

Zeitschrift: Freiburger Zeitschrift für Philosophie und Theologie = Revue philosophique et théologique de Fribourg = Rivista filosofica e teologica di Friburgo = Review of philosophy and theology of Fribourg

Band: 61 (2014)

Heft: 2

Artikel: Aristotelian Limits

Autor: Furlan, Timothy J.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-761046>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. [Siehe Rechtliche Hinweise.](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. [Voir Informations légales.](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. [See Legal notice.](#)

Download PDF: 14.03.2025

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

TIMOTHY J. FURLAN

Aristotelian Limits

“And definiteness (*horismenon*) is part of the nature of goodness...”
(*NE* 1170a21-22)

Natural things in the Aristotelian universe have a definite size. Even the cosmos itself is not *apeiron*, unbounded and infinite in extent.¹ In the *Poetics*, for instance, Aristotle characterizes the correct length of a dramatic plot by drawing an analogy to living things: “beauty in a living thing, and anything which has parts, not only ought to have an arrangement but should possess a definite magnitude (*megethos*). For beauty lies in magnitude and order. Thus a living thing which is very small would not be very beautiful [...] nor a very large one” (1450b34-38). Not surprisingly, the same principle, which in its most basic sense covers the growth and proper size of individual members in a species (*GA* 745a5 and 771b33-37), also gives parameters to the amount of material goods needed to support the best life and also sets a limit to the size of the healthy polis. A passage from the *Politics* expresses this principle well:

Beauty (*to kalon*) is realized in number and magnitude, and the city which combines magnitude with good order must necessarily be the most beautiful. To the size of the state there is a proper measure (*metron*), as there is to other things, plants, animals, implements; for none of these retain their natural power when they are too large or too small, but they either wholly lose their nature, or are spoiled (1326a33-36).

In this paper I would like to examine Aristotle’s account of how size and beauty work to constrain the acquisition of external goods and how, at least in an analogous sense, the trained dispositions of character impose definite limits to the materials they train and give shape to. My thesis is that the concepts of *peras* and *horos* should tell us something significant about the perfection of external goods and moral virtue, since they apply to both. Moreover, they are principles that exclude by their very nature; this is most evident in the case of external goods, but it also sheds light on the familiar doctrine of the golden mean which, as I will argue, is likewise analogous to the physical concept of a limit (*peras*). I would like to begin then by examining Aristotle’s account of external goods, and in particular the function they have in the best life. With this in mind, I will then examine the principles that establishes the right amount of external goods

¹ Aristotle’s universe comprises a single cosmos of finite extent, outside of which is nothing having spatial extension, not even a void. For a good summary see HUSSEY, Edward: *Physics: Books III and IV*. Oxford: Clarendon Press 1993, pp. xxiii-xxvi.

necessary for the attainment and preservation of *eudaimonia*. In this regard, I will focus on both instrumental and intrinsic types of external goods, leaving until the third and final section the role of limits in determining the goods of ethical action.

EXTERNAL GOODS AND HUMAN FLOURISHING

For Aristotle, the best life is a kind of actuality (*energeia*) which realizes the highest state of activity over the span of an entire life, not simply on a single occasion or a brief period of time.² The goal of a human life is to demonstrate excellence over an extended period, to engage in just, courageous and contemplative acts continuously (*NE* 1100b15-17) since happiness is a kind of unimpeded activity (*NE* 1153b10-12). An interesting characteristic of human happiness, one that Aristotle never stresses in connection to the well-being of any other creature (even though he could easily do so for any animal that lives for a significant period of time), is that in addition to nothing impeding our physical, intellectual and ethical development there must be nothing blocking us from consistently participating in the activities that make up the *telos* of human life. That is to say, human well-being must be sustained and continuous (*NE* 1100b2-15).

Sustained well-being, however, is not easily achieved. Unimpeded and continuous activity requires a certain level of material support, and this in turn requires that our good fortune extend throughout the better part of our lifetime. Poor health, economic hardship, loss of friends and loved ones, disfavor with a political community or banishment from the polis – all of these may hinder or even prevent excellent activity (*NE* 1099a31-b6).

² In some ways the English word “actuality” is a better translation than “activity,” in particular since it captures the important contrast between actuality and potentiality, *energeia* and *dunamis*. But “actuality” does not work well in those contexts where Aristotle has in mind certain actions that are not instrumental in nature and hence not processes or *kinesis*, like acts of courage and justice or the special type of activity involved in philosophical contemplation. The term “actuality” has some of the proper metaphysical connotations, but the problem is that we do not usually think of a person’s actions – like courage or contemplation – to be “actualities.” Yet they are actualities in a sense, despite the awkwardness of the English phrase. A true and full act of courage implies a kind of manifestation, an actualization of a human capacity that was previously only potential; and likewise *theoria* involves the manifestation of an intellectual capacity of the soul. In this sense, both courage and contemplation may be spoken of as an *entelecheia*, a fulfillment of the human soul, a term which can be used interchangeably with *energeia* (*Meta* 1050a21-23). For a good overview see POLANSKY, Ronald: *Aristotle’s Demarcation of the Senses of Energeia in Metaphysics IX. 6*, in: *Ancient Philosophy* 3 (1983) 160–170; KOSMAN, L.A.: *Substance, Being, and Energeia*, in: *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 2 (1984) 121–149; KORSGAARD, Christine: *Aristotle and Kant on the Source of Value*, in: *Ethics* 96 (1985) 486–505; DUNNE, Joseph: *Back to the Rough Ground: Practical Judgment and the Lure of Technique*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press 1997; and ACKRILL, J.L.: *Aristotle’s Distinction between Energeia and Kinesis*, in: *Essays on Plato and Aristotle*. Oxford: Clarendon Press 2001, 142–163.

For a person to be *eudaimon* it is therefore important that he or she have a certain measure of external goods and consistent good fortune. One reason that “flourishing” is a helpful translation of *eudaimonia* is that it brings to mind the way that any organism prospers when external impediments are removed.³ Thus, even though lions and leopards are not *eudaimon* in the human sense, they do possess something analogous to it (*NE* 1141a23-28). As Aristotle notes, every animal pursues what it perceives to be its own good, even if it is not fully aware of its goodness and even if, unlike human beings, it does not attain this good through reason and deliberation (*Phys* 198b8-9 and *De An* 434b24-25). In either case, poor external conditions clearly impede a creature’s well-being. A leopard in a zoo is really only *potentially* what a leopard should be, particularly if the zoo is a confining one; set free in the wild it displays the *energeia* proper to its species.

In this regard, it is also important to note the disanalogies between animals and humans, and we should not think that human well-being is so thoroughly dependent on external circumstances that a change in luck completely ruins it. For Aristotle, luck (*tuche*) has only a limited influence on our happiness, and a virtuous person can make the best of any situation, like the good general who makes the most of the army at his command or the craftsman who makes the best out of the material available to him, displaying not the fragility, but the durability and strength of human goodness (*NE* 1101a2-5). Moreover, a virtuous state or condition (*hexis*) can only be corrupted or destroyed by the actions opposed to it, and as Aristotle makes clear, luck or misfortune alone will never cause a noble person to act contrary to virtue: “if activities are, as we said, what determines the character of life, no blessed man can become miserable; for he will *never* do the acts that are hateful and mean” (*NE* 1100b32-33).⁴ We should not fail

³ This claim is recognizably part of the *Physics*’ teleology: even though nature always works toward a goal it does not always attain its *telos* since events may impede an organism’s ability to function. The activities of art and nature, though teleological, are not necessary in their operations. Acorns grow into oak trees “for the most part” (*hos epi to polu*) but it sometimes is the case that a fire comes along and destroys a sapling. What Aristotle finds illuminating in such an example is that the “for the most part” character of the natural process opens up the way for the chance event to occur. If nature were completely of necessity, in other words, no chance event would ever take place. But because it is open to possibility, not only to deviations from the end, but also, to different ways of realizing a given end, nature, as well as art, is amenable to chance. For a good account see MILLER, Fred D./BRADIE, Michael: *Teleology and Natural Necessity in Aristotle*, in: *History of Philosophy Quarterly* (1984) 133–146; COOPER, John M.: *Aristotle on Natural Teleology*, in: *Knowledge, Nature, and the Good: Essays on Ancient Philosophy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press 2004, 107–130; JOHNSON, Monte R.: *Aristotle on Teleology*. Oxford: Clarendon Press 2005, 99–103; and BROADIE, Sarah: *Nature and Craft in Aristotelian Teleology*, in: *Aristotle and Beyond: Essays on Metaphysics and Ethics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2007, 85–100.

