

## Why does Aristotle Think that Ethical Virtue is Required for Practical Wisdom?

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### Abstract

In this paper, I ask why Aristotle thinks that ethical virtue (rather than mere self-control) is required for practical wisdom. I argue that a satisfactory answer will need to explain why being prone to bad appetites implies a failing of the *rational* part of the soul. I go on to claim that the self-controlled person does suffer from such a rational failing: a failure to take a specifically rational kind of pleasure in fine action. However, this still leaves a problem: could there not be someone who (unlike the self-controlled person) took the right kind of pleasure in fine action, but who failed to be virtuous on account of bad appetites? If so, would such a person be practically wise but not virtuous? I end with some suggestions about how Aristotle might answer this.

### Keywords

practical wisdom, self-control, ethical virtue, reason

Aristotle says that only the virtuous person has practical wisdom (*φρόνησις*) (*Nicomachean Ethics*, VI.13.1144b30-32). This implies that I cannot have practical wisdom if some of my appetites are bad. Practical wisdom is, according to Aristotle, a virtue of the rational part of the soul (more specifically, of the rational part that is concerned with action). From this it follows (or so, at least, I shall claim) that someone who lacks practical wisdom must have a *rational* failing. Hence, Aristotle is committed to the view that if I have a bad appetite, there must be something wrong with the rational part of my soul. My question in this paper is how he might justify this view.

Aristotle describes practical wisdom as an intellectual (*διανοητική*) virtue (*Nicomachean Ethics*, I.13.1103a5-6). In *Eudemian Ethics* II.1 (1220a4-11),

he says that intellectual virtues are virtues of the rational part of the soul (in contrast to ethical virtues, which belong to the part that is nonrational but reason-responsive). That practical wisdom belongs to a rational part of the soul is confirmed in *Nicomachean Ethics* VI.5<sup>1</sup> (where Aristotle goes on to specify that it is a virtue of the *doxastic* rational part: the part that has opinions about contingent matters, 1140b25-8). This also seems to be implied by *Nicomachean Ethics* I.13, where Aristotle first describes the difference between a rational part of the soul and a nonrational-but-reason-responsive part, and then goes on to say that it is on the basis of this difference that the virtues are distinguished into two types: intellectual virtues, on the one hand, and character virtues, on the other (1103a3-5).<sup>2</sup>

I want to claim that since practical wisdom is a virtue of the rational part, those who lack practical wisdom must have some rational failing. There would be grounds for disputing this, if it could be shown that practical wisdom was a state not only of the rational part (the part that has reason ‘properly and in itself’) but also of the nonrational, reason-responsive part (the ‘desiderative’ part that ‘has reason’ only in the sense that it listens to reason as to a father). This is the view of John McDowell, who holds that ‘the sense in which [practical wisdom] is a state of the intellect does not interfere with its also being a state of the desiderative element.’<sup>3</sup> McDowell argues that in order to understand Aristotle’s view that practical wisdom requires virtue we need to recognize that practical wisdom just ‘is the properly moulded state of the motivational propensities, in a reflectively adjusted form.’ However, this interpretation is very hard to reconcile with Aristotle’s remarks about the distinction between intellectual and ethical virtues. As we have seen, Aristotle does not *merely* say that

<sup>1</sup>) This is one of the books common to the *Eudemian* and *Nicomachean Ethics*.

<sup>2</sup>) As Hendrik Lorenz (2009) points out, Aristotle does not actually say here that intellectual virtues are of the rational part and character virtues are of the nonrational-but-reason-responsive part. (Lorenz argues that it would be a mistake to infer from this passage that character virtues are states solely of the nonrational-but-reason-responsive part.) However, it is hard to see in what sense Aristotle would be distinguishing between the two types of virtues on the basis of the difference between these two types of the soul, unless he were at least committed to the view that the intellectual virtues were virtues solely of the rational part (as Lorenz himself implies, p193).

<sup>3</sup>) McDowell (1998) p40. By ‘the desiderative element,’ McDowell means the nonrational, reason-responsive part (described as ‘desiderative,’ ὀρεκτικόν, by Aristotle at NE I.13.1102b30).

intellectual virtues (such as practical wisdom) belong to the rational part; rather, he appeals to the difference between parts of the soul to distinguish between intellectual and ethical virtues.<sup>4</sup> If practical wisdom were a state of both nonrational and rational parts, the decision to class it as an intellectual *as opposed to an ethical* virtue would be very puzzling. It would have at least as much in common with the ethical virtues as with the other intellectual virtues mentioned in *Nicomachean Ethics* I.13. Theoretical wisdom (σοφία) and understanding (σύνεσις) are clearly states of the rational part alone. Of course, these considerations would not be decisive, if McDowell's interpretation gave us our only hope for understanding Aristotle's claims about the connection between practical wisdom and ethical virtue. But this, I shall argue, is not the case. We can make sense of the claim that practical wisdom requires ethical virtue, while giving due weight to Aristotle's remarks about parts of the soul and to his distinction between ethical and intellectual virtue.

If one grants that practical wisdom is a virtue solely of the rational part, then it is hard to resist the conclusion that someone who lacks practical wisdom must have a rational flaw. Otherwise, the claim that only virtuous people are practically wise would threaten to become a mere stipulation about language: "we won't *call* this excellent state of the rational part 'practical wisdom' except when it is accompanied by all the virtues of character."

