

Aristotelian Ethics Without Exploitation?

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Introduction

Those of us who find value in Aristotle's approach to ethics and in many of his substantive ethical positions need to think seriously about how the aspects of his ethics that we admire relate to several positions almost all modern Western readers recognize as deeply wrong and prejudicial. The most notable of these are Aristotle's endorsement of slavery (because he thought that some people are by nature unable to reason and so are natural slaves for those who can reason), his view of women as unable to act on their deliberation (and therefore as unable to achieve happiness and unworthy to vote), and his view that practicing certain occupations that he regarded as necessary for the survival of a city makes one base and unfit for citizenship. Viewed by modern lights, the men who achieve the ideal set forth in Aristotle's ethics do so in significant part by *exploiting* people of these three sorts; for these other people play a significant role in creating and maintaining the goods and conditions that make it possible to engage in the activities that Aristotle thinks constitute happiness (*eudaimonia*), but they are precluded from engaging in these activities, or at least from engaging in them fully.

Of course, from the standpoint of Aristotle's own premises, it would be a mistake to describe women and slaves as exploited, if by this we mean (as I do) that their interests are being sacrificed for the sake of the citizens; for Aristotle thinks that woman and natural slaves are by nature incapable of (fully) engaging in the activities that constitute human happiness, and that they are indeed best off in the roles to which his ethical and political theory relegates them. However, it is less clear that any similar response can be made in the case of the workers in the

debasement professions, whom Aristotle called *banausoi*. (The term is often rendered, “mechanic” or “vulgar craftsman,” but I will leave it untranslated.) And in any case, whether or not Aristotle recognized it as such, the fact remains that we can recognize that the way of life he endorsed involved the exploitation of women, slaves and *banausoi*.

The question I want to consider in this paper is the relation of this exploitation to Aristotle’s ethical system.¹ Is it an accidental or peripheral attribute of the system—something that can easily be purged to yield an ethical theory that is consistent with and more fully realizes Aristotle’s central ethical commitments? Or does the exploitation follow somehow from these very commitments, so that Aristotelian ethics is essentially exploitative, and any system purged of exploitation would be fundamentally different from Aristotle’s own, though it may borrow some elements from him.

I believe that the truth lies between these two extremes. The exploitive elements cannot be excised as easily as has sometimes been thought. Doing so requires rethinking some of the central concepts and tenets of his ethical theory, and indeed his entire philosophy, rather than merely sweeping away prejudices that caused him to misapply these abstractions in the cases of certain types of people. However, this rethinking suggests an ethical theory that, though importantly different from Aristotle’s own, takes its inspiration from him and remains much closer to him in fundamentals than to any other major figure in the history of ethics. In this sense, we may still speak of it as an Aristotelian ethics.

This paper is intended more as a work of philosophy drawing on and engaging with Aristotle, than it is a work of scholarship. I will cite texts and in some cases discuss the merits of

¹ When I speak of Aristotelian ethics, I mean of course to include his politics as well, and indeed the passages where we learn of the status of the relevant groups mostly come from the *Politics*, but I will be discussing these issues primarily as ethical issues.

competing interpretations of them, but my topic is not how we should read or understand these texts, but whether there can be a moral theory that is both essentially Aristotelian and non-exploitative.

A Non-Invasive Procedure: Excise the Minor Premises

The prospect of removing the exploitative elements by a non-invasive procedure is reasonably promising in the cases of women and natural slaves, for a reason I've already mentioned. Aristotle's view here stems at least in part from his belief in certain morally-relevant natural differences between these people and those whom he recognized as fully functional human beings. People who are constitutionally incapable of deliberating or of acting on their deliberation (as Aristotle thought slaves and women to be, respectively) ought to be treated differently. Some mentally ill or disabled people in fact fit these descriptions, and we think that it is right to deny them the vote, to make key life decisions for them, and to encourage them to lead types of lives that we recognize would not be satisfying (or satisfactory) for normally functioning adults.² So at least much of what is problematic in Aristotle's view of how women and the "natural slaves" ought to be treated is due to minor premises about the abilities of the relevant people. If we think that these minor premises are a reflection of the prejudices of Aristotle's day (as they surely are), and if we do not think that these prejudices have infected his major premises as well, then it would seem that we can eliminate much of the exploitation non-invasively, by correcting the mistaken minor premises.