⁴ Terence Irwin captures this point well in his review of Nussbaum’s *Fragility of Goodness*: “Plato disagrees with Homer and the tragedians in so far as he claims that the good

to note that Aristotle is speaking here of the endurance of great misfortune, namely, the suffering of Priam, a man who has lost nearly everything, and that even in such extreme circumstances a virtuous person will make the best of the situation at hand. In some cases, the impediments will be very great, permitting only the narrowest range of actions, yet “even in these nobility shines through, when a man bears with resignation many great misfortunes, not through insensibility to pain but through nobility and greatness of soul” (*NE* 1100b30-32).

ORGANIZING GOODS

There is another sense in which external goods – that is, goods distinct from the virtues *aretai* of the soul are important. Some of the goods have intrinsic worth and are not simply instruments to make activity easier. For Aristotle, there is a rough division between those external goods that are useful instrumentally, like wealth or power, and those that are necessary to possess (*huparchein anankaion*) if we are to be happy, such as good birth and children, health, and physical beauty (*NE* 1099b1-7, b26-28).⁵ Against the last set of examples, one could perhaps object that good health or good looks often help in attaining some further goal. Although this is true, it does not vitiate the fact that such goods are worth having even when they do not bring collateral benefits. One reason I want to discuss this distinction is the apparent credence it gives to the inclusivist claim that the best life is made up of the sum total of *all* possible intrinsic goods.⁶ Thus, according to the inclusivist account the best life must in-

person is better off than anyone else; no matter what else happens to him; and Nussbaum gives no reason to suppose that Aristotle disagrees with Plato on this claim. He urges that the happy person can never become wretched (*athlios*), ‘because he will never engage in hateful and base actions’ (*NE* 1100b34-5), and he will always (*aei*, 1101b12) do what is best in the circumstances. In denying the happy person could ever become wretched, Aristotle rejects a universal assumption of the tragedians (see e.g., SOPHOCLES: *Oedipus Tyrannus* 1196–1206). In Nussbaum’s paraphrase, however, ‘always’ is abruptly and unjustifiably transformed into ‘often.’ She obscures the extent of Aristotle’s disagreement with the tragic outlook and the extent of his agreement with Plato.” See IRWIN: *Review of Nussbaum’s The Fragility of Goodness*, in: *Journal of Philosophy* (1988) 381. On the overcoming of “moral luck” see WHITE, Stephen A.: *Aristotle’s Favorite Tragedies*, in: OKSENBERG RORTY, Amelie (ed.): *Essays on Aristotle’s Poetics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press 1992, 221–241 and *Sovereign Virtue: Aristotle on the Relation between Happiness and Prosperity*. Stanford: Stanford University Press 1992, 115–118.

⁵ I call this a “rough” division since most of the non-instrumental external goods he lists can also have instrumental functions. Furthermore, one of the instrumental goods, friendship, should be a non-instrumental good if any of them are.

⁶ In this regard, J.L. Ackrill has given a good summary of the inclusivist account: “*Eudaimonia*, being absolutely final and genuinely self-sufficient, is more desirable than anything else in that it includes everything desirable in itself. It is best, and better than everything else, not in the way that bacon is better than eggs and than tomatoes (and therefore the best of the three to choose), but in the way that bacon, eggs, and tomatoes is a better breakfast

clude a certain amount of practical activity, theoretical activity and those external goods which are choiceworthy for their own sake.⁷ The latter claim has a certain amount of plausibility since most of us would still choose to have good children or physical beauty even if they brought no other rewards; as something “end-like” they ought to be part of our happiness.

The more difficult problem is one of organization, particularly the question of how various goods are prioritized or related to one another. It is difficult enough to decide how activities as distinct as political action and philosophy can be brought together in a single life, but by adding certain kinds of non-instrumental external goods to the list of intrinsic goods we make the task even more complicated. Should we pursue a family life no matter what our other aims? Is a good family life compatible with Aristotle’s ideal of contemplation or political action? The difficulty in reconciling politics and family life, is just one example of how some goods might conflict. The inclusivists often shy away from explaining how all the goods in a life are to be harmonized. Rather than affirming or denying that some principle of organization is required, they seek to establish instead a

than either bacon or eggs or tomatoes – and is indeed the best breakfast without qualification. See his article *Aristotle on Eudaimonia*, in: *Essays on Aristotle’s Ethics*, ed. Amelie Oksenberg Rorty. Berkeley: University of California Press 1980, 21.

⁷ An interesting question is whether the inclusivist reading of Aristotle presupposes some version of the liberal theory of the good. My inclination is to think there is a strong affinity between them, for if the inclusivists want to argue that the human good is a plurality of goods without hierarchy, their position bears a striking resemblance to contemporary liberal accounts. And yet if this liberal principle were presupposed or implied by the inclusivist interpretation it is easy to point out its inconsistency with other Aristotelian doctrines. Although Aristotle anticipates the notion of equality under the law, and even anticipates something like a Kantian respect for persons in his account of friendship, it would be grossly overstating the case to claim that Aristotle is neutral on questions of the good life. Not only does he claim that the good life is excellent activity (which clearly rules out a life spent pursuing wealth or pleasure), he even spells out the priority that holds among these activities: philosophy fulfills the conditions of the highest good more than any other activity. For this reason alone we should be wary of an interpretation of Aristotle which is silent about the priority and ranking of activities as inclusivism is. On the question of equality see PREUS, Anthony: *Aristotle and Respect for Persons*, in: *Aristotle’s Ethics: Essays on Ancient Greek Philosophy*, Vol. IV, ed. John P. Anton and Anthony Preus. Albany: SUNY Press 1991, 215–226. On Aristotle and liberal theories of the good see NUSSBAUM: *Aristotelian Social Democracy*, in: DOUGLASS, Bruce, R. (ed.): *Liberalism and the Good*. New York: Routledge 1990, 234–235, 238; *Nature, Function, and Capability: Aristotle on Political Distribution*, in: *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, suppl. Vol. 1 (1988) 160–194; and SANTAS, Gerasimos: *Goodness and Justice: Plato, Aristotle, and Moderns*. Oxford: Wiley 2001. For an excellent response to Nussbaum see CHARLES, David: *Perfectionism in Aristotle’s Political Theory*, in: *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* (1988) 185–206. For a skeptical treatment of whether any contemporary political theory captures Aristotle’s meaning, see WALLACH, John R.: *Contemporary Aristotelianism*, in: *Political Theory* 20 (1992) 613–641.

more basic point, namely that *eudaimonia* is not identical with any single activity.⁸ This, however, leaves the problem of organization unresolved.

Interestingly enough, Aristotle himself does not say much about how the sum total of all intrinsic goods are to be harmonized or balanced in a single life.⁹ If he really did make the same assumptions the inclusivists do, we should expect from him a detailed discussion about the potential conflict among goods, since the more goods we allow into the good life the more likely they are to conflict. And even if we do not begin with the same assumptions of inclusivism, one of the most puzzling aspects of the *Nicomachean Ethics* is its silence on the issue of conflicting goods and their organization. In the following section I will deal with a smaller version of this problem, one that Aristotle clearly does say something about, namely, what is the principle that establishes the right amount of external goods necessary for the attainment of *eudaimonia*? My belief is that we begin by understanding Aristotle's reasons for setting limits to external goods, the same principle will tell us something significant about the nature of the moral virtues themselves.