Our task, then, is to explain why someone who falls short of ethical virtue must have a rational failing. One important question this raises is what exactly it takes for a failing to count as 'of the rational part.' I shall not attempt to give a general answer to this question here, but I hope that

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<sup>4</sup> McDowell recognizes that it is difficult to reconcile NE I.13 with his interpretation. He warns us against 'overreading' this passage and claims that the rest of *Nicomachean Ethics* shows 'that we should not take the structure [described here] too rigidly' (1998) p40, ft. 30. However, even if we are prepared to follow McDowell in playing down the significance of NE I.13, it is hard to reconcile this interpretation with the fact that Aristotle reiterates the distinction between parts of the soul at the beginning of NE VI (1138b35ff), and repeats the claim that practical wisdom is a virtue of the intellectual part (1140b25ff). Admittedly, Aristotle does go on to say here that practical wisdom 'is not only a state involving *logos*' (and that the fact that it involves something more than *logos* explains why it cannot be forgotten), 1140b28-30. But this, I think, shows only that practical wisdom is not simply an ability to produce good arguments: having practical wisdom also involves having the right rational desires. This does not imply any weakening of the claim that practical wisdom is a virtue of the rational part (and only the rational part).

my discussion of the kinds of failing Aristotle is prepared to attribute to the rational part will be a useful preliminary towards arriving at such an answer. For example, I shall argue that we can only understand Aristotle's claim that practical wisdom requires ethical virtue, if we appreciate that on his view the function of the rational part is not purely cognitive. Aristotle attributes to the rational part, not only knowledge (*ἐπιστήμη*) and judgment (*δόξα*), but also a distinctively rational kind of desire (*ὄρεξις*), a rational kind of pleasure, and even perhaps a rational kind of seeing-as (*φαντασία*).<sup>5</sup> The importance of this point will become clear when we ask about the rational failing of the self-controlled person. I shall argue that this rational failing consists primarily in a failure to enjoy a specifically rational kind of pleasure.

### Vice, Akrasia and Rational Failings

It is relatively easy to explain why neither the vicious nor the akratic person can be practically wise. Aristotle claims that the virtue of temperance (*σωφροσύνη*) gets its name from the fact that it preserves practical wisdom (*ὡς σφζουσσαν τὴν φρόνησιν*) (1140b11-12). It does this because pleasure and pain tend to corrupt beliefs about what is to be done. Once corrupted in this way, one 'fails to see the starting point, and to see that one should choose everything and do everything for the sake of this and because of this' (1140b17-19). Since vice (*κακία*) is corruptive of the starting point (1140b19-20), the vicious person cannot deliberate well.<sup>6</sup> From this, it

<sup>5</sup> Aristotle describes a deliberative kind of seeing-as (*φαντασία*) at *De Anima* III.11.434a5-10. Only animals that can engage in calculation (*λογισμός*) are capable of this kind of *φαντασία*. On one plausible interpretation, *φαντασία* of this kind is a function of the rational part of the soul. I argue, below (155-7), that Aristotle is committed to a rational kind of pleasure. That there is a specifically rational kind of desire is implied, I think, by *Nicomachean Ethics* VI.2, where Aristotle describes decision (*προαίρεσις*) as a special intellectual (*διανοητική*) kind of desire (*ὄρεξις*) (1139b5).

<sup>6</sup> See also 1144a31-b1, where Aristotle explains why it is impossible to have practical wisdom without ethical virtue: 'Chains of practical reasoning have a starting point "since the end, i.e. what is best, is such and such" (whatever it happens to be: let it be, for the sake of argument, whatever one happens to choose), and this does not appear except to the good person. For badness (*μοχθηρία*) makes us corrupt and mistaken about practical starting points. So it is clear that it is impossible for someone who is not good (*ἀγαθόν*) to be practically wise.'

follows that the vicious person cannot have practical wisdom (for Aristotle says that the ability to deliberate well is the mark of the practically wise person, 1140a25-31). However, by itself this does not seem enough to show that practical wisdom requires *virtue* (though it is presented, here and elsewhere, as an argument for that conclusion),<sup>7</sup> for bad appetites do not, in all cases, prevent one from grasping the right starting points. This is clear from what Aristotle says about the akratic person (who is, by definition, someone with bad appetites): akrasia is better than vice 'and is not unconditionally bad, because [in the akratic person] the best thing, the starting point (ἀρχή), is preserved' (1151a24-6).<sup>8</sup>

To explain why the akratic person cannot be practically wise, Aristotle uses a different argument. No one, he says, would suppose it characteristic of the practically wise willingly to do the worst things (1146a5-7). This is because practical wisdom is *practical* (1146a8): its whole point is right action. 'One does not count as practically wise merely by having knowledge, but by being such as to act (πρακτικός); the akratic person, though, is not such as to act (πρακτικός)' (1152a8-9). By this, Aristotle must mean that the akratic person is not such as to act *on what practical reason prescribes*. If practical reasoning does not issue in the right action, then it does not achieve what it is *for*, and hence does not exhibit the virtue of practical wisdom.

But this still cannot be the whole story about why practical wisdom requires virtue. One can fail to be virtuous without being either vicious or akratic. On Aristotle's view, I might make the right decision and act on it, and yet fail to be virtuous because I have some bad appetites. I might, for example, be self-controlled.

If practical wisdom requires ethical virtue, then the self-controlled person too must lack practical wisdom, and hence have some rational flaw. At this point, one might doubt whether Aristotle really means to insist that a self-controlled person cannot be practically wise. There are, indeed, some grounds for doubt here. In *Nicomachean Ethics* VI.13, where he argues that practical wisdom requires ethical virtue, Aristotle does not seem to have

<sup>7</sup> Here (1140b12-20) it is presented as an argument that practical wisdom requires the virtue of temperance. At 1144a31-b1, the argument purports to show that practical wisdom requires ethical virtue (as Aristotle says at 1144a29-31).

<sup>8</sup> Of course, what exactly is meant by this depends on what Aristotle means by 'starting point' (ἀρχή), in these contexts. At 1144a31-b1, Aristotle seems to identify the 'starting point' with the end one sets before oneself in practical deliberation.

the possibility of self-control in mind.<sup>9</sup> Later, in a context where he is discussing self-control, he says merely that it is not possible to be practically wise (φρόνιμος) unless one has a 'good' (σπουδαῖος) ethical state (1152a7-8). This remark comes shortly after he has said that self-control is a good ethical state (using the same word, 'σπουδαῖος,' 1151b28). This might suggest that the self-controlled person's ethical state, though it does not amount to virtue, is good *enough* to be compatible with practical wisdom. However, this weakening of the claim that practical wisdom requires ethical virtue would undermine Aristotle's argument for the unity of the ethical virtues in *Nicomachean Ethics* VI.13 (1144b30ff). For that argument depends upon the claim that someone who has practical wisdom will also have all the ethical virtues (1145a1-2), and Aristotle emphasizes here that by 'virtue' he means a state on account of which one is called 'good without qualification' (1144b36-45a1). This suggests that Aristotle is committed to the view that practical wisdom requires full ethical virtue: it is not enough to have the kind of good ethical state that is compatible with self-control.<sup>10</sup>

This implies that, on Aristotle's view, bad appetites prevent one from being practically wise, even when they do not prevent one from making or acting on the right decision. My question, then, is how this can be. Why does having a bad appetite imply a flaw in the rational part of one's soul? It will help to clarify why this question is puzzling, if we look first at some unsuccessful attempts to answer it.