² Of course, we do not think that the guardian of a disabled ward is entitled to use the ward as a mere means to advance the guardian's personal interests. Rather, we think of the guardian as being obligated to aim at the ward's interest when making decisions about the ward's affairs. The guardian is a trustee for the ward. Part of the reason that we think this, however, is that we think of such disabilities as pathological and relatively rare. If we thought, as Aristotle does, that the majority of human beings lack the ability to deliberate and act on their own deliberation, and that this was not some aberration but a fact of nature, we would surely have a different view of how fully functioning people ought to interact with those who are not fully functioning (whether or not we accepted Aristotle's specific view on this issue).

Why this Procedure will not work with the *Banausoi*

But curing Aristotle's ethics of exploitation is not so easy because this non-invasive procedure will not work in the case of the *banausoi*. Aristotle's objection to them stems not from any premise about their innate abilities or any other natural characteristics, for he does not think that *banausoi* are *banausoi* by nature.³ His primary objection concerns the work that they do: this work is both necessary for human life and yet it damages those who perform it, rendering them unable to engage in the activities that are the goal of human life.⁴

Children should be taught those useful things that are really necessary. But it is evident that they should not be taught all of them, since there is a difference between the work of the free and those of the unfree, and they should share only in such useful things as will not turn them into *banausoi*. Any work, art, or learning should be considered *banauson* if it renders the body or mind of free people useless for the practices and activities of virtue. That is why the arts that put the body into a worse condition and work done for wages are called *banauson*, for they debase the mind and deprive it of leisure.⁵

The human good consists in the exercise of certain virtues, and there is certain work that must be performed if anyone is to acquire and exercise these virtues, but doing this work precludes those who perform it from achieving the virtues that their work helps to make possible. It is this view that gives rise to exploitation. If the people performing the work would have otherwise been capable of achieving and exercising virtue (and thereby of being happy), then the

³ See *Politics* 1260b1-2. In these lines what Aristotle says strictly is that shoemakers and other *technitai* are not such by nature, but the role of this premise in the argument makes it clear that shoemakers are *banausoi*, and *technitēs* is either equivalent to *banausos* or includes it as a subtype.

⁴ On the need for the work done by the *banausoi*, see 1278a11-13. Aristotle says here that the work is needed for the city, and since a city is needed for the cultivation of virtue and happiness, the work must be needed for these ends as well.

⁵ 1337b5-15.

workers are sacrificing (or being made to sacrifice) their own good in order to enable others to achieve this good at the workers' expense.^{6, 7} On the other hand, if the workers are by nature incapable of achieving virtue, then they are natural slaves. Indeed, the belief that there is necessary but degrading work of this sort could motivate the belief in natural slaves.⁸

If we accept the premise that life requires that such degrading work be done, then the achievement of the good by some people will necessarily come at the expense of others who are thereby unable to achieve it. Perhaps some equitable system (e.g. lots) can be found by which to determine who is to be sacrificed for whose benefit. Alternately, if the debasing work only prevents one from achieving the good if done in large quantities, perhaps it could be divided among many people so that no one does enough of it to be ruined by it. Aristotle, however, seems not to think that this latter is a possibility, for he sometimes writes (as in the passage quoted above) as though even learning the skills well enough to perform them adequately will ruin one's soul or body.

The thesis that there is degrading work to be done leads to troubling consequences, even if that work is chosen by people who prefer it to more noble work. Though someone's having this preference may benefit others, it would still be both a sign of a character defect and an impediment to improving his character. Therefore, other people, even while benefitting from a

⁶ Reeve (*Politics* 261) takes Aristotle's claim (1260b1-2) that no one is any sort of *technitēs* by nature to suggest that "if they hadn't become vulgar craftsmen, they might have been capable of virtue and happiness." This suggestion is plausible, but it is not the only way to understand the passage. If the *banausoi* are not *banausoi* by nature, it need not be the case that they are naturally suited to be free; all or some of them may be natural slaves. The *banausoi* are likened to that of slaves at 1278a11-13 in that both perform work that is "necessary"; the two are said to be different only in that slaves work for individual masters and *banausoi* for the city.

