

Aristotle's Ethical Psychology: Reason's Role in Virtue and Happiness
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Since happiness is an activity of the soul expressing complete virtue, we must examine virtue... But by human virtue we mean not the virtue of the body but that of the soul, and we also say that happiness is an activity of the soul... The student of politics therefore must study the soul, but for the sake of these things and to the extent that is sufficient for the things sought. (*EN* 1102a5-25)¹

The study of the human good requires the study of the human soul; Aristotelian ethics requires Aristotelian psychology. Not too much psychology, Aristotle warns us, but enough for the purpose at hand (1102a23-6) – the *Ethics*' purpose of defining the human good and explaining how it is achieved. Thus as ethicists we can for instance ignore questions about the ontological status of soul-parts. What do we need to know?

Aristotle's answer comes from the function argument (*EN* 1097b21-98a20), whose conclusion he restates in our opening quotation. The human good consists in the excellent performance of the human function; the human function consists in distinctively human activity, i.e. a distinctively human life; this can only be the activity of the distinctive parts of the human soul.² The ethicist must thus study these parts enough to understand what they do – their functions – and what makes them do that excellently – their virtues.

Aristotle assumes without argument that we know something general but crucial about these distinctive parts: they are those that “have *logos*” – usually glossed as “share in reason,” “are rational.”³ He states this already in the function argument (*EN* 1098a3-5); later discussions give us more detail.

Two parts of the soul have *logos* in themselves (VI.1-2). One is the scientific or knowledge-having part (*epistêmonikon*), the other the calculative (*logistikon*). The former contemplates necessary, eternal truths; the latter deliberates about how to achieve goals. Each has various virtues enabling it to perform its function well in various domains, supreme among them *sophia* (theoretical wisdom) for the contemplative part, and *phronêsis* (practical wisdom) for the deliberative.

A third part of the soul shares in *logos* “in a way,” not by possessing *logos* in itself, but rather by being able to listen to, agree with it, or fight against it (I.13). This part Aristotle first identifies as the appetitive or desiderative part, and later as the seat of all the non-rational passions, emotions as well as appetites; I will follow his own practice in the *Politics* of calling it the passionate part (*pathêtikon morion*, *Pol.* 1254b9; cf. *EN* 1168b20-21). Its function is evidently to feel passions, although we will want to refine this slightly below; the virtue that enables it to do this excellently is what Aristotle calls character-virtue, a genus that includes courage, temperance, justice, mildness, magnanimity, and so on.

¹ *EN* = *Nicomachean Ethics*. Translations are mine throughout.

² Aristotle here assumes the general theory of soul he expounds in the *de Anima*: the soul of an *x* (mushroom, slug, human) is what makes an *x* a living thing, for it is the set of capacities for all the activities that constitute an *x*-type life (*de Anima* II.1).

³ Elsewhere (Moss 2014) I argue that the primary or focal sense of *logos* in this context is ‘account,’ and show how the word comes to play the role it does in Aristotle's ethics and psychology; there is no harm for our purposes, however, in sticking with the traditional translation.

That effectively exhausts Aristotle's explicit statements about the soul in the *Ethics*. His main concern there is of course with the virtues of the soul and, ultimately, the excellent activity they enable – happiness (*eudaimonia*). He does say quite a bit more about these virtues and activities, but offers no further direct characterizations of the soul-parts that underlie them. Is what he has said enough for his purposes in the *Ethics*, or should we look for a fuller psychological account?

In fact we have good reason to look beyond the explicit statements of *Ethics*, for these leave open some important *ethical* questions about the soul.

Most generally, it is clear that the notion of reason is absolutely central to Aristotle's ethical psychology, but this notion is under-explained in the *Ethics*. (Contrast for example the detailed definitions of decision (*prohairesis*) or the voluntary with the total lack of explicit definition of *logos*.) If we want to understand what makes the rational parts of soul in particular so crucial to human virtue and happiness, we should seek a better understanding of the Aristotelian notion of reason.

More specifically, we need a better understanding of what it means for each part to share in reason in the way that it does, and of the ethical difference this makes between them.

First, in what sense is the passionate part rational at all, given Aristotle's evident contrast between reason and passion, and strong signs that our passionate part has much in common with a part of the soul found in non-rational animals? To put the point another way, why do emotions and desires count as distinctively human enough to play a role in our happiness?

Second, what do the strictly rational parts have in virtue of being strictly rational, and why does this make them so ethically superior? As we will see below in the course of answering the first question, Aristotle relegates a good deal of what we might consider crucial for virtue to the passionate part. He nonetheless insists that one cannot have full ethical virtue – and hence cannot engage in fully ethically virtuous activity, and hence cannot achieve the happiness constituted by such activity – without also having and exercising the excellent condition of the practical rational part. Non-rational virtue and non-rational activity are lacking, and must be under the command of reason. To understand why, we need a better account of what it is for this superior part of the soul to have reason. This should also illuminate what it is for the theoretical part to have reason, and thus why its exercise is the most fully human thing we can do.

My aim in what follows is to look beyond Aristotle's *Ethics* to get a fuller picture of the three distinctively human parts of the soul, with an eye to understanding what it means for each of them to partake in reason. What I offer will be an overview, brief and so sometimes of necessity dogmatic; I will however note controversies as I go along, and will refer to fuller defenses of my interpretations elsewhere.

