Aristotle does not altogether reject the many's sense of 'selfish': he allows that there is a sense in which thieves and the like may be called 'selfish'. However, he does not treat this sense as on a par with his own idiosyncratic sense of the word. Virtuous people, he argues, are *more selfish*—that is, they are more properly called 'selfish'—than the people who are conventionally so called. The conventional usage calls 'selfish' those who are less concerned with themselves than virtuous people are, and it does this based on a mistaken view of what it is to be concerned with oneself.²⁰ Aristotle's alternate usage retains the core idea of 'securing' or 'apportioning' the best things to oneself, but it replaces the many's misunderstanding of the self and the good with a radically different view of these matters. Thus Aristotle's usage of '*philautos*' follows the pattern that we observed in the contemporary reclaiming of 'slut'.

However, unlike other reclaimers of disparaging terms, Aristotle was not motivated by considerations of justice to the disparaged group, so it is curious that he would adopt so confrontational a tactic as valorizing what is ordinarily a term of derision. His motivation becomes clearer when we consider how central to his thinking his opposition to the many's premise about the good is, and when we notice that this opposition leads him to make at least one other iconoclastic remark.

IV. The Radicalism of Aristotle's Opposition to the Many's View of the Good

Opposition to the many's identification of the good with 'something obvious' is a theme running throughout Plato's dialogues, where it is consistently argued that one's good is at least partially constituted by virtue (or, in some texts, wisdom).²¹ The deep impression this made on Aristotle is obvious from the elegy in which he describes Plato as

a man whom bad men profane even to praise; he alone, or first among mortals, revealed clearly, by his life and by the course of his arguments, that a man becomes good and happy simultaneously.²² (Fragment 650)

The idea that virtue is central to one's own good is one of Aristotle's key philosophical commitments, and it is deeply counterintuitive. Its distance from con-

¹⁹ The idea that one aspect of one can be more oneself than another can be fruitfully compared to the argument in *Protrep.* 75-82 that there are degrees of living, and that for an animal to be is to live.

²⁰ It might be objected that the meaning of 'selfish' includes the idea that one pursues one's own interests *at the expense* of others. However, this meaning presupposes that one's interest is the sort of thing that can be achieved at someone else's expense. This presupposition is a consequence of the many's view of the good, and Aristotle rejects it.

²¹ In addition to the *Republic*, which is a sustained argument for this thesis as applied to the virtue of justice, see: *Apology* 29c-30b, 36c; 38a; *Crito* 44d, 47c-48b; *Euthydemus* 280a-281e; *Gorgias* 466b-475e, 507a-e; *Meno* 87e-89a (cf. 96e-97c), *Laws* ii 661a-d.

²² The passage has occasionally been thought to refer to Socrates rather than Plato. This interpretation is unlikely, but it is irrelevant for my purposes which of the two Aristotle is praising. On the interpretive issue and for some interesting reflection on the significance of the elegy, see Jaeger 1927.

ventional thinking is stressed time and time again by Plato. Glaucon's challenge (*Republic* ii 357a-362c) is the most famous example, but there are others such as the arguments in the *Gorgias* (474b-470e) that it is better to suffer injustice than to commit it, and that a criminal is better off if he is punished than if he is not.

Aristotle was capable of being equally bold in his challenges to conventional wisdom. The *Eudemian Ethics*, for example, begins by throwing down a gauntlet:

The man who proclaimed his verdict in the god's [precinct] at Delos wrote upon the gate of Leto's [temple], distinguishing (not as all holding of the same thing) what's good, what's noble, and what produces pleasure: 'What's most just is noblest, while health is greatest (λῦσιτον); and to happen on something one desires is the pleasantest thing of all.' But we do not concede this. For happiness is the noblest and most excellent (ἄριστον) of all things, and the pleasantest. (1214a1-8)

Sarah Broadie comments on this inscription as follows:

Delos was a great centre for the worship of Apollo, and rivaled in importance by Delphi alone; thus the pessimistic verses must have been credited with the same authority as the Delphic 'Know thyself' and 'Nothing in excess.' Variants occur in the poets Theognis, Simonides, and Sophocles. (Broadie and Rowe 2002, 281)

Given this context, to refer to the claim as the verdict of an unnamed man is already iconoclastic, because it serves to undercut any presumption of divinity, and it pointedly ignores the verdict's place in a poetic tradition and its authority as conventional wisdom. Aristotle's unapologetic disagreement, with no effort at finding common ground, is similarly bold; and this is repeated in *Nicomachean Ethics* i 8.1099a20-31, which tells us that a life of virtuous activity is pleasant, good (ἀγαθός), and noble, all 'in the highest degree', and insists that the 'qualities are not divided as the description at Delos says', since all three 'belong to the most excellent activities; and we say that happiness is these or the one that is most excellent'. (Oddly, the radicalness of challenging this slogan is rarely remarked on in the literature.)

