Aristotle's Right Reason

Alfonso Gómez-Lobo

The purpose of the present paper is to offer an interpretation of Aristotle's conception of the role of reason in moral virtue. The right reason, I shall hold, is a particular practical proposition which identifies the intermediate to be chosen in the given circumstances.

I shall argue for my interpretation in three steps. First, I briefly examine the Nicomachean definition of moral virtue and some interpretations offered for the *logos* within that context. I then turn to the opening section of Book VI of the *EN*, a passage which refers back to the definition and points to the need to specify the role of (right) reason in moral choice. Finally, I try to show how the previously obtained results are buttressed by Aristotle's conception of prudence, good choice and liberality.

I

The Revised Oxford Translation renders Aristotle's Nicomachean definition of moral excellence as follows:

> Excellence, then, is a state concerned with choice, lying in a mean relative to us, this being determined by reason and in the way in which the man of practical wisdom would determine it.[1]

1 Barnes (1984) *ROT*, II, 1748. Barnes prints the Ross translation of the *EN* as revised by J.O. Urmson and subsequently revised by himself. In correspondence Barnes has indicated to me that he is responsible for the new wording of 1106b36ff. The unmodified Ross translation is readily accessible in McKeon (1941 and numerous reprints). In this paper I do not deal with the definition of moral excellence in the

This rendering breaks at two points with a widely shared tradition best represented by the translation from which it departs. (1) Ross, who favors the term 'virtue' for ἀρετή, had rendered ὡρισμένη λόγῳ as 'determined by a rational principle' thus suggesting that there is some kind of rule, plan or principle involved. (2) Ross had accepted Bywater's emendation of ὡς to ᾧ in the OCT edition of 1894, an emendation derived from Aspasius. Ross accordingly translated the relative cause as 'and by that principle by which'. According to this translation, the definition states that the *logos* or principle employed to determine the mean is the same as the one the prudent man would use.

The new *ROT* translation by substituting 'reason' for *logos* leaves the interpretation underdetermined, and, by retaining the modal ὡς which represents the *consensus codicum*, allows for a looser connection between the instrument to determine the mean and the reference to the man of practical wisdom. Both decisions are, I believe, commendable. If we can make sense of a manuscript reading as it stands, it should certainly be preferred, and a rendering of *logos* which allows the reader to decide among the different senses of this word is often preferable to a translation which offers narrower options.

Before turning to the interpretation of *logos* within the definition a minor anomaly should be noted. In the phrase 'this being determined by reason' it is unclear what the pronoun 'this' refers to. If we take the reading of the manuscripts (ὡρισμένη) it would be the state (*hexis*) that is thus determined. If, alternatively, we read the dative ὡρισμένῃ with the putative manuscript of William of Moerbecke and with the commentators Aspasius and Alexander, it is rather the middle state (*mesotēs*) that is delimited by reason. Both alternatives are unsatisfactory because Aristotle's explanations in the remainder of the chapter show rather clearly that the *mesotēs* character of the *hexis* and, hence, the *hexis* itself, are a consequence of the habitual choice of the *meson*. 'Excellence is a kind of mean (*mesotēs*), since it aims at what is intermediate (*meson*)'.[2] Aristotle's

---

Eudemian Ethics (1222a11ff.) although it raises similar problems to the ones discussed here. Unless otherwise noted, translations are from the *ROT*. I am grateful to my colleagues Henry Richardson and Nancy Scherman for helpful criticism of earlier drafts of this paper. My thanks are also due to Richard Bosley, Janet Sisson and Roger Shiner for their valuable objections and suggestions.

2 *EN* II 6, 1106b27-8

settled view is doubtless that it is the latter item, i.e., the object of our choice or the intermediate relative to us, that is determined by *logos*.

What does the term *logos* stand for in this context? There is one reply that can be easily disposed of, the one namely that holds that *logos* here refers to reason, in the sense of the rational capacity of the human soul, as opposed, in particular, to the desiderative part of the soul. This view was put forward by J. Cook Wilson in a famous article published in 1913 which generated a lively controversy.[3] His critics were quick to refute him by producing a host of arguments, among them that in the passages he quotes the term *logos* cannot be taken to stand for reason as a part of the soul (Aristotle's expression for the human rational faculty is not *logos* but τὸ λόγον ἔχον, 'that which has *logos*'). Moreover, the dative has to be understood as instrumental and it is unlikely that a human faculty is the instrument.[4] I find it hard to believe that anyone would want to defend this position today.

The second reply worth considering is the one adopted by most opponents to Cook Wilson, and by their followers. According to this view, *logos* should be translated by such terms as 'rational principle', 'norm', 'rule' and even 'plan'.[5] The philosophical substrate common to these proposals is that there is a universally quantified propositional content endowed with normative force which ought to be used to determine the intermediate.