The picture I develop is one on which Aristotelian reason is above all an ability to grasp *causes* or, equivalently, *explanations*, along with the phenomena they explain. To use Aristotle's own terms, reason is what lets us grasp *whys* as well as *thats* (the *dioti* as well as the *hoti*). In the theoretical realm the relevant causes will be those that ultimately explain why things are as they are (usually formal and final causes); in the practical realm, they will be the final causes that explain why we should act in the ways that we should – goals that give our actions their value.

Thus what reason adds to a life lived on the basis of the non-rational parts is a better grasp of phenomena, but also and most distinctively a grasp of the explanations that underlie them. A

flourishing, virtuous human life is thus not merely one of doing and believing the right things, but of understanding the causes that explain our world and our own actions.

I. Parts of the soul

Just after our opening quotation Aristotle refers us to “the exoteric discourses” for a fuller picture of the parts of the soul (1102b26-7). He may have in mind some now lost texts, but we modern readers must look among his surviving works.⁴ The most obvious place to turn is to his treatise on the soul, the *de Anima*, and in particular to its discussion of the parts of the human soul.

The *de Anima* distinguishes between various psychic faculties or capacities or, equivalently for our purposes, parts of soul:⁵ the vegetative or nutritive, the perceptive, the desiderative, and the intellectual.

Most primitive is the nutritive part, found in all living things, plants and animals as well as humans; its activities are nutrition, growth, and reproduction. We see this part under the same name and description in the *Ethics*, where it is introduced only to be dismissed as irrelevant to human virtue and happiness and so not a subject of study for the ethical psychologist (I.13). In what follows we will thus mostly ignore it, but it will be useful as a contrast with the distinctively human parts: whatever it is that *logos* bestows on a soul-part must be something this part lacks, so by considering its deficiencies we can hope to illuminate what the higher parts have.

At the other end of the scale of nature is a part the *de Anima* identifies as distinctively human: the thinking part (*dianoêtikon* or *noêtikon*). It seems obvious that we should identify this with the *Ethics*’ strictly rational parts (these are even called the *noêtika* in *EN* VI.2), and although the *de Anima* makes very little of the *Ethics*’ distinction between practical and theoretical rational parts it does acknowledge that distinction at least in passing (*de An.* 433a14-16).

What remains on the *de Anima*’s scheme are the in-between parts that we share with animals but not with plants: the perceptive and the desiderative. The *de Anima* eventually declares that there is in fact just one part here: the perceptive and desiderative parts are “the same, although different in being” (431a13-14). This seems to mean at a minimum that while *what it is to be* perceptive differs from *what it is to be* desiderative, the two capacities and their resulting activities are necessarily found together. (Compare other pairs that stand in this peculiar sameness relation: the road from Athens to Thebes and the road from Thebes to Athens, or teaching and learning.)⁶ Since the *Ethics* too identifies in the human soul a plant-like part, an intellectual part, and one in between, an obvious hypothesis is that the *de Anima*’s perceptive-cum-desiderative part is identical with the in-between part in the *Ethics*, and indeed we have seen that the *Ethics* introduces this as the desiderative part (*EN* 1102b30, cf. *EE* 1219b23).

Moreover, we find abundant evidence for a close link between perception and non-rational desire (and other passions) in Aristotle’s most extensive treatment of the passions, in the *Rhetoric*. Here Aristotle argues that passions are caused or perhaps even partly constituted by an offshoot and

⁴ Some think he has in mind instead the theory of Plato’s Academy, but even if this is so we still need to understand what Aristotle takes the right version of Plato’s rational/non-rational distinction to be.

⁵ Aristotle says in *EN* I.13 that we do not need to ask, for ethical and political purposes, if the parts are separate or in what way; this seems to license us in using ‘part’ as a functional synonym for faculty. For discussion of Aristotle’s parts as faculties see Johansen 2013.

⁶ See *Physics* III.3, and for fuller discussion see Whiting 2002: 156-160.

close cousin of perception: *phantasia*, “imagination” or “appearance”.⁷ Fear is “a pain or disturbance arising from the *phantasia* of a destructive or painful future evil” (1382a21-23); shame is “a *phantasia* of a loss of reputation,” (*Rhet.* 1383b13); appetites involve pleasurably remembering a past experience or expecting a future one (1370b15-17), where memory and expectation are both functions of *phantasia* (1370a28-35), and the other passions too involve *phantasia* in one way or another. *Phantasia* is defined in the *de Anima* as caused by and sharing its objects with perception (428b12-13, 429a1-2), and in the *Rhetoric* as “a kind of weak perception” (1370a28-9). It thus seems to be an activity of the perceptive part of the soul, and indeed Aristotle says elsewhere that the perceptive and phantastic parts are “the same but different in being” (*de Insomniis* 459a16-17).

For present purposes we need not distinguish between perception and *phantasia* as causes of passions, and I will in fact use ‘perception’ in a broad sense to cover both perception and *phantasia*, arguably following Aristotle’s own occasional practice. The main point is that the *Rhetoric* characterizes passions as underwritten by cognitive acts of the perceptive part of the soul, and this confirms that the part of the soul that feels passions is identical to the part of the soul that perceives, thus completing the parallels between the *de Anima*’s psychology and the *Ethics*’.