What is it about the inscription that has Aristotle on the barricades? Surely it is the implication that there is something of genuine value that is distinct from and in competition with the life of virtuous activity, so that there is a respect in which an agent can be worse off for having acted virtuously. This interpretation of his motive finds confirmation when we notice that *Eudemian Ethics* i 2.1214b10-11 goes on to advise each person to erect for himself a single end towards which to direct all of his actions, 'since not having one's life arranged towards some end is a sign of great imprudence'. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, the attack on the inscription follows a discussion of how the life of a virtuous person is pleasant in itself without needing extrinsic pleasures added, and how this makes it more pleasant

(as well as more noble and good) than any other pleasures—including especially the transient and conflicting pleasures favored by the many. In both treatises, the discussion of the inscription is part of a project of showing that there is no respect in which any competing end can be superior to the life of virtue.

The attempts to undermine any putative values that are supposed to be independent of virtue are characteristic of Aristotle and Plato. And in making this case, both thinkers appeal to the thought that it is virtue that makes an agent into the sort of unity that he needs to be in order for the sorts of goods recognized by the many to in fact benefit him. The *Republic* 352a argues that injustice puts one at war with oneself (cf. 422d-423a), whereas being just means that one ‘rules and arranges himself and becomes his own friend’ (443d). By contrast, an unjust life is not worth living, ‘not even if one has every food and drink, all the wealth, and every political office’ (445a). Thus a completely unjust man will be miserable (577c-580a)—all the more so if he succeeds at acquiring wealth and political power (588e-589b). External goods, though sought by most people as though they were the best things, are good for one only insofar as one is virtuous. And it is a mistake to identify oneself with one’s appetites for such things, because (among other reasons) appetites conflict, so that the satisfaction of one appetite invariably leads to the frustration of others. One’s self is more properly identified with that in virtue of which one is a unity—the ‘most authoritative part’, which Aristotle tells us is one’s mind (*nous*, 1168b23-69a3).²³

Aristotle is deeply committed to the theses that we are, most of all, our minds and that the things sought by the many are valuable only insofar as one is virtuous. These are radical opinions, and, as a means of pressing them, he is sometimes willing to make bold and direct challenges to conventional wisdom, as he does in the case of the Delian inscription. This explains why he would be moved to argue for an idiosyncratic sense of ‘*philautos*’. To disparage thieves and the like as ‘selfish’ (or motivated by ‘self-love’) is to suggest that thieves benefit from their loot—that vices yield genuine benefits on which the virtuous miss out. To combat this suggestion Aristotle takes the counterintuitive step of recasting in a positive light a disparaging term that embodies the many’s mistaken premises.

In truth, and from the perspective of a *phronimos*, the value of anything possibly acquired by vicious action is both dwarfed by and dependent on the value of living virtuously, so there cannot be any case in which choosing virtue represents a sacrifice of one’s interests. To think otherwise is to take on the (depraved) beliefs and values of the many. And this is what one does when one ascribes vicious acts to self-love or thinks of the requirements of virtue as a sacrifice.

I know of no case where Aristotle describes a requirement of virtue as a sacrifice.²⁴ If there were any such cases, they would surely be well known, because

²³ The analogy Aristotle draws in this passage between reason as the most authoritative part of a soul and that of a city is evocative of the central argument of the *Republic*.

²⁴ The one seeming exception is from *NE* iv 1.1120b4-7 in connection with generosity: ‘It is also very definitely characteristic of the generous person to exceed so much in giving that he leaves less for himself, since it is proper to a generous person not to attend to himself.’ But the subject here is

they have been searched for, most notably by Kraut 1989, 78-154, who argues that Aristotle held that ‘One should at times make a sacrifice, and do something that is less good from one’s own point of view, so that others may attain their highest good, or at least come close to that goal’ (85). Finding no cases in which Aristotle says that an agent should give up what is best for himself, Kraut makes his case by arguing that certain of the actions Aristotle thinks are mandated by virtue do in fact involve an agent’s giving up things that Aristotle is committed to regarding as essential to the agent’s interest.