GOODS AND LIMITS

A common mistake people make is to think that happiness is measured in terms of material wealth. "Most men think," Aristotle notes in the *Politics*, "the happiness of the polis depends on its being great in size," and conse-

⁸ In this regard, Irwin has argued for a version of inclusivism based on the distinction between types and tokens: a person should possess a token of every type of good, but not necessarily every token of every good. See IRWIN: *Permanent Happiness: Solon and Aristotle*, in: *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 3 (1985) 89–124. Other good examples of the inclusivist approach include: PRICE, A.W.: *Aristotle's Ethical Holism*, in: *Mind* 89 (1980) 338–352; ROCHE, Timothy: *Ergon and Eudaimonia in Nicomachean Ethics I: Reconsidering the Intellectualist Interpretation*, in: *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 26 (1988) 175–194; NUSSBAUM: *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1986, 297–298; WHITE, Stephen: *Sovereign Virtue: Aristotle on the Relation of Happiness and Prosperity*. Stanford: Stanford University Press 1992, 13; and CRISP, Roger: *Aristotle's Inclusivism*, in: *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 12 (1994) 11–36.

⁹ On this point see MACINTYRE, Alasdair: *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press 1981, 164 and WHITE, Nicholas P.: *Individual and Conflict in Greek Ethics*. Oxford: Clarendon Press 2002, 215–244. In this regard, there has been a surge of interest in the question of moral dilemmas by contemporary moral philosophers. As MacIntyre has noted: "If one were to publish two volumes, the first containing the entire preceding philosophical literature concerning [moral dilemmas], broadly construed, from Plato to W.D. Ross [...] while the second was devoted to the publications of the last 30 years, the second volume would be by far the larger." See MACINTYRE: *Moral Dilemmas*, in: *Ethics and Politics: Selected Essays*, Vol. 2. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2006, 85–101. A good overview of contemporary work on the subject can be found in *Moral Dilemmas*, ed. Christopher W. Gowans. Oxford: Oxford University Press 1987, as well as *Moral Dilemmas and Moral Theory*, ed. H.E. Mason. Oxford: Oxford University Press 1996.

quently they favor a policy of warfare against neighboring states, the aim of which is to amass as much wealth and territory as possible (1326a9-13). But a much better way to assess the well-being of the polis is to judge it by the virtue of its citizens and the health of its internal affairs rather than its ability to conquer other cities. The problem with the Spartans is that they occupy themselves too much with warfare and too little with good government, neglecting the education of their women (*Pol* 1269b 13ff and 1324b9-10). Moreover, the same lesson applies to the way we manage our lives as individuals. Indeed Aristotle, much like Plato in the *Republic*, thinks the well-being of the individual is similar in many respects to the well-being of the polis or vice versa (*Pol* 1323b33-37 and 1324a5f). Individual members of the polis often pursue a policy of unlimited acquisition just as a hostile polis does, and the problems facing acquisitive individuals are likewise analogous to those facing a polis whose primary goal is external conquest.

Drawing an analogy to living things, we might say that excessive accumulation of goods threatens to destroy the very culture or individual which thinks (wrongly, of course) that its well-being is served by these goods.¹⁰ This is essentially what Aristotle has in mind in the passage from the *Politics* quoted earlier: the identity and existence of a polis is threatened when too much territory is acquired, just as an organism that grows too large or eats too much, “none of these retain their natural power when they are too large or too small, but they either wholly lose their nature or are spoiled” (1326a35-37). As Aristotle notes, when the polis grows so large that its population can no longer be surveyed at a glance, the bond and intimacy between its members grows weak and it no longer functions well as a cohesive whole (*Pol* 1326b22-24).¹¹

Similarly, problems occur when an individual seeks excessive wealth. Wealth, according to the classification of goods in the *Magna Moralia*, is only a potential good, one which is good only if it is used to further higher human activities (*MM* 1183b27-35). By making wealth the central concern

¹⁰ Kraut’s arguments against Henry Sidgwick are relevant here: “But Aristotle must be doing more than analyzing common usage; otherwise he could not recognize the existence of virtues for which there are no names. He is trying to show why temperance, courage, and so on deserve a prominent place in *any* human life. Excellent theoretical and practical thinking are the proper ultimate ends of human life, just as reproduction is the proper end of plants. This commits him to the view that any society that impedes the full development of this end is defective, even if the ‘Common Sense Morality,’ of that society makes rational excellence subordinate to certain other ‘virtues.’ For example, if a political community makes fierceness in battle the ultimate ‘virtue,’ Aristotle will criticize it, because excellent reasoning, not martial valor, should play that role.” See KRAUT, Richard: *Aristotle on the Human Good*. Princeton: Princeton University Press 1989, 342, n. 27.

¹¹ In particular, it is crucial that citizens have the ability to know each others’ character well enough to decide questions of justice and to distribute offices “according to merit” (*Pol* 1326b14-16). On this theme see Kraut: *Aristotle: Political Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2002, 46.

in life a person's priorities become radically distorted. On this account, material wealth ought to be sought for the sake of well-being, and potential (or instrumental) goods for the sake of activities in the full sense, not the other way around. I have singled out wealth here because it demonstrates more clearly than any other external good an important feature, namely, that it has no inherent limitations. By extending Aristotle's notions of form and proximate matter we can say that wealth is analogous to proximate matter and the role it plays in a life or a city is analogous to form.¹² As something with no inherent limitations, as something "unformed," there is never a point when so much wealth is accumulated that it loses its nature as wealth. As Aristotle notes, the desire for wealth can extend, and sometimes does, *eis apeiron*.¹³

In this regard, *apeiron* is another one of those nicely ambiguous Greek words. Partly it means unlimited in quantity, which in the present context would mean that we can continue to amass wealth infinitely in time or amount. But more importantly, it describes something that lacks a definite shape or limit, something that is literally *a-peiron*, without *peras*. In Aristotle's metaphysical framework, it is form that accounts for the definite structure any composite object has; lacking this, matter would be *apeiron*, without delimited boundaries. As Aristotle notes, the natural elements are like this, in particular fire (*De An* 416a9-18) since it can grow indefinitely without losing its nature; a glowing ember and a burning field are equally instances of fire.¹⁴ In a parallel way we can say that external goods need a principle of organization analogous to the way that matter receives a form. In this way, human life needs a *horos*, a definite standard or target to aim at (*NE* 1138b23-25).

In Plato's *Gorgias*, Callicles attempts to defend the sort of life that places no boundaries or limitations on desire, by arguing that "anyone who is to live properly should allow his appetite to grow to the greatest extent and not check them, and through courage and intelligence should be competent to minister to them at their greatest and to satisfy every appetite with what it craves" (491e). In an important way then, the Aristotelian notions of *peras* and *horos* are meant to counter the very kind of life Callicles

¹² This figure of speech seems appropriate after all since Aristotle treats matter and form as a conceptual distinction useful in explaining a variety of problems. For a helpful overview of the various senses of form and matter see IRWIN: *Aristotle's First Principles*. Clarendon: Oxford University Press 1988, 223-248.

¹³ See *Politics* 1257b32-35: "Hence it appears necessary that there be a limit to every kind of wealth. Yet what we actually see occurring is the very opposite, for all kinds of men who seek material wealth want to increase their supply of money to an unlimited degree (*eis apeiron*)."

¹⁴ In a very interesting way, Aristotle rejects the view that fire is what makes the soul grow "for fire grows on growing to infinity, as long as there is fuel to be consumed, but in natural wholes there is always a limit and proportion (*peras kai logos*) which determines growth and size" (*De An* 416a9-18).

advocates. If we really do make our central purpose the satisfaction of *epithumia* we take as our goal something that is ultimately unattainable and thus makes living futile: bodily desire is, as Socrates says, like a leaky jar, never fully sated (493b2-3). For Aristotle it is the concepts of *peras* and *horos* that keep human desire in check, and for this reason both concepts are very similar to that of a *telos*, since having a definite limit set to desire and external goods is very much like having an end or goal to aim at.