There is however one *prima facie* argument against the identification: the *Ethics*’ passionate part seems to play its special ethical role precisely because it is uniquely human, while the *de Anima*’s perceptive-cum-desiderative is explicitly identified as present in animals too.⁸ On the other hand, there is some sign in the *de Anima* that the perceptive part in humans differs significantly from what is found in animals. Animals have perception while lacking *logos* (e.g. 427b13-14), and yet Aristotle says that it is “not easy to classify perception as *logos*-having or *logos*-lacking” (432a30-1). We can reconcile the two claims if we take him to hold that in animals the perceptive part has no share in *logos* while in humans it does; this would render the human version of the perceptive part different enough from the animal version to justify the *Ethics*’ treating our perceptive part as distinctively human. Below we will see strong confirmation of this reading.

We have seen strong evidence that the *de Anima*’s soul-parts line up with the *Ethics*’, and thus we should be optimistic that we can use Aristotle’s overall psychology to illuminate his ethical psychology, and in particular to answer our questions about reason. We can hope that Aristotle’s discussion of thought in the *de Anima* and in other works will illuminate the nature of the strictly rational parts of the soul, that his detailed account of perception will illuminate the passionate part,

⁷ There is a good deal of controversy over this claim: some have argued that Aristotle’s talk of *phantasia* in the *Rhetoric* should not be taken in the technical sense of the *de Anima*; his real view is that passions are underwritten by intellectual cognitions (e.g. beliefs), and he uses *phantasia* and cognates – words connoting appearance – to highlight the subjective nature of these beliefs, or their vividness, rather than to connect them with perception. There is however overwhelming evidence that he means *phantasia* and cognates precisely in their technical psychological sense (see Moss 2012 chapter 4). The connections between passion and belief are interesting and complex, but the directive cognitive basis for passions is non-rational perception or *phantasia*.

⁸ The *Nicomachean Ethics* argues that the human function must be something distinctive (*idion*) to us, and thus must be the activity of the parts of the soul that have *logos* rather than a life of nutrition or perception (*EN* 1097b33-98a5). The *Eudemian Ethics*’ version of the argument states outright what this seems to imply: the passionate part, as well as the part that has *logos* more strictly, is distinctive (*idion*) of humans (*EE* 1219b37-8).

and that his account of the differences between thought and perception will illuminate the superiority of the rational parts.

II. The passionate part

The *Ethics* does not say as much as we would like about what this part does, although Aristotle's names for it – appetitive or desiderative, or in the *Politics* passionate – imply that its main function is to feel appetites and other passions. The *Ethics* does however have a great deal to say about the virtues of this part, the character-virtues. Given that Aristotle follows Plato in defining the virtue of a thing as what enables it to perform its function well (1106a15-18), we can use his discussion of character-virtue to infer a fuller account of this part's function.

Character-virtue is a disposition to act and feel passions in ways that hit the mean, that is, in accordance with right *logos* (II.6). This implies that the function of this part of the soul is not simply to feel passions but rather to do so *in relation to logos*, and Aristotle's discussion of this part in I.13 confirms this. When the passionate part has its proper virtue and so functions well, it feels passions in agreement with *logos*; when it lacks this virtue and so functions poorly, it feels passions against *logos*, or in reluctant obedience to it (1102b13-28). This connection with *logos* is what gives the passionate part of the soul a role in human virtue and hence in human happiness.⁹

We now see an answer to the worry about how the passionate part can be distinctively human while also found in animals: the human version of this part is different from the animal, for it has an importantly different function. As Aspasius puts it, in the oldest extant commentary on the *Ethics*, the animal and human versions of this part are the same insofar as they “partake of spirit and appetite and in general of pleasure and pain,” but differ insofar as the animal version “is not obedient to *logos*” (comment *ad EN* 1102b13).¹⁰

But this may seem to raise more questions than it answers. What does it mean for a passionate part to agree with or listen to or resist *logos*? If it means simply that our passions can push us either in the same or the opposite direction as our reasoning, how does this make for any intrinsic difference between this part and its animal counterpart – or, for that matter, between this part and our vegetative parts? After all a dog can be fearful in accord with or against its master's commands, and we can digest or grow in accord with or against our own reasoned wishes. Hence the first of the specific questions about reason we raised above: In what sense can the passionate part of our soul really be said to partake of reason, even “in a way”?

Here we can hope for significant help from the connections we have seen between the passionate part of the soul and the perceptive, and between passions and perception. Aristotelian passions are not brute reactions to stimuli, but instead underwritten by rich, complex, value-laden

⁹ If character-virtue is a disposition regarding passions *and actions*, is this part's function also to cause actions in relation to *logos*? This is a complicated question. Aristotle's view is that although passions certainly can cause actions, as for example in animals, children, people with mere “natural” virtue, and akratics, fully virtuous action is directly caused instead by decision (*prohairesis*), with passion merely harmonizing, or acting as an ally (*sunergei*, 1116b31). For our purposes here we do not need to decide whether the human passionate part's function includes causing action; we can simply note that if it does, the relevant function is not simply to cause action, but to cause action in relation to *logos*.