⁷ Of course this sacrifice, even if undertaken voluntarily, cannot be construed as an act of virtue, for doing this work is incompatible with the possession of virtue. One might imagine cases analogous to Plato's philosophers returning to the cave, in which a person who has already developed virtue will, because of his virtue, recognize an obligation to ruin his virtue by working in order to make it possible for a succeeding generation to keep their capacity for virtue intact. But there is no evidence that Aristotle entertained such a view. And there is strong evidence that he does not think that virtuous actions ever involve sacrifices of what is genuinely best for oneself. (On this issue, see the final section of my "Aristotle on Selfishness: Understanding the Iconoclasm of Nicomachean Ethics IX.8".)

⁸ And if combined with natural teleology, it might even provide an argument that there must be natural slaves.

person's choosing the degrading work, would reasonably look down on him for choosing it, and might even reasonably seek to exclude him from playing an active role in the political process—as Aristotle thought *banausoi* should be excluded from citizenship.

If I am correct that Aristotle's view of certain forms of work is a major source for the exploitive elements in his ethical theory, then to determine how deep these elements run, we need to consider what work the *banausoi* do and why Aristotle views it in such a negative light.

What is the Banausoi's Work and What's Wrong with It?

We have already seen indications that the problem with the *banausoi* and their work is that it is not "leisurely." But we might wonder precisely what Aristotle means by this, and in particular how this makes *banauson* work so different from the various affairs that a land owning citizen might need to attend to in connection with his farm. In commenting on Politics III.5, Richard Robinson writes:

This chapter exhibits Aristotle's feeling that it is an essential part of the human goodness to lead a life of leisure. He infers that workmen and laborers cannot be good men. He does not feel any reluctance or shame or sorrow in accepting this conclusion. We, on the contrary, are liable to be so intensely shamed as to pretend we do not believe it if we do. Perhaps, if it were not for this intense shame, we should think that it is almost impossible to be a high type of man while passing one's working life on an assembly-line.⁹

Robinson's likening of *banausoi* to assembly-line workers might suggest that they are poor people with no other option than to devote their lives to mind-numbingly tedious tasks. But this is clearly not the case. Aristotle thinks that most *banausoi* become rich! (1278a24-25) Note

⁹ Robinson, *Aristotle Politics Books III and IV*. p. 71.

also the vice of *banausia* (*NE*), which consists in spending large sums of money garishly so as to flaunt one's wealth rather than with the taste exhibited by the possessor of *megalopropia*. Clearly this is a vice of the *nouveau riche*. If the rich *banausoi* continue to work long hours at mindless jobs it is because they choose to, not because they have no other option.

But there is little reason to think that their jobs were mindless. At least many of the *banausoi* were masters of crafts who owned and operated factories in which slaves or less skilled employees did the bulk of the manual labor. These men, and (especially) their grown children, continued to operate their businesses but seem to have had enough leisure time to become very actively involved in Athenian politics (including military expeditions).¹⁰ It not certain whether Aristotle would have considered such sons *banausoi*, but the remark about rich *banausoi* (and the virtue of *banausia*) suggests that he may have. If so, what difference in principle could he have seen between their role in the administration of their businesses and the role played by a citizen land owner in the administration of his farm?

In a few places Aristotle says that the *banausos* exists in a state of delimited slavery to each of his employers or customers (1259b41) or is like a slave to the city as a whole (1278a13). Like the slave and unlike the head of a typical household (which would have included farmland) the *banausos* does not have a *life of his own*, but participates (in a delimited way) in the life of each of the clients whom he serves, just as slave participates (though more fully) in the life of his master. It is possible that Aristotle intended these remarks only to apply to *banausoi* who hired themselves out personally as manual laborers, doing for various masters the same sorts of work

¹⁰ One example is Cleon, whom Forrest (*The Emergence of Greek Democracy* 221) describes as “a wealthy manufacturer and the son of a wealthy manufacturer.” Aristotle refers to him in *Athenian Constitution* (28) as the first leader chosen by the Athenian people “who was not respected by the upper class.” Socrates’ prosecutor Anytus is another example of a rich and politically active person who Aristotle may have thought of as a *banausos*. He operated a large tannery. (Nails, *The People of Plato*, 37.)