For example, Kraut 1989, 90-104 contends that when someone submits to ostracism or to taking turns in public office (both practices endorsed in the *Politics* as best for the city), he gives up opportunities to engage in political activity. Since this activity constitutes the good of an individual who is incapable of living the contemplative life, such an individual would be sacrificing his good when he does as justice demands and steps down from office at the end of his term.

Kraut’s argument depends on too crude a conception of self-interest. If someone is cut out for a political life, what is good for him is not wielding political power as such, but rather exercising the virtue of statesmanship and administering the city’s affairs well. An office would only be good for such an agent insofar as it affords him the opportunity to do this, so if the circumstances were such that his retaining the office would be bad for the city, then retaining the office would no longer be good for him. In fact, in such a case the virtue of statesmanship itself would demand his resignation.²⁵ No use an official might make of his powers can be an exercise of a virtue that he is violating by remaining in office. The only exercise of statesmanship open to an official at the end of his term is to leave office, and it is this action that is both virtuous and best for him. This is so even if he would have been better off in some other circumstance in which he could have justly retained the office. The same point applies to the case of ostracism. A banished citizen who remains in his city as an outlaw is not leading a political life. The only exercise of statesmanship possible to him is to accept his ostracism and leave the city. Moreover, from the standpoint of civic engagement, he would be much better off as a resident alien in another city.²⁶

specifically the giving and taking of wealth, which (as we have seen) Aristotle does not think is a major value.

²⁵ Cf. *Republic* iv 445a-b where Glaucon argues that it would not be worth living even if one had many goods including ‘every political office imaginable’, if one could not do ‘what would liberate one from vice and injustice’.

²⁶ Kraut’s remaining examples of Aristotelian virtue requiring self-sacrifice, are cases in which justice demands that someone forgo a life of contemplation in order to engage in political activity (cf. McKlerlie 1991, 92). How such cases are to be interpreted, and indeed, whether Aristotle thinks that there are any such cases, depends on how he views the relation between the contemplative and political lives. I cannot take up this vexed issue here, except to point out that there are other accounts (e.g., Lear 2004) that preserve many of Kraut’s points about the relation between the two lives without implying that virtue of character ever demands that we sacrifice what is best for us in order to fulfill our civic obligations. If justice did ever demand such sacrifices, this would be a major, life-shaping issue for Aristotle’s audience, and it is difficult to imagine that he would not have addressed it explicitly. So his total silence on this issue is a strong reason to prefer an interpretation (such as Lear’s) on

It is no accident that Aristotle does not speak of cases in which virtue calls upon an agent to sacrifice his interests. For central to Aristotle's ethics is that virtue is itself the chief constituent of one's interests, such that nothing contrary to virtue can qualify as good for one. The view that virtue does or even can require such sacrifices presupposes an alternative conception of an agent's interests that makes no reference to virtue. This presupposition comes naturally, because it is deeply engrained in conventional thinking. However, the Socratic tradition (of which Aristotle is emphatically a part) argued that this conventional view is both incoherent and a sign of a less than virtuous character.

If the Socratic tradition is correct, then one can only make sense of an agent's having *an interest* at all (as opposed to a motley set of incompatible and competing drives) insofar as the agent is virtuous and thereby unitary. Whatever the merits of Plato and Aristotle's arguments for this conclusion, the debate they initiated makes it clear that the very notion of 'one's interest' (as distinct from one's appetites and from what one happens to want in a given moment) is contentious and laden with philosophical presuppositions.²⁷ Thus it is a mistake, especially when discussing these philosophers, to help oneself to the conventional notion of an agent's interests and to make assumptions on this basis about which actions involve sacrifices.

V. Aristotle's Account of Actions Conventionally Considered Self-Sacrificial

Aristotle does advocate many actions that are ordinarily construed as self-sacrificial, but (as I have been arguing) there is a deep thread in his thinking that is opposed to this construal of them. It is this thread that finds voice in *Nicomachean Ethics* ix 8, where he reinterprets such actions as selfish:

It is also true of the outstanding man (σπουδαίος) that he takes many acts for the sake of his friends and his fatherland, and he will lay down his life (ὑπεραποθνήσκειν), if he must; for he will give up (προήσεται) both wealth and honors and, in general, the goods that are fought over [to] secure (περιποιούμενος) for himself what is noble; for he will choose a short period of being pleased intensely over a long [period of being pleased] gently, and [he will choose] living this year out nobly over many haphazard years, and [he will choose] a single noble and great action over many small ones. Presumably this happens for those who lay down their lives (ὑπεραποθνήσκειν);

which the issue does not arise.