¹⁰ For fuller arguments see Moss 2012 chapter 4.

perceptions, e.g. the perception of something as painful evil or a shameful insult. And this suggests an answer to the question of how passions can be genuinely subject to rational influence. For there is strong evidence that Aristotle thinks reason can influence perception; if passions are grounded in perception, then reason can thereby influence passions too.

Aristotle seems to allow for two sorts of rational influence on perception. First, on a widespread account of Aristotle's view of perception, reason can expand the range of what we can perceive, through what is nowadays called "cognitive penetration": if you have the concept of triangle, or of injustice, you can perceive things as triangular or unjust, while an animal cannot.¹¹ Thus a perceptive faculty housed in a human soul can come to share the rational part's vocabulary in a way that allows for real agreement and disagreement. If you have the concept of the shameful, for example, you have the capacity to *perceive* an insult as shameful. Your perceptive part thereby has the capacity to harmonize or conflict with your reasoned judgment of the insult; therefore the passion your perception generates – anger or shame, in this case – will genuinely agree or disagree with *logos*, rather than merely falling into or out of line with it.

Second, reason can "persuade" the passionate part by playing on our imagination. Unlike animals we can consider different possible courses of action, using our powers of deliberation, and along with that ability comes the ability to imagine (have *phantasiai* of) those possible courses and their consequences. Given the connection between perception and *phantasia* on the one hand and passions on the other, this means that deliberation can generate new passions by generating new perceptual appearances.¹²

Here is an example to illustrate both forms of rational influence. If a dog has not eaten for some time and is presented with a juicy steak, it will perceive the steak as pleasant and want it, even if its master commands it to hold back.¹³ A human by contrast – or more precisely, a human with well-habituated, virtuous passions – has the capacity to reason herself out of desiring the steak if there is some reason not to have it: she can (a) perceive the steak as unhealthy or intemperate, perceptions arguably informed by her conceptual repertoire, and/or (b) deliberate about the consequences of eating it and as a result imagine it as causing pain. Her passions will follow suit, and so will agree with *logos*. (Recall that her nutritive part is completely *logos*-lacking, and hence on this score no different from the dog's: her stomach will still rumble and she will still drool. This highlights the difference between the nutritive and passionate parts, and the sense in which the latter alone partakes of reason.)

Thus a deeper psychological picture of the *Ethics*' passionate part of the soul illuminates its function and, crucially, the sense in which it is rational. We have an answer to the first specific question about rationality that we raised above.

On the other hand, the second question has become more pressing. Now that we recognize the cognitive richness of the passionate part we may wonder why Aristotle thinks it so ethically deficient, and the rational part so central to our virtue and flourishing.

¹¹ For this view see e.g. Whiting 2002: 188.

¹² For fuller argument see Moss 2012 chapter 6.

¹³ Fears caused by memory of past pains following on disobedience might overwhelm the power of appetite, and so the dog might after all *de facto* "follow reason" and hold back, but this cannot count as rational persuasion in the sense Aristotle requires, precisely because it is available to animals too.

Consider a life guided mostly by a well-habituated passionate part, with some rational supplementation. The agent perceives the morally relevant features of situations, feels desire, pity, anger, aversion and other passions in response to these perceptions, and acts on them. Reason may have supplied the conceptual material for these perceptions, if the cognitive penetration interpretation is right. Reason may also intervene on occasion to guide these perceptions onto the right objects through rational persuasion, but good habituation has ensured that the passionate part's own immediate responses will be for the most part correct; furthermore, even when reason does intervene it is the resulting perceptions and passions that are decisive for action.

This would seem to be a life that Aristotle would deride as lived “according to passion rather than *logos*”. And yet it looks like a very human life, and a morally worthy one at that. Why insist on any larger role for reason? Why insist that action in the strict sense, and fully virtuous action, must be done on the basis of decision rather than passion (VI.2, II.4), and so must be based on rational deliberation rather than perceptual evaluation?

There is a quick answer to this question, formally correct but obviously unsatisfying: reason is ethically crucial regardless of any issues about practical guidance or moral worth, because *given that humans are distinctive in virtue of having reason, our flourishing must consist in the exercise of reason*. This is the main idea of the function argument. Even if a life largely guided by the non-rational part of the soul could consist in correct actions accompanied by correct feelings, it would not be a fully human life, and hence not a happy life.

Does this resolve the worry? Surely not, unless Aristotle can show us that what he calls reason is something that we recognize and value in ourselves. If the function argument is to be more than stipulative – if it is to have a chance of persuading us that reason plays the chief role in our flourishing – Aristotle needs to give us an account of reason which shows it worthy of that role. And to repeat the worry, it may seem that he cannot: if complex evaluations and emotions belong to the non-rational part, perhaps a mostly non-rational life is good enough not only morally but also prudentially – satisfying enough, fulfilling enough, human enough for us.

To make headway here we clearly need a better grip on what precisely Aristotle means by reason – the very general question with which we began. What is this essentially human quality that is so crucial to our virtue and to our flourishing, and that is lacking even in the most admirable perceptions and passions? Let us turn then to consider the strictly rational parts of the soul, to see what Aristotle thinks rationality amounts to, and thus to see why it plays its crucial ethical role.

