

Aristotle's Non-'Dialectical' Methodology in the *Nicomachean Ethics*

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Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* is often seen as a paradigm case of a 'dialectical' work, on a certain understanding of that term. The ubiquity of this interpretation is evidenced by its presence in the introductions or commentaries accompanying most recent translations of the treatise. Irwin 1999, 326-327 (cf. 1998, 347-349) sets forth the view as follows:

The method of ethical inquiry is dialectical, described in *Top.* i 1-4, 10-12. Hence it begins from common beliefs [viz. *endoxa*], what seems or appears to the many or the wise... He takes common beliefs as starting points because they are known (or 'familiar') to us... Discussion of these common beliefs shows that they raise puzzles, *aporiai*, when we find apparently convincing arguments from common beliefs for inconsistent conclusions... To solve (or 'loose' 1146b7) the puzzles, Aristotle looks for an account that will show the truth of most and the most important of the common beliefs (1145b5). This account will provide us with a principle that is 'known by nature'...because it justifies claims to knowledge. A defense of a theoretical principle shows how it vindicates many of the common beliefs (1098b9). But it does not vindicate them all. Hence a proper defense should also show why false common beliefs appear attractive and rest on explicable misunderstandings.¹

We can break down this interpretation into four claims:

C1. The starting-points from which Aristotle argues are *endoxa*—opinions held by all or most of the many or the wise.²

¹ Similar, though more cautious, claims are made in Brodie 2002, 385 that describes 1145b2-7 as 'for once' describing Aristotle's 'characteristic method'; and Crisp 2000, ix-x that gives the C3 procedure pride of place in his discussion of the *NE*'s method, even while acknowledging significant exceptions. For the classic statement of this 'dialectical interpretation' of Aristotle's method in the ethics and beyond, see Owen 1975, and cf. Barnes 1980.

² I use 'starting-point' as a generic term for anything from which an intellectual process begins. I take this to correspond to Aristotle's most general sense of the term ἀρχή, which is usually translated 'principle' (or 'first principle') when Aristotle uses it to refer to the premises from which demonstrations proceed or to the objects whose existence and identity is grasped in these premises. This usage can be seen as a specification of the generic usage, and so I use 'starting-point' as a translation

C2. The treatise's goal is to resolve tensions in the set of starting-points, in such a way as to preserve as many of the starting-points as possible (perhaps with some being given more weight than others).

C3. The method by which this is accomplished consists in a three step procedure (described by Aristotle in *NE* vii 1.1145b2-7: first one sets out the *endoxa*, second one finds the *aporiai* to which they lead, and third one works to resolve these *aporiai*).

C4. To proceed in this way is to practice dialectic, as described in the *Topics*.

In parts 1 and 2, I argue that C1-C3 are false. It follows from this that the *Nicomachean Ethics*' predominant methodology is not 'dialectical' in the present sense of that term. C1-C3 address three fundamental questions we can ask about a method of inquiry: What are its *starting-points*? What is its *goal(s)*? What is the *process* by which we progress from the starting-points to the goal(s)? Against C1, I argue that many of the *NE*'s arguments are premised on discriminations and evaluations that issue from experience and good character and do not qualify as *endoxa*. Against C2, I argue that the immediate goal of the inquiry is to arrive at definitions rather than to resolve inconsistencies. The process by which Aristotle reaches his definitions varies from case to case, but we will see that it usually involves comparison of the definiendum to a number of related items. In part 3, I discuss the several roles *aporiai* play in *NE*, only some of which correspond roughly to the methodological statement in vii 1.

These points are only the beginning of a positive interpretation of Aristotle's ethical methodology. A more complete treatment will have to wait for another occasion. It would include an inquiry into the relation between *NE*'s method and that practiced or espoused in other treatises. This inquiry would be necessary to address C4, which is a claim about how the method attributed to Aristotle by C1-C3 relates to one of his own methodological concepts. Though I cannot pursue this issue in any detail here, my title and my purpose here might be misunderstood if I did not mention that I find the claim dubious and say a word or two about why.

The *Topics* does not itself recommend anything like the procedure described in C3, nor is it clear that Aristotle believes that there is any such thing as a 'dialectical inquiry' (whether characterized by C2's goal of rendering a body of pre-existent beliefs maximally consistent or not). In his corpus, the adjective 'dialectical' primarily describes a type of argument, and 'dialectic' a method for constructing and refuting such arguments. Dialectical argumentation does play a role in many inquiries, and in *Topics* i 2 Aristotle tells us that it is useful in finding the starting-points of sciences (101a34-b4), but this does not establish that there is or can be any inquiry or discipline whose method *is* (rather than merely involves) dialectic. Any inquiry conducted on the C3-method, or otherwise organized around *aporiai* will have to employ dialectical arguments, but it does not follow

throughout, leaving it to context to make clear whether the narrow or the wider sense is intended.

from this that such methods of conducting an inquiry are properly described as ‘dialectical’, much less that Aristotle discusses them in the *Topics*. In my title I use the word in the sense stipulated by C4; going forward I will avoid it and speak rather of C3 and its method.

It should be clear, then, that I do not mean to deny that *NE* makes use of the argumentative strategies recommended in the *Topics*. It certainly does. For example at v 1.1129a18-26, Aristotle explains and employs the technique (discussed in *Topics* i 15) of examining a term’s contrary to determine if the term is used in more than one way. Similarly, he makes constant use of *Topics* iv 3’s strategy of looking to inflections and co-ordinates in establishing or refuting a genus or differentia (124a10-14), when he infers things about the virtues from their possessors on the grounds that ‘it does not matter whether we consider the state itself or the person who acts in accord with it’ (1123b1). The role of such forms of argument in Aristotle’s practice, and of the *Topics* in Aristotle’s thought is a subject that deserves more attention than it has received.

I. Preliminary Considerations against C1-C3

I begin with 1145b2-7, the *locus classicus* for C3:

It is necessary, as in the other cases (ὡςπερ ἐπὶ τῶν ἄλλων), to set out the appearances and, having first gone through the *aporiai*, to prove ideally (μάλιστα) all the *endoxa* about these affections or, if not, most of them and the most authoritative. For if the difficulties are resolved and the *endoxa* remain, it will have been sufficiently proven.

This passage is naturally read as announcing the three step procedure described in C3, and the phrase ὡςπερ ἐπὶ τῶν ἄλλων can be taken to endorse it as a general method. On this basis alone this procedure is sometimes taken to be *the* method of Aristotelian ethics.³ The *NE* does contain, of course, a number of discussions that are organized around *aporiai* in something like this manner. Most notably, the bulk of the discussion of *akrasia* and the two discussions of pleasure have this sort of structure, as does the discussion of friendship in books 8 and 9. The progression of book 1 also is also sometimes thought to follow this pattern, on the grounds that some views of the many and wise are considered in i 5-6 and *aporiai* are resolved in i 8-12. I think this way of reading book 1 is misleading, because these views are considered only as possible answers to a question that had already been posed independently of them, and because the chapters that do most of the work, i 1-2 and i 7, are not themselves aporetically organized, and I

³ Bolton, 1991, 8; cf. Nussbaum 1968, 240. It is worth noting that the phrase ‘as in the other cases’ appears in a number of other passages in the corpus connected with method, none of which endorses anything like the method described in *NE* vii 1. See esp. *Politics* i 1.1252a16, where Aristotle uses it in connection with the method of analyzing composites into indivisible elements, and *Physics* ii 3.195b22 where it is used in connection with the method of looking for primary causes; the phrase also occurs in *NE* ii 7.1108a17 in connection with the need to make up names for the unnamed states of character.

do not think they can be plausibly seen as instantiating any of the procedure's three steps. Whatever we say about book 1, however, it is clear that some of the *NE*'s most central discussions are not aporetic. In particular, the general discussion of virtue of character in book 2 is not; there are few *aporiai* in the discussions of the individual virtues that occupy books 3.6-5; and moreover, unlike the *Metaphysics*, the treatise as a whole is not structured aporetically, few of the discussions that are organized around *aporiai* contain surveys of appearances or *endoxa* of the sort we find in vii 1. More often discussion of *aporiai* are preceded by passages in which Aristotle develops his own positive account.⁴

We cannot, then, understand 1145b2-7 as an articulation of the method of *NE* as a whole, rather than as a method employed in some of its discussions. Or at least we cannot do so without explaining how this method is somehow at work in the discussions where it is not apparent and how it is driving the progression of the treatise as a whole. In defense of C3, we might argue that, in the cases where *aporiai* follow accounts, the accounts themselves are articulations of appearances and so correspond to the first step of the procedure. If so, then maybe in the cases where no *aporiai* are raised, it is only because the appearances are consistent, so that the first of the three steps is sufficient. This view might draw some support from Aristotle's willingness throughout viii 1 to argue briefly (and presumably unnecessarily) in support of propositions that are plausibly construed as appearances being 'laid out'.