This view has to face insurmountable difficulties, the most important of which is that by declaring that the intermediate is relative to the agent, and also to the time of the action, the objects involved, the people affected, the motive adopted, the mode of the action, etc.[6], Aristotle

---

3 Cook Wilson (1913), 113-17

4 Lord (1914), 1-5; Burnet (1914), 6-7; Stocks (1914), 9-12

5 In a sense, R.A. Gauthier and J.Y. Jolif (1970), II 1, 149 bring earlier strands together when they write: 'Ce qu'il faut retenir, c'est que le *logos* qui sert de norme à la vertu n'est pas seulement un plan qui permet d'atteindre la fin, mais qu'il est en même temps une intimation, un commandement; c'est pourquoi nous traduisons par le terme de *règle*, qui rend ces deux idés: la règle est à la fois ce quit permet de parvenir à la fin souhaitée et ce que s'impose avec autorité.' Ross in his translation oscillates between 'rational principle' and '(right) rule'. For 'plan' cf. Flashar (1983), 245, apparently following Dirlmeier.

6 *EN* II 6, 1106b21-2

seems to have ruled out a general principle or norm in this domain. If not only the constitution of each single agent has to be taken into account but also a host of different circumstances in which the same agent may find himself, then the rule would have to be amazingly complex, involving multiple quantification over a large set of variables. It would thus turn out to be perfectly useless for action.

It seems to be very much in the spirit of Aristotle's ethics to say that there simply are no precise rules to determine the *meson*. There are, at most, vague pieces of advice such as the following:

> But we must consider the things towards which we ourselves also are easily carried away; for some of us tend to one thing, some to another; and this will be recognizable from the pleasure and pain we feel. We must drag ourselves away to the contrary extreme; for we shall get into the intermediate state by drawing well away from error, as people do in straightening sticks that are bent.[7]

This kind of advice is in fact useful because it takes into account our inclination to steer away from the *meson*, but it then follows that it can be applied only *after* the intermediate has been determined. Hence, it cannot be taken as an example of the *logos* used for its determination.

At this point it would be tempting to conclude that since the relativity of the intermediate entails that there are no precise rules guiding its choice, it then follows that Aristotle adopts some form of moral relativism. Whatever the individual chooses would be rightly chosen.

This, of course, will not do. Aristotle is quite firmly in the absolutist camp since he holds that certain actions are always wrong. Adultery, theft and murder can never be rightly chosen.[8] But from the fact that the

---

7 *EN* II 9, 1109b1-7

8 *EN* II 6, 1107a8-27. The unconditional rejection of adultery, theft and murder generates a serious problem of interpretation because it doubtless commits Aristotle to exceptionless general moral rules forbidding actions of these kinds. The reason why such actions cannot be the object of virtuous choice in certain cases is that they are institutionally defined. Marriage and property rights define what is to count as adultery and theft, respectively. Murder is also institutional since the killing of someone who does not have rights in a given polis presumably would not be considered murder. Acts of these sorts are therefore not relative to the agent, the occasion, the circumstances, etc. In order to account for this fact within the frame-

appropriation of someone else's money is always wrong, it does not follow that the use of one's own money is always right.[9] One's own property does not define a range within which any choice counts as a choice of the intermediate. Aristotle's views in this domain also commit him to a non-relativistic position, as we shall see in section III *infra*.

The upshot of this is that in the absence of universal rules for the choice of the intermediate, it is unclear how Aristotle would argue for a non-relativistic understanding of moral choice.

In order to work towards a satisfactory resolution of the issue, I would like to suggest an interpretation of *logos* along different lines than the ones mentioned hitherto.

First, we would do well to notice that the occurrence of *logos* in the definition of moral virtue has been preceded by references to *logos* in chapters 2 and 3 of the same Book and will be explicitly recalled in the opening section of Book VI.

When Aristotle first invites us to examine the nature of actions which will lead to the acquisition of excellence, he starts off by saying:

> That we must act according to the right reason (κατὰ τὸν ὀρθὸν λόγον) is common ground and must be assumed.[10]

In other words, it is taken as beyond dispute that an action is correct if it conforms to the right reason, but how far does the acceptance of this view extend?

---

work of his doctrine, Aristotle holds that they are clear instances of excess or deficiency, and that it is absurd to look for the intermediate within each of those extremes. Cf. 1107a8-27. Rules of this nature, however, do not allow us to determine the intermediate in the case of actions that are *not* sharply defined by an institution. The dividing line between liberal and illiberal giving cannot be settled in the same way as the dividing line between theft and legitimate appropriation can.

9 *EN* IV 1 *passim*. Cf. especially 1121a1-2 on spending one's money 'contrary to what is right and noble'.

10 *EN* II 2, 1103b31-2. I think Barnes is right in reading πράττειν <δεῖν> in the *ROT*. The second infinitive could have easily disappeared by haplography and it seems to be needed because the clause surely has to have normative force. I translate 'common ground' with Thomson (1978), 93 instead of the *ROT*'s 'common principle'. There is no word for 'principle' in the Greek. I have also supplied the article before 'right reason' to match the article in the original.