### Three Unsuccessful Answers to Our Question

#### 1. 'Someone who has bad appetites does not see the right things as good.'

John McDowell claims that both the akratic and the self-controlled person 'are alike shown not to see things exactly as the practically wise person does

<sup>9</sup> In this context, for instance, he is prepared to say that decision (προαίρεσις) cannot be right (ὀρθή) without practical wisdom or virtue (1145a4-5), but the self-controlled person, as later described, seems to be someone who makes the right decision (προαίρεσις) in spite of not having ethical virtue: at 1152a17, the akratic person is described as someone who makes a 'decent' (ἐπιεικής) decision.

<sup>10</sup> Admittedly, in this passage the contrast he has in mind is with natural virtue (1144b35-6), but nevertheless this remark does seem to rule out the possibility that 'virtue' here could extend to the kind of good ethical state possessed by the self-controlled person.

by the fact that they feel an appetitive pull towards an action other than what, as they realize, virtue requires.’ The self-controlled person, he says, achieves ‘at most an imperfect approximation to the “situational appreciation” of a person who is temperate in the strict sense, in a situation in which temperance requires refraining from an opportunity for pleasure.’<sup>11</sup> I want to argue that while there is a *sense* of ‘seeing as’ in which the person with bad appetites does not ‘see things as’ the virtuous person does, this sense is not such as to help us with our question about practical wisdom. This becomes clear once we take proper account of Aristotle’s remarks about the distinction between the rational and nonrational parts of the soul.<sup>12</sup>

Aristotle does hold that if you and I have different appetites, then we will *see* different things as good (we will differ in what appears good to us). His view is that nonrational desire, quite generally, has as its object an apparent good.<sup>13</sup> But this does not imply that you have to *believe* something is good in order to have an appetite for it. Aristotle’s point is, rather, that the object of your appetite must *appear* good to you. The pleasant, he says, is desired because it is an apparent good ‘for some think it such, and to some it appears such, though they do not think so’ (*Eudemian Ethics*, VII.2.1235b27-8). So if your appetites differ from those of the virtuous person, you and the virtuous person will see different things as good (but need not differ in your beliefs about what is good). The reason why this does not help to answer our question about practical wisdom is that Aristotle says that *this* kind of *seeing as good* is a function of the *nonrational* part of the soul. It is possible to see something as good without believing that it is good just because ‘appearance (φαντασία) and belief (δόξα) do not reside in the same part of the soul’ (*Eudemian Ethics*, VII.2.1235b28-9). Since having beliefs, for Aristotle, is a function of the rational part, this implies

<sup>11</sup> McDowell (1996) p105. See also McDowell (1998) pp46-7, where he claims that [for Aristotle] ‘there cannot be both a perfect match with the practical thinking of a fully virtuous person and a felt temptation to do otherwise [than as the virtuous person does].’

<sup>12</sup> I have already argued against McDowell’s suggestion that we should downplay such remarks (see p144 ft. 4 above).

<sup>13</sup> At EE VII.2.1235b25-7, he says that ‘the desired and the wished for is either the good or the apparent good’ and goes on to add, ‘Now this is why the pleasant is desired, for it is an apparent good.’ In *De Anima* III.10 he says quite generally that the object of desire is ‘either the good or the apparent good’ (433a27-9). For further discussion of the sense in which the object of appetite is the apparent good, see Moss (2009).

that this kind of seeing-as (*φαντασία*) is a function of a different, non-rational, part.<sup>14</sup> It follows that if you differ from the virtuous person in what you (in this sense) see as good, that is not in itself enough to show that you differ from the virtuous person in respect of your rational part. Hence, it is not enough to show that you lack practical wisdom, which is a virtue of the rational part.

McDowell might reply that, according to Aristotle, practical wisdom itself involves a special, rational, kind of seeing. To be practically wise is to have a 'situational appreciation' that enables you to respond appropriately to the ethically salient features of your particular circumstances. Aristotle says that practical wisdom, unlike scientific knowledge (*ἐπιστήμη*), concerns things that are the objects of a special kind of perception (*Nicomachean Ethics* VI.8.1142a23-30). In a phrase that recalls Plato's *Republic* (519a-b), he describes practical wisdom (or possibly the part of the soul in which it resides) as an 'eye of the soul' (*Nicomachean Ethics* VI.13.1144a29-30). But whatever these remarks mean, they cannot *by themselves* provide an answer to our question about why practical wisdom requires virtue. This is because it is so far quite unclear why someone with bad appetitive desires couldn't 'see' correctly, in this special, rational sense of 'seeing.' After all, the self-controlled person must at least have a good enough 'situational appreciation' to be able to make, and act upon, the decision that is just right for the circumstances. What, then, are the grounds for supposing that such a person lacks the special rational sensitivity characteristic of the practically wise?<sup>15</sup>

2. *'Someone who has bad appetites takes into account the wrong things in deliberation.'*

Terry Irwin has claimed that if I have bad appetites, I will not deliberate as the virtuous person does: "The temperate, as opposed to merely [self-controlled],

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<sup>14</sup> This is further confirmed by Aristotle's claim that, although some non-human animals can see things as being a certain way (that is, they have *φαντασία*), only humans have beliefs (since only humans have reason): 'whereas *φαντασία* is found in some beasts, reason is not' (DA III.3.428a19-24). Here, and in EE VII.2, Aristotle has in mind perceptually based *φαντασία* (the kind of seeing-as that is possible also for nonrational animals). In *De Anima* III.11, he describes a different, specifically rational, kind of *φαντασία*.