In taking this position, we would have to acknowledge that the first step of the procedure often consists in something a lot more complicated than the surveying of appearances. The introduction of the idea of a chief good in i 1-2, the function argument in i 7, the account of virtue as arising from habituation in ii 1-4, the definition and classification of virtue in ii 5-8, and the account and definition of justice in v 1-8 are all progressions of reasoning, rather than catalogues of observations or received opinions. Thus, if we interpret 1145b2-7 liberally enough to make it correspond to Aristotle's practice, we render it uninformative about the method at work in the passages listed above, since on this view, almost all the philosophical work in these passages will be accomplished in some unspecified manner as part of the procedure's first step. But we ought to expect any account of the method of the *NE* to tell us something about how this work is accomplished.

Also, even interpreted liberally, C3 does not explain the organization of the *NE* as a whole. Consider the relationship between the discussions of the virtues of character and of the virtues of thought, and the relationship between both of these and the project of determining what the human good is. Even if each discussion consisted in a sequence of the sort mandated by C3, no such sequence explains the structure of the whole. There are treatises that begin with lengthy surveys of *endoxa*, followed by chapters drawing out *aporiai*, and then, finally, resolutions; but the *NE* is not organized in this way and there is a logic to its organization.

⁴ This is the case with the *aporiai* in i 8-9, iii 5, i 10-12, ii 4, v 9-11, and vi 12-13.

In broad strokes at least, this logic is not difficult to grasp, and considering it sheds considerable light on the treatise's goal. The *NE*'s subject is the good achievable in human action, and its project is to define this good in a manner that will assist us in achieving it. This project is introduced and motivated in i 1-2, especially at 1094a24-25 where Aristotle tells us that 'we should try to grasp, in outline at least, what this [good] is', because doing so will enable us to achieve it in action. An outline definition of the good is developed in i 7. Since the central term in this definition is virtue, it becomes necessary to define virtue as well. Thus i 13-vii 10 are given over to discussions of virtue in general and then of the particular virtues (both of character and of intellect) and related states. Each of these discussions aims at a definition of its subject.

Virtue of character is defined in ii 5-6, and this definition is elaborated by the discussion of choice and the voluntary in iii 1, which Aristotle tells us must be defined as part of an inquiry into virtue because it is about 'feelings and actions' and these are only subject to praise and blame when they are voluntary (1109b30-34). Voluntary is defined in terms of decision, a term that itself appears in the definition of virtue, and that is defined in iii 2. Deliberation and wish (from which deliberation is distinguished) are discussed in iii 3 and 4, respectively, and iii 5 draws on these discussions to explain how virtue and vice are voluntary, thus completing the 'common' discussion of the virtues 'in outline' (1114b26-27). Throughout, Aristotle's attention is on *what virtue is* and *how it comes about*. He takes up new subjects because virtue is defined in terms of them or because the definition of virtue suggests that they are relevant to the question of how virtue can be acquired.

After the general account of virtue of character, Aristotle turns his attention (iii 6-v) to the individual virtues. We can see from the way he concludes many of these discussions that they too are aimed at definitions. For example, the discussion of bravery ends with the claim that 'it is not hard to grasp, in outline at least, what it is from what's been said' (1117b21-2), and book 5 concludes: 'concerning justice and the rest of the virtues of character, let them be defined in this way' (1138b13-14; cf. 1123a19, 1125a16-17, a35, and 1127a6-7). The remaining three topics treated at length by *NE* are pleasure, *akrasia*, and friendship. And the conclusion to vii indicates that at least part of Aristotle's aim in these discussions is to arrive at definitions: '[We have spoken] about continence and incontinence, then, and pleasure and pain and what each is and how some are good and others bad; it remains to speak also about friendship' (1154b32-34).

Definition is clearly a goal of the treatise, and Aristotle's consistent reference to it in his transitions, and the work it does in explaining the structure of the treatise, gives us strong reason to think of it as *the* goal. Or rather, it is what we might call the 'cognitive goal'. Since the *NE* is a work of practical philosophy, definitions cannot be its ultimate purpose, as Aristotle himself explains early in book 2: 'The present treatment is not for the sake of study, as the others are; for we do not enquire in order to know what virtue is, but rather in order to become good, since otherwise it would not benefit us' (1103b26-29). Notice the implication that if

the work were for the sake of study (*theoria*), the aim of the discussion would be a definition of virtue. In fact, though pursuing this point would take us outside our present discussion, Aristotle holds that the aim of all inquiries is to determine whether something exists (the if-that question) and then what it is (see especially *Posterior Analytics* ii 1). Knowledge of what something is is intimately connected with (or perhaps equivalent to) a grasp of the manner in which it causes and is caused by other things. The state we are in when we fully have this knowledge is *epistēmē*, and study is its exercise. Unless, that is, the thing about which we know is something that we ourselves can bring about. In that case, perfected knowledge of what it is will be part of *phronēsis* or one of the *technai*, and will amount knowing how to bring it about; the exercise of which will be the actual bringing about of the thing.⁵ This is the case with virtue, and with the human good of which it is a central part.

The function of the *NE* as a whole seems to be to help us to become good, but insofar as it is an inquiry it aims at knowledge; and this knowledge, which I called the ‘cognitive goal’, is an understanding of what the good is. The identification of definition as the *NE*’s cognitive goal, suggests that we can come to understand the treatise’s starting-points and process by examining how Aristotle develops and defends his definitions.

I pursue this suggestion in part 2, focusing on the discussions of the virtues of character. Our provisional conclusion that definition is Aristotle’s goal in *NE* is not incompatible with the claim that *aporia*-resolution is also properly described as the goal. Perhaps Aristotle views one goal as the means to the other, so that one is the proximate and the other the ultimate goal. Whether or not *aporia*-resolution is *NE*’s goal, any discussion of its method ought to treat *aporiai*, both because they play a role in organizing several of the discussions, and because of the famous comment at 1145b2-7. I take up the role of *aporiai* in part 3.

I have already offered preliminary reasons for rejecting C2 and C3 in favor of an alternative account of *NE*’s goal and procedure. I turn now to some similar considerations against C1, the claim that Aristotle’s ethical starting-points are *endoxa*. Before proceeding any further, we need to consider the question of what *endoxa* are. In formulating C1 above, I followed Irwin (and many others) in taking an *endoxon* to be a belief held by all or most of the many or the wise. This understanding of the term derives from *Topics* 100b21-24: ‘The things that seem so to everyone or to most people or to the wise (i.e., to all of them or to most or to the most well-known and reputable [ἐνδοξος]) are *endoxa*.’ My formulation of C1 presupposes that this statement is a definition of *endoxa*, and it is often read that way. There is an alternative interpretation, however, according to which for a premise to be *endoxon* is simply for it to be acceptable to one’s interlocutor. On this view, to which I am myself sympathetic, the present passage simply tells us what sorts of premises most interlocutors will accept.⁶ When addressing an audi-

⁵ On Aristotle’s view of knowledge, see Salmieri 2008, esp. §3.3.3 and §4.2.

⁶ Or perhaps, as Smith 1997, xxiii contends, the passage tells us that different sorts of premises

ence that is unusual in the premises it will accept, some of the views of the many and wise may fail to qualify as *endoxa* and some things held by neither the many nor the wise may qualify. As we will see shortly, the *NE*'s audience is unusual in just this respect, so on this alternative understanding of *endoxa*, a variant of C1 may be true even if the *NE*'s premises are not opinions of the many or the wise. I will return to this possibility in due course. For the present, I set it aside and assess C1 as formulated above.