²⁷ Madigan 1991, 88ff. makes a similar point when he classes Aristotle with several twentieth-century thinkers who do not regard 'the self as something simple and easily understood, as much talk about self-love, self-interest, self-sacrifice would seem to do'. Madigan thinks that Aristotle's position on this issue follows from his holding an inherently social conception of the *kalon* (cf. n8, above). But the point that the self and its interests are more complex than is often supposed has been maintained by individualist thinkers as well. In particular, it is a major theme running throughout Rand's work (see esp. Rand 1982 and Wright 2011, 17-23).

so they choose something greatly noble for themselves. They would also give up wealth if their friends would get more; for, while the wealth comes to the friend, what's noble comes to him, so he apportions the greater good to himself. And it is the same way with honors and offices; for he will give these up to a friend, since this is noble and laudable for himself. It is no surprise, then, that he seems to be outstanding [when he] chooses above all what is noble. But it is possible for him to give up even actions to a friend; being the cause of his friend's acting can be even nobler than acting himself. In everything that is laudable, then, the outstanding man appears to award what's most noble to himself. (1169a18-b2)

All of the actions ascribed in this passage to the outstanding man are standardly conceived of as self-sacrificial, and are often described as such in the secondary literature on the passage.²⁸ It is significant that this is not how Aristotle characterizes them. Certainly the outstanding man is motivated to take these actions in part by a love of his friend or community, and it is clear from the passage's context that he loves his friends for their own sakes rather than as a means to some other advantage for himself.²⁹ Certainly the outstanding man gives up some goods for the sake of his friends. However, as Aristotle describes him, he does not give up anything that is *better* than what he attains for himself in the process—quite the contrary: Aristotle insists that by sometimes forgoing money, longevity, and even opportunities for noble actions, the outstanding man secures something greater for himself.

This leads Annas and others to worry that the outstanding man's actions are ignoble because he takes them for his own sake rather than for that of his friend.³⁰ She attempts to save Aristotle from this charge by suggesting that, for

²⁸ Kraut 1988, 21-23 and Madigan 1991 both describe these actions as sacrifices, and Annas 1988, 9 uses 'sacrifice' as a translation for *προήσεται* at 1169a20.

²⁹ Notice also that the passage does not say that the outstanding person will seek to benefit people in general; it speaks only of his acting to benefit 'his friends and fatherland'—that is, people with whom he has personal ties. Moreover, it does not say that his acting to benefit these people (much less, to benefit other people in general) is what makes him or his actions outstanding. It merely says that his virtue will sometimes lead him to act in order to benefit certain other people. To see how modest a claim this is, recall that virtue will sometimes lead one to act on such motives as hunger, sexual arousal, and fear. The modesty of ix 8's claim takes on an added significance when compared to *Magna Moralia* ii 13.1212a32-33, which says that 'the reason why [someone] is an outstanding man is that he takes actions for the sake of another'. Recall that the author of that treatise goes on to deny that virtuous people are 'strictly speaking' selfish.

³⁰ Annas 1988, 9 (cf. Whiting 1996, 175): 'Altruism turns out to be formally self-serving after all; even the ultimate sacrifice, dying for another, turns out to be assigning to yourself more of what matters more. And in the way he presents the altruistic choice as a choice of the heroic over the humdrum, Aristotle seems to be assimilating it to a familiar Greek tradition of heroism that is distinctly self-centred in its desire to shine and excel for a brief and glorious moment.' To illustrate this tradition of selfish heroism, Annas references *Iliad* vi 206. Even more relevant is Plato's *Symposium*

him, ‘self-love of the right kind explains and justifies what the agent does, but it is not what motivates him’:

The virtuous person is not thought of as consciously rejecting the humdrum, as though it were beneath her; rather, she chooses what is in fact a more heroic option, and so more creditable to herself. What she chooses is the greater good, and is more heroic, but what motivates her is the thought that virtue requires this sacrifice, not the thought that she will be a hero. (Annas 1988, 12-13)

Whatever merit there may be to this distinction between the agent’s motivation and the justification of her actions, Annas is wrong to attribute to Aristotle’s virtuous person the thought ‘that virtue requires this sacrifice’.³¹ For the person to think of her action as a sacrifice would be for her to think that she suffers a net loss by taking the action. This is the very thought that Aristotle is at pains to convince us is false, and no falsehood could be essential to the motive of virtuous action, since the virtuous agent is a *phronimos*.