<sup>15</sup> A similar objection would apply to the view that someone with bad appetites must have some false beliefs about what is good. Why suppose that this *must* be true of someone with bad appetites?



person about bodily pleasures does not think he is being asked to make some serious sacrifice if he must refuse satisfaction to excessive appetites; he will therefore not count this refusal as a significant cost of an action, and will not be inclined to take it into account in his deliberation. To this extent, the deliberation of a merely [self-controlled] person will be different.' For example, if I have a bad appetite for a certain type of bodily pleasure, then I will count the sacrifice of that bodily pleasure as relevant to my decision, in a way that a virtuous person would not. Though we might come to the same conclusion about what to do, I (unlike the virtuous person) would reach this conclusion only because I think the advantages of satisfying my bad appetite are *outweighed* by other considerations. (I say to myself: "On the one hand it would be disgraceful to eat yet another doughnut, but on the other hand it would be very pleasant. On balance, the disgracefulness outweighs the pleasure, so I shall refrain." The virtuous person simply feels no appetite for yet another doughnut.)<sup>16</sup>

The trouble with this suggestion is that it is hard to see why Aristotle should suppose that simply possessing a bad appetite entails being at fault in this further way. Surely, it is possible to have a bodily appetite for something, while thinking that, in the circumstances, there is *nothing* to be said in favour of attempting to satisfy this appetite. At least, as we have seen, *Aristotle* appears to admit this possibility, when he allows that one can have an appetitive desire for something without believing that that thing is good.<sup>17</sup> In such a case, it should be possible simply to ignore one's appetite in the course of deliberation.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Irwin (1988) p88. McDowell (1998), pp46-7, seems to endorse a similar view, when he says: 'On this occasion, what matters about the situation, as the practically wise person sees it, is not the opportunity for pleasure but, say, the fact that this would be his fifth doughnut at one sitting. The practically wise person registers, but counts as irrelevant to the question what to do, an instance of a kind of consideration (that pleasure is available) that does bear on the question in other circumstances. His counting it as irrelevant shows in his being unmoved by it, by contrast with the merely continent person (the ἐγκρατής) who has to overcome temptation to get himself to do the right thing.'

<sup>17</sup> EE VII.2.1235b27-8. Of course, this leaves it open that Aristotle might think that, at least in humans, having an appetitive desire implies believing that the object of desire is *good in some respect*. But I can find no evidence for supposing this to be Aristotle's view.

<sup>18</sup> It might be argued that to ignore a bad appetite is itself to exhibit a rational failing: if the rational part were properly fulfilling its function, it would be engaged in an attempt to *modify* the bad appetite. However, Aristotle could concede this, without allowing that the presence of a bad appetite need have any affect on one's ability to deliberate. It is quite

3. 'Someone who has bad appetites cannot be relied on to deliberate well (and act on the results of deliberation).'

It is often claimed that someone who falls short of virtue by having bad appetites cannot be *relied upon* to deliberate well. Michael Woods writes that 'Aristotle is committed to denying that anyone could be *consistently* [self-controlled]. The [self-controlled] person's state is essentially unstable.'<sup>19</sup> John Cooper writes that the practically wise person relies on the continued supportive functioning of his 'non-rational desires in order to hold firmly to the correct overall view of the good, holding to which constitutes his being practically wise in the first place.'<sup>20</sup> To count as having practical wisdom, one has to have a rational part that reliably functions as it should. The person with bad appetites, on this interpretation, is someone whose practical reasoning is always in danger of being corrupted. Hence, such a person does not have the virtue of practical wisdom.<sup>21</sup>

However, this view faces an obvious problem. Aristotle himself never suggests that self-control is radically unstable. He describes self-control as an ethical disposition (ἔξις): a kind of character trait (*Nicomachean Ethics* VII.8.1151a27-8; 10.1152a34-6). He even, at one point, tries to show that it is a kind of good disposition in a mean between two bad ones.<sup>22</sup> To be self-controlled is to be someone who is *such as* to have bad desires and

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possible to be actively engaged in an attempt to modify some appetite, while at the same time ignoring the existence of this appetite *for the purposes of deliberation*. (Of course, if your rational part is engaged in trying to modify your bad appetites, it won't be a perfect match for the virtuous person's rational part: the virtuous person does not have any bad appetites. But this is not enough, in itself, to show that your rational part is at fault. After all, on this story, it is doing just what it should be doing, given the presence of bad appetites.)

<sup>19</sup> Woods (1986) p152. Drefcinski (2000) makes the same point and invokes it to explain why the self-controlled person cannot be practically wise.

<sup>20</sup> Cooper (1998) p279.

<sup>21</sup> Broadie (1991) p308 ft. 11, uses this point about reliability to explain why the akratic cannot be practically wise: 'The incontinent may deliberate well on one or other occasion, but he cannot be relied on, as the wise person can, to deliberate well. If the temptation which deflects him from acting had occurred instead when he was deliberating, he would have been distracted from deliberating well.' Note, however, that this justification for regarding the akratic person as unreliable would not apply to the self-controlled person: he is *not* deflected from action by pleasure, so there is no reason to suppose his deliberation would be vulnerable either.

<sup>22</sup> The two bad dispositions are: (i) that of the *akratic* who acts against his decision (προαίρεσις) because of the strength of his bodily appetites, and (ii) that of a very rare type

*such as* not to be led by them (1152a1ff).<sup>23</sup> The self-controlled character is prone to bad appetites, and yet reliably makes, and acts upon, the right decision (προαίρεσις). Of course, these remarks are compatible with the view that self-control is not quite as stable a character trait as virtue.<sup>24</sup> However, the bare possibility that the self-controlled person might undergo a character change is not, I think, enough to explain Aristotle's refusal to count such a person as practically wise.