If C1 is true we would expect *NE* to make frequent and respectful appeals to the many or the wise. In fact, the opposite is the case. The *NE* contains comparatively few references to the wise by name, and almost none of them occur in the chapters where accounts are developed (the ones most likely to instantiate the first step of C3's procedure). Most of these mentions occur in the discussions of incontinence, friendship and pleasure, which are more aporetic in structure and less intimately connected with the treatise's central project than the other discussions. The discussion of the virtues of character in particular has strikingly few references to Socrates and Plato, who are surely the most prominent philosophers associated with the subject. Worse, it ignores significant Platonic or Socratic positions that are directly relevant to its subject matter. Aristotle's discussion of temperance makes no reference to the *Charmides*, though his treatment differs considerably from Plato's, especially in giving the virtue a much more narrowly delimited scope. The same point applies in the case of courage and the *Laches*, though he does mention briefly Socrates' view that the virtue is *epistēmē* (1116b4). He offers us no reason why piety does not appear on his list of virtues, though Plato devoted the whole *Euthyphro* to it.⁷ Most notably, Aristotle ignores the idea that wisdom, courage, temperance, and justice are the cardinal virtues, a view central to the *Republic* and other Platonic dialogues (and that is at least misleading according to Aristotle's own position).⁸

The reputedly wise simply do not play the sort of prominent role in *NE* that they do in the *Metaphysics*, *Physics*, or *De anima*. Moreover, in one of the cases when Aristotle does appeal to their opinions, he makes it clear that he regards their role as secondary:

The opinions of the wise do seem to harmonize with the accounts. But while even such things lend some credence, the truth in practical matters is discerned from actions and life; for it is in these that authority resides. It is necessary to examine

will be acceptable to different sorts of interlocutors, some to the many and others to the wise or to the followers of different men reputed to be wise.

⁷ Indeed piety is not even mentioned in *NE*, though Broadie 2002, 447-448 and 2003 points out that Aristotle's claim that wisdom is 'most loved by the gods' (1179a24, a30) connects it to a standard view of piety.

⁸ In the *Republic*, the thesis is put forward by Socrates and accepted by Adeimantus and Glaucon at 427e. It is central to the dialogue since Socrates uses the claim in an eliminative argument to arrive at his identification of justice. For Aristotle, of course all four are virtues, but wisdom is a virtue of thought whereas the other three are virtues of character, and many other virtues of both sorts are omitted from the list.

the aforesaid things by relating them to actions and life, accepting the things that accord with our actions and assuming the conflicting things to be mere theory. (1179a16-23)

If Aristotle marginalizes the wise in *NE*, he is routinely contemptuous of the opinions and values of the many. The very few passages that treat the many respectfully (e.g., 1098b23-29) are insignificant in comparison to the more common and more explicit passages in which they are derided or dismissed (e.g., 1095b18, 1105b12, 1113a33, 1124b6, 1125b15, 1129b33, 1159a17-19, 1163b26, 1166b2-6, 1169b2, and 1179b33-1180a4; cf. *EE* 1214b29-1215a2). The portrait of the many that emerges from the treatise is of a hoard of immature and thoughtless men who lack a coherent conception of their own good, cannot tell what is fine, and are led largely by their passions.

Given this estimate of the many, it is implausible that Aristotle would regard their opinions as a suitable starting-point for ethical inquiry, and he is nearly explicit that he does not do so. In *i* 4, after concluding that ‘we must start from what is well known by us’ (rather than what is well known *simpliciter*), he comments:

That’s why we need to have been brought up in fine habits if we are to listen adequately [to lectures] about fine things and just things and, in general, matters of statesmanship. For the ‘that’ is the starting-point, and if it is apparent, one can start without also needing the ‘why’. Such a person has or can easily grasp the starting-points. (1095b4-8)

Since badly raised people, including many of the many, will not have access to the starting-points (i.e., to what is first ‘to us’), the starting-points cannot simply be the many’s own opinions. They must be opinions that presuppose a decent character. And such a character is not the only thing necessary to grasp the starting-points: in *i* 3 we learn that the audience must also be experienced ‘in the practices of life’, because ‘the accounts [arise] from these and are about them’ (1095a3-4).⁹ Thus, the starting-points are such that they could not be grasped by a child of good character or even by a decent adult who lacked experience in the actions of life—for example, by Miranda in Shakespeare’s *Tempest*, who was brought up on an island isolated from other people.

Now we are in a position to return to the possibility, set aside earlier, that for a premise to be *endoxon* is simply for it to be acceptable to one’s interlocutor. If this view is correct, then, since Aristotle limits the *NE*’s audience to people who are decent and experienced (1095a3-13), these people’s opinions, rather than those of the many or the wise, will be the *endoxa* from which, according to a suitably modified version of C1, we should expect the *NE* to take as his starting-points.¹⁰ The modified version of C1 would read something like this:

C1’. The starting-points from which Aristotle argues in the *NE* are

⁹ Cf. 1142a13-21 on why the young cannot attain *phronēsis* or wisdom or master natural science.

¹⁰ This is, in essence, the position defended by Barnes 1980, 504.

endoxa—opinions held by his audience.

Understood in the most straightforward way, this claim is trivial: who argues from premises that he does not think his audience will accept? A claim of this sort would be true of any competently-written treatise whatsoever, even one composed entirely of demonstrations. Demonstrations proceed from ‘true and primary’ starting-points, and *Topics* i 1.100a25-31 distinguishes them on this basis from dialectical arguments, which proceed from *endoxa*. But a treatise full of demonstrations would have to be addressed to an audience that accepts its true and primary starting-points, which would thereby qualify as *endoxa*.

If there is to be a distinction between demonstrative and dialectical argument, and if C1' is to say anything of interest, then what is meant in saying that an argument proceeds from *endoxa* cannot be simply that its premises are *accepted*—be it by a particular interlocutor or by the many or the wise. For an argument to proceed from *endoxa* must mean that its premises are selected *on the grounds that* they are acceptable to certain people, rather than on some other grounds (such as being true or primary). Everyone presenting an argument expects his audience to accept his premises; but sometimes he expects this because he has selected the premises because he knows that the audience accepts them, and other times he expects this because he has selected the members of his audience on the grounds of their acceptance of the premises from which he intends to argue. We have already seen that the *NE* falls into this second category. It is because only well brought up and experienced people have or can easily grasp the starting-points proper to the inquiry that Aristotle limits his audience to such people. These starting-points are determined by the nature of the subject matter rather than with reference to the audience.¹¹ These starting points are *endoxa* in the trivial sense that the audience accepts them, but not in the sense of deriving their authority from this acceptance or from the acceptance of the many or the wise. (Going forward I will use ‘*endoxa*’ primarily in Irwin’s sense, to refer to premises that derive their authority from their acceptance by the many or the wise.) In parts 2 and 3, we get a sense of just what these starting-points are and of the use to which Aristotle puts them.

¹¹ In the terminology of the *Sophistic Refutations*, this makes *NE* a didactic rather than a dialectical treatise.

There are four kinds of arguments (λόγοι) used in discussion (διαλέγεσθαι): didactic, dialectical, examinational (πειραστικοί) and contentious. Didactic [arguments] are those that deduce from the starting-points appropriate to each study (μοθήματα) and not from the opinions held by the answerer (for the student must be convinced [of the starting-points]). Dialectical [arguments] are those that deduce from ἔνδοξα to the contradictory [of a thesis]. (165a38-b4)

In the sequel Aristotle seems to treat didactic arguments as equivalent to demonstrative arguments, which he tells us he treated in the *Analytics*, but I think it is significant that he used a different term here—the same term used in the first sentence of the *Posterior Analytics*, which is clearly intended there to apply to other cases as well as to demonstrative arguments. Demonstrations constitute an important sub-class of what are here called didactic arguments; they are the ones in which the premises are primary. But there are other arguments too that begin from starting-points that are true and proper to their subject matter (cf. *DA* 402a16-22).