III. The deliberative part¹⁴

We can begin with the practical rational part, the one that oversees the passionate part and produces action. Aristotle calls this the calculative part (*logistikón*), on the grounds that “to deliberate and to calculate are the same thing” (1139a11-13), and so we can infer that its essential function is deliberation. Deliberation is a specific form of reasoning that begins from the laying down of a goal for which one has a wish (*boulêsis*), consists in reasoning out the means or best means to achieve this goal, and results in the forming of a decision (*prohairesis*) to perform the action identified as the proximate means (III.2-3), which decision in turn causes action (VI.2). Evidently all this has a very special ethical status. If we do not go through this process of deliberation but act instead on the promptings of passion alone, our behavior does not count as action (*praxis*) in the strict sense (VI.2), and does not count as done virtuously (II.4): we are merely doing what animals can do. Our rational nature is expressed only when we act on the

¹⁴ I provide much fuller arguments for the main claims of this section in Moss 2014.

basis of deliberation, and we act virtuously in the strict sense only when we act on the basis of excellent deliberation.

Our task is to try to determine what gives deliberation this special ethical status by determining what makes it specially rational.

One might think the answer is obvious: deliberation is important because it is often hard to hit on the right thing to do, and it counts as rational because reason is what makes us able to figure things out. Moreover this might seem a natural fit with Aristotle's characterization of thought, along with perception, as a faculty of *krisis*, discerning or discriminating. Perception allows us to discriminate hot from cold, red from green, and so on for all perceptible qualities, but reason is needed to discriminate imperceptible properties, and among these are the properties most important to action: the just and unjust, fine and shameful, beneficial and harmful, and so on. Without reason we cannot identify the right things to do. Let us call this the Information view of reason.

Is this in fact Aristotle's view? He clearly thinks that we at least sometimes need to exercise reason in order to hit on the right thing to do: "naturally virtuous" passions without the guidance of reason can cause harm (VI.13); *phronêsis*, the virtue of practical reason, "makes right the things toward the goal," i.e. tells us which particular actions to perform (VI.12-13). But his account of reason's practical role cannot be quite as simple as this.

First, we have already seen evidence that Aristotle's view of perception is more generous than the Information view of reason implies, and in the *Politics* he says explicitly that humans can perceive "the good and bad and just and unjust and the others like these" (*Pol.* 1253a17-18). Second, and crucially, we will now see that when Aristotle directly addresses the question of what deliberators can do that non-deliberators cannot, he does not emphasize the ability to discriminate further properties at all. Instead, he emphasizes something very different: practical reason is superior to perception not by virtue of grasping a special range of phenomena, but rather in grasping the *causes* or *explanations* that underlie these. To anticipate Aristotle's language in a passage we will consider in the next section, reason is needed in addition to perception not because it gives us more *thats*, but because it alone gives us *whys*. Let us call this the Explanation view of reason.

Aristotle explicitly addresses this question of what makes deliberation distinctively rational in a passage from the *Eudemian Ethics*, and while what he says here goes beyond what he says in the *Nicomachean Ethics* it looks like an elaboration of his general characterization of deliberation as always beginning from the laying-down of a goal, and resulting in the decision to do an action for the sake of that goal:

(a) [D]ecision (*prohairesis*) is not present in the other animals nor in people of every age nor of every condition. For neither is deliberation [present], nor supposition of the that-on-account-of-which, but nothing prevents many from being able to opine whether something is to be done or not to be done, while not yet doing this through reasoning (*dia logismou*). (b) *For the deliberative capacity of the soul is the capacity contemplative of a certain cause (to theôrêtikon aitias tinos)*. For the that-for-the-sake-of which is one of the causes, because the that-on-account-of-which is a cause... Wherefore those for whom no goal is laid down are not deliberative. (*EE* 1226b20-30, emphasis mine)

Part (a) singles out deliberation (and hence decision) as uniquely rational: it is only found in well-developed humans,¹⁵ and it is a form of *logismos*, reasoning (cf. *EN* 1139a11-13, *de An.* 434a7-11). Part (b) explains this fact (note the “for” (*gar*) at 1226b25) by characterizing deliberation as contemplation of a cause, or explanation (*aitia*). The relevant notion of cause is final cause, what Aristotle here calls “that-for-the-sake-of-which” (*hou heneka*). Forming goals, deliberating, and forming decisions all involve final-causal thinking: in adopting some *x* as one’s goal, and in deciding on some *y* as a means to it, one is taking *x* to explain why *y* is-to-be-done – one is choosing *y because of x*. And Aristotle’s “for” at the start of (b) implies that it is this essential connection with explanation that marks these activities as rational.¹⁶

If this is right, then a life spent acting on passion is deficient because the agent has no thoughts about *why* she acts as she does, and natural virtue is ethically inferior because it includes no understanding of *why* the actions done are the right one. What practical rationality adds to perception and passion is the dimension of explanation.

We find strong confirmation that Aristotle holds this Explanation view of reason when we turn to the texts that most promise to reveal the ethical value of rationality: texts that contrast strict character-virtue, the kind that requires *phronêsis* (see especially VI.13), with mere “natural” virtue, a disposition of the passionate part which is found also in children and beasts.