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We can now, I think, see more clearly the difficulties we face in trying to explain why the practically wise person has to be virtuous. The challenge is to explain why having bad appetites implies a fault in the *rational* part of the soul (and indeed in the practically rational part: the part concerned with action), to explain this without simply stipulating that Aristotle must think those who have bad appetites have some further, rational, fault, and moreover, to explain this in a way that allows for the possibility of a type of person (the self-controlled person) who is prone to bad appetites but nevertheless reliably reaches the right decision (προαίρεσις) and acts on it.

### **A Proposal: The Self-Controlled Person's Rational Flaw**

As should be clear by now, the character trait of self-control raises a particular difficulty here. Someone who is self-controlled has a relatively stable disposition to do the right thing, and, moreover, to do it as a result of making the right decision (προαίρεσις) and having the right starting point. So Aristotle has to allow that it is possible for someone who is not virtuous to acquire the kind of rational sensitivity to particular circumstances that is needed for making the right decisions – otherwise, it would be completely mysterious how anyone could ever develop the disposition of self-control. If there is some good disposition of the emotions that is presupposed by

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of character, who acts against his decision (προαίρεσις) because he enjoys bodily pleasures less than he should (NE VII.9.1151b28-30).

<sup>23</sup> This point is emphasized by Cooper (2009) pp11-13. The self-controlled and akratic types are 'people with more or less permanently, or at least well-settled, divided minds and feelings about the matters that they are self-controlled or uncontrolled about' (p13).

<sup>24</sup> At NE I.10.1100b12-17, Aristotle says that *no* other kind of disposition is as stable as a virtue.

the ability reliably to make and act on the right decisions, then this must be a good disposition that falls short of ethical virtue, for it must be a disposition that is also possessed by the self-controlled person.

If we are to understand why the self-controlled person fails to have practical wisdom, we need to look more closely at how Aristotle characterizes self-control. He says that someone who is self-controlled has appetites that are strong and bad (1146a9-16). He also tells us (in *Eudemian Ethics* II.8) that the self-controlled person is pained when he acts against his appetites (1224a33-6, b16-19), and (in *Nicomachean Ethics* VII.9) that the self-controlled person would enjoy acting on his appetites against reason (1152a1ff). These remarks about the pleasures and pains associated with self-control are the key to understanding the way in which self-control implies a rational failing. I shall argue: (i) that the self-controlled person does not sufficiently enjoy acting virtuously, (ii) that this failure to enjoy acting virtuously is a failure of the rational part: a failure sufficiently to appreciate the fineness of fine action.

#### (i) The Pleasures and Pains of the Self-Controlled Person

Aristotle says, in *Eudemian Ethics* II that, in doing the right thing, the self-controlled person is pained by the frustration of appetite: 'the self-controlled forcibly (as they say) drags himself way from appetites for pleasant things, for he is pained in dragging himself away against the resistance of desire' (1224a34-6). He goes on to add that this pain is mixed with a kind of pleasure: 'the self-controlled person feels pain now in acting against his appetite, but enjoys the pleasure of hope that he will later be benefited or that he is even already benefited by being healthy' (1224b16-19).

That the self-controlled person feels pain in acting against appetite is not surprising, for (as Aristotle emphasizes elsewhere) he has particularly strong appetites (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1146a9-10). What is interesting about this passage of *Eudemian Ethics* is the kind of pleasure that the self-controlled person is said to get from acting in a self-controlled way. The pleasure comes from the anticipation of some benefit that the action is expected to produce: the benefit of good health. It is *not* said to come from any awareness that, in acting that way, one is acting finely (or at least, as finely as is possible, given the presence of bad appetites).<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> *Fineness* does not count as a product of the action, in the way that *health* might be.

This, I think, helps to explain a central claim Aristotle makes about the difference between self-control and temperance. He says that the self-controlled person not only has bad appetites, but also would enjoy acting on those appetites against reason:

Both the self-controlled and the temperate are such as to do nothing contrary to the prescription [the λόγος] because of bodily pleasures – only the former acts while having bad appetites, the latter while not having, and the latter is such as not to feel pleasure contrary to the prescription, while the former is such as to feel it but not to be led by it (*Nicomachean Ethics* VII.1151b34-52a3).

This brings out the strength of the self-controlled person's bad appetites. The point, I take it, is not simply that the self-controlled person has an appetite for some pleasure that reason forbids him to pursue. The point is, rather, that the self-controlled person's appetitive desire is so strong that he would enjoy acting on it, even though he was aware that this was not the right thing to do. If he were to act on his appetite, he might feel some pain in anticipation of future bad health, and he might even feel some pain at the thought that his action was shameful, but none of this pain would be of a kind to mar the bodily pleasure he would obtain from the satisfaction of his appetite.

Taken together, these remarks suggest that the self-controlled person is not sufficiently pained by the shameful of bad action: he would enjoy it, in spite of its shameful (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1152a2-3). Nor is he sufficiently pleased by the fineness of good action: he finds good action painful, in spite of his awareness that it is the right action (*Eudemian Ethics* 1224a34-6), and any pleasure he gets from good action comes only from the anticipation of a good product such as health (*Eudemian Ethics* 1224b16-19).

(ii) This is a Rational Failing

I shall now argue that this failure to take proper pleasure in the fineness of right action (or to be properly pained by shameful action) is, at least in part, a *rational* failing (even if it is a failing caused by bad appetites). In the virtuous person it is the rational part that enjoys the fine (τὸ καλὸν) in action (and that would, correspondingly, be pained by shameful action), so when someone does not sufficiently enjoy the fineness of right action, it is the rational part that is at fault.

Why suppose that the pleasure taken in the fineness of an action must be a pleasure of the rational part? The answer, I shall argue, is that Aristotle takes the capacity to discern the fineness of action to be a rational capacity, and he assumes that if the capacity to discern *Fness* is rational, the pleasure taken in *Fness* must be a pleasure of the rational part (whereas if the capacity to discern *Fness* is perceptual, the pleasure taken in *Fness* is nonrational).