Annas may be right that Aristotle’s outstanding person attends primarily to those aspects of his circumstances that make a certain action noble, rather than to the fact that he benefits from acting nobly.³² However, the outstanding person can never be motivated by the thought that it is noble to give up what is best for himself, since to have this thought he would need to regard the thing he was giving up as having value independent of virtue, that is, he would have to adopt the many’s perspective. From this perspective, the things virtue calls for are indeed often sacrifices; but, according to Aristotle, this perspective is alien to the virtuous agent and deeply misguided.

There is a second problem with Annas’ account of the virtuous agent’s motivation in the relevant cases. If what motivates the agent is the thought that virtue demands a certain sacrifice, then it is this demand rather than a concern for the friend as such that moves the agent.³³ Conversely, if we have the resources to understand motivation by the requirements of virtue in a way that is compatible

where there are three occurrences of *ὑπεραποθνήσκειν* (‘to lay down one’s life’) all of which refer to cases of a lover dying for his or her beloved (179b4, 207b4, 208d2). The last two of these occurrences are in Diotima’s speech, which claims that such actions are taken for the sake of ‘immortal honor’ and ‘immortal virtue’. So the view that Annas is worried that Aristotle may be embracing is not only part of the Greek tradition; it is baldly endorsed by Plato’s Socrates in a passage that is recalled by ix 8’s language. (1169a18 is the only occurrence of *ὑπεραποθνήσκειν* in Aristotle’s corpus, and the three occurrences in the *Symposium* are the only times it appears in Plato’s.)

³¹ The distinction and its motivation have been criticized by Kraut 1998, 22-230 (cf., Pakaluk 1998 200-201).

³² However, there is a great deal of evidence that Aristotle, and the Greeks in general, admired a sort of concern with one’s own nobility that Annas and some other commentators (e.g., Broadie 1991, 94 and Ross 1949, 215) find objectionable. For an excellent discussion and brief defense of Aristotle’s view on this point, see Lear 2006, 127-131.

³³ This is, of course, the familiar Williams 1981 ‘one thought too many’ objection to consequentialism and Kantian ethics.

with the action's being genuinely for the friend's sake, then we can use these same resources to understand the agent's selfish motivation as being for the friend's sake; since what the truly selfish agent seeks for himself is precisely to act virtuously.

The puzzle about how an agent can take the action both for the sake of someone else and because the action is noble will arise for any theory that recognizes any principles governing when and to what extent we should act to benefit other people. A conscientious person does not indulge motives of friendship, benevolence, or patriotism in all circumstances and at all costs. He would not, for example, steal to buy his friend a gift, or help his country to prosecute an unjust war. Thus, when he does act for the sake of his friend or his country, a full account of his reasons for doing so will have to include not just his concern for the friend or country, but also whatever considerations are relevant to the propriety of acting in specific ways for the friend's or country's sake in the present circumstance. Ethical theories will differ over just what considerations will be relevant here, but all must acknowledge that some are; so the question of the role of these considerations in one's motivation when acting for the sake of others must be faced by any ethical theory.

Whatever we are to say about this role, it would be a mistake to say that the relevant considerations constitute an ulterior motive and that the actions are therefore not really taken for the sake of the other person. A conscientious man, when benefitting his friend, does so both for the friend's sake and because acting in this way to benefit this friend on this occasion is proper. If this is intelligible, then it is intelligible how the Aristotelian virtuous agent can (self-consciously) act a certain way both out of love for his friend and because the action is noble and (therefore) better for himself than anything he might be forgoing for his friend's sake. Whatever questions we might have about the details of this sort of motivation, these questions will arise for any ethical theory; they are not generated by Aristotle's position that the virtuous agent acts selfishly when taking extravagant actions for the sake of friends.

Given that the agent does act for the sake of his friends, it may seem strange to describe him as 'selfish', but I have been arguing that this strangeness is intentional on Aristotle's part. If I am correct, then he is more of a radical than has been widely recognized. He is not necessarily an egoist, for this depends on the direction in which we read the equation between self-interest and the virtuous life. Nor is he, like Stirner, Nietzsche, and Rand (in their different ways), railing against the prevailing opinion about what we owe to others. Because he is not this sort of radical, championing selfishness is not a prominent and recurring theme in his work, as it is for these opponents of altruism. But he is nonetheless a radical who opposes deeply held assumptions about what things are of value and about what constitutes one's self. These assumptions color the way most people conceive of and lead their lives, and they are reflected in and reinforced by our

language—whether that language is Attic Greek or American English.³⁴

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