Commentators usually state that it represents a consensus within the Academy and the Lyceum.[11] But this can hardly be right. *Orthos logos* not only appears in Herodotus[12] and Thucydides.[13] There is also an occurrence of this expression in Plato's *Apology* which confirms, because of its context, that its use was not limited to philosophical circles. Socrates has said that those 'corrupted' by him might have reason to help him

> ... but the uncorrupted, already older men, ... what other *logos* do they have to help me but the right and just one, that they know that Meletus is lying and that I am telling the truth?[14]

Socrates here relies on the fact that the jurors will accept the argument that an agent has done the proper thing if he has the right reason, i.e., the correct justification, on his side. This doubtless constitutes an appeal to everyday Athenian usage of the expression and is thus common ground. The addition of καὶ δίκαιον, 'and just', on the other hand, may well be attributed to the Platonic Socrates given his interest in justice in the early dialogues and what is at stake in the trial itself.

The passage from the *Apology* not only points to widespread use of the appeal to the right reason, it also gives us an instance of an *orthos logos*: 'that Meletus is lying and that I am telling the truth'. Here the right reason or justification is not a general rule or norm, but rather a conjunction of two particular propositions. It is not difficult to see, of course, that in order to have a full-blown valid justification one would have to assume a principle of the form: 'in all cases in which the accuser is lying and the accused telling the truth, one ought to help the accused', but it is interesting to observe that in the context of the *Apology* what has been said is enough. Socrates adds εἶεν δή, 'be that as it may', and moves on to something else.

---

11 For a list of authorities cf. Bärthlein (1964), 130 n. 3. I am grateful to Prof. Ernst A. Schmidt, Tübingen, for an offprint of this article from the estate of Prof. Franz Dirlmeier.

12 Cf. Herodotus II xvii 1; VI liii 2; VI lxviii 1.

13 Cf. Thucydides II lxi 2, where Pericles tells the Athenians that his *logos* will not appear right to them because of the weakness of their resolution. It is assumed that the average Athenian will understand Pericles' reproach.

14 *Apol* 34b. Cf. Burnet (1924) *ad loc* :' ... *logos* in this phrase means "account" or "explanation"'.

In Aristotle the primary function of the right reason is somewhat different. Rather than justifying an independently described action, it is involved in the identification of the appropriate action itself. And because of this it can then play a justificatory role. The best candidate for a *logos* that is to discharge such functions, I submit, is a particular proposition.

Consider Aristotle's example about the intake of food:

> if ten pounds are too much for a particular person to eat and two too little, it does not follow that the trainer will order six pounds; for this also is perhaps too much for the person who is to take it, or too little — too little for Milo [the huge wrestler from Sicily], too much for the beginner in athletic exercises.[15]

What will the trainer prescribe, say, for the beginner? Surely not a *range* of choices, for the example is precisely designed to illustrate the idea that there is only one correct amount or *meson* for a given individual in the particular context of choice.[16]

The trainer will say to the young athlete something like this: 'Four pounds [e.g.] is the appropriate amount for you given the circumstances, your physical constitution, etc.' This is the right *logos* that justifies the young man's eating four pounds of food that day, not more, and not less.

The *logos* has determined a boundary (ὅρος) above which he would be eating too much and below which he would be eating too little. Later on we shall reap some fruits from this observation about *horos*.

II

Let us now turn to the opening section of Book VI of the *EN*, a passage which officially supplements the definition of moral excellence but, as I shall argue, tends to be misunderstood because the wrong metaphor is commonly assumed when trying to make sense of it. It is also illuminating in that it shows beyond reasonable doubt that we have to understand 'determined by *logos*' in the definition as shorthand for 'determined by the right *logos*'.

---

15 *EN* II 6, 1106a36-b4.

16 The application of this example to moral choice rules out any interpretation holding that by *to meson* Aristotle means a range of actions. 'Excellence both finds and chooses that which is intermediate' (1107a5-6), i.e., a particular action.

In the Revised Oxford Translation the passage in question reads as follows:

> Since we have previously said that one ought to choose that which is intermediate [τὸ μέσον], not the excess nor the defect, and that the intermediate [τὸ μέσον] is determined by the dictates of reason, let us discuss this. In all the states [ἕξεις] we have mentioned, as in all other matters, there is a mark [σκοπός] to which the man who possesses reason looks, and heightens or relaxes his activity accordingly, and there is a standard [ὅρος] which determines the mean states [μεσότητες] which we say are intermediate between excess and defect, being in accordance with right reason. But such a statement, though true, is by no means illuminating; for in all other pursuits which are objects of knowledge it is indeed true to say that we must not exert ourselves nor relax our efforts too much nor too little, but to an intermediate extent [τὰ μέσα] and as right reason dictates; but if a man had only this knowledge he would be none the wiser — e.g., we should not know what sort of medicines to apply to our body if some were to say "all those which the medical art prescribes, and which agree with the practice of one who possesses the art". Hence it is necessary with regard to the states of the soul also not only that this true statement should be made, but also that it should be determined what right reason is and what is the standard that fixes it.[17]