With this in mind, there are good reasons to think Aristotle's claims about the highest human good (*to ariston*) point to a concrete ideal, one which actually exists and is fully attained. This is partly evident from a passage in *Metaphysics Beta*, which notes that "those who posit an infinite goal (*to apeiron*) are inadvertently destroying the nature of the good. Indeed no one would undertake to do anything without intending to reach a definite end (*peras*); nor would there be any intelligence in the world, because the man who has intelligence always acts for the sake of something, and this is a limit, because the end is a limit" (*Meta* 994b12-18). But it is also apparent from the priority of actuality to potentiality: if the human good were never fully actualized, if it were the sort of ideal we approach asymptotically without ever reaching, then potentiality would stand higher than actuality. This is not to deny that an ideal can be approximated by degrees or that people can be more or less virtuous; clearly they can, but the point is simply that his ideal is fully attainable and, moreover, for the purposes of ethical education it helps greatly if an example of excellence already exists which can serve as a model (*NE* 1094a18-24).¹⁵

Finally, the question of how many external goods we need is not a question Aristotle is willing to answer in principle.¹⁶ He simply says we must be equipped "sufficiently" (*hikanos*) (*NE* 1101a16). But it is important to see that having a *peras*, as wealth and other external goods must have supplied to them, implies both a lower and an upper limit. The lower limit is obvious, since too few goods impede our ability to engage in excellent actions. Some virtues, such as generosity in small and large amounts (*eleutherois* and *megaloprepeia*), presuppose that someone has a certain amount of wealth to give away. Other virtues may not involve the possession of material wealth as an integral part of their practice, and yet

¹⁵ Likewise, examples of a fully realized polis may be rare, but it is still plausible to claim that one kind of political arrangement is best by nature and serves as model or goal to aim at. As Aristotle notes, even though the practice of justice varies from city to city, the best type of political constitution is by nature only one (*NE* 1135a3-6). Nature can serve as an ideal in the sense that we call the nature of a living thing its *eidōs* (*Phys* 193b2ff), and this is likewise true in the case of a political community.

¹⁶ This is explained by the limits in ethical precision which Aristotle stresses at the beginning of the *Nicomachean Ethics* 1094b12ff. For an excellent treatment of this theme see ANAGNOSTOPOULOS, Georgios: *Aristotle on the Goals and Exactness of Ethics*. Berkeley: University of California Press 1994.

indirectly they require a minimum amount of material support, depending on the nature and circumstances of each type of virtue.¹⁷ Presumably an upper limit applies whenever too many goods might distract us from the particular kind of excellent activities that are the focus of our lives. A philosopher or physicist might be distracted from the financial concerns that might come from too much wealth, and a soldier might be distracted by the obligations that come from holding a particular political office. An analogous and very interesting case here is the limit set to the number of friends one should possess. As Aristotle notes, having too many friends tends to spread our energy and attention too thinly, making true friendship more difficult or even impossible (*NE* 1109b22-24).¹⁸ This seems to be Aristotle's point in saying that good fortune, when it is excessive "actually impedes happiness, and then it is no longer rightly called good fortune, since its *horos* is set by happiness" (*NE* 1153b23-25).

EXCLUSIVE WHOLES

So far our discussion of limits (*peras*) has treated only instrumental external goods, like wealth and power, and not goods like friends, honor, and pleasure, which have intrinsic worth.¹⁹ How are these things to be organized in the best life, and how are we to decide their priority in particular situations? Aristotle often answers questions like these by pointing to the actual practitioner of a particular virtue, the one who knows how to do something, when to do it, with whom to do it, and so on (*NE* 1106b21-22 and 1107a1). Given Aristotle's belief that ethical discussions have inherent

¹⁷ Since courage for Aristotle primarily means courage on the battlefield, it requires some kind of arms, but not necessarily the most expensive horses or shields. For instance, it is not possible to fight bravely on a trireme if one is excluded, for reasons of poverty, from joining the navy. Other virtues of character, such as self-control and generosity, do not seem to require external goods, unless we count those goods which allow us to maintain our existence. They certainly do not require any specific external goods in the same sense that generosity (wealth) or greatness of soul (honor) do.

¹⁸ Moreover, at *NE* 1170b29f he raises the question of how many friends are possible or enough. Should one have many friends or is there a certain limit "just as there is for the population of a polis?" Once again, he emphasizes the role of limits and the importance of practical wisdom in determining them: "ten people would not make a polis, and with a hundred thousand it is a polis no longer; though perhaps the proper size is not one particular number but any number between certain limits."

¹⁹ Aside from Aristotle's critique of Plato's Form of the Good in *NE* I. 6, the best indication of the plurality of intrinsic goods appears at *NE* I. 7: "Honor, pleasure, intelligence (*nous*) and every kind of virtue we choose for their own sake (*di' auta*), for even if nothing resulted from them we would still desire each one of them" (1097b3-4). On Aristotle's critique of the Platonic Good see JACQUETTE, Dale: *Aristotle's Refutation of the Universal Good*, in: *Journal of Value Inquiry* 32 (1998) 301-324.

limitations in their precision (*NE* 1094b13f),²⁰ we should not expect anything more; moreover, a concrete model is often more informative than an abstract rule or formula, and as I have already suggested, a concrete and actually existing ideal is fundamental to Aristotle's ethical theory. This being so, we might follow the example of the *megalopsuchois*, the great-souled man who knows the proper worth of certain intrinsic goods such as honor (*time*).²¹ Behind Aristotle's description of *megalopsuchia*, if we ignore those features of it that are purely Greek, is an attempt to stress the importance of good judgment, and the importance of weighing the value of different goods and pursuing only the worthy ones.²² Stated in these terms, it is not much different from what Charles Taylor calls "deep" or "strong evaluation," a way of assessing the worth of different courses of action without reducing them to a common standard, like pleasure or pain, as contemporary utilitarians do. Although Taylor writes in a more liberal and democratic spirit than Aristotle, his project is sympathetic to Aristotle's description of *megalopsuchia* as the ability to "distinguish great goods from small" (*EE* 1232a31-32).

More importantly, the example of *megalopsuchos* calls into question the notion that the best life must be an inclusive or comprehensive whole. Despite the plurality of goods which Aristotle recognizes, the best life need not contain them all, or even a token sample of them all. To lead a good life often means knowing what to leave out, an ability the great-souled

²⁰ This point is implied in Aristotle's claim about ethical judgment at *NE* 1109b22-24: "For no object of perception is easy to define, and issues of this sort depend on individual circumstances, and judgment (*krisis*) rests in perception." It is easier to grasp a concrete example, and hence learning by example is often the best way to proceed. On this theme see NUSSBAUM, Martha C.: *The Discernment of Perception: An Aristotelian Conception of Private and Public Rationality*, in: *Love's Knowledge*. New York: Oxford University Press 1990, 54-106.

²¹ The best way to grasp what honor (*time*) means for Aristotle is to understand first what honor is not. First, honor is not simply associated with a social class. When we speak of a code of honor – those norms obeyed from a sense of duty rather than a fear of punishment – we often have in mind a particular class of people such as military officers, royalty, and so on. But for Aristotle honor cannot be limited to a particular class or occupation because it is granted in recognition of excellence *qua* human being: that is, those who carry out well the function (*ergon*) unique to human beings, not necessarily unique to a particular class of human beings, deserve to be honored. For this reason it is a mistake to equate honor solely with a soldier's success in warfare, even if such an equation was common to the Greek mind. Acts of courage are certainly worth honoring, Aristotle thinks, but so are acts of great generosity, self-control, and intellectual theorizing. Although otherwise an excellent account Peter Berger tends to treat honor primarily as a class concept. See BERGER: *On the Obsolescence of the Concept of Honor*, in: HAUERWAS, Stanley/MACINTYRE, Alasdair (eds.): *Revisions: Changing Perspectives in Moral Philosophy*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press 1983, 172-181.

²² For a good defense of Aristotle against those critics who think *megalopsuchia* is simply a summary of aristocratic Athenian values see HARDIE, W.F.R.: *Magnanimity in Aristotle's Ethics*, in: *Phronesis* 23 (1978) 63-79 and PAKALUK, Michael: *The Meaning of Aristotelian Magnanimity*, in: *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 26 (2004) 241-275.

man possesses.²³ Some goods he may not mind losing, such as a seat at the theater or an invitation to a banquet. The loss of other goods is however more painful, when for instance a man sacrifices his life – a good which he clearly values for its inherent goodness, more so than a person who is less than exceptional in *arête* – for the sake of a noble cause. As Aristotle notes, “the more he possesses total excellence (*ten areten pasan*) and the more happy he is, the more death will cause him pain, for to such a person life has the greatest worth (*axion*), and he knows that he stands to lose the greatest of goods, and this must be painful” (*NE* 1117b10-15). Self-sacrifice is certainly an extreme case of foregoing something intrinsically good, but it is nevertheless a good example of how the *megalopsuchois* goes without some things for the sake of a more important aim.