that a slave might do for his single master. But if we think that Aristotle intended “*banausos*” here to include also the operators of businesses who had their own employees, and who must have been engaged in the same broad sorts of managerial thinking required by the head of a household, then we might wonder why, when a tanner and a farm-owning citizen trade, the tanner is merely participating in the life of the farmer rather than leading his own, whereas the independence of the farmer’s life is not similarly undermined.¹¹

It is hard to see Aristotle’s preference for the farmer as anything other than an expression of a prejudice in favor of farming and against the urban middle class that had recently developed in Athens. And insofar as it is just an issue of prejudice against a certain group, the mistaken view could be non-invasively excised from Aristotle’s thought. But this prejudice is not all that is at work. Even within the domain of farming there are things the citizen should not do or study (at least not in much detail) because they are unliesurely. Aristotle clearly thinks that many of the necessary *technai* themselves (as opposed to just the lifestyle of someone who makes his living by plying these *technai*) are servile and unsuitable for a free person.

Seemingly then, the cause of (much of) the exploitation Aristotle endorses lies in his view of the many *technai* that are needed to produce the goods that enable us to survive. Because these *technai* are lowly, base, banal, or servile, they interfere with the achievement and exercise of virtue and cannot be performed by those of us who aspire to be happy. Rather, we must enlist other, less worthy people to do this work for us.

The Servility of Production (and Producers)

¹¹ Perhaps the idea is that each farm (and so the life of each farm owner) is largely self-sufficient, getting only a few needed items by trading with *banausoi* or other farmers, whereas the *banausoi*, by specializing in item or service, had to supply most of their needs through trade.

What I think is Aristotle's basic reason for thinking that the *technai*, and thus the lives of *banausoi*, are servile can be seen early in the first chapter of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1249a3-5), where Aristotle differentiates between ends that are activities (*energeiai*) and ends that are products apart from the actions by which they are produced. In the latter case, he says that the products are always better than the actions by which they are produced. An act of productive action has a product, and the product is *better than action*. The product is ulterior (*teleioteron*) to the productive act—it is a higher end which is valuable independently of the action and from which (some or all of) the value of the action is derived. Production then is valuable (at least largely) for the sake of the products. These products, in turn, are valuable because of the use we can put them to in acting (or because they keep us alive in order to act). Though some products, such as a craftsman's tools, are surely valuable for the contribution they make to further productive actions, Aristotle clearly thinks that the value of products (and so of production) derives ultimately from the contribution they make to activities that do not have products beyond themselves. Thus there is a hierarchy of ends here: production for the sake of products, products for the sake of activity.

Of course some (non-productive) activities are for the sake of others, but the relationship here isn't one of instrumental means to ends, but of parts of constituent means. Thus to use a famous example of Akrill's, we repay a debt in order to be just—and the repaying is constitutive of being just. Further, presumably we are just because justice is a part of the holistic activity which is living well. By contrast, when we work to make the money, which we will use to pay the debt, our end, the money, is something apart from the action, rather than the action itself, and the value of this money lies not in itself or in the action by which it was produced, but in its ability to serve as an instrument for virtuous activity. And if this product wasn't necessary as an instrument to be used in some (intrinsically good) activity, we would have no reason to engage in production.

There is an inherent slavishness to productive actions (and so in the *technai* and in the lives of the *banausoi*) because the ends that confer value on these actions lie not in the actions themselves but beyond them. Put another way, the productive actions have merely instrumental value, and a life is servile to the

extent that it is composed of such actions. Notice that the source of the servility of productive actions so understood is not that the beneficiary of the action is someone other than the agent. A solitary life lead on a desert island would be servile in this sense, even though the agent would be acting only for his own sake. The problem is that all of his time would be absorbed by the process of producing the conditions needed for his survival, and he would have no time left to engage in activities that are intrinsically good and that constitute happiness. (This, of course, is the state that Aristotle thinks a human being is in when he lacks a city.)