That the capacity to discern fineness in action is a rational capacity follows, I think, from Aristotle's doctrine of the mean. The capacity by which one discerns that an action is in accord with the mean is a rational capacity. It is a capacity that Aristotle assigns to the practically wise person as such, and hence to the rational part of the soul. The mean is consistently said to be determined by the right reason (*λόγος*) (1138b19-20, b29).<sup>26</sup> At 1106b36-1107a2, Aristotle says that the relevant reason (*λόγος*) is that by which the practically wise person would determine the mean. This rational capacity to determine what is in accord with the mean must, I think, be one and the same as the capacity used in determining whether or not an action is fine. Aristotle associates fineness, in general, with order (*τάξις*), symmetry (*συμμετρία*) and definiteness (*τὸ ὀρισμένον*).<sup>27</sup> In ethical contexts, the fine is what is fitting (*τὸ πρέπον*).<sup>28</sup> But fittingness and definiteness, in the field of action, are exhibited by just those actions that accord with the mean.<sup>29</sup> Such actions are fine *because* they are strikingly well

<sup>26</sup> The moderate person, who aims at the fine, has appetites for the right things, in the right way and on the right occasions, that is, he has appetites *as the reason* (*λόγος*) *prescribes* (1119b16-17); the courageous person withstands fearful things as he should, following the right reason (*λόγος*), for the sake of the fine (1115b11-12).

<sup>27</sup> *Metaphysics* XIII.3.1078a36-b1. For further discussion see Lear (2005).

<sup>28</sup> EE VIII.1249a9. See also Aristotle's discussion of the virtue of magnificence (*μεγαλοπρέπεια*) in NE IV.2-3. The magnificent person acts finely because he engages in large expenditure that is fitting. He thinks about 'the finest and most fitting way to spend,' rather than about the cost and how to spend least (1122b8-10). For further discussion, see Irwin (2010).

<sup>29</sup> As Aristotle says, in his discussion of magnificence, 'what is fitting is relative to oneself, the circumstances and the purpose' (1122a25-6). Aristotle explains how actions in accordance with the mean are definite or limited in NE II.6: 'There are many ways to be mistaken – badness is proper to the unlimited (*ἄπειρον*), as the Pythagoreans pictured it, and good to the limited (*πεπερασμένον*) – but there is only one way to be right. That is why error is easy and rightness is difficult, as it is easy to miss the target and difficult to hit it. And so for this reason excess and deficiency are proper to vice, and the mean is proper to

attuned to their circumstances, and because this kind of attunement is difficult to achieve (1109a26-30). The capacity by which we grasp this kind of appropriateness in action is a rational capacity: it is the capacity that enables us to determine what is or is not in accord with the mean. Hence, the capacity by which we discern that an action is fine is a rational capacity.

From this, I think, it follows that the pleasure taken in this kind of fineness is a rational pleasure. Though Aristotle does not explicitly endorse this view, it is strongly suggested by his remarks about the relation between pleasure and perceptual or intellectual activity. Aristotle describes the pleasure taken in Fness as a kind of completion of the activity of perceiving or grasping Fness. For example, the musical person's pleasure in melodies is a kind of completion of the activity of hearing, whereas the pleasure experienced by the lover of learning is a kind of completion of the activity of thought (*διάνοια*) (1175a13-16). In *Nicomachean Ethics* IX.9, Aristotle compares the pleasure an excellent man takes in his own actions to the pleasure the musical expert takes in fine melodies: 'The good (*σπουδαῖος*) man, *qua* good, rejoices in actions that are in accord with virtue, but is disgusted by those that are vicious, just as the musician is pleased by fine melodies and pained by bad ones' (1170a8-11). As the musician's pleasure is a pleasure of hearing (a kind of completion of the activity of hearing), this suggests that, by analogy, the practically wise person's pleasure in the fineness of his action should be a pleasure of practical thought (a kind of completion of the activity of practical thought). This is, then, a pleasure of the rational part.

That it is on account of one's *rational* part that one is pleased by the fineness of fine action is, moreover, confirmed by some remarks Aristotle makes in his discussion of self-love.<sup>30</sup> To call someone a 'self-lover' is, he says, normally considered a reproach. This is because we normally think of self-lovers as people who aim to 'gratify their appetites, and in general their passions and the nonrational part of the soul' (1168b19-21). Against this, Aristotle argues that the self-lover, properly speaking, is the person who 'indulges' and 'gratifies' the 'most authoritative element of himself,' namely

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virtue, 'for we are noble (*ἔσθλοὶ*) in only one way, but bad in all sorts of ways' (1106b28-35).

<sup>30</sup> NE IX.8. For this argument (and indeed for my understanding of Aristotle on fineness more generally), I am much indebted to Lear (2005).

intellect ( $\nu\omicron\upsilon\zeta$ ) (1168b33-4).<sup>31</sup> And it is by acting finely that one cherishes this part of oneself: 'in doing fine things, he [the good man] will himself be benefited and will benefit others' (1169a11-13). The excellent person (who appreciates the pleasure of fine action) will be happy to forgo money and honours, 'and all the goods people fight over, while keeping the fine for himself' (1169a20-22). In doing this, he will be choosing intense pleasure over milder pleasure (and he will prefer this, even when the fine action is likely to lead to his own death, so that the choice is between intense pleasure for a short time and milder pleasure for a longer time). In sum, Aristotle says here that the excellent person takes a certain special pleasure in acting finely (and in the prospect of so acting), and that this gratifies the rational part of him. This confirms that this kind of pleasure is a pleasure of the rational part.

If this is right, then we have shown that the self-controlled person has a fault in the rational part. The self-controlled person does not enjoy the fineness of good action as he should, nor is he pained as he should be by the shamefulness of bad action. Since it is, in the virtuous person, the rational part that takes pleasure in fine action, the failure to take this kind of pleasure is a failure of the rational part. The self-controlled person is able to discern what is appropriate to do in particular situations, and in this he has an ability that is similar to that of the practically wise person. But unlike the practically wise person, he does not properly take pleasure in the fineness of the appropriate action. It is because of this rational failing that he falls short of practical wisdom.