This translation is unsatisfactory at several points. It omits 'right' before 'reason' in the opening sentence, but given that further along 'right reason' is the rendering for *orthos logos*, we may take this to be a misprint. More importantly, no effort is made to indicate that in the Greek *orthos logos* (and the unqualified *logos* on line 22) is always preceded by the definite article and therefore suggests something quite specific. 'The man who possesses reason' translates a Greek expression which is meant to single out not a reasonable person in general, but rather someone who has the *logos* corresponding to a particular craft or *technē*. Furthermore, there is nothing in Greek for 'activity', i.e., that which is supposed to be heightened or relaxed, assuming that these words represent adequate translations. Finally, there are two genitives whose rendering is overdetermined: for 'a standard which determines

---

17 *EN* VI 1, 1138b18-34

the mean states' the text simply has 'the *horos* of the mean states' and for 'what is the standard that fixes it (sc. the right reason)' it really has 'and of this [sc. the right reason] what is the *horos*'.

The passage explicitly refers back to the definition of moral excellence and promises to discuss its conceptual core, i.e., the view that the intermediate to be chosen is as the right reason says it is. The need to raise this question is first justified by showing within the context of a highly metaphorical description of the moral excellences that it is insufficient to make a general reference to the right reason. The text then shows that exactly the same shortcoming obtains in the case of such arts or *technai* as gymnastics and medicine.

It is the initial metaphor which has proven to be rather elusive, hence we are well advised to start with the less controversial instances. In physical training (represented in the text by the verbs πονεῖν and ῥᾳθυμεῖν) to say that one should exert oneself and relax 'the intermediates' or to an intermediate extent, i.e., as the right *logos* indicates, is true, but hardly helpful until the particular right reason for each individual and each type of exercise is identified. The same holds for medicine. Here the question is what kind (ποῖα) of medicines or food to offer the patient. To reply 'all those (ὅσα) which medicine prescribes, i.e., as he who has it indicates' is again true, but unhelpful.

Just as in the Athenian agora public officials placed a boundary stone or *horos* beyond which those banned from the marketplace could not enter, likewise here the right reason uttered in the particular case by the trainer or the physician establishes a limit beyond which exercise and food would be excessive. The same limit viewed from the opposite direction indicates also when the amount of exertion and nutrition would be insufficient. The right *logos*, the particular practical proposition conceived by the trainer or the doctor, thus determines the *horos* or boundary mark for a proper choice.[18]

---

18 I have seen a modern substitute for the older stone with the inscription ΟΡΟΣ ΕΙΜΙ ΤΗΣ ΑΓΟΡΑΣ, 'I am a boundary mark of the market place', at the south-west corner of the Athenian agora. For a clear and uncontroversial use of *horos* in the sense of 'limit' within the *EN*, cf. I 7, 1097b11. At VII 5, 1148a34f. there is an occurrence of the plural within a phrase that the *ROT* rightly renders by 'beyond the limits'. I had reached my views on this matter before reading Peterson (1988). Much of what I hold here is consistent with Peterson's position and I am indebted to her paper for clarification on several points.

Is this interpretation correct? It certainly contradicts venerable opinion. Ross took the *horos* to be the standard that fixes right reason and Grant went so far as to speak of the standard of the law.[19] Further afield stand Gauthier and Jolif with their conviction that the standard is the rule leading to contemplation, which in turn leads to the absurd view that, say, a choice in battle exhibiting courage instead of rashness or cowardice is determined by a consideration of a plan that would lead to that ultimate goal. For the sake of contemplation cowardice may be a better piece of advice than risking one's life.[20] Irwin's rendering of *horos* by 'definition' is also puzzling because the point at stake is surely not the general characterization of the right reason, but rather the discovery of what counts in each singular case as the right *logos*.[21]

In order to assess the advantages of the present interpretation, let us turn back to Aristotle's metaphorical summary of the way moral excellence works. He first says that there is a mark or target (*skopos*) towards which the man who has the *logos* looks. Taken in conjunction with a famous remark in Book I about the usefulness of knowing the human good ('Shall we not, like archers who have a target [*skopos*] at which to aim, be more likely to hit upon what we should?'[22]), our passage suggests prima facie the image of the bowman.[23]

The text then adds something that does not quite fit into the picture: 'he tightens and relaxes'. No object for these actions is mentioned. Commentators who have assumed the archer metaphor have to say that what you relax or tighten is the string at the moment of shooting.[24] But this is not the actual practice in the domain of archery. In aiming at a

---

19 Grant (1885), II 146

20 Gauthier et Jolif (1970), II 1, 149

21 Irwin (1985), 148. For a similar case in which the τί ἐστι question does not request a definition but a specification of what counts as a such and such, cf. *An Po* II 2, 90a6 and the detailed treatment of the point in Gómez-Lobo (1980).

22 *EN* I 2, 1094a23-4 (my trans.).