If such a solitary person could occasionally secure for himself some brief periods of leisure in which he could engage in intrinsically valuable activities, he would be toiling the rest of his days in service to these few occasional precious hours. There may be no literal exploitation in this situation, but there is a sort of parallel to it within the agent's own life. Lives lead on this pattern are common, even among people who do not reside on desert islands, but who spend most of their waking hours at jobs that they do not find fulfilling, and live for the hobbies and social activities they engage in briefly on evenings and weekends.¹²

Human survival and prosperity is a work-intensive goal. We can debate about the comparative justice of different social systems in which productive jobs are distributed differently, but on any viable system most people, if not everyone, will spend much of his time engaged in productive work of one kind or another.¹³ If Aristotle is correct that much of this work renders the worker unable to be virtuous and engage in intrinsically good activities, even in his remaining leisure time, then few people, if any, will be able to engage in such activities at all, and those who can engage in them will be able to do so only at the expense of those who sacrifice (or are made to sacrifice) their own highest good to make this possible for

¹² The commonness of this pattern is indicated by a headline in the satirical newspaper *The Onion*: "Find The Thing You're Most Passionate About, Then Do It On Nights And Weekends For The Rest Of Your Life." (<http://www.theonion.com/articles/find-the-thing-youre-most-passionate-about-then-do,31742>)

¹³ For centuries people have either fantasized or feared that advanced in technology would make it possible for human beings to survive and prosper with very few of them working. This has not come to pass, but it is notable that the types of work in which people engage, the amount of time that they spend at work, and their standard of living all changed considerably as a result of the industrial revolution and subsequent technological developments.

the favored few. But even if we think that a worker is capable of developing virtue and engaging in intrinsically good activities in his few free hours, the view of the value of work that we have been discussing implies that most people must devote the bulk of their lives to work that is of little or no value in its own right.

This conclusion has especially troubling implications when paired with an ethical system according to which the ultimate good as a *life* consisting primarily of an *activity* that is an end in itself. Even if (contra Aristotle's own view) a worker can engage in such activity occasionally, "one swallow does not make a Spring" (1098a14), and occasional, frequently interrupted bouts of an activity that is worth performing for its own sake, do not amount to a good life. If we accept both the Aristotelian view of the value of production and the Aristotelian view that the ultimate good is a life comprised of activity that has its end in itself, then we are led to the conclusion that the only way a person can live such a life is if the bulk of his material needs are provided others who afford him the leisure needed for such a life by doing all the work needed to produce the goods he needs to survive and prosper. That is: the Aristotelian good life will only be achievable by exploitation.

A non-exploitive Aristotelian ethics would need to reject this view of production, and there are a number of commentators who have argued that this view of production is inconsistent with Aristotle's view of *technai* as a distinctive type of knowledge and even (according to some interpreters) an intellectual virtue. These interpreters note that Aristotle identifies the human good as activity of the rational part of the soul in accordance with virtue, and that the rational part of the soul is responsible for three distinct types of thinking: theoretical, practical, and productive. The sciences (*epistēmai*) and especially wisdom (*sophia*) are the states that perfect theoretical reasoning, and prudence (*phronēsis*) and the virtues of character are the states that perfect practical reasoning and our ability to act on it. Thus Aristotle counts all of these states as virtues, and he sees the human good as consisting in a life of exercising them. But there are corresponding states, the *technai*, that perfect productive reasoning. Since productive reasoning is a type of reasoning, these states are (or should be regarded by Aristotle as)

virtues, and their exercise is part of the *end* of a life of rational activity, rather than being merely a means to such a life.

Cary Nederman argues for this sort of position and reports it was “widely adopted by medieval Latin authors familiar with Aristotle’s conception of the ordering of the human sciences, both before and after the translation and transmission of his main writings during the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries.”¹⁴ David Keyt defends this same position in a recent paper, and Christine Swanton suggested in a 2011 talk that modern virtue ethicists should adopt such a position and accept creativity and productiveness as virtues.¹⁵