II. Defining the Virtues

We have seen reason to think that the cognitive goal of the *NE* is definition. Because they are numerous, uniform in purpose, and relatively brief, the discussions of the individual virtues of character afford a good case study in *NE*'s method of definition, from which we can hope to learn about the *NE*'s starting-point and process. Aristotle describes the goal of these discussions as follows: 'Resuming [our earlier discussion] let's say about each [virtue] what it is, and with what sort of thing it's concerned and how [it's concerned with it]. At the same time it will be clear also how many there are' (1115a4-5). Since, as of ii 5-6, each virtue is an intermediate state concerned with some area of life, it will be distinguished from other virtues by its area of concern and from other states within that area by its intermediate character. Thus, rather than being distinct from its definition, a virtue's area and manner of concern are its differentiae, within the genus state-that-decides.¹² The aim of the discussions, then, is to reach definitions. Aristotle's remark that the discussions of the virtues will also make clear 'how many there are' indicates that at least some of the discussions will address the question of whether their subjects exist or are virtues.¹³ We know from *Posterior Analytics* 89b32-35 that, except in cases where it is already obvious, it is necessary to inquire 'if something is' before inquiring into 'what it is'. Aristotle proceeds in just this manner in his discussions of several of the virtues—for example, friendliness (iv 6), wit (iv 8), the virtue concerned with small honors (iv 4), and justice (v 2).¹⁴

¹² In the *Topics* (e.g., at 127b18-25) Aristotle often gives 'virtue' as the genus of the individual virtues, and plausibly virtue, rather than state of character, is the more proximate genus. When he discusses definitions with multiple differentiae in *Meta.* vii 12 and viii 6 and in *Post. An.* ii 13, Aristotle sees the differentiae as standing in a definite order, with each differentia except the last marking out a proximate genus that is then divided by the subsequent differentiae. Thus one might think that state of character is divided immediately into virtue and vice by the differentia intermediate or extreme and only then subdivided by area, and that in defining virtues as states in the *NE*, Aristotle is following a method he mentions in *Topics* iv 5.143a12-28 of naming the higher genus, and specifying the proximate one only by giving its *logos*—i.e., by including its differentia in the definition of the ultimate definiendum. However, it is more natural to think of, e.g., 'intermediate concern with pleasure' as a division of 'concern with bodily pleasure' than to think of it as a division of 'intermediate concern', and indeed Aristotle begins each discussion by distinguishing the relevant virtue's area before differentiating it from the vices. This suggests either that the proximate genus of, e.g., temperance is 'state concerned with pleasures' or else that 'state of character' is the proximate genus for each virtue with area and manner serving as simultaneous (rather than successive) differentiae. Aristotle discusses the need for simultaneous differentiae in *Parts of Animals* i 3, suggesting that the point has relevance to non-zoological kinds (643a17, b12). On this point, see Balme 1992, 101-104.

¹³ Aristotle never argues that there are exactly a certain number of virtues, nor is there any obvious single principle directing the list of virtues he discusses or the order in which he discusses them. His claim about showing how many there are is best interpreted as a claim that he will show that there are many, as opposed to, e.g., one or four (contra *Protagoras* and *Republic*, respectively).

¹⁴ Justice is a something of a special case. There is no question that some positive trait(s) called justice exists. What Aristotle establishes is that there is a virtue, justice, distinct from the other virtues. This is necessary because the term justice can refer to virtue as a whole insofar as it is manifest in one's dealings with others. Another special case of Aristotle asking the 'if it is' question is the

Let us consider in detail how this progression works in the case of one of these virtues, friendliness. Its discussion begins as follows:

In get-togethers, community, and sharing discussions and activities, some people seem to be ingratiating; aiming to please, they praise everything and never object, thinking rather that they must be painless to the people they deal with. Those who, contrary to these people, object to everything and don't care at all about causing pain are called cantankerous and quarrelsome. It's not unclear that the aforementioned states are blameworthy and that their intermediate, in accordance with which one accepts or objects when it's right and in the right way, is praiseworthy. (1126b11-19)

Aristotle directs our attention to two sorts of people with contrary dispositions towards social interactions and notes that both of these dispositions are faults. From this he concludes that there must be a virtue in this area. This passage is an example of Aristotle answering the 'if it is' question. Notice that the starting-points from which Aristotle answers it are accessible to his audience precisely in virtue of its experience and good character. A decent and experienced person is likely to have made the requisite observations and formed concepts like 'ingratiating', 'cantankerous', or 'quarrelsome'. Even if he had not done this, he would be able to identify the relevant types of people in his experience, once the distinction was pointed out to him. He would find it natural to group various distasteful people and literary characters into these categories because he would see, e.g., ingratiating people as *commonly* offensive and therefore as constituting a type.

Conversely, Aristotle's claims about ingratiating and cantankerous people would hold no meaning for someone who lacked the requisite experience or character. If Miranda, isolated on her island with little knowledge of other people, could follow Aristotle's reasoning at all, she would only be 'saying the words', and would lack any real conviction. Consider also the case of a cantankerous hermit. Not only would he not acknowledge that his state is blameworthy, he would fail to recognize that there are two distinct classes of people friendlier than himself,

for the brave person appears rash relative to the coward and cowardly relative to the rash person; likewise the temperate person appears intemperate relative to the insensible and insensible relative to the intemperate and, the generous person wasteful relative to the ungenerous and ungenerous relative to the wasteful. And that's why people of each extreme push the intermediate person towards the other [extreme]: while the coward calls the brave person rash, the rash person calls him a coward, and analogously in the other cases. (1108b19-26)

discussion of shame (iv 9). Again there is no question of whether there is such a thing as shame. What Aristotle argues is first that it is a feeling rather than a state (and so cannot be a virtue). He then argues that there is no virtue concerned with this feeling.

If someone can grasp the distinction between cantankerous and ingratiating people and notice that there is a third alternative, it is only because his own character is at least generally intermediate as regards social encounters. 'For in accordance with each state there are distinctive fine things and pleasures, and the excellent man differs most perhaps by seeing the truth in each case' (1113a31-33).

Starting from contrasts between people and evaluations of people, both of which are made possible by experience and character, Aristotle has established that there is an unnamed virtue intermediate between the two blameworthy states. It remains to say what it is. It is already clear that it is a state concerned with pleasures and pains in social encounters, and that its manner is somehow intermediate between that of cantankerous and ingratiating people. Aristotle identifies more precisely its manner of concern by comparison with friendship. Both friends and possessors of the virtue 'refer to the fine and beneficial in aiming not to pain or to share pleasure' (1126b29-30); the two sorts of men differ in that a friend behaves this way towards particular people because of the affection he feels for them, whereas a possessor of the virtue behaves this way towards everyone as a result of his character. Thus friendliness is a state of character concerned with the pleasures and pains that arise in meeting people, from which one aims to cause pleasure and avoid pain, but only when it is fine and beneficial to do so. From this definition, Aristotle demonstrates a number of attributes of the friendly person: most significantly, the circumstances under which he will opt to cause pleasure or pain and acquiesce or object to the actions of others (1126b27-34), and the different ways in which he will act towards people of different sorts (1126b35-a4).

Because the members of Aristotle's audience are able to identify friendly people in their experience, they will be able to observe that friendly people do have at least some of the attributes that follow from the definition; the explanation of these attributes both helps the student to organize his knowledge of friendly people around causal relationships, and serves as a supporting argument for the correctness of the definition.¹⁵

Notice that the definition is based entirely upon observations, discriminations, and evaluations that require experience and character. These starting-points are all concrete judgments about how people, actions, or states are similar or different and better or worse than one another. They are the sort of judgments that arise spontaneously in the course of acting, rather than general premises that could have currency with a given class of people—with the many, the wise, or even with Aristotle's proper audience.

The discussions of the unnamed virtues all follow this pattern. Aristotle begins either by naming an area (in the cases of mildness, wit, and the virtue concerned with small honors) or by observing a blameworthy state or type of person (in the case of truthfulness). When he begins with an area, he immediately observes and

¹⁵ The transition from observation of friendly people to the development of a definition and the demonstration of what follows from it is marked grammatically by a shift from the present into the future tense. Similar tense shifts occur in the discussions of courage, temperance, generosity, magnificence, pride, and wit at 1117b8, 1119a18, 1120a25, 1122b6, 1124a5, and 1128a29, respectively.

evaluates the differences between types of people in that area, establishing that there are two opposed blameworthy states and, therefore, that there must be a virtue intermediate between them. In the discussion of truthfulness, where he begins by noting a vice, he immediately identifies its area and then proceeds as in the other discussions. In either case, after establishing the virtue's area of concern, he articulates its manner of concern by contrasting it with the vices, and he often shows how derivative features of the person who has a virtue follow from its manner of concern. In the case of wit there is a question as to which feature is essential, and Aristotle considers 'whether the person who jokes well should be defined by his saying things that are not unfit for a freeman or by his not paining the audience or even by his delighting it' (1128a25-28). Aristotle adopts the first alternative, since the audience-relative alternative is 'indeterminate' whereas the virtuous person, even while adapting his remarks to his audience, makes jokes of a determinate sort—the very sort that he himself would be willing to listen to (1128a28-30).