23 The list of authorities who hold this view would be long indeed. Cf., e.g., Hardie (1980), 214. Even such an attentive critic as S. Peterson (see note 26, above) is misled on this point, as the conjecture 'his bow' in her translation of VI 1. indicates.

24 Gauthier et Jolif (1970), II 2, 436: 'il y a en effet un but en regard duquel celui qui possède la règle tend ou détend la corde de son arc.'

target the bowman pulls back the string as far as possible whether the target lies close at hand or at a certain distance. What the archer modifies accordingly is the inclination of the arrow, not the tension of the string.[25] A weak shot is worthless. The mark does not provide any criterion to tighten or relax anything.

I submit that if we start our interpretation by considering the verbs involved and move backwards to accommodate the reference to a target we can obtain a surprisingly coherent picture.

Just as the infinitives *ponein* and *rathymein* point to physical training, the forms ἐπιτείνει and ἀνίησιν, as Grant saw long ago, are taken from the practice of music.[26] In tuning a lyre a musician has a target: to tune a given string, say, at the octave. This implies finding the point or limit in the tension of the string above which the sound would be too high and below which it would be too low.[27] This limit is in accordance with the right reason if it matches the account given by the expert when he says: 'This is the proper tension.' The mark now provides a criterion for choice: the right reason determines the *horos* at which the choice ought to aim. In fact, to aim at the target *is* to aim at the limit, as a glance at the corresponding passage of the *Eudemian Ethics* shows. There the wording is very similar to the passage we are discussing, except that the object of *apoblepein pros ti*, 'to look towards something' is, by substitution, *horos* instead of *skopos*.[28]

Moreover, the limit is strictly particular. It is the one that corresponds to this particular string of this particular instrument. A longer or thicker string, or a string made of a different material, may require a different

---

25 I owe this observation to Mr. St. John Colón, a former student of mine who is well versed in archery both ancient and modern. R. Sorabji apparently perceived the difficulty and appended to a paper on these topics a footnote asking, 'Are the archers here and at 1094a23 trying to shoot a certain *distance*, aided by a marker that marks that distance, rather than shooting at a marker?' Sorabji (1980), 219, n. 5. In the absence of any indication that this unusual setting is assumed, I think Sorabji's suggestion is quite implausible.

26 Grant (1885), 147 with references to *Lysis* 209b and *Phaedo* 98c.

27 Plato (*Laws* 785b) uses the expression γάμου ὅρος to designate the proper time to marry. Before that it would be too early; after that, too late.

28 *EE* II 5, 1222b7-9. Cf. also VIII 3, (or VII 15), 1249a22-b3 where the physician is said to proceed by reference to a *horos*. If he does less or more, health will no longer be the outcome of the treatment.

degree of tension. This explains why 'it is true, but not clear' to require that the string be tuned at the limit: to say that we should look for the *horos* (that will give us the octave) is a general standard, but the *horos* itself is not a standard. It is the correct tension for this particular case.

Now that the key metaphor has been clarified, one minor difficulty remains in that Aristotle uses here the term *mesotēs*, the term used officially for the mean states. Given the clear parallelism with 'the intermediates' in the example of the trainer and the amount of food (or medicines in the example of the doctor), we should not hesitate to take the plural of *mesotēs* as pointing not to the subjective states, but rather to the objective amounts to be chosen.[29]

If the foregoing is correct, the delimitation of the intermediate is performed by means of a particular practical proposition without the aid of a general rule or plan of which it would be a direct application. There doesn't seem to be a standard to fix the right account. How, then, do we identify the right reason and its limit?

The seed of a reply is contained in the last, epexegetic clause of the definition of moral excellence: the delimitation of the intermediate by reason proceeds 'in the way in which the man of practical wisdom would determine it'.

As we noted earlier, if we drop Aspasius' conjecture ὃν and return to the ὡς of the manuscripts (as we should on strictly paleographical grounds), the reference to the prudent man becomes vaguer. On this reading, it is not the case that there is a specific *logos* for delimiting the mean, exactly the *logos* that the prudent man knows and would himself use. The definition says instead that in determining the mean one should proceed as the man of practical wisdom would, i.e., that prudence simply provides a model for the required operation.

A brief treatment of some well-known (though not undisputed) features of prudence should provide partial confirmation of the view defended thus far.

---

29 On this point cf. Peterson (1988), 235n6.

III

Phronēsis (practical wisdom, prudence) is the excellence of the calculative part of the rational soul. It is operative when we perform well a wide variety of interconnected intellectual operations which aim at attaining truth in the domain of action.

It is originally introduced as a capacity to deliberate well.

> Now it is thought to be a mark of the man of practical wisdom to be able to deliberate well about what is good and expedient for himself, not in some particular respect, e.g., about what sorts of thing conduce to health or strength, but about what sorts of thing conduce to the good life in general. This is shown by the fact that we credit men with practical wisdom in some particular respect when they have calculated well with a view to some good end which is one of those that are not the object of any art. Thus in general the man who is capable of deliberating has practical wisdom.[30]

Since moral excellence is conducive to the good life in general it is tempting to follow Gauthier and Jolif and apply these remarks to the question of practical wisdom's contribution to moral virtue. If the good life consists in contemplation, then the prudent man would be expected to determine the intermediate by deliberating about what is conducive to this privileged activity.[31] As I have already suggested, this is highly implausible because in many instances the action according to a vice, e.g., cowardice or illiberality, may be the most conducive to future contemplation.