We can put the point differently by saying that a life might be perfect (*teleios*) and whole (*holos*), and still exclude many things. This is Aristotle’s point in contrasting “whole” and “infinite” in Book III of the *Physics*:

The infinite turns out to be the contrary of what it is said to be. It is not what has nothing outside it that is infinite, but what always has something outside it. Something is *apeiron* if, taken quantity by quantity, we can always take something outside. On the other hand, what has nothing outside is perfect (*teleion*) and whole (*holon*) (*Phys* 207a7-9).

In other words, an object is whole which lacks nothing, not because it contains everything but because it possesses whatever is *essential* to the kind of thing it is. To further illustrate this distinction, Aristotle gives a number of examples:

We can define the whole as that from which nothing is missing (*hou meden apestin*), as a whole man or a whole box. Whole and perfect are either quite identical or closely akin in nature. Nothing is perfect which has no *telos* and its *telos* is a *peras* (*Phys* 207a10-15).

²³ If an agent opts for a course of action based on its inherent worth (rather than its consequences) and its centrality to a conception of a self, he counts as a “strong evaluator.” As Taylor notes, “what is missing in the case of weak evaluation is a qualitative evaluation of my desires; the kind of thing we have, for instance, when I refrain from action on a given motive, say, spite or envy, because I consider it base or unworthy. In this kind of case, i.e., strong evaluation, our desires are classified in such categories as higher or lower, virtuous or vicious, more and less fulfilling, more and less refined, profound and superficial, noble and base. They are judged as belonging to qualitatively different modes of life: fragmented or integrated, alienated or free, saintly or merely human, courageous or pusillanimous and so on” (16). In this regard, Taylor’s claim that courses of action be judged by their nobility, rather than their tendency to promote pleasure, is fundamentally Aristotelian. Notice, furthermore, that noble and base acts are not commensurable in the way eating desert or dinner can be made commensurate, that is, in terms of the pleasure they bring. On this account, a strong evaluator chooses without taking recourse to some kind of quantitative standard. See TAYLOR, Charles: *What is Human Agency*, in: *Philosophical Papers: Human Agency and Language*, vol. 1. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1985, 15–45.

Analogously, we can extend this claim to include the ordering of goods in the best life. Some elements of a particular way of life are much more essential to it than others, and so if the non-essential parts are eliminated no real loss should be felt. As Aristotle notes in *Metaphysics*, the absence of just *any* part does not destroy the whole, as baldness is not a mutilation of the whole man (1024a25-28).²⁴ On this account, then, a life is “perfect” (*teleion*) and “whole” (*holon*), then, not when it possesses *every* intrinsic or instrumental good, but when it displays or manifests the highest kind of human *energeia*, philosophical activity (*NE* 1177b27-28).²⁵ The most perfect life may require that we leave something out, and not simply on the contingent grounds that other activities may conflict with philosophical contemplation. If it is true that *theoria* is incommensurably better than other activities, we ought to engage in it as much as possible. This seems to be Aristotle’s point in saying that non-contemplative activities are second-best because we seek them only *qua* the needs of a human being (*he anthropos*); first and foremost are the activities that reflect what is most divine in us (*he theion ti en auto*), our intellect (*NE* 1177b27-28). If so, his ideal way of life is the opposite of a broadly and diversely constituted one.

There is, of course, a sense in which Aristotle admires a well-balanced life. Even though he says very little about the importance of well-roundedness, he certainly thinks the best life has balance and harmony among its interests. One of the functions of *phronesis* for Aristotle is to keep the different virtues from conflicting and, more generally, to bring about the well-being of a life as a whole. As Aristotle notes: “it appears to be characteristic of the practically wise person that he is able to deliberate well about what is good and advantageous to himself, not in one part only [...] but in terms of what furthers the good life in general” (*to eu zen hoios*) (*NE* 1140a25). Since even the philosophical life must contain other goods – it must possess the ethical virtues, particularly self-control, it brings a unique type of pleasure, and it requires a modicum of external goods – the practically wise person must know how to organize these goods into a single coherent whole. Moreover, it is important to note that even the best

²⁴ See CLARKE, Stephen R.L.: *Aristotle’s Man: Speculations upon Aristotelian Anthropology*. Oxford: Clarendon Press 1983, 155.

²⁵ One thing Aristotle does not appear to be saying, however, is that contemplation is the best element of the best total life for a man. This is the position, for example, of GAUTHIER, Rene/JOLIF, Jean: *L’Ethique a Nicomaque: Introduction, Traduction et Commentaire*. 2nd ed., vol. II. Paris: Beatrice-Nauwelaerts 1970, 862 and COOPER, John M.: *Contemplation and Happiness: A Reconsideration* in: *Reason and Emotion*, 212–237. It also seems to be Nussbaum’s position in that she calls *theoria* the “brightest jewel” in the crown of happiness (*FG* 374). But as Kraut indicates (*AHG* 43-44 n. 26) “Aristotle can believe that contemplation is the ultimate end (not just the best component of the ultimate end) without regarding ethical activity as a mere means to this end. He can say that moral activity is good in itself, and more significantly, that it comes close to fulfilling the conditions demanded of an ultimate end.”

life orders and organizes the goods it contains, it is a mistake to think everything receives its goodness solely from the role it plays in this life. For instance, a scholar may value the virtue of self-control but this is not to deny that acts of self-control have their own nobility and value regardless of any other benefit. As Aristotle notes, each of the virtues share in common the aim of the beautiful or noble (*to kalon*) rather than the merely beneficial (*to sumpheron*) (*NE* 1122b7-8). Moreover, any particular way of life will contain elements that contribute nothing at all to its focal good: a scholar may enjoy a Bach fugue, not because it contributes to his or her research, but simply because he or she enjoys beautiful music. This follows from the fact that Aristotle never appeals to an all-encompassing teleological principle in explaining an organism's behavior or morphology. As a result, we should expect limits to how far any activity – even the most perfect activity – explains the events and choices in a person's life.

It is important to note, however, that the harmony of interests in a virtuous life does not entail its breadth in scope. Since “whole” does not necessarily mean “comprehensive,” a good Aristotelian life can focus on a primary set of interests. And moreover, even if a good life does contain several things we recognize as valuable, the possession of them does not explain why such a life is the best for Aristotle. There is a significant difference between saying that 1) the best life is best because it possesses the sum total of *all* possible goods, values, and activities that have intrinsic worth, including *theoria*; and 2) the best life includes a number of different goods and activities, but it is best because it possesses and displays the highest kind of human activity, *theoria*. This is the difference between locating the goodness of life in its diversity, as inclusivism claims; or in the goodness of its best part, *nous*, without at the same time denying that it may contain other goods and activities. Significantly, the second possibility not only makes room for ethical virtue and external goods, but actually *requires* them. Nevertheless, it is not good because it includes these things, but rather because it attains the highest possible *telos* for human beings by satisfying all of the conditions Aristotle lists in *NE* X, and because the objects of contemplation are (according to Aristotle) the most exalted things in the universe (*NE* 1141a21-29 and *Meta* 982b1-10).²⁶ In an interesting way, an analogous principle holds true in the case of friendship: what Aristotle calls perfect friendship (*teleia philia*), is perfect not because it also brings pleasure and other benefits, even though it is certainly true that friendship is also pleasurable and can be advantageous on occasion. Friendship is perfect when both of the two parties are morally virtuous and both are well

acquainted with the virtue of the other; the pleasure or advantageousness of the relationship is truly secondary (*NE* 1156b7-32).²⁷

ETHICAL VIRTUES AND LIMITS

In the final part of the paper, I would like to turn to the virtues of character in order to round out our discussion of limits. In particular, I want to argue that Aristotle's notion of a *peras* not only plays a role in what amount of external goods the best life possesses but also the very nature of the moral virtues. We see this particularly in his well-known account of the golden mean and the claim that virtue occupies a definite place along a continuum, the latter of which is foreshadowed in the *Philebus*, where Plato uses the notion of *peras* and *apeiron* in a discussion of pleasure.²⁸ In this regard, Aristotle seems to be developing and applying Plato's insights (who in turn borrowed and developed the notion from the Pythagoreans) to each of the moral virtues.²⁹

