

This paper challenges received scholarly wisdom about a key aspect of Aristotle's argument that virtue and vice are dependent upon us. The importance of properly interpreting a single word in Aristotle's argument will also serve to emphasize the danger of treating any argument as separable from the text, as scholars have tended to do here.

In section 3.5 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle claims that virtue and vice are "dependent upon us" (ἐφ' ἡμῶν) (1113b6-7). When he puts forward a formal argument for this view at 1113b7-14, Aristotle says that if doing good and bad things depends on us, and not doing such things depends on us, and if this *was* (ἦν) being good and bad, then being decent and worthless depends on us. In his commentary to the *NE*, Burnet interprets the imperfect ἦν at 1113b12—without any expressed argument—as the so-called idiomatic imperfect, referring not to the literal past, but instead referencing a previous claim in the *NE* (Burnet 1900, 134). And so Burnet glosses ἦν "is, as we saw." If we follow Burnet, however, as even fine recent translators have done (Rowe 2002, 130; Irwin 1999, 37), then Aristotle requires with this conditional that "doing good and bad things (and not doing them)" is identical to being good and bad. Accordingly, scholars who follow Burnet have found an inconsistency here (Ott 2000, Ackrill 1978), since for Aristotle virtue and vice require acting in a certain way repeatedly over a period of time—even in *NE* 3.5 (1114a9-10). But if instead we reject Burnet's interpretation of the imperfect, then the conditional requires that doing good and bad things *was* being good and bad—presumably at an indefinite point in the past when virtue and vice were still in the process of becoming fixed through repeated action. This reading, unlike that of Burnet, presents no problem for Aristotle's view that virtue and vice arise from repeated action, since *from the perspective of any significant duration of time* it is possible to view doing good things and being good as the same.

Other parts of Aristotle's discussion in *NE* 3.5 are also consistent with this interpretation. For example, after putting forward an argument that virtue and vice are voluntary, Aristotle concludes that "...it was possible (ἐξἦν) from the beginning for both the unjust man and the unbridled man not to have become such. And because of this they are willingly such. But it is no longer possible for them not to have become such" (1114a19-21). So Aristotle clearly acknowledges that injustice, at least, is voluntary only in the sense that *it could once have been otherwise*—not in the sense that a person can choose at any moment to be virtuous or vicious, and not in the sense that "doing good and bad things" is identical to "being good and bad." And this idea of past possibility seems to be exactly what Aristotle has in mind with the imperfect conditional (1113b13).

After considering a few further pieces of evidence for my interpretation, I shall conclude by briefly suggesting why Aristotle brings actions and character states closer together in *NE* 3.5 than elsewhere in the *NE*.

References:

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