There is a recent (and much more sophisticated) variant of this position which assumes an inclusive rather than a dominant interpretation of Aristotelian happiness.[32] It is best represented by R. Sorabji when he writes:

> Whatever other roles practical wisdom may or may not play, I suggest that one role is this. It enables a man, in the light of his conception of

30 *EN* VI 5, 1140a25-31

31 Gauthier and Jolif (1970), II 1, 149. Cf. note 20.

32 For the use of this terminology cf. the seminal article by Hardie (1965), 277-95.

> the good life in general, to perceive what generosity requires of him, or more generally what virtue and *to kalon* require of him, in the particular case, and it instructs him to act accordingly. A picture of the good life will save him from giving away too much, or too little, or to the wrong causes, in particular instances.[33]

I think this is excessively optimistic. A comprehensive picture of the good life, a picture that regards liberality as an important ingredient within it, will simply tell an individual that he has to be generous, and that virtue and nobility require that he be so, but it will hardly indicate to him the right amount to give in a particular case. Two individuals may have the same picture of the good life, but if there is considerable difference in personal wealth between them, the requirements of liberality will also differ widely. It is not a matter, of course, of saving money for a life of leisure, but of attaining excellence here and now,

> ... for liberality resides not in the multitude of the gifts but in the state of the giver, and this is relative to the giver's substance. There is therefore nothing to prevent the man who gives less from being the more liberal man, if he has less to give.[34]

The ultimate reason to be moral does not coincide with the reason to choose to give a specific amount of money. Likewise, there is no direct inference from the notion that the best state for the lyre is to have all of its strings in tune to the conclusion that this is the proper tension for this particular string.

I doubt, then, that keeping before our eyes a picture of happiness is the major contribution prudence makes to the determination of the intermediate.

That deliberation enters into moral choice cannot be doubted. A liberal individual certainly has to deliberate about how to spend his money, but his deliberation, as we have seen, flows within the channels of preset limitations because he aims at spending 'according to his substance and on the right objects'.[35] How much spending will be

---

33 Sorabji (1980), 206

34 *EN* IV 1, 1120b7-11

35 *EN* IV 1, 1120b23-4

compatible with his wealth has to be determined by a different operation, one that precedes the deliberation about how to spend it, but is not equivalent to his grasp of the good life.

What feature of prudence, then, allows it to make the decisive contribution to the delimitation of the intermediate?

Since for each action the limit is particular, it can only be grasped correctly by an intellectual excellence whose task is to deal also with particulars. Aristotelian science, of course, cannot do the job because it is 'an apprehension of universal and necessary beings'.[36] Moreover, what is required is a practical grasp, i.e., not simply a grasp of what is the case, but of what is good or best within the circumstances.

These requirements are satisfied by prudence. It is not concerned with universals only: it must also recognize particulars.[37] And it is an excellence of practical, not of theoretical knowledge, i.e., of knowledge which is 'for the sake of something', viz., action.[38]

How then does practical wisdom operate in moral excellence? It is well known that in his discussion of prudence in Book VI of the *EN* Aristotle does not give us a single example of moral reasoning. All of his examples are taken from the non-moral realm and for the most part address the question of deliberation towards an end.

If my previous thoughts are correct, the direct role of prudence in moral excellence is to identify the immediate end of an action. By immediate end I mean something like this: my remote end is to flourish and of this prudence gives me a general picture within which I see liberality as an ingredient. Liberality then becomes for me an intermediate end. I aim to be liberal because that will make a contribution to my being a good quality human being, a flourishing human being. But I can only become a liberal person, prudence also tells me, if I engage in 'right giving'.[39] Right giving on this occasion then becomes my immediate end.

What constitutes right giving? According to the general standard provided by the definition of liberality, it consists in doing it 'for the sake of the noble', i.e., not for any subordinate advantage for myself but

---

36 *EN* VI 6, 1140b31-2 (my trans.)

37 *EN* VI 7, 1141b15. Cf. also VI 8, 1142a14; VI 9, 1143a32-4

38 *EN* VI 1, 1139a32-3 and 1139b1

39 *EN* IV 1, 1120a24-6

because of its beauty and intrinsic worth.[40] My grasp of the definition of the intermediate end is important because it sketches before my mind certain general conditions that right giving ought to satisfy, but my aiming at the *kalon*, however, may not be enough. I can make a mess of it if I fail to satisfy further conditions. Right giving implies 'giving to the right people, the right amounts, and at the right time, with all the other qualifications that accompany right giving'.