The courage on account of spirited passion seems most natural, and when *decision* and *the that-for-the-sake-of-which* are added, [seems really] to be courage. People too [like animals] feel pain when they are angry, and pleasure when they get revenge; those who fight on account of these things are warlike, however, but not courageous. For they do not [act] *on account of the fine*, nor as *the logos* [says], but on account of passion. (*EN* 1117a4-9, emphases mine)

The problem with the naturally courageous person is not that she tends to do or feel the wrong things, but that she is not acting for the sake of any goal, let alone the correct goal.¹⁷ To become strictly virtuous she must acquire the ability to recognize the fine as the “that-for-the-sake-of-which” of her actions – that which *explains why* they are valuable, to-be-done – and thereby also acquire the ability to deliberate with a view to that goal and decide on actions as means to it. The naturally virtuous person lacks an explanatory account of why she should act as she does, which is another way to say that she acts without *logos*: she does not act “as the *logos* [says],” a9; compare the parallel discussion in the *EE*, where strict courage, by contrast with natural and other deficient types of courage, is called “a following of the *logos*” (*EE* 1229a1-2). She needs *logos* to give her a *why*, and the correct *why* at that.

¹⁵ Presumably the qualifications are meant to exclude children and “natural slaves,” who according to the *Politics* both lack the power to deliberate, although in different ways.

¹⁶ But don’t animals act for the sake of goals too, for example stalking their prey to for the sake of getting food? Aquinas considers this objection in his discussion of the Aristotelian thesis that animals have no share in decision (*electio*), and offers a promising solution: animals can act on account of a goal (*propter finem*), but do not grasp the notion of a goal (*non apprehendunt rationem finis*) and so do not grasp goals as goals (*Summa Theologica*, First Part of the Second Part, Question I article 2). For a somewhat different resolution see Lorenz 2006, chapter 12.

¹⁷ Those who do courageous actions on account of the wrong goal exhibit not natural courage but some other form of pseudo-courage: for example those who act for the sake of honor have civic courage (1116a28-9).

This passage on natural courage may seem to imply that that non-rational perception and passion suffice for right action and right feeling while reason adds only the element of explanation, but as we saw briefly above, Aristotle elsewhere makes clear that practical reason also identifies the actions that lead to the goal.¹⁸ Indeed coming up with the right *thats* – telling us what to do – cannot be the exclusive province of the passionate part of the soul, for that would give this part a leading rather than following role in action. Deliberation tells us *what* to do, and this function is crucial, for when we ϕ virtuously we are ϕ -ing *because* we have decided to ϕ on the basis of deliberation. The virtuous passionate part of the soul follows and agrees with reason and so generates a passion to ϕ in harmony with the decision, but it is the decision that plays the lead role in causing action.¹⁹ Thus while Information view of reason does not give the whole story, it does give part.

Nonetheless, when Aristotle discusses reason's contribution to virtue and action he tends to emphasize the less practical, more purely intellectual function of providing explanations – he writes as if he subscribed to the Explanation view alone. Perhaps he thinks that the information-providing function is often redundant: there is no having *phronêsis* without also have a well-habituated, strictly virtuous passionate part, and such a part, unlike a merely naturally virtuous one, is arguably sufficient in most cases to generate right action and right feeling on its own.²⁰ But the main idea may be that reason makes us better at figuring out *what* we should do precisely by giving us a grasp of *why* we should do it: “Just like archers who have a target,” those who understand the goal are better at achieving it” (*EN* I.2 1094a22-4).

In this section we set out to find an answer to our second specific question about the parts of the soul: why is the practical rational part necessary for virtue and happiness? The answer we found is that it can grasp explanations as well as the phenomena they explain: it can grasp the goals of actions and understand how the actions it prescribes are for the sake of those goals.

¹⁸ See the passages cited above on *phronêsis* making right the things toward the goal, and on natural virtue without *phronêsis* leading us to act wrongly; moreover, and most obviously, Aristotle characterizes deliberation as the process of figuring out what to do, e.g. whether to do one thing or another.

¹⁹ When we act without deliberation– in emergencies, for instance, where there is no time for deliberation – the passionate part must take the lead, directly causing action, but this does not seem to be virtuous action *par excellence* (*EN* III.8 1117a18-22).

²⁰ Toward the end of his discussion of *phronêsis* Aristotle considers the objection that it is practically redundant because anyone who has it will also have character-virtue, and this alone is sufficient for right action: “For what is [*phronêsis*] needed? For if *phronêsis* is the [virtue] concerned with the just and fine and good for man, but these are the things which it belongs to the good man to do, we are *no more practical* about these things by virtue of knowing” (*EN* VI.12 1143b21-4, emphasis mine). Although he does go on to say that *natural* virtue without reason is dangerous, he never makes the same claim about habituated virtue. Indeed his immediate response to the practical redundancy objection is to accept it while insisting that *phronêsis* is nonetheless valuable: “But about being no more practical concerning fine and just things on account of *phronêsis*, we must begin a bit farther back, taking this as our starting-point: Just as we say that some do just actions without yet being just... so, it seems, it is possible to do each of these things in such a condition as to be really good – that is to say, *on account of decision and for the sake of the things done themselves*” (*EN* VI.12 1144a11-20, emphasis mine). Even if *phronêsis* made no difference in *what* we do it would still make the crucial difference in our understanding of *why* we do it, and that is enough to render *phronêsis* ethically necessary.