This leaves us with a question. Even if we grant that the self-controlled person differs in this way from the virtuous person and, moreover, that this is a difference in respect of the rational part, a doubt might nevertheless be raised whether this really counts as a significant rational flaw, a flaw that disqualifies one from being practically wise. Why can one not count as practically wise in spite of a failure to take proper pleasure in the fineness of right action?

There are, I think, two plausible answers to this question, though both of them are rather speculative. The first is that Aristotle *may* hold that taking pleasure in a fine action (and in the prospect of engaging in it) is

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<sup>31</sup>) As evidence that intellect ( $\nu\omicron\upsilon\zeta$ ) is what we really are, Aristotle points out here that people are called unself-controlled (akratic) or self-controlled with reference to whether  $\nu\omicron\upsilon\zeta$  is in control, 1168b34-5.



part of what is involved in properly appreciating its fineness. If this is Aristotle's view, then, although someone who fails to take such pleasure might *believe* that the right action is fine, this belief would not rest upon full understanding. Full understanding, at least in matters of this sort, would require a kind of pleasurable engagement.

The best evidence for attributing this view to Aristotle can be found in his discussion of pleasure in *Nicomachean Ethics* X.4. As we have already seen, he describes pleasure as a kind of end that supervenes upon a perfect intellectual or perceptual activity (1174b31-3). For the activity in question to be 'perfect' is for it to be an activity of a power that is 'in a good condition' and is active 'in relation to the finest of its objects' (1174b14-16; see also 1174b21-3). So, for example, if I am looking (with proper attentiveness and appreciation) at a beautiful painting, then my activity of looking is in the relevant sense perfect. Similarly, if I am discerning the fineness of a noble action (or action-in-prospect), then my activity of discerning is in the relevant sense perfect. Now Aristotle claims that in such cases, provided that the activity in question is indeed perfect, the activity will be pleasurable: so long as 'the object of thought or sense-perception is as it should be, and so is what discriminates or contemplates, there will be pleasure in the activity' (1174b34-75a1).<sup>32</sup> Aristotle goes on to discuss an apparent counterexample: surely it sometimes happens that, after engaging in the same activity of perceiving for a certain length of time, one ceases to find it pleasurable. His answer to this is that in such cases the activity is not really uniform. As one gets tired, one engages in the activity less intensely (for example, one focuses less on what one is looking at), and this explains the waning of the pleasure (1175a6-10). Aristotle holds, then, that if one fails to take pleasure in the exercise of perceptual or reasoning faculties, this must be either because the object apprehended is not fine or because one is not properly apprehending it. From this, it follows that the failure

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<sup>32</sup>) This is sometimes taken to imply that what is enjoyed is the activity of perceiving or thinking (as opposed, for example, to the fine thing that is seen or grasped in thought). This, for example, is the view of Bostock (2000), pp160-5. But Aristotle could equally well be saying that the pleasure *consists in* the activity of perceiving or thinking (and that what is enjoyed is the object that is apprehended as fine or beautiful) – and this interpretation certainly fits better with the passage we discussed earlier, where Aristotle alluded to the pleasure taken in beautiful melodies (1170a8-11). For further discussion of this, see Taylor (2003) and Harte (forthcoming).

to take pleasure in an action that is in fact fine must always imply a failure properly to *grasp* its fineness.<sup>33</sup>

If this is right, it could help to answer a worry I raised earlier. Aristotle says that the correct 'starting point' of action does not appear to (or is not seen by) the vicious person (1140b16-19, 1144a31-b1), and he draws from this the conclusion that only someone who is virtuous can be practically wise. The worry was that this argument seems ignore the possibility that the correct 'starting point' might appear to someone who was merely self-controlled. We can now see how Aristotle might rule out this possibility. He might say that, although the self-controlled person can have the right *beliefs* about the goals of action (and even about whether or not those goals are fine), the goals do not *strike* the self-controlled person *as* fine, in the way they should (they do not 'appear' as they should). This is shown by the self-controlled person's failure to take appropriate pleasure in the fineness of the right action.<sup>34</sup>

This suggests that the self-controlled person exhibits a failing in a specifically rational kind of sensitivity to appearances, or, as Aristotle would put it, a rational kind of φαντασία. Interestingly enough, Aristotle describes in *De Anima* III.11 (434a7-10) a kind of φαντασία that is only possible for rational beings. He says that animals that can engage in calculation (λογισμός) have the ability to form a single appearance out of many. He describes this ability as a deliberative kind of φαντασία. His remarks here are brief and their meaning is rather elusive, but if he is describing a specifically rational sensitivity to appearances, then these remarks fit very well with the view we have found in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. If I am virtuous, I will be able to put together the different appearances in such a way that the right action will appear fine to me. In doing so, I exercise deliberative φαντασία: a rational kind of sensitivity to appearances. But to be struck, in this way, by the fineness of an action is to feel a kind of pleasure in the prospect of performing it. Hence, someone who fails to feel this kind of

<sup>33</sup>) Note, though, that this is not *only* a point about fine action. On this view, a failure to take pleasure in beautiful music shows a failure to listen to it properly.

<sup>34</sup>) The view I outline here has obvious affinities with David Charles's view that desiring A is the same activity as taking A to be good (2006). However, my suggestion here is not quite the same as Charles'. My suggestion is that to have a certain kind of grasp of A's fineness (a grasp that amounts to a full appreciation of its fineness), one must take pleasure in A.

pleasure in the prospect of acting finely is failing in the proper exercise of deliberative φαντασία.

There is, moreover, a second reason why failing to feel appropriate pleasure in fine action might count as a serious rational flaw. Aristotle's description of the relation between the parts of the soul in *Nicomachean Ethics* I suggests that one important function of the practically rational part is to 'persuade' the nonrational, desiderative, part.<sup>35</sup> I want to suggest that if the rational part fails to take appropriate pleasure in fine action, it will be unable to perform this function. If this is right, then a further ground for denying that a self-controlled person could be practically wise is that such a person's rational part could not perform this persuasive function: this failure in the rational part would be partially responsible for the persistence of the self-controlled person's strong bad appetites.