At this point, I would suggest, the aspect of practical wisdom directed to particulars steps in. A good intellectual grasp is required to know if it is right to give, say, to this or that person or institution, to know what would constitute the right amount given my substance, to know if this is the right moment because giving too early may be bribing instead of expressing gratitude. Aristotle adds the equivalent of *et cetera*, 'and the rest', indicating that the list of variables to consider may be, as we know from our own lives, quite long.

Each of these variables would have to be substituted by a reference to a specific person or group of persons, to a specific amount, to a moment in time, etc. Thus, we are back at the notion of a highly complex propositional content constituting the right reason that specifies the intermediate by fixing the *horos* or limit. Although each item can be partially justified by explaining why this is the right person, the right amount, etc., no overarching, fixed standard seems to be in sight.

I may now return to a difficulty suggested earlier concerning this interpretation: does it not imply that, since there is no general standard of which a particular right reason is a deductive application, our moral decisions turn out to be relativistic and thus arbitrary?

I think not. Although morally right choice has been shown to be relative to the agent, the circumstances, his condition, the recipients, etc., this does not imply relativism because it does not follow that what seems right to the agent is right for the agent. Rightness and wrongness is not a function of the agent's perception or persuasion. He may well be wrong. There are cases of good practical grasps and of bad, i.e., mistaken, ones. The accounts of the latter would be wrong, not right, *logoi*.

In fact, Aristotle's understanding of the commonly accepted appeal to the right reason seems to be that it not only has to be adequate and to the point, but that, first and foremost, it has to be true.

---

40 *Ibid*.

Just as lack of art (ἀτεχνία) is a state concerned with production but involving a false *logos*, likewise a failure in prudence amounts to engaging in action under the guidance of a false propositional content. Indeed, when specifying what constitutes an excellent choice (προαίρεσις σπουδαία), Aristotle enumerates three conditions that have to be met:

(1) The *logos* must be true,

(2) the desire must be right, and

(3) the desire must pursue what the *logos* says.[41]

These conditions appear in a highly controversial passage which perhaps the foregoing developments will help to clarify.[42] Appealing once more to the example of liberality, let us assume that a certain Pleistarchos, a moderately wealthy but otherwise unknown Athenian, decides to contribute to the embellishment of a small Ionic temple on the banks of the Ilissos. Let us assume further that, given his substance, his having a debt of gratitude to the god, his city not being at war, etc. two minae is the right amount and that this can be justified by reference to his wealth, his devotion to this divinity and the rest of his circumstances.

If it is true that this is the proper amount, and if he desires to contribute just that, the *logos* and the desire point in the same direction and his decision will be excellent.

If Pleistarchos recognizes that two minae is the proper amount and yet feels strongly inclined to contribute four, perhaps out of vanity, his desire will not be right. It does not pursue what the *logos* establishes as the limit. If he contributes two after all, he will be engaging in the equivalent of self-control or *enkrateia*. If he instead contributes four, we shall impute to him weakness of the will or *akrasia*. Neither of these two, of course, constitutes excellent choosing.

Still worse would be his choice if his vanity leads him to wrongly believe that four minae is the proper amount, and he in fact contributes four. The object of desire and the subject of the *logos* coincide (it did not in the previous two cases), but now the *logos* is false and the desire wrong.

---

41 *EN* VI 2, 1139a23-6

42 I cannot provide here a detailed defense of my interpretation, but I can indicate that I owe much of it to Loening (1903).

Pleistarchos has been intemperate in his giving. He has fallen prey to the vice of prodigality.

In this last case the *logos* has failed to delimit the intermediate. Pleistarchos has not determined it in the way the prudent man would, i.e., taking into consideration all of the relevant, particular factors.

Aristotle's explanation of such failure does not consist in complaining about lack of standards, as we would. He introduces instead a very important doctrine in moral epistemology, the doctrine namely that consistent moral failure, i.e., vice, has a negative impact on the prudential grasp 'for wickedness perverts us and causes us to be deceived about the starting-points of action.'[43] The inveterate drunkard believes that one more drink will be alright.

If Pleistarchos has been hitherto virtuous, his excellence, as Aristotle somewhat cryptically puts it, will 'make his goal right',[44] i.e., will provide the conditions for a correct grasp of the fact that, on this occasion, giving two minae is the proper thing for him to do. It will also allow him to see, of course, that thereby he will be doing the liberal thing, and that liberality will make an important contribution to his flourishing as a human being.

In our fictitious example two minae is the limit determined by *logos*. This is the right account. It is the account that accords with practical wisdom,[45] or, to use Aristotle's pregnant formulation, it *is* practical wisdom in this domain.[46]

One final misunderstanding of Aristotle's definition of moral excellence can now be disposed of, the one namely that derives from equating the prudent man with the good or excellent man (the *spoudaios*) who later on is said to be 'as it were the norm (*kanon*) and measure (*metron*) of them',[47] sc. of the noble (*kala*) and the pleasant (*hēdea*). It is tempting to infer from this that Aristotle has in mind some privileged individual who

---

43 *EN* VI 12, 1144a34-6. Cf. further the paragraph that etymologically explains temperance (σωφροσύνη) as 'that which preserves prudence' (ὡς σῴζουσαν τὴν φρόνησιν), sc. VI 5, 1140b11-20.