It is not surprising that Aristotle does not draw on *endoxa* or raise *aporiai* about these unnamed and unrecognized virtues. Precisely because they are unnamed and unrecognized, there are few received opinions and live debates about them. In the discussions of the recognized virtues (courage, temperance, generosity, magnificence, pride, and justice), Aristotle does appeal to what 'we say' or think, and to linguistic and laudatory practices. However, as we will see, these appeals serve only to orient the discussion, to corroborate its results, or to clarify the relationship between his own account and other views. The starting-points from which he develops his account remain the sorts of discriminations and evaluations we have seen, and the goal remains a statement of the virtue's area and manner of concern.

About each recognized virtue there will be a body of received opinion about its area of concern and established linguistic practices of calling people, e.g., 'brave' insofar as they conduct themselves in certain ways with respect to a certain area of life. In the specific case of bravery, Aristotle has already made use of some of this common knowledge in his general discussion of virtue of character in book 2, so at the outset of his discussion of bravery he takes himself to have already established that 'it is a mean concerned with fear and boldness' (1115a6-7).¹⁶ However, this common understanding of bravery's scope is far broader than the area of the virtue as Aristotle understands it, and he makes no attempt to encom-

¹⁶ The discussion of temperance begins with a similar claim (1117b25). These claims are often taken to refer to the enumeration of virtues and vices in ii 7. I think it is more likely that Aristotle is referring to his frequent use of courage and temperance as examples in ii 3-6. Though Aristotle is not explicit here that courage and temperance in particular are means concerned with fears and pleasures, the implication is clear. This interpretation of the references explains why they occur only in the discussions of courage and temperance. All of the virtues and vices are mentioned in ii 7, yet this chapter is conspicuously not referenced in any of the other discussions. The unrecognized virtues named in ii 7 are discovered and named again (as if for the first time) in iv. This suggests that ii 7 is a *précis* of iii 6-vii, rather than a preliminary discussion on which the later chapters can rely for provisional findings.

pass with his account every sort of person who is called 'brave'. Indeed, he mentions at least seven conditions other than the virtue that answer to that name.

Aristotle's goal is to identify the area of concern of a particular type of intermediate person, if there is one, who is called 'brave', and he does this by differentiating this area within the genus 'fear'. Assuming that bravery is a virtue and that it consists in a certain sort of imperviousness to fear, Aristotle immediately rules out types of fear that are fine, even though 'shameless' people who are impervious to them are sometimes called brave 'metaphorically' (1115a12-15). To grasp that the relevant usage is metaphorical one needs to be able both to recognize the fineness of the relevant fears and to distinguish shameless people from brave ones. Aristotle goes on to differentiate the fears with which bravery is concerned from other bad fears, by observing that 'some people, though cowards in the dangers of battle, are generous and face confidently a loss of assets' (1115a20-23). It is obvious that one's knowledge that there are such people depends on one's life experience; it depends also on one's character, since a coward would view the battlefield desertion of a cowardly spendthrift as a prudent retreat. We have here an example of Aristotle relying on the kind of starting-points we have come to expect. Notice also that he is relying on his general account of virtue of character as a state. Since states are stable and enduring, braving battle (which is the paradigmatic exercise of bravery) and 'braving' poverty cannot issue from the same state, if there are people who habitually do the latter but not the former. Thus there must be two states, the former being (or including) bravery and the latter being generosity.

Having established that not all frightening things concern the brave person, Aristotle asks which frightening things concern him. He answers: 'the most frightening; for no one stands firmer against frightening things' (1115a25-26). For this answer to be persuasive, the audience's attention must be focused on a particular sort of person. This was not the case prior to the differentiation of the brave person from shameless or financially fearless people, since both of these types are called brave 'by similarity'. Until they are differentiated from the genuinely brave person, there is a danger of conflating the three types. Once the relevant distinctions are in place, Aristotle can rely on his audience's experience and character to convince them that brave people specifically stand firmest against the most frightening things.

Aristotle notes that the most frightening thing is death, but observing that 'the brave person seems not even to be concerned with death in every [circumstance], such as at sea or by sickness', he asks in which conditions death concerns him (1115a28-31). This reasoning also requires that the audience's attention be fixed on a particular sort of person. One grasps that what concerns the brave person is not fear of death in general by noticing that it was not with all forms of death that, e.g., Achilles' bravery was concerned. The concern of bravery is specifically deaths in the finest conditions (1115a30-32)—conditions, like those that arise in battle, where it is worthwhile to lay down one's life. Unlike a sailor who keeps his wits in a deadly gale or a soldier who is not frightened only because he knows

his opponent is no threat, the brave man chooses to face a danger that is deadly and that he could avoid. His decision involves recognizing that the situation is one in which death would be preferable to avoiding the danger, and he acts on this recognition in action, despite the fear of death. Aristotle notes that his statement of bravery's area of concern is supported by the laudatory practices of his day, and he uses it to explain the distinctive way in which brave people face death at sea or illness (1115a32-b6).

With bravery's area of concern established, Aristotle turns, in iii 7, to its manner of concern, discussing the role of reason and the fine in the brave person's state, how he responds to different sorts of fears, and how he differs from excessive and deficient people. Use is made of the audience's discriminations and evaluations, but the opinions of the many and the wise are nowhere to be found. In iii 8, when Aristotle returns to states other than the virtue that are often called 'bravery', *endoxa* are taken up, but Aristotle makes no effort to preserve them. He explains the relation of each state to bravery and how it came to be called 'brave', without arguing that the received opinion is correct, or even well reasoned. For example, he holds that Socrates was simply (though explicably) wrong to identify bravery with knowledge when, in fact, merely knowledgeable soldiers will disgracefully flee from battle if they discover that they do not have the advantage and 'the brave person is not like that' (1116b4-23).

A similar critique of common parlance can be found in the discussion of generosity. Aristotle complains that people who have a collection of distinct flaws are incorrectly called wasteful: 'Now they're not properly so called; for a wastrel is meant to have a single vice—the destruction of his property; for someone is a wastrel because he wipes himself out, and the destruction of one's assets seems to be a sort of wipeout, since one's life is due to such things' (1119b33-1120a3). Notice how the argument here rests on ability to discriminate character traits. Intemperate people may waste their money on indulgences and bitter people may waste it on vendettas, but these people do not count as wasteful, because there is a specific character trait, independent of these vices, from which certain people waste money simply because (as we might say) they do not appreciate the value of a dollar.¹⁷

In homing in on temperance's area of concern within the wider domain of plea-

¹⁷ This discrimination of the wasteful person by contrast to other money-wasters makes generosity's specific area of concern clear. Not to know the value of money is not to know what it is good *for*—i.e., to be ignorant of its proper use; thus generosity is the state from which one uses money well. It is on this basis that Aristotle says that generosity is more about giving money than taking it. The differentiation also makes it clear why there is a virtue, distinct from generosity, concerned with large scale expenditures. Endowing a university chair or financing a festival involves a host of considerations and possible dangers distinct from the issue of whether the money is put to the best use. For example, someone who is motivated to make such an expenditure by a desire to show off may spend too conspicuously, leading to a garish result. The problem here is not that the money is wasted, but that the quality of the product is diminished. Likewise one can 'destroy a fine result' by denying the funds necessary to complete an ambitious project in a manner befitting both its scale and the investment one has already made in it (1123a29).

sure, Aristotle follows linguistic practice more closely than in the cases of bravery or wastefulness, however he does not justify his account on its basis. Rather he uses it as a guide or heuristic to focus attention on the starting-points from which the account is justified. He proceeds by dividing pleasure first into pleasures of the soul and pleasures of the body, and then dividing bodily pleasures according to the different sense modalities. Within this divisional schema, he locates the people who ‘we call’ temperate or intemperate; these people are so called with respect to their concern with the pleasures of touch and taste, which are shared with animals.¹⁸ The divisional schema is asserted flatly, without any basis in what ‘we say’, and once Aristotle locates the people called temperate or intemperate within it, he begins to talk about the people themselves, leaving linguistic practice (and common opinion) behind. He immediately notes that intemperate people ‘appear to have little or no use for even taste’ and then supports this judgment by citing facts that distinguish them from ‘cooks and wine tasters’, who are connoisseurs of flavor, and he explains why their lust for mere tactile pleasures ‘justly seems reproachable’ (1118a26-b3).