I am sympathetic to this sort of view, but its proponents too often think of it as a straightforward application of Aristotelian principles, and this is a mistake. Aristotle did regard the exercise of the *technai* as a form of reasoning and did think that part of their value derives from this fact rather than from their products. We can see this aspect of his view very clearly in *Metaphysics A*, where he tells us that the discoverers of new *technai* “were marveled at not only because there was some use for the discoveries but as wise and as differing from the rest” and that we hold possessors of *technē* in higher esteem than people who can produce the same effects through means that do not involve the *technē*-possessor’s grasp of the relevant universals and causes.¹⁶ It is significant, however, that the value Aristotle accords in this passage to the *technai* as instances of reasoning (and to their possessors as examples of wisdom) in no way depends on the usefulness of the products. Indeed, Aristotle tells us that “when more arts were

¹⁴ Nederman, “Men at Work: *Poesis*, Politics and Labor in Aristotle and Some Aristotelians,” *Analyse & Kritik* 30.2008, pp. 25-26.

¹⁵ Keyt, “Aristotle on the Joy of Working” delivered at Notre Dame in April of 2014; Swanton, “Virtues of Creativity and Productivity, Moral Theory, and Human Nature,” delivered at the APA Pacific 2001. Swanton’s suggestion was based on ideas she finds in Nietzsche and Rand. In my comment on the paper (delivered at that same conference), I argued that the Nietzschean creativity (as Swanton describes it) is not essentially productive in the relevant sense because the creations are valuable as an expression of the creator’s activity rather than because they fulfill survival needs (like the products whose creation Aristotle most regards as servile), and it is not clear that Nietzsche’s view of producing our means of sustenance is any brighter than Aristotle’s or that he is any more an enemy of exploitation. For Rand, by contrast, the status of “productiveness” as a virtue does depend both on the contribution the products make to survival and on the fact that production is an exercise of reason. Part of the question I am raising in this paper is how compatible a view with this shape is to Aristotle’s approach to ethics.

¹⁶ 981b12-17, 981a12-b5.

discovered, some related to necessities and others to recreation, the discoverers of the latter were always supposed to be wiser than those of the former because their knowledge wasn't related to use."¹⁷

What we see in that passage is that Aristotle thinks that a *technē* can be valued as an exercise of reason or for the usefulness of its products, but that these two ways of valuing it are at odds. Aristotle says that the *technai* involved in recreation are held in greater esteem and viewed as "wiser" not because the intellectual work involved is somehow more profound or demanding, but simply because they are "not related to use"—because they are less servile. And even these *technai* are servile by comparison to the *epistēmai* Aristotle goes on to discuss that are "neither relative to pleasure nor to necessity" and were "discovered first in those places where people first had leisure."¹⁸ What Aristotle is doing in this first chapter of the *Metaphysics* is leading us by degrees from the primitive cognition of sense-perception to the exalted cognition of first-philosophy, which is the topic of the treatise. At each stage, he argues that the cognition is valuable for reasons distinct from its usefulness; he treats this sort of value as superior to usefulness and motivates first philosophy as the fullest realization of this value.

What lessons can we draw from this for the *banausoi*? First the people Aristotle calls *banausoi* are (or are primarily) those whose *technai* come early in *Metaphysics* A.1's progression: they are the producers of useful items. They and their work are held in less esteem, and have less intrinsic value, precisely insofar as they are useful. He seems to regard the utility of their work as diluting or compromising any intrinsic value it has as an exercise of reason. We might be tempted to dismiss as a peripheral aristocratic prejudice the idea that a *technē*'s utility diminishes its intrinsic value as an exercise of reason. But even if we do so, we must acknowledge that Aristotle does not think of the usefulness of the state's products contributes in any way to its value as an exercise of reason, and that his view on this issue does follow from his general understanding of value and of the value of reason specifically: exercises of reason have their value intrinsically, and this intrinsic value cannot be enhanced by any instrumental value that may also have.

¹⁷ 981b17-20.

¹⁸ 981b20-23.

Productive acts are intrinsically valuable only insofar as they are like actions that do not aim at anything beyond themselves—insofar as they are worth doing for their own sake rather than for the sake of their products. But a productive act that was performed by someone whose aim was something other than its product would not really be an act of production at all. It would be an activity like a game which is organized around an arbitrary goal, but is engaged in not for the sake of this goal but for its own sake. A *technē* is only truly productive—truly a *technē*—to the extent that it is practiced not in this game-like way, but for the sake of the product. And to precisely this extent, it is valued instrumentally rather than intrinsically.