The notions of boundedness and boundlessness are, once again, meant as analogical extensions of the relationship of form to proximate matter. The material of a virtue is usually a feeling or desire which occurs naturally and which mimics the fully developed virtue, but which must be habituated to harmonize with reason in order to be considered a virtue in the full and proper sense. For example, righteous indignation (*nemesis*) is a primitive and unformed version of justice; spiritedness (*thumos*) is a raw version of courage (*EE* 1234a24-37) and so on. With the proper ethical training and practical wisdom these basic human emotions are transformed into virtues in the complete sense (*kuria arête*) (*NE* 1144b16-17). Unlike external goods, however, the virtues and their material are qualities of the soul, and therefore they are not strictly visible. Even though the deeds (*erga*) that result

²⁷ In this regard, there is a rich body of literature on Aristotle's account of friendship. Some of the better studies include: ANNAS, Julia: *Plato and Aristotle on Friendship and Altruism*, in: *Mind* 86 (1977) 532-554, and *The Morality of Happiness*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 1993, 249-262; COOPER, John M.: *Aristotle on the Forms of Friendship*, in: *Reason and Emotion: Essays on Ancient and Moral Psychology and Ethical Theory*. Princeton: Princeton University Press 1999, 312-336; PAKALUK, Michael: *Friendship*, in: ANAGNOSTOPOULOS, Georgios (ed.): *The Blackwell Companion to Aristotle*. Oxford: Blackwell Press 2009, 471-483; PRICE, A.W.: *Love and Friendship in Plato and Aristotle*. Oxford: Clarendon Press 1989; and SOKOLOWSKI, Robert: *Friendship and Moral Action in Aristotle*, in: *Journal of Value Inquiry* 35 (2001) 355-369.

²⁸ See PLATO: *Philebus*, 23c-25a: "Your attention now, please. The matter which I request you to attend to is difficult and controversial, but I request you nonetheless. Take 'hotter' and 'colder' to begin with, and ask yourself whether you can ever observe any sort of limit attaching to them, or whether these kinds of things have 'more' or 'less' actually resident in them, so that for the period of that residence there can be no question of suffering any bounds to be set. Set a term, and it means the term of their own existence."

²⁹ On this theme see DILLON, John M.: *The Heirs of Plato: A Study of the Old Academy* (347-274 B.C.). Oxford: Oxford University Press 2003, 18.

from these virtues are fully visible, the qualities of character supporting them are not. Aristotle is fully aware of the problem, and in order to define ethical virtue he employs a visible illustration to explain the nonvisible qualities of the soul: “it is necessary to use the evidence of apparent things (*tois phanerois marturiois*) on behalf of those things that are not apparent (*NE* 1104a13-14).³⁰

As we see here, the illustration he uses is a continuum, which even though it applies more naturally to visible and physical phenomena, can also describe a virtue of character. A continuum applies to anything that possesses a more and a less, a greater and a smaller, in the way that temperature and musical pitch do.³¹ The emotions that constitute ethical virtue fit along a continuum since we can be more or less angry, more or less fearful, and so on. Just as significantly, to say that something is continuous means that it is *apeiron*, without inherent boundaries. The difficulty lies in understanding what *apeiron* means in this context. When applied to the material of ethical virtue, “infinite” does not really work as a translation since the emotions are not normally thought to extend to infinite extremes, unless we are speaking metaphorically about someone’s anger being “infinite” or his desire for pleasure being “bottomless.” In this context it is better to render *apeiron* as “indefinite,” which is closer to its root sense of something lacking inherent limitations. On this account, human emotions are indefinite in their natural condition; unshaped and uninfluenced by habituation, our natural capacity to feel anger or fear or pleasure is likely to fall anywhere along a continuum.

It is no surprise, then, to see Aristotle repeat the Pythagorean claim that badness is *apeiron* while goodness belongs to what is limited:

Moreover, there are many ways to be in error – for badness is proper to the indeterminate, as the Pythagoreans pictured it, and good to the determinate (*peperasmemon*). But there is only one way to be correct. That is why error is easy and correctness is difficult, since it is easy to miss the target and difficult to hit it. And so for this reason also excess and deficiency are proper to vice, the mean to virtue; ‘for we are noble in only one way, but bad in all sorts of ways.’ (*NE* 1106b29-35)

As we see here, moral virtue sets a limit or boundary, a *peras*, to the right amount of action and emotion. This is yet another example of how the beautiful or noble (*to kalon*) resides in the definite amount of something,

³⁰ Consider also *Politics* 1254b37-39: “But the beauty of the soul is not as easy to see the beauty of the body.” In the present passage Aristotle probably has in mind a saying of ANAXAGORAS: “Visible things are a sight of the unseen” (*DK* 59 B21a/J. M. Robinson trans.)

³¹ For a good discussion of the origins of Aristotle’s account of the mean and its relation to the *Philebus* and the *Statesman* see ANGIER, Tom: *Techne in Aristotle’s Ethics: Crafting the Moral Life*. London: Continuum Press 2010, 83–105. On the notion of the *apeiron* in Plato see MCCABE, Mary Margaret: *Plato’s Individuals*. Princeton: Princeton University Press 1994, 245–256.

as it does in the mean state (*mesotes*) of virtue. In this way, Aristotle speaks of the mean state as something that maintains or “preserves” (*sozei*) (*NE* 1104a16-17, a25-27), a claim which brings to mind the way that a proper balance of elements maintains the health or physical well-being of an animal; for instance, a balance in the right amount of heat or nourishment, which would otherwise occur in indefinite quantities.³² In this way the mean-state of ethical virtue develops and ultimately brings to completion (*apotelein*) the dispositions and capacities that allow us to perform our highest and most characteristic function or activity (*NE* 1098a15-16, 1144a7-8).

DISTINCTLY HUMAN VIRTUE

We now have a better sense of the claim that human perfection lies in a limit, a mean-state between excess and deficiency. This claim, although accurate, is not the whole story and we should add three further observations. First, if we examine each of Aristotle’s ethical virtues separately – courage, self-control, generosity, justice, and so forth – we notice that the specific characteristics of each virtue often obscure the general traits every virtue is supposed to share. Each individual virtue has features which do not always fit neatly into the Procrustean bed of deficiency-mean-excess. A good example here is the virtue of courage which is an anomalous not simply because it involves two different types of emotions, confidence and fear, while most other virtues involve only one, but also because courageous acts are sometimes painful (*NE* 1117b7-18). In contrast, the general indication of a virtuous character is that the agent takes pleasure in the virtuous act (1104b4-7). The notion of ethical virtue per se is therefore an abstraction. It often makes more sense to speak of virtue in the plural, not only because each of the ethical virtues has its own aim but also because there is a set of virtues appropriate to philosophers, musicians, soldiers, and so on.³³ As Aristotle notes in the *Politics*, “it is misleading to give a general definition of virtue, as some do, who say that virtue is being in a good condition as regards the soul or acting uprightly or something of the sort” (1260a25-27). For this reason any attempt to locate the most general features of ethical virtue, for instance, that it lies in a mean-state of feeling and action, creates the same difficulty facing the attempt to define the

³² “First, then, we should observe that these sorts of states naturally tend to be ruined by excess and deficiency. We see this happen with strength and health – for we must use evident cases [such as these] as witnesses to things that are not evident. For both excessive and deficient exercise ruin bodily strength, and similarly, too much or too little eating or drinking ruins health, whereas the proportionate amount produces, increases, and preserves (*sozei*) it.” See ARISTOTLE: *NE* 1104a15-17.

³³ Moreover, he regards human virtues as only one instance of virtue generally, since things such as horses and eyes also have virtues (*NE* 1106a17-21).

general nature of the soul (*psuche*).³⁴ In the case of ethical virtue this is due largely to the fact that each virtue concerns a different kind of human good, and we will consider some examples in a moment.