As in the case of bravery, once temperance’s area of concern has been established, Aristotle begins drawing distinctions within the area (e.g., between pleasures common to all people and those distinctive to individuals at 1118b8-9) and he contrasts in some detail the virtuous and vicious manners of concern. Common parlance (e.g., the use of the term ‘stomach-crazed’ at 1118b19) and the views of the wise (e.g., Homer at 1118b11) are occasionally mentioned, but they are never taken as premises and no effort is made to preserve them. In some cases they serve as illustrations. In others they are explained, but Aristotle gives no sign that he takes his explanation of them to justify his own account; rather these *endoxa* or *legomena* are themselves justified either by the account or by proper ethical starting-points. For example, Aristotle introduces the claim that ‘many people err in many ways about those pleasures that are distinctive [to them]’ with the observation that ‘people are called lovers of something because they either enjoy things one shouldn’t or enjoy them more than most people do in a way in which one shouldn’t’ (1118b22-25). He immediately observes, in his own voice, that ‘the intemperate go to excess in all these ways’, and he supports this with the further observations: ‘some of the things they enjoy one shouldn’t (since they’re hateful) and if one should enjoy some such things, they enjoy them more than one should and more than most people do’ (1118b26-27). Thus the belief that people err in many ways is supported by observations and evaluations of people in action—by the facts, evident to experienced and decent people, that different people behave in various ways some of which are right and others wrong. Attention is called to the relevant facts by received opinions and linguistic practices, but it is the facts themselves on which Aristotle’s own account is founded.¹⁹

¹⁸ The same is true of the discussion of justice, which Aristotle begins by referring to ‘the state that everyone means in speaking of justice’ (1129a6-7).

¹⁹ This method of using established concepts or linguistic practice to orient a discussion, then establishing the basis of the practice before continuing is also fairly common. A particularly clear

Aristotle takes his discussion of the types of errors people make regarding different sorts of appetites to make it clear that there is an excessive state regarding pleasure: intemperance. He goes on to discuss the way in which intemperance and temperance are concerned with pains, contrasting this opposition with that between bravery and cowardice. This contrast establishes that temperance and intemperance determine whether one is pained at all over the absence of pleasures (1118b28-33). This point about pain having been made, Aristotle can state the fundamental manner of concern of the intemperate person, which explains the way in which he is pained: ‘The intemperate person, then, craves all pleasures or the most pleasant, and is led by the craving to choose these over the rest. That’s why he’s even pained both when he fails to get something and when he craves it, for craving involves pain; but it seems absurd to be pained because of pleasure’ (1119a1-5). In stating what intemperance is, this account makes clear why it is bad. The contrast with intemperance (and with the rare, opposite vice of insensitivity to pleasure) leads to a statement of temperance’s manner of concern:

The temperate person has a mean concerning [bodily pleasure], for he’s not pleased by what most pleased the intemperate person but finds it disagreeable; in general he’s neither pleased by things one shouldn’t be nor intensely pleased by anything of this sort; he is not pained at their absence, and he doesn’t crave them, or he does so moderately, neither more than one should nor when one should not, nor, in general, anything of that sort. He desires moderately and as one should whichever pleasures are conducive to health or fitness and, whichever of the other pleasures neither impede these things or the fine nor are beyond his means. For someone of such [character] likes such pleasures more than their worth, but someone of temperate [character] is not like that, but as the correct account [says]. (1119a11-20)

We have looked at enough cases to provide a general statement about Aristotle’s method of defining the virtues. To define the virtues Aristotle has to identify their areas and manners of concern. He identifies each by differentiating it from foils such as closely related areas (e.g., the differentiation of bravery’s concern from other sorts of fearful situations), alternative ways of being disposed to a given area (e.g., the vices), or analogous dispositions in other areas (as in the discussion of friendliness and friendly people). Often these distinctions involve an evaluation that could only be made by a decent person, and they nearly always depend on an experience-based ability to discriminate types of characters and circumstances.²⁰

example occurs in *Physics* 192b8-34 where Aristotle initially supports the claim that plants, animals, and their parts exist by nature by noting that ‘we say that these and the like exist by nature’. He immediately proceeds: ‘All the things mentioned differ apparently from things which are not constituted by nature’, and he goes on to argue that this is the case.

²⁰ It is worth noting, in this connection, that the *Topics* lists ‘finding differences’ as one of four

A proper definition is causal, and Aristotle shows how the various attributes of virtuous (or vicious) people follow from the definition of a virtue (or vice). I have pointed this feature out in connection with the discussions we have looked at already, but it is worth pausing over the discussion of pride, in which it is particularly pronounced. Aristotle demonstrates that the proud person has a whole series of attributes, including a disdain for honors from trivial people and a moderate appreciation of honors from excellent ones (1124a4-12), a moderate attitude towards riches, power, and fortune (1124a12-20), a disposition to face danger without reservation, but only in great causes (1124b7-9), an aversion to gossip (1125a6), and ‘slow movements, a deep voice and calm speech’ (1125a12-16). Each of these traits follows from pride’s essence—the proper concern with the superlative honors due to one because of one’s virtue. For example, the proud man moves slowly and speaks calmly because in thinking himself superlatively worthy, the proud man sees himself as above most situations and concerns; ‘since he takes few things seriously, he is in no hurry, and since he counts nothing great, he is not strident; and these things are the causes of a shrill voice and hasty movements’ (1125a14-16).

Some of the attributes demonstrated from the definition may be *endoxa*, in the sense of received opinions, but they need not all be; and, when they are, Aristotle rarely calls our attention to this fact. When received opinions and linguistic practices are raised and explained, it is most often on the basis of truths directly accessible to the members of Aristotle’s audience because of their discriminative and evaluative abilities. These are the proper starting-points of ethical inquiry. When Aristotle makes use of *endoxa*, he traces the plausibility of these opinions back to their roots in our ability to discriminate and evaluate character types, and justifies (or criticizes) the opinions accordingly.

III. Resolving *Aporiai*

As I noted earlier, *NE*’s investigations of several subjects are aporetic in the sense that they begin with the raising of *aporiai* and are structured around their resolution. Book 7’s discussion of incontinence has received the most attention, but the discussions of pleasure in vii 11-14 and x 1-5 and of friendship in viii-ix also meet this description. In other investigations, *aporiai* are discussed only after an account has already been developed. For example, *aporiai* about the good are raised in i 8-12, after i 7’s outline definition; similarly, after arguing that virtue is acquired by habit (in ii 1-3), Aristotle raises an *aporia* in ii 4 about how this is possible. Again *aporiai* about justice and intellectual virtue (in v 9-11 and vi 12-13 respectively) are raised only after Aristotle has given his own account of the subjects. I will discuss *aporiai* of this latter sort first, before turning my atten-

‘means by which we are equipped with deductions’ and tells us that it is useful ‘for recognizing what something is because we usually separate the distinctive account of the being of anything by means of the differences appropriate to it’ (105a21-25, 108b4-5). The other three means by which we become equipped with deductions are ‘obtaining premises’ by the consent of the interlocutor, ‘being able to distinguish in how many ways a word is said’, and ‘the examination of likeness’ (105a20-25).

tion to the more properly aporetic investigations. *Aporiai* addressed after an account has been developed can be divided into those that arise because of the account itself and those that arise independently of it. I take them up in turn.

An example of the first type of post-account *aporia* can be found in ii 4:

Someone might raise an *aporia*, however, about how we can say that people must do just things to become just and temperate things to become temperate; for if they do just and temperate things, they already are just and temperate, just as if they do grammatical and musical things, they're grammarians and musicians. (1105a17-21)

Aristotle makes two responses to this objection. First, he denies the premise that doing the actions of a craftsman is a sufficient condition for having a craft, citing the fact that one might perform these actions by accident or under someone else's instructions (1105a22). Second, he challenges the analogy between crafts and virtues. Though merely doing the actions of a craftsman is not sufficient for having a craft, doing them with knowledge that they are the actions of a craftsman is. This is because 'products of a craft determine by their own qualities when they have been produced well', so that, for a person to produce a good product non-coincidentally, he needs only the relevant knowledge (1105a29).²¹ The qualities of an action, by contrast, are not the sole determinants of whether the action is done virtuously, so it does not follow that a man is virtuous from his performance of the actions of a virtuous man, even if he knows that they are the actions that a virtuous man would perform. Aristotle had already said as much in ii 3, where he made enjoying virtuous action a necessary condition for virtue. In ii 4 the enjoyment condition is recast. We are told that the virtuous man must 'decide on [the virtuous actions], and decide on them for themselves', and a second condition is added: he must 'do them from a firm and unchanging state'.