Notably, this also implies an answer to our general question: what is Aristotelian reason? The implication seems to be that reason is the capacity to grasp explanations, or rather entire explanatory accounts that both identify phenomena and explain them. The deliberative part exercises reason when it grasps *whys* along with *thats*. The passionate part of the soul shares in reason insofar as it can be influenced by reason's deliverances to some extent, harmonizing with the *thats* (wanting to do what reason prescribes), but it is not strictly rational because it has no grasp of the *whys*.

Is this general account of Aristotelian reason correct? To answer that question we need to look at the other strictly rational part of the soul, the theoretical part. In the next section I will show that doing so provides support for this interpretation of Aristotelian reason. In the final section I will return to consider the ethical consequences of this picture.

IV. The theoretical rational part

In Book VI of the *Ethics*, in the *de Anima*, in the *Posterior Analytics*, in the *Metaphysics*, and in scattered discussions throughout the corpus Aristotle discusses theoretical intellect and its activities and virtues: thought (*dianoia*, *noêsis*) and calculation (*logismos*),²¹ intellectual intuition or understanding (*nous*), scientific knowledge (*epistêmê*), and wisdom (*sophia*). When we look at these discussions do we find an account of what marks all these as rational, setting them apart from and above perception?

This is an enormous question: Aristotle has a lot to say on the subject, but it is not at all obvious how to unify his various remarks, and I will not attempt to give an exhaustive or decisive answer here.²² I want merely to point out that when Aristotle directly addresses the question of what make perception inferior to reason, as well as when he discusses the *telos* of reason – the activity in which its distinctive features are fully expressed – what he says provides striking support for the account of reason we inferred above.

The *telos* of theoretical reason is excellent contemplation (*thêoria*), contemplation on the basis of scientific knowledge (*epistêmê*) and wisdom (*sophia*). Aristotle makes very clear that such contemplation consists in the grasping of the ultimate causes of things: see especially *Metaphysics* I.1-2 on the exercise of *sophia*, and the *Posterior Analytics* on *epistêmê* (e.g. 71b9-12, 74b27-8, 90a5-7). Reason is valuable because it allows us to grasp causes; that is what it does when it functions at its best.

Moreover, there is good evidence that this ability to grasp causes is what distinguishes reason from perception.

The most obvious evidence comes from the *Metaphysics*' account of perception's limitations. Perception does not count as knowledge or wisdom because it does not grasp causes:

²¹ The *de Anima* clearly countenances practical thought and calculation as well as theoretical (see especially III.7-11); I mean here to be asking about Aristotle's characterizations of non-practical intellectual activity, or his characterizations of intellectual activity that are not specifically focused on its practical aspects.

²² For good treatments of the question see e.g. Modrak 1987, chapter 5, arguing that thought is distinguished by being more abstract and universal than perception, Irwin 1988 chapter 14, arguing that thought essentially involves inference, and recently Johansen 2012 chapter 11, arguing that thought essentially involves being responsive to *logos*.

The senses do not tell us the *why* (*to dia ti*) of anything, e.g. why fire is hot; they only say *that* it is hot. (*Met.* 981b12)

This account of the crucial difference between perception and reason gains much more support from other sources than has been recognized. In the *de Anima* Aristotle distinguishes the two as follows:

One discerns what-it-is-to-be-flesh (*to sarki einai*), and flesh, either with something different or with something in a different condition. For flesh is not without matter [while its essence is]... With the perceptive faculty one discerns the hot and the cold, and the things of which flesh is a *logos*, but with something else [i.e. *nous*]... one discerns what it is to be flesh. (*de An.* 429b12-16)

Reason is superior to perception in that it can grasp essences. But the essence of *F*ness is on Aristotle's account a kind of *cause*: the formal cause of *F* things being *F* – what explains their being what they are, and also explains most of their qualities.

Moreover, this turns out also to be the main point underlying one of Aristotle's clearest and most frequent contrasts between perception and reason, his claim that perception cannot grasp universals (see for example *de An.* 417b23-4, *APo.* I.31). One might think this a different contrast from what we have just seen, but in fact Aristotle holds that universals *are* causes: formal causes, i.e. essences, of the type we have just seen above. Significantly, moreover, Aristotle makes clear that perception's inability to grasp universals is a deficiency precisely because in failing to grasp universals it fails to grasp causes. Perception cannot yield knowledge because it cannot grasp universals, but universals yield knowledge just insofar as they are causes:

One necessarily perceives the particular, but *epistêmê* (scientific knowledge) is knowing the universal ... [Even if we saw an eclipse] we would perceive *that* [the moon] is now eclipsed but not at all *why*; for there is no perception of universals... *The universal is valuable (timion) because it reveals the cause (aition)* (*APo.* 87b37- 88a6, emphases mine)

Perception is deficient precisely because it cannot grasp causes. Reason is valuable precisely because it can: what distinguishes it from lower forms of cognition is the ability to grasp causes, and it achieves its *telos* when it actualizes this very ability through excellent, wise contemplation.

Moreover, just as in the practical case, Aristotle's view is that reason is exercised to its fullest when it not only grasps causes but also thereby enhances its grasp of the phenomena they explain. Someone who has *nous* of the ultimate causes in a domain can use these causes as first principles in a demonstration of the phenomena in the domain, thereby coming to have *epistêmê*, scientific knowledge, of these phenomena. Perception is limited to *thats*; reason gives us an enhanced grasp of *thats* by relating them to *whys*.