Rethinking Activities, Ends, and the Value of Production

From the standpoint of Aristotle's premises, acts of production do have something non-instrumentally good about them, but their primary value still lies outside of themselves in the activities they enable, and in order to be genuinely engaged in a productive acts one needs to regard it as for the sake of its ulterior end, rather than as an intrinsically valuable activity. Thus production remains worse than the activities that Aristotle identifies as ends in themselves—namely *theoria* and the exercise of *phronēsis* and the virtues of character. If someone chooses a life of productive work for himself when he could have devoted himself to one of these other ends, it could only be because he has a defective character and is unable to appreciate the greater value of the activities that are ends in themselves.¹⁹ And since this work must be done in order for anyone to achieve the good life, if anyone does achieve the good life, it will be made possible only by people acting either under compulsion or out of a bad character. In either case the relationship between the person realizing the Aristotelian ideal and the workers who enable him to do so remains one of exploitation.

In order to develop a view of productive work on which it is not servile and an ethics in which people can achieve the human good without exploiting others, I think we need to reconsider the

¹⁹ This is presumably what Aristotle thinks is the case of anyone who chooses the life of a money maker. He describes this life as forced on people at 1069a7ff., but it is clear from *Politics* I.8-10 that he was aware that some people choose this life despite having other options.

distinction between activities that have their ends in themselves and productive processes that have their ends outside of themselves.

Aristotle is no doubt right that a productive act, which aims at an end outside of itself, is less of a value than the ulterior end at which it aims, and that there is not necessarily any end ulterior to an activity that has its end in itself. It follows from this that if there is an ultimate end, it must be an activity rather than a productive process. However, this distinction does not imply that activities other than the one that is our ultimate end are any more intrinsically valuable than are productive processes (or their products).

Though activities do not aim at a product beyond themselves, Aristotle recognizes that some activities can be subordinate to others, and that these other activities are therefore ulterior to and so better than them (1094a10-18). For example, the activities of dancing or enjoying a fine meal might be subordinate to the more inclusive activity of enjoying an evening on the town, the activities of repaying a debt and indulging moderately in a bodily pleasure may be subordinate to the more comprehensive activity of exercising the virtues of character, and the activities of proving the Pythagorean theorem and the dissecting a frog may be subordinate parts of the more general activity of contemplation. In each of these cases the broader activity is ulterior to and better than each of the narrower activities which are its parts. In *Nicomachean Ethics* I.7, Aristotle gives us a criterion by which we can establish that this is the case. The ultimate good, he tells us must be “self-sufficient,” rather than being one good among many. And a good is self-sufficient only if it alone makes a life choiceworthy and lacking in nothing. Thus if a good is not self-sufficient, and therefore not the ultimate good, a life possessing this good could be improved by the addition of any further good (1097b7-21).

Though I cannot put my finger on a passage where Aristotle says this directly, my sense is that he views many of the activities that constitute a life as intrinsically valuable in the sense that he thinks that they would be worth engaging in for their own sakes, even if taken in total isolation from the other goods that constitute the life. Each of these activities, especially if performed excellently would be of *some* value when isolated from the others, but some would be

more valuable than others—more worth engaging in. None of these activities (at least in the form that human beings can perform it) is the ultimate end because none is self-sufficient: the life in which we do any is enhanced by the addition of other activities.²⁰ Each activity, by being valuable in itself, contributes value to the life that it includes it. Since some of the activities are better than others, whole lives can be ranked by the extent to which they are organized around the best of the activities, with the less good activities playing subordinate roles. In contrast to all of these activities, productive processes would not (or hardly) be worth engaging in at all if taken in isolation from the rest of life (including from their products). So the inclusion of such processes in a life would add little or nothing to it. They are worth adding only insofar as they are needed to attain products that are valuable because they enable us to engage in the intrinsically valuable activities. A life in which such productive processes played a central role would be defective and certainly worse than any organized around an activity. This is, of course, what is wrong with the lives of the *banausoi*.

I think this view that the activities that compose a life are intrinsically valuable is the ultimate source of the conclusion that lives in which one earns one's keep are inferior to lives in which one does not—for the intrinsically valuable activities are precisely the ones by which one does not earn one's keep and from which earning one's keep is (at best) an unwelcome distraction. If I am right, the view that activities are intrinsically valuable is the root cause of the exploitive elements in Aristotle's ethics.