While, in case of virtue, the knowing accomplishes nothing, or a little, the others, which arise from much doing of just and temperate things, enable not a little, but everything. So, while deeds are called just and temperate when they're such as a just and temperate person would do, the just and temperate person is not [merely] the one who does these things, but the one who also does them in the way in which just and temperate people do. (1105b2-9)

If Aristotle's goal were simply to remove the threat to his position, the first solution would have been sufficient. Giving only this solution, however, would have suggested that knowledgeable performance of certain actions is a sufficient condition for virtue (as it is for craft). If Aristotle had given only the solution, which

²¹ By 'non-coincidentally' I mean to exclude both of Aristotle's counterexamples. A man who unintentionally produces a good product produces it coincidentally as it is coincidental that his fumbling resulted in *that* product. In the case of a man who produces a good product under the direction of a craftsman, what is coincidental is that *that man* produced the product, because any other man could have equally well been the craftsman's agent.

does not have this implication, he would have failed to point out the most blatant flaw in the objection and a genuine similarity between the acquisition of virtues and crafts would have been obscured. Aristotle is not focused myopically on answering the objection, but on clearing up a possible confusion concerning his account.

Let us turn now to post-account *aporiai* that arise independently of the accounts. Examples can be found in i 8-12, where, having developed an account of the good, Aristotle reconsiders the issue in light of ‘the things said about it’. Before looking at one of the *aporiai* in this section, it is worth considering the purpose of the section as a whole. Aristotle begins i 8 as follows: ‘We should inquire into this, however, not only from the conclusion and premises, but also from the things said about it (ἐκ τῶν λεγομένων περὶ αὐτῆς). For, while the facts (τὰ ὑπάρχοντα) all harmonize with the truth, the truth soon disagrees with a falsehood’ (1098b9-12). It is clear that i 7’s account is supposed to be somehow confirmed by its concordance with what is said about the good, and Aristotle points out that his account agrees with received opinions about the different types of goods and ‘the belief that the happy person lives well and does well’ (1098b18) and that it includes ‘all the features that people look for in happiness’ (1098b23). The elaboration on this last point makes it clear that the relevant opinions are *endoxa* and that agreement with them is a virtue of the account:

For to some [happiness] seems to be virtue, to others prudence, to others a sort of wisdom; to others it seems to be these, or some of them, accompanied by pleasure, or not without pleasure. Other people bring in external prosperity also. Some of these things are said by many—i.e. by the ancients; others are said by a few reputable men. Probably neither [side] goes wholly wrong; rather each gets at least one thing, or even most things, right. (1098b23-29)

The *endoxa* do lead to certain *aporiai*, and Aristotle’s account is confirmed by its ability to explain and resolve them. One example should suffice. Aristotle tells us that the very existence of an *aporia* about whether or not we can consider a person happy during his lifetime provides evidence for his account (1100b10). The premise behind the conclusion that we cannot count someone as happy during his lifetime is that some awful stroke of luck could always ruin what had heretofore been a successful life, and the premise for resisting this conclusion is that happiness is a stable and enduring state. Aristotle’s definition of happiness as a life of virtuous activity explains the plausibility of both premises, and resolves the *aporiai* by making happiness enduring without being entirely impervious to chance. Virtue is the controlling element in a happy life. Since virtue is a state, it is enduring, and since it is up to us it is not a matter of fortune. But happiness is not merely virtue; it is an activity that requires some external goods. Since these goods are affected by fortune, happiness will not be entirely immune from it. Serious and repeated misfortune can ruin someone’s happiness (though, even then it will not make him miserable, 1101a11-13).

However, though Aristotle's account is confirmed by its concordance with *endoxa* and its ability to resolve *aporiai*, this is not the primary grounds on which the account is justified, nor is confirming the account the sole reason for going through the *aporiai*. Prior to embarking upon the examination of the good from common beliefs, Aristotle shows no signs that he thinks the account developed in i 7 lacks justification. Though he makes it clear that the account is only an outline in need of further elaboration, he does not treat it as tentative or indicate that further evidence will be forthcoming. So, insofar as i 8-12 is meant to justify i 7's account at all, it must be only in a supplemental manner, as one checks an addition problem by subtracting.²²

Notice though that in the introduction to i 8, Aristotle does not announce any intent even to confirm i 7's account by its conformity with anyone's beliefs. It is not *endoxa* or *legomena* but *huparchonta* that are said to harmonize with truth and clash with falsehood. The most common sense of *huparchon* in Aristotle is 'attribute' (corresponding to ὑπάρχειν as the copula in his logic), but it can also mean 'fact'—i.e., 'that which obtains *simpliciter*' rather than 'that which obtains of something'.²³ In either sense, the word refers to something in the world and not to things that are merely said or thought.²⁴ Therefore, if the account of the good is tested against the *huparchonta* when the good is examined from the *legomena*, this is not because the *legomena* are themselves *huparchonta*. Rather, the point must be that discussing the *legomena* will raise *huparchonta* that otherwise might have been overlooked. Presumably some *huparchonta* were already in view in i 7, and the point in i 8-12 is to raise more, since the truth will harmonize with all of them and a falsehood may clash with any.

Moreover, Aristotle does not say that it is only i 7's account that must face the *huparchonta*; the *endoxa* and *legomena* may also be tested against *huparchonta* that are already contained in the account. Where Aristotle's account disagrees with *endoxa*, it is the *endoxa* that are usually rejected or qualified. For example, he qualifies the opinion that happiness is virtue, pointing out that it is, rather, virtuous activity (1098b33-1099a7), and he rejects outright the inscription on the Delian monument because it contradicts his conclusion that happiness is finest, more pleasant, and most beneficial (1099a24-31).

According to C2, Aristotle's sole or primary justification for his account of the good would be its ability to harmonize received opinions about the good; and, according to C3, the function of i 8-12 would be to establish this justification. But in fact, he regards the account as proven by the end of i 7. *Endoxa* and *aporiai* are considered in i 8-12 in order to call attention to additional facts that must be explained by the account (e.g., that external goods can be affected by chance)

²² See *Prior Analytics* 47a6 for a similar example of confirmation.

²³ There are several passages that require 'fact' rather than 'attribute' to make sense: *Poetics* 1458a27 and *Rhetoric* 1355b10-11, 1369a4-b19, and 1403a3.

²⁴ This is underscored by the contrast drawn between τὰ ὑπάρχοντα and τὰ δοκούντα ὑπάρχειν at both *Physics* 211a9 and *Rhetoric* 1396a15, a17, a27. In *De caelo* 279b19 and *Generation and Corruption* 321a18 *huparchonta* refers to perceptible facts to which a theory is held accountable.

and to raise questions that must be answered by it (e.g., ‘Can we be happy while we’re alive?’). The *endoxa* are judged against the account and the facts. The ability of the account to perform this function and illuminate all the relevant issues is further assurance of its truth, but not its primary justification.

The discussion of the *aporiai* has a further function. It calls attention to some non-obvious aspects of the account that require elaboration. *NE* i 7 gives only an outline to be filled in by the subsequent books. In particular, it demands the discussion of virtue that occupies i 13-vi. Fleshing out the account also requires discussion of pleasure and external goods (including friends), and these requirements only become clear in the course of the responses to *aporiai* in i 8.