44 *EN* VI 12, 1144a7-8

45 *EN* VI 13, 1144b23-4

46 *EN* VI 13, 1144b27-8

47 *EN* III 4, 1113a33

would actively determine the intermediate and thus the noble thing to choose. He would be the person we should look to and imitate because, in so far as he is the preeminently prudent person, whatever he does would be the prudent thing to do. That we would have to rely on the evidence of prudent choices to identify the prudent man generates, of course, a well-known circularity problem.

Much of what appears in part III of this article is meant to resolve that problem. What defines the *spoudaios* is not that whatever he does is noble and good, but rather that he 'judges each case rightly and in each the truth appears to him'.[48] Should the truth not appear to him, i.e., should he make a mistake in a particular case, then his choice, as we saw, ceases to be *spoudaia* and he himself can hardly count as *spoudaios* on this occasion. There is no individual whose practical grasp of the intermediate can always be guaranteed to be correct. A morally upright and practically wise person is 'as it were' a norm and a measure in moral matters. In fact, the norm and the measure is the right reason, that is, the true particular practical proposition relevant in the circumstances.

At the outset of this paper I rejected the view that in his definition of moral virtue Aristotle means by *logos* either the human capacity we call 'reason' or a general rule, norm or principle. I then attempted to show that *logos* in the definition stands for the expression 'the right *logos*', an expression commonly used in the justification of an action. With the aid of Aristotelian examples, I claimed that the right reason is a particular practical proposition which specifies a *horos* or limit, thus rejecting earlier interpretations which held, conversely, that the *horos* was a standard for the *logos*. Finally, a fictitious case of liberality provided an adequate illustration of how the present interpretation would work in the absence of a general rule specifying amounts for right giving: the remote end of the agent is to be happy, the intermediate end is to be liberal and the immediate end is to give the right amount. A prudential grasp of the particulars of the case issues in a true practical proposition which specifies the *meson* or correct amount. To choose this amount, therefore, is to act in accordance with Aristotle's right reason.

---

48 *EN* III 4, 1113a29-31

Bibliography

Barnes, J. 1984. *The Complete Works of Aristotle. The Revised Oxford Translation (ROT)*. 2 Vols. Princeton.

Bärthlein, K. 1964. 'Der *orthos logos* und das ethische Grundprinzip in den platonischen Schriften'. *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 46: 129-73.

Burnet, J. 1914. 'On the meaning of *logos* in Aristotle's *Ethics*'. *Classical Review* 28: 6-7.

Burnet, J. 1924. *Plato's Euthyphro, Apology of Socrates, and Crito*. Oxford.

Bywater, I. 1894. *Aristotelis Ethica Nicomachea*. Oxford. Reprint 1957.

Cook Wilson, J. 1913. 'On the meaning of *logos* in certain passages in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*'. *Classical Review* 27: 113-17.

Flashar, H. 1983. *Aeltere Akademie — Aristoteles — Peripatos* (Ueberweg, *Grundrisse der Geschichte der Philosophie*, Die Philosophie der Antike, Band 3). Basel/Stuttgart.

Gauthier, R.A. et Jolif, J.Y. 1970. *L'Ethique à Nicomaque*. 2 Vols. Louvain/Paris.

Gómez-Lobo, A. 1980. 'The so-called questions of existence in Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics* II 1-2', *Review of Metaphysics* 34: 71-89.

Grant, A. 1985. *The Ethics of Aristotle*, illustrated with essays and notes. London. Reprint New York, 1973.

Hardie, W.F.R. 1965. 'The final good in Aristotle's *Ethics*'. *Philosophy* 40: 277-95.

Hardie, W.F.R. 1980. *Aristotle's Ethical Theory*. Second Edition. Oxford.

Irwin, T. 1985. Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*. Indianapolis.

Loening, R. 1903. *Die Zurechnungslehre des Aristoteles*. Jena. Reprint Hildesheim. 1967.

Lord, A.R. 1914. 'On the meaning of *logos* in certain passages in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*'. *Classical Review* 28: 1-5.

McKeon, R. 1941. *The Basic Works of Aristotle*. New York. Numerous reprints.

Peterson, S. 1988. '*Horos* (limit) in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*'. *Phronesis* 23: 233-50.

Sorabji, R. 1980. 'Aristotle on the role of intellect in virtue'. In Rorty, A.O. *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*. Berkeley. 201-19.

Stocks, J.L. 1914. 'On the Aristotelian use of *logos*: a reply'. *Classical Quarterly* 8: 9-12.

Thomson, J.A.K. 1978. *The Ethics of Aristotle*. Harmondsworth.

Urmson, J.O. 1980. 'Aristotle's doctrine of the mean'. In Rorty, A.O. *Essays in Aristotle's Ethics*. Berkeley. 157-70.