²⁰ The partial exception here is the activity of contemplating first causes. This activity is so good that engaging in it full time (as God does) would be far superior to any life a human being can live. But since it is impossible for us to engage in it full time, this fully Godlike activity is not an option for us, and a life in which we engage in other valuable activities in the periods between contemplations of first causes is better than a life that lacks these other activities.

I think that we can eliminate the view of these activities as intrinsically valuable while retaining the view that the ultimate end is (and must be) an activity that is good in itself—the activity of living a whole human life in accordance with the virtues that enable us to lead such a life excellently. On such a view, the various activities that are components of such a life will not be valuable independently, but will rather derive their value from the role they play in the whole life. These activities will contain their ends in themselves in the sense that there will be no valuable product or effect apart from the activity for the sake of which they are engaged in. Rather the performance of the activity itself will play the role that is played by the product in the case of productive processes. And like the products, this end will not be intrinsically valuable but will only be choiceworthy because of the role it plays in the whole activity of living. On such a view the distinction between activities and productive processes becomes much less significant. Both depend for their value on the whole, and the productive acts are no less parts of this whole than are the activities that lack an end distinct from themselves. Moreover, if we think of this whole as *living a human life* it becomes quite natural to think of the production of life-sustaining products as an essential part of this life rather than as a regrettable precondition for it that is best delegated to others.

Quite apart from any concerns about exploitation, this seems to me to be the right way to think about the value of a life and of its constituent activities. If I try to mentally isolate episodes of virtuous action or scientific (or artistic) contemplation from the rest of life, I find myself no more able to value them than I am able to value the activities of a cobbler considered in isolation from the shoes that are their goal and from a life in which shoes are needed. And though I love philosophical contemplation, I find myself (as a psychological matter) wholly unable to envy the life Aristotle projects for his God—or even to prefer such a life (to the extent that I can imagine

it) to death. Philosophical activity, as I understand it, can only exist and be valuable in the context of a whole human life. And when I decided to make philosophizing the central activity in my life by selecting philosophy as a career I viewed this as a choice of specializing in one aspect of life—a choice that only makes sense and that I could only value in the context of a society teaming with other people who choose to specialize in other aspects of life—including many people who choose to specialize in the production of the many goods and services that I need in order to do my work. Each of the fields in which one can specialize is a part of human life, deriving its value from the whole. And though there are local teleological relationships between some of the jobs in which people specialize (e.g., some people manufacture stethoscopes so that others can listen to lungs) no broad type or part of human life is for the sake of any other.

I say only that this *seems* to me to be the right way to think about the value of philosophy and of other human activities. I will not try to argue for this view here. I suspect it is shared (though to different extents) by many of my fellow 21st Century philosophers. It is almost certainly shared by most contemporary scientists who see themselves not as contemplators whose work has no use beyond itself, but as contributing members of a division of labor economy. This view of ourselves, our activities, and our place in society, is quite distant from Aristotle's, but I think it is just this sort of distance that is needed to entirely eliminate all of the exploitative elements from Aristotle's ethics.

For if one thinks that all or much of the value in a human life derives from a specific set of activities that one thinks contribute little or nothing to the rest of life, and if one recognizes that these activities cannot be performed unless certain work gets done, and if one thinks that engaging in this work prevents one from engaging in the relevant activities (or from engaging in them as well as one could have absent the work) then one will be lead to think of these activities

and the people who perform them as means that exist to serve the more valuable activities and the people who engage in them.

If I am correct in this, can an ethics that abandons all of these exploitation-generating tenets still be essentially Aristotelian? Can these tenets be regarded as minor premises stemming from the prejudices of an aristocratic society? Are there deeper major premises constituting Aristotle's essential commitments in moral philosophy—premises that when paired with replacement minor premises will yield an ethics that is essentially Aristotelian but non-exploitative? I have indicated what such a view might look like and some of the respects in which it would be like and unlike Aristotle's own. I leave you with the questions of whether such a view is cogent, essentially Aristotelian, and genuinely non-exploitative.