Let us turn now from post-account *aporiai* to more properly aporetic investigations. Much of the attention given to this sort of *aporia* in *NE* has been focused on the conflict between manifestly apparent things (φαινόμενα ἐναργῶς) and Socrates’ thesis that incontinence is impossible (1145b28). With this case as one’s paradigm of *aporia*-resolution, it is not unreasonable to conclude that Aristotle’s goal in an aporetic investigation is to eliminate the tensions from a body of belief, especially since this understanding coheres with Aristotle’s methodological remarks in vii 1 and 2. We must observe, however, that not all of the *aporiai* raised even in the aporetic investigations arise out of seeming contradictions between *endoxa*. Consider the following examples:

Further, if there is incontinence and continence about everything, who is incontinent *simpliciter*? For no one has all the incontinences, but we say that some are [incontinent] *simpliciter*. (1146b2-5)

Set aside the natural-scientific ἀπορήματα, for they don’t belong to our present inquiry, but we have to examine any that is human—i.e., pertains to character and feeling—e.g.: whether friendship arises amongst all sorts or the wretched cannot be friends and whether there is one form of friendship or many. Some think one form, since it admits of more and less, but they’ve been convinced by an inadequate sign, for things of different forms also admit the more and the less. (1155b8-15)

In laying out and discussing these *aporiai*, Aristotle shows no concern for preserving any set of *phainomena*, *legomena*, or *endoxa*; he simply poses questions and sets to work answering them, drawing on the data of experience as needed. Someone who reads the relevant discussions (in vii 4-10) without vii 1’s methodological remarks in mind would not conclude that Aristotle’s goal was to render a body of received opinion coherent. Indeed, in all of vii 4, where Aristotle takes up the question of who is simply akratic, there is not a single attempt to resolve a seeming contradiction or to save an *endoxon*; instead we find a discussion of different sources of pleasure and how to classify people who, despite knowing better, pursue the different pleasures excessively. There are no objections being removed, and no issue is made of which *endoxa* are defeated or preserved.

Aporiai arising from inconsistencies in the *endoxa* are in the minority in *NE*. Let us turn now to the most famous *aporia* of this sort, the one concerning the possibility of incontinence. It is raised by Socrates' argument that it is impossible for someone to be swayed by pleasures to act against what he knows to be best, 'for it would be terrible...for knowledge to be in someone, but mastered by something else, and dragged around like a slave' (1145b23-24). Thus Socrates claimed that there is no such thing as incontinence, understood as the condition of pursuing pleasures despite knowing better. This conclusion contradicts the near universal belief in such a phenomenon. Aristotle resolves the *aporia* by distinguishing between the possession and exercise of knowledge (1146b31-33). A person who possesses a piece of knowledge may fail to exercise it even while speaking words that express it, for there are circumstances under which someone could speak these same words even if he lacked the knowledge altogether (1147a19-21). Thus, a person can act against his knowledge that (e.g.) overeating is bad, if he does not exercise his knowledge, and he can fail to exercise his knowledge even while uttering the words: 'Overeating is bad'. No one, however, can act against his knowledge when that knowledge is being exercised, so Socrates was right to insist in the authority of (exercised) knowledge. The distinction shows that that Socrates' (sensible) premise does not require the conclusion that incontinence is impossible.

Aristotle proceeds to give a fuller account of incontinence than this. He draws a further distinction between universal and particular knowledge, both about oneself and about the objects of one's actions, comments on the role of each in practical reasoning (1146b35-1147a7), and then goes on to 'look for the cause' of incontinence 'by the method of natural science (ὡςδε φυσικῶς)' (1147a24). If Aristotle's goal was simply to remove tensions in the *endoxa*, we would not expect any of this. He includes it presumably for the same reason that he goes out of his way to resolve ii 4's *aporia* in a way that illuminates the relation between virtue and craft: his goal is not limited to eliminating inconsistencies (as per C2).

If we look at vii 3 without focusing on its aporetic context, its progression is readily explained by standard Aristotelian methodical principles. In defusing Socrates' argument, Aristotle has established the existence of incontinence. No positive argument for its existence is needed because it 'appears manifestly'—i.e., we can observe the phenomenon in ourselves and others. The only reason to doubt its existence was Socrates' argument. Aristotle has shown that this argument works by confusing incontinence, properly understood as a certain failure to exercise knowledge, with the impossible condition of failing to act on exercised knowledge. Having established that the former condition exists, Aristotle goes on to ask *what it is* (which, for him, means to determine its cause). This explains why, in his conclusion to vii 10, Aristotle claims to have said, for incontinence and several related states, 'what each of them is' (1154b33).

The content of Aristotle's account of the cause of incontinence poses several interpretative difficulties, and we need not address it here, but it is worth noting that the premises from which Aristotle develops this account are theses that may

derive from his own psychology concerning issues about which the many are unlikely to have thought, and these theses are not bolstered by appeals to any respected authorities.²⁵

Aristotle's initial distinctions between the possession and exercise of knowledge and between universal and particular knowledge could be more plausibly described as *endoxa*, but I doubt that they are. The wise are not mentioned, and the many are unlikely to have opinions on the number of senses of 'knowledge'. These distinctions are more like the ones that Aristotle draws in his discussions of the virtues. They are truths that he thinks are available to his audience to grasp, rather than premises he expects it to hold already.

Even in the aporetic investigations, then, the starting-points on which Aristotle bases his conclusions are not *endoxa*, and his goal is not to resolve inconsistencies amongst them, nor is the resolving of such inconsistencies a sufficient means to his goal, though it may be a necessary one.

IV. Conclusions

Returning to the three questions corresponding to the claims with which we began, we have seen that the *starting-points* of Aristotle's method in the *NE* are evaluations of and differentiations between people, actions, and states of relatively non-abstract sorts, and that the *goal* is definition. What of the *process*? Aristotle begins by establishing that the subject exists, if this is in question. He then defines it by contrasting it with related subjects. These contrasts are made possible by the proper ethical starting-points, rather than linguistic practices or the beliefs of the many or the wise, and the resulting definitions are not justified primarily by their ability to resolve *aporiai* raised by these *endoxa*. Thus Aristotle's method is essentially foundationalist rather than coherentist, as it would be if C1-C3 were true—that is, instead of seeking to harmonize a body of beliefs, he regards justification as flowing primarily from the sorts of premises that I have characterized as starting-points to other ethical beliefs.

Though most received opinions and most of one's own pre-reflective ethical beliefs are not starting-points, neither are they to be abandoned as irrelevant to

²⁵ Does Aristotle's practical philosophy depend on his theoretical philosophy? In one sense, yes, and in another, no. The human good, the subject matter of practical philosophy, is influenced in innumerable ways by various facts that are not up to us—such facts as that our souls stand in a certain relation to the souls of animals, that perceptual knowledge of minor premises is susceptible to being distorted by extreme desire, that certain desires are felt by everyone, etc. Insofar these facts are not up to us, but are part of our nature, they are properly within the domain of theoretical philosophy, natural philosophy in particular. However the use that the practical philosopher needs to make of these points is fairly limited, and for his purposes he does not need the sort of precise and causally-deep knowledge that the natural philosopher seeks. Sometimes the knowledge he needs will be obvious even to people who have made no study at all, other times some results from the theoretical study may be required. The key text here is I.13 (1102a15-a28), where Aristotle says that the statesman must study the soul, but with a limited amount of precision, and resolves to rely on the discussion that he has given in his works addressed to the general public (as opposed, presumably, to drawing on more technical material present only in *De anima*).

ethical inquiry. The experienced and decent people who are the proper students of ethics will have already traveled part of the distance from the starting-points towards definitions, though often in a confused manner. So their current beliefs about the various virtues, though not data for ethics, will likely contain material of value. Aristotle often works back from the sometimes confused beliefs of his audience to what is truly ‘first to us’, and then proceeds from these starting-points to definitions. Thus *endoxa* and *aporiai* do have a role to play. By studying them one may notice starting-points that might otherwise have been overlooked and one will be able to take advantage of any progress that has already been made. If Aristotle’s method is foundationalist, it is not Cartesian. Instead of leveling the unsurely built edifice of opinion in order to build knowledge afresh, he repairs and develops the existing structure by locating its foundation and ensuring that the higher floors are indeed supported by it.²⁶

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²⁶ I began thinking about the methodology in the *Nicomachean Ethics* in the late nineties as an undergraduate at the College of New Jersey, where I wrote a thesis on it under the supervision of Allan Gotthelf. He suggested looking to *Posterior Analytics* ii for insight in the discussions of the virtues of character, an idea which has shaped much of my thinking on the issue. I wish to thank him as well as James Allen, Sarah Broadie, Steve Engstrom, Andrea Falcon, Irfan Khawaja, Jim Lennox, John Lewis, Robert Mayhew, John McDowell, Ron Polansky, and Heda Segvic, Karen Shoebottom, and an anonymous referee for their input, in the form of discussions of Aristotle’s methodology and feedback on this article and its ancestors.