This has been a very brief argument. I have not attempted anything like an overview of all Aristotle's characterizations of theoretical reason nor of its differences from perception. I have however focused on what he himself presents as reason's most valuable features and perception's most important limitations. I hope therefore to have shown that what Aristotle says about theoretical reason and about the limitations of perception provides support for the account of rationality we inferred from what he says about practical reason. What makes us rational is our

ability to grasp explanations; we reach our *telos* when we exercise this ability well, in the practical domain and in the theoretical.

V. Conclusions

A fuller picture of Aristotelian psychology yields a fuller picture of Aristotelian virtue and Aristotelian happiness. We understand the human good and human virtue when we understand the distinctively human function, and we understand this when we understand the distinctively human parts of the soul. In particular, since what makes these parts distinctively human is their rationality, we illuminate Aristotle's picture of virtue and happiness when we see what it means for each of these soul-parts to be rational.

The theoretical and practical rational parts are strictly rational because they can grasp explanations along with the phenomena that they explain. The former can grasp the eternal truths that ultimately explain why all phenomena are as they are, and the latter can grasp the goals that explain, as final causes, why we should act the way we should. The passionate part has some share in reason insofar as it can be influenced by these practical explanations: being non-rational it can have no grasp of the *because*s, but it can be influenced by reason's enhanced *thats*.

The implications for the very best life, that of theoretical contemplation, are clear and fit easily with Aristotle's explicit characterizations of that activity: we fulfill our highest function when our theoretical intellect is engaged in contemplating the highest causes, ultimately God (*Met.* I.2). The implications for the life of ethically virtuous activity are however more surprising, and reveal afresh what is by modern standards sometimes alien in Aristotle's ethics. For Aristotle's view that strict virtue and excellent ethical action require the active exercise of reason turns out to be a very demanding one.

The thought is not simply that reason is necessary for doing and feeling the right things (as on the Information view): a well-habituated passionate part of the soul is often enough for this, and even when reason does identify the right passions and actions this does not exhaust its role.

Is the idea then that reason is necessary for doing and feeling the right things *for the right reasons*? Yes and no.

We might mean "for the right reasons" in the familiar sense on which it simply rules out actions that are done for bad motives: helping a friend in order to get a reward, for instance. But this doesn't require reason on Aristotle's picture: good passions will suffice. (The naturally virtuous person does not act for ulterior motives: she helps her friend out of pity, fights injustice out of anger, and so on.) Or we might mean "for the right reasons" in what is probably the dominant sense in modern ethics, to pick out motivations that respond to ethically relevant features of a situation: "because he is in pain," "because she is my friend," even "because doing so would be fine, and failing to do so would be shameful." But here too well-habituated or naturally good passions will often suffice.²³

What our account of Aristotle's ethical psychology has shown is that Aristotelian virtue and flourishing requires acting for the right reasons in a much more demanding sense. Excellent ethical activity requires grasping the correct goal, deliberating about how to achieve it, and deciding on one's actions as means to that goal. When we act in this way we do not merely do the right things, nor do we merely do them in response to the right considerations: we do them on

²³ Well-habituated people who are not yet fully virtuous, and need the help of *logos* to become so, already love and live oriented toward the fine (*kalon*) (1179b30, 1180a10).

the basis of a full understanding of why they are to-be-done. (Note that this condition will be more or less difficult to meet depending on how general or abstract the relevant goals are. On a persuasive although contested reading of Aristotle's *Ethics*, the virtuous deliberator's explicit ultimate goal is a worked-out conception of happiness: the deliberative path from this to a specific decision will be very complex indeed. Even if we reject this picture we should note that Aristotle routinely describes virtue as aiming at the fine (*to kalon*) or at the mean; the deliberative path from such abstract goals will also be complex and difficult.)

We might well think this an excessively intellectual account of virtue and virtuous action. If someone reliably does what is right on the basis of the right considerations and with the right feelings, why refuse her full ethical praise simply because she does not have an explicit account of how her actions contribute to her goals?²⁴

But here we must remember that Aristotle's way in to questions about virtue and virtuous action is through the function argument – through questions about the fully flourishing human life. Aristotle's psychology teaches that we are essentially rational creatures – essentially, I have argued, creatures who can give and grasp explanations. Thus his ethics teaches that we are only excellent humans, and only live excellent human lives, when we exercise that ability, in the practical sphere as well as the theoretical. Virtue is what allows us to do this well. Thus the point of being virtuous and acting virtuously is not – or at least not only – to do and feel what is right. It is also, and above all, to exercise our distinctive human capacity for reason to its best and fullest.²⁵

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²⁴ For compelling arguments against this picture see Arpaly, *Unprincipled Virtue*, especially chapter 3. Note however that if I am right Aristotle's account is even more demanding than the one she argues against: the virtuous agent does not merely grasp ethically relevant considerations (like "because it is fine") as reasons, but has a worked out understanding of how her actions serve her goals.

²⁵ Many thanks to audiences at NYU, Yale, and Hopkins for comments on versions of this material; I also benefited greatly from discussion with Elena Cagnoli Fieconi and from reading her MS, "Aristotle on the Limits of Perception."