Aristotle says that the self-controlled person's *nonrational* part does not 'listen' enough to reason.<sup>36</sup> This might sound like a flaw confined to the nonrational part, but the explanation for it may lie in reason's failure to take proper pleasure in fine action. Though the nonrational part cannot itself discern fineness, it is responsive to pleasure. The (rational) enjoyment of fine action (or of the prospect of fine action) is just what would be needed to 'persuade' the nonrational part, and to rid the soul of strong and bad appetites.<sup>37</sup> Thus, because the self-controlled person does not take proper (rational) pleasure in the fineness of right action, her rational part

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<sup>35</sup> This is, I think, suggested by Aristotle's claim that the nonrational desiderative part is 'in a way persuaded by reason' (1102b33-4). Aristotle compares the way in which the nonrational part listens to reason to the way in which one follows the advice of one's father or friends (1102b31-2). His view, I think, is that reason (like one's father or friends) has a responsibility, not only to get things right, but also to be persuasive in presenting its advice.

<sup>36</sup> NE 1.13.1102b25-8. What he says, strictly, is that the virtuous person's nonrational part listens *better* to reason than the self-controlled person's nonrational part does. I take it this implies that the self-controlled person's nonrational part doesn't listen enough.

<sup>37</sup> If this is the kind of 'persuasion' Aristotle has in mind in NE I.13, it is a persuasion that can only happen to the nonrational part of a human soul. The appetites of an animal can, of course, be manipulated by a human trainer. In that sense, they too are responsive to reason. But Aristotle is saying that human appetites share in reason in a way that a nonrational animal's appetites do not. My appetites are directly affected by the pleasure my reason takes in the fineness of certain actions (and the pain it experiences, at the shamefulness of others). Appetites can only 'share in' reason in *this* sense if they belong to a soul that itself has a rational part.

cannot perform one of its essential functions: it cannot 'persuade' her non-rational part to agree with it. This, then, is a further respect in which the self-controlled person's rational part is at fault, and it provides a further reason for denying that the self-controlled person is practically wise.<sup>38</sup>

### A Final Question: A State between Virtue and Self-Control?

I have argued that the self-controlled person suffers from a rational defect, and hence fails to be practically wise. My argument depended on the claim that the self-controlled person does not sufficiently appreciate, or take pleasure in, the fineness of right action (or find sufficiently painful the shameful of shameful action). As I have said, I think Aristotle's remarks about self-control make this clear. However, it might seem that this opens up the possibility of a state intermediate between self-control and virtue: the state of someone who has bad desires, but would *not* enjoy acting on them against reason; someone who enjoys the fineness of acting rightly, in spite of the fact that in doing so he is frustrating some bad appetites. So it might seem that, even if I have shown the self-controlled person cannot be practically wise, I still haven't shown that one needs to be *virtuous* in order to be practically wise. Someone in this nameless intermediate state *would* take proper pleasure in fine action. If his nonrational part did not listen to his rational part, that would not be because of anything that his rational part was doing wrong.

Indeed, it might seem that, whatever Aristotle says about self-control, some of our more vivid internal struggles occur just when we *are* fully appreciative of the pleasure of acting finely, but at the same time beset by bad appetites. Does Aristotle simply deny that this is possible? If not, why does he not discuss it? Would he have to admit that a person of this sort was practically wise?

Here we have to speculate. I shall end by offering two suggestions. (i) Aristotle's views about what it is for a desire to be *strong* may rule out the possibility that one could properly appreciate the fineness of good action and yet feel a *strong* desire to act otherwise. He seems to think that your bad appetite counts as strong just in case you would enjoy acting on

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<sup>38</sup>) Compare Plato, *Republic* IV, 442c, where a soul is said to be wise only if its rational part has knowledge *and rules* (which implies that one can only be wise if one, in addition, has the other virtues).

it against reason (and hence, just in case your pleasure in satisfying the appetite would not be marred by your awareness of acting shamefully). At least, this is suggested by his discussion of self-control.<sup>39</sup> Of course, one might well dispute this view about what it is for an appetite to be strong: surely it is possible to feel a strong appetitive pull towards something, while being fully aware that you would not enjoy acting on this desire. But if I am right that this is *Aristotle's* view, it implies that someone who properly appreciated the fineness of good action could have, at most, *weak* bad appetites. Perhaps Aristotle would be happy to allow that someone who had a few weak bad appetites, and was in other respects like the virtuous person, could count as practically wise.

(ii) Alternatively, Aristotle might allow that it is *possible* for someone with bad appetites to take pleasure in fine action, but insist that such a person would be in a radically unstable character state, and hence would not be practically wise. Of course, more would need to be said to explain why this state (unlike a state of self-control) could not be stable. Perhaps Aristotle would answer that there cannot be a stable character state in which one is strongly attracted to incompatible pleasures. The self-controlled person (as Aristotle describes him) is not in such a state, for he is not strongly attracted to the pleasures of acting finely. Instead, he habitually acts against what he takes to be the more pleasurable alternative. Someone who, while beset by bad appetites, took proper pleasure in right action would be very different. He would be strongly attracted to conflicting pleasures. Aristotle might hold that conflicting pleasures have a tendency, over time, to drown one another out. If this were so, then this hypothetical character state would be unstable. Over time, it would either develop into virtue or deteriorate into self-control. Because of the risk of deterioration, a person in this state could not be relied upon to take proper pleasure in fine action. Hence, such a person would not be practically wise.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> I have suggested that it is because self-control implies having *strong* bad appetites that Aristotle stipulates that the self-controlled person would enjoy acting on his bad appetites.

<sup>40</sup> For comments on earlier drafts of this paper I would like to thank David Charles, Jessica Moss and my two respondents at the 2011 classics triennial, Fiona Leigh and Giles Pearson. I also benefited from comments made by audiences at Oxford, NYU, Rutgers, Yale and at a graduate student workshop at Berkeley.

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