Secondly, and more importantly for our purposes here, we should not forget that *arête* takes two forms – ethical and intellectual – and that what accounts for the goodness of an ethical virtue is not what accounts for the goodness of an intellectual virtue, like *sophia* and its active employment in *theoria*. As is well known, Aristotle explicitly draws a contrast between the truth-attaining activity of science (*episteme*) and the truth attaining activity of practical wisdom (*phronesis*). For Aristotle, practical wisdom is essentially distinct from and irreducible to *episteme* because it deliberates about a subject, namely, human action, which admits of variation. In contrast, *episteme* concerns itself with the universal and the necessary, and therefore its subject matter cannot possibly be deliberated about as deliberation always concerns that which is in the sphere of choice. Practical wisdom thus consists in excellence in deliberation “and the man who is without qualification good at deliberating is the man who is capable of aiming in accordance with calculation at the best for man of things attainable by action” (*NE* 1141b12-15).³⁵

³⁴ Even though the three types of soul can be ranked in order from lower to higher – nutritive, sensitive, rational – Aristotle is careful to note the distinctness of each from the others. There is a definition (*logos*) common to every kind of soul, as a first actuality of a body having organs. But a general definition of that sort only takes us so far. As Aristotle notes, “it is evident that a single definition can be given of soul only in the same sense as one can be given of a figure (*schema*). For as in that case there is no figure apart from triangle and those that follow in order, so here there is no soul apart from the forms of soul just enumerated” (*De An* 414b20-27). In short, there is no soul *as such* just as there is no figure *as such*: there are only triangles, squares, and so on. Just as importantly, each of these specific types of soul has a purpose which is not reducible to the purposes of a higher or lower form of soul, despite the fact that the lower forms are subsumed in the higher. The nutritive soul is concerned with matters of nourishment and reproduction, the sensitive soul with desire, pleasure, and perception generally, the thinking (*dianoetike*) soul with matters of reason. This is not to deny that their functions are coordinated in those organisms that possess two of them – nutritive or sensitive, in the case of animals, or all three, in the case of human beings – and that when the whole soul is functioning properly, its parts are distinct only in theory (cf. *NE* 1102a30-33). The point is that each represents a potentially autonomous principle of vitality (*zen*), an autonomy we can understand in two ways: 1) we can define the active state (*energeia*) of each type of soul without invoking the activity of any other. And in a related sense we should note how each can pursue an intrinsically worthwhile end. As Aristotle notes, mere life itself is choiceworthy (*NE* 1166a17-20 and 1170b26f), although not under every condition; seeing or perceiving can be its own end (*Meta* 980a26 and 1048b23-24), even though it usually serves the purpose of an animal’s survival; the activity of the intellect is the most leisured since it seeks no end beyond itself; 2) It is possible for two of the three types of soul to exist in isolation from the others, as the nutritive does in plants and as the intellectual part (*nous*) is said to be separate (*choristos*) from the rest of the soul (*De An* 430a22-23).

³⁵ Aristotle’s shift towards a distinctly practical form of rationality represents one of the most significant differences between his own approach and that of Plato’s. Most impor-

Moreover, practical wisdom is not, as Aristotle states at *NE* 1141b15, a knowledge of universals alone (*oud estin he phronesis ton katholou monon*); it must also account for particulars (*ta kath' hekasta*) which cannot be subsumed under any system of universal principles (*episteme*). General rules are criticized for their lack of concreteness and flexibility earlier on in *NE* II as well. For instance, at the beginning of Chapter 7, Aristotle argues that “among statements (*logoi*) about conduct, those that are universal (*katholou*) are more general (*koinoterai*), but the particular are more true – for action is concerned with particulars, and statements must harmonize with these” (1107a29-32). Thus, any statement intended to cover a wide range of instances is without doubt going to be of limited value in one’s deliberation. It will simply lack the flexibility required for it to correspond to the concrete circumstances we encounter in our daily lives. This requirement of flexibility is captured by Aristotle in a vivid metaphor at *NE* V. 10:

This is the reason why not everything is guided by law. For on some matters legislation is impossible, and so a decree is needed. For the standard applied to the indefinite is also indefinite, as the lead standard is in Lesbian building, where it is not fixed, but adapts itself to the shape of the stones; similarly, a decree is adapted to fits its objects (1137b29-34).

As we see here, Aristotle argues that there is a natural limit to which the effectiveness of law can extend. In other words, there will always be some cases in which the circumstances will be intractable to general rules and definitions and special ordinance will become necessary. Just as the good architect will, like the builders at Lesbos, measure with a flexible strip of metal the intricate curves of a column, so a good legislator will declare a special ordinance to fit the unique circumstances of a given situation (1137b30-32). Experience is therefore of paramount importance in acquiring

tantly, Aristotle finds it necessary to draw a sharp distinction between theoretical knowledge of principles, on the one hand, and knowledge concerned with deliberation, on the other. Plato, by contrast, understands theoretical knowledge of principles (e.g., knowledge of the Forms) as the very same knowledge required for deliberating well. For Plato, there is only one form of wisdom, which comprehends both sorts of knowledge. Aristotle, on the other hand, analyses wisdom into two distinct forms. Whereas theoretical wisdom is a science (*episteme*) involving a systematic grasp of theoretical principles, he denies the same status to practical wisdom (*phronesis*). Instead, he repeatedly emphasizes that it consists of, among other things, certain capacities for judgment, perception, and sensitivity to particular circumstances about which one cannot have systematic knowledge. He also stresses that it is acquired not through the theoretical study of geometrical proportions or of musical harmonies, as Plato seems to hold in the *Republic*, but through experience, habituation, and training. By drawing this distinction, Aristotle both opens up space for an *independent* treatment of practical rationality and the capacities necessary for its excellent functioning, both of which, from Plato’s point of view, are part of a broader account of theoretical knowledge. For a rich discussion of the relation between Plato and Aristotle see MACINTYRE: *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press 1988, 89–103.

practical wisdom. Only in experience is one able to attain the knowledge of particulars one will need in assessing situations and formulating the principles appropriate to the moral life (1142a11). Aristotle's arguments in the opening chapters of *NE VI* suggest that it is very difficult to acquire the virtue of practical thinking. To do so, one must both understand and desire the good life, and this can come about only over time, through much learning, discipline, and experience. Universals in disciplines such as mathematics, however, are more easily acquired, as little experience is needed in order to grasp them, and for this reason the young are better able to achieve excellence in mathematics than in practical wisdom (1142a12-16; 1142a25-b14).

Finally, intellectual virtues, as Aristotle notes, do not involve mean-states (*NE* 1106b16), at least not in the same sense that ethical virtues do. Ethical virtue in the full sense (*kuria arête*), requires that our innate ability to feel anger, indignation, and so on, is brought into conformity with reason (*kata logon*).³⁶ But there is no corresponding sense in which *sophia* or *theoria* is the middle-state between two extremes. The ability to contemplate may require that we discipline our desire for sensual pleasure, but that is not strictly the function of *theoria* but rather *sophrosune*, an ethical virtue. It is significant to note as well that the difference between *theoria* and the ethical virtues reflects a distinction Aristotle draws in Book X of the *Nicomachean Ethics* between what is divine in us and what is strictly human. Our possession of intellect, *nous*, is a divine trait, while all of the ethical virtues are distinctly human (1178a9f). Behind this dichotomy is the broad (and perhaps overstated) claim that every ethical virtue is bound up with bodily emotion (*sunokeiosthai tois pathesi*) (1178a16). We might wonder, for instance, how *megalopsuchia*, which concerns honor (and not bodily pleasure), and liberality, which deals with gifts and property (and not bodily pleasure), also fit this description. Nevertheless, not much hangs on the difficulty since we can still think that every ethical virtue concerns some kind of human desire, even if we do not think that every virtue arises from some bodily passion or the need to discipline some passion. Greatness of soul and liberality, although they do not deal directly with a bodily need, require that we have a balanced desire for honor and to share our wealth with others.

³⁶ Without any socialization human emotions still possess a direction and tendency of their very own; we are said to be moved (*kineisthai*) by them, for instance (*NE* 1106a4-6); they provide a kind of motivating force (*horme*). These emotions (*pathe*) are not psychological "drives" in the modern sense since they lack consistency and permanence if unrefined by moral education; but they influence our behavior nevertheless. For Aristotle, rational choice (*proairesis*) is what gives them a definite and consistent direction by working them into the larger goals of a life. Traces of the original emotion still remain, but they are now part of a habituated way of feeling and acting. They are no longer merely natural once they become part of a stable disposition of choice, and this, in short, is what the ethical perfection of nature entails.

THE INTRINSIC VALUE OF THE VIRTUES

And yet we might grant the uniquely human quality of ethical virtue, but raise the following sort of objection. For both humans and gods the highest activity is *theoria*, but unlike a god (that is, Aristotle's unmoved mover), a human being must learn how to contemplate and must acquire the right kind of ethical habits and dispositions that make contemplation easier. If so, the argument might lead us to think that the ethical virtues are valued solely for their contribution to the theoretical life. This implies a very strong form of intellectualism,³⁷ and gives credence to the claim that one single or highest Good determines the goodness of all others.

Against this tendency we should note the independent value and worth of each ethical virtue.³⁸ Every virtue deals with a distinct kind of good which, when possessed in the right amount, is valued for its own sake, and which no truly human life lacks. Some examples should bear this out. The virtue of being even tempered (*praotes*), allows us to feel the right amount of anger at the right time towards the right individual(s). The ability to regulate our anger has of course significant social benefits, allowing us to live peacefully with other people (among other things), but this is not the only reason Aristotle praises the even-tempered man. He seems to think that being balanced in temper is choiceworthy by itself since it has its own inherent nobility and worth, just as any other virtue does (*NE* 1122b7). The social benefits of this virtue are not its sole attraction, for otherwise Aristotle would have less reason to criticize those who are deficient in feeling anger. As Aristotle notes, the man who expresses no anger is *elithios*, foolish or silly (1126a5-6), not because he is socially unproductive or useless for certain kinds of tasks (although he may be), but because he is not a good example of a human being.

Likewise, the reason we cultivate temperance or self-control (*sophrosune*), is not simply for its external rewards, its benefits to an athlete or philosopher, but because self-controlled acts are valued for their own sake.³⁹ For Aristotle the exercise of virtuous activity is its own reward,

³⁷ For a good example see KRAUT: *Aristotle on the Human Good*, 178–182, 194–196 and Trond Berg ERIKSEN in: *Bios Theoretikos: Notes on Aristotle's Ethica Nicomachea*, X 6–8. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget 1976, 131–147.

³⁸ On this point see COOPER, John M.: *Reason and the Human Good in Aristotle*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company 1986, 110.

³⁹ Despite his otherwise rich appropriation of Aristotle, MacIntyre seems to get this point wrong. See in particular *After Virtue*, 184: "We need to remember however that although Aristotle treats the acquisition and exercise of the virtues as means to an end, the relationship of means to end is internal and not external." This is misleading, however, since virtuous actions for Aristotle are not necessarily distinct from the end they are supposed to bring about, namely, *eudaimonia*. They constitute *eudaimonia*, at least a secondary kind of *eudaimonia*. In a curious way MacIntyre sees a much sharper distinction between virtue and the end of virtue than Aristotle does: "A virtue is an acquired human quality the possession

since “good action (*eupraxia*) is its own end” (*NE* 1140b5). Moreover, Aristotle’s treatment of *sophrosune* is illuminating because it suggests that some qualities, if they were missing in our lives, would make us less than human.⁴⁰ As Aristotle notes, “if someone exists who finds nothing pleasant or sees no difference between the pleasure of one thing or another, such a person would hardly be human” (*NE* 1119a6-11). The self-controlled man is no ascetic, and Aristotle forcefully criticizes the man who denies himself every pleasure. This is not to suggest that pleasure is always a good thing or to ignore the importance of seeking pleasure in the right amounts, with the right people, and so forth as practical wisdom dictates. Instead the point is that pleasure is an essential part of human life, and for this reason we seek to cultivate the virtue of character which handles it best.⁴¹ If it were an intrinsically bad thing it would not belong in Aristotle’s list of virtues; it would belong in the same category as maliciousness, adultery, theft and murder, which Aristotle says are “bad by themselves” (*to auta phaula*) because no question arises whether we can pursue adultery, theft, or murder too much or too little (*NE* 1107a9f).

One final point about the ethical virtues and their distinctive human qualities. Even on those occasions when Aristotle makes the case, and perhaps overstates it, that the ethical virtues are bound up with the interests of the body, it is important to appreciate that a disparagement of the body or material things does not follow necessarily as a result. In matters of ethical virtue (leaving aside the issue of *theoria*) Aristotle does not agree with the claims Socrates makes in the *Phaedo*, namely that the body is a hindrance or obstacle to a purer kind of existence and that while we are alive we ought to “practice dying” by steering clear of its distractions.⁴² Even in *NE* X, which praises intellectual activities as highly as Socrates does, Aristotle also reminds us that the virtues dealing with the composite of body and soul bring a definite kind of happiness – not the highest happiness but a kind of happiness all the same (1178a9). There is no

and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which effectively prevents us from achieving any such goods” (191). Here MacIntyre suggests that the goal of virtuous activity is different from (even if integrally related to) the activity itself. This sounds somewhat implausible since Aristotle explicitly claims that all virtuous actions are noble in themselves regardless of whatever further goals they achieve (Cf. *NE* 1140b5). For an excellent overview of MacIntyre’s distinct version of Aristotelianism see D’ANDREA, Thomas: *Tradition, Rationality, and Virtue: The Thought of Alasdair MacIntyre*. London: Ashgate 2006 225–289 and KNIGHT, Kelvin: *Aristotelian Philosophy: Ethics and Politics from Aristotle to MacIntyre*. Cambridge: Polity Press 2007, 124–144.

⁴⁰ For a good treatment of this theme see NUSSBAUM: *Fragility of Goodness*, 291–297. On the virtue of *sophrosune* see MacIntyre’s fascinating essay: *Sophrosune: How a Virtue Can Become Socially Disruptive*, in: *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 13 (1988) 1–11.

⁴¹ On this point see ANNAS, Julia: *Aristotle on Pleasure and Goodness*, in: *Essays on Aristotle’s Ethics*. Berkeley: University of California Press 1980, 285–298.

⁴² For a rich discussion of this theme see NEHAMAS, Alexander: *The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault*. Berkeley: University of California Press 1998, 159–167.

Socratic abnegation of life on the part of the person who truly possesses the ethical virtues, if abnegation here means a disinterest or disdain for the concerns and needs of the body. This in turn follows from Aristotle's deep appreciation for the natural world and the strong desire on the part of all living things to continue living, either as individuals or as members of a species.⁴³ The fact that human beings are natural living things makes them no different in this regard, for "life itself has a certain amount of natural sweetness and goodness" (*Pol* 1278b30).⁴⁴

Abstract

In this paper I examine Aristotle's account of how size and beauty work to constrain the acquisition of external goods and how, at least in an analogous sense, the trained dispositions of character impose definite limits to the materials they train and give shape to. My thesis is that the concepts of peras and horos should tell us something significant about the perfection of external goods and moral virtue, since they apply to both. Moreover, they are principles that exclude by their very nature; this is most evident in the case of external goods, but it also sheds light on the familiar doctrine of the golden mean which, as I will argue, is likewise analogous to the physical concept of a limit (peras). I would like to begin then by examining Aristotle's account of external goods, and in particular the function they have in the best life. With this in mind, I will then examine the principles that establish the right amount of external goods necessary for the attainment and preservation of eudaimonia. In this regard, I will focus on both instrumental and intrinsic types of external goods, leaving until the third and final section the role of limits in determining the goods of ethical action.

⁴³ This theme is beautifully illustrated in Aristotle's brief vignette about Heraclitus from the *Parts of Animals*: "Every realm of nature is marvelous: and as Heraclitus, when the strangers who came to visit him found him warming himself at the furnace in the kitchen and hesitated to go in, is reported to have bidden them not to be afraid to enter, as even in that kitchen divinities were present, so we should venture on the study of every kind of animal without distaste; for each and all will reveal to us something natural and something beautiful" (*PA* 645a4-23).

⁴⁴ The value of our own lives is, however, not absolute, as Aristotle's discussion of courage in the *Nicomachean Ethics* shows. There are some instances where noble action requires the sacrifice of life (*NE* 1117b7-15). Still, Aristotle thinks that this is a great sacrifice. We would prefer to be noble and continue living, but as he notes in his treatment of involuntary and "mixed" action in *NE* III, some circumstances may require us to choose between the two.