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ARISTOTLE'S ACCOUNT OF THE VICIOUS: A FORGIVABLE INCONSISTENCY

David Roochnik

In the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle seems to offer inconsistent accounts of the vicious man. In Book VII, he is explicitly contrasted with the *akratês*, the morally weak. The latter is overcome by a desire or an emotion that overrides his reason; he suffers a conflict between his *logos* and his *pathos*. As a result, he does something he knows he shouldn't, and feels regret afterwards. The genuinely vicious man, by contrast, is described as precisely not experiencing this sort of conflict. He is bad through and through, and thus feels no regret for his actions. In Book IX, however, when explaining why a vicious man cannot be a friend to himself, Aristotle's description of him shifts. Here he is said to have a soul in conflict with itself, to be full of regret, even of self-hatred, and thus to be quite like the *akratês* described in Book VII.¹

Part One of this paper will analyze the account of the vicious man in Book VII. Part Two will show how differently he is presented in Book IX. Part Three will show why, even though the inconsistency is undeniable, it is nonetheless forgivable. To prefigure the argument: yes, Aristotle offers opposing accounts of the vicious man. But he does so in service to the phenomena. In other words, in his very inconsistency Aristotle "saves" the phenomenon of the vicious.² Part Four will conclude by briefly addressing a potential objection to this thesis.

PART ONE: THE VICIOUS MAN OF BOOK VII

Moral weakness is the condition suffered by someone who knows he should not do something bad, but does it anyway because he is overpowered by a passion. He cannot abide by or stay with, he stands outside of (*ekstatikos*), the conclusions of his own reasoning. (See 1145b11–14, 1150b27–28 and 1151a20–22.)³

The psychological mechanisms, and the general theory of action and practical reason, presupposed by Aristotle's account of moral weakness are far from transparent.⁴ In this paper, the short sketch above will have to suffice. It can, however, be amplified by contrasting moral weakness with the specific vice of intemperance (*akolasia*: 1146b21).

The morally weak and the intemperate person might perform the same action with regard to the same object, for they both pursue sensual pleasures, specifically those of taste and touch (1150a9, 1118a28), which they ought not pursue. This explains why Aristotle suggests that "in some way perhaps [moral weakness] is" vice (1151a6). In spite of these similarities, the intemperate and the morally weak are fundamentally different. The former "is guided by having made a choice and supposes that he must always pursue the present pleasure, while [the morally weak] does not suppose [that he must always pursue the present pleasure], but nevertheless does pursue it" (1146b22–24. See also 1148a17).

The morally weak person's bad actions emanate from a passion or desire rather than from his basic character or from rational deliberation. He has knowledge of what he ought to do but, because he is overpowered by passion or desire, does not use or activate it (1146b32). His knowledge is temporarily ineffectual, as if it has gone to sleep (1147a13, 1147b7).⁵ As a result, he does not actually choose to perform the bad, the pleasure-driven, action, at least not in Aristotle's sense of *proairesis* (see 1113a5–15). He acts on appetite (*epithumia*) rather than choice (1111b13). The action is neither the consequence of rational deliberation nor does it emanate from a stable disposition. Instead, it is like an epileptic spasm (1150b34). As a result, when the passion subsides, the morally weak man will be regretful (*metamelêtikos*: 1150b30. Also see 1150a21). Even when he does wrong, after (*meta*) the fact he reveals that he cares (*melein*) about doing what is right. For this reason he is not genuinely vicious: he is not bad through and through for he still cares about being good. This is why he is "curable" (1150b32).

In sum, the morally weak person is in conflict with himself. He is drawn to pleasure and gripped by desire, but also cognizant of the good reasons why he should resist his temptations. That he follows desire rather than good reasons shows that his soul is not properly ordered; he has not made his desires reasonable (i.e., he is not temperate), nor has he even managed to master them (i.e., he is not morally strong). Instead, he sometimes pursues pleasures that he knows he should resist. When he does, his actions are voluntary and therefore blameable (1109b30, 1111a25–b4). Nonetheless, even though his actions are wrong, at least some of them are pardonable (*suggnômonikon*), especially if he

is overcome by particularly strong emotions while struggling against them (1150b8). This principle holds more when he loses his temper (*thumos*) than when he gives in to desires for pleasure. Because anger is like “listening to reason” (1149a26)—it is a response to a perceived slight or injustice—and because human beings are by nature rational, anger is “more natural” (1149a6) than the desire for pleasure. Finally, because “it is more pardonable to follow natural impulses” (1149b4), acts of moral weakness triggered by anger are more readily pardoned.⁶

Even performing actions for which he should not be pardoned—when, for example, he succumbs to weak desires that he ought to be able to resist—the morally weak man is still not vicious. As long as his “ruling principle” (*archê*) is sufficiently intact and can wage even a losing battle against inappropriate desires, he is not bad through and through. Because his actions do not emanate from a rational choice, they do not express or reflect the essential nature of his character. As Aristotle puts the point, although someone morally weak may perform an unjust action, he is not himself unjust (1151a10).

If the morally weak is like the epileptic, then the vicious is like someone with a chronic disease (1151a33). The intemperate man, for example, does not suffer regret and his actions are fully in conformity with his choice (1150b29–30. See also 1151a7). Indeed, lack of regret is his salient feature. Rather than being overpowered by a mad spurt of passion, he sees no reason why he should not do what he does. His ruling principle has been destroyed (1140b20, 1151a15) and so he no longer cares about being virtuous. As a result, he experiences no psychological turmoil. His soul, like that of the virtuous, is harmonious; his reason and his desires drive him in the same vicious direction. He is clear-headed about his actions even though, because he is morally obtuse, their ultimate import eludes him (1150b36). As Rorty puts it, “he has ends—he is the sort of person who can act in the light of his ends—but he has the wrong ends.”⁷ Because his reason is corrupt, the intemperate person is “continuously bad” (1150b34) and so is neither pardonable nor curable. He is genuinely or “entirely bad” (1110b29).

Aristotle elaborates: “We would say that someone is more intemperate when he pursues the excessive [pleasures] and flees moderate pains, but does so while not desiring them, or desiring them only slightly, than someone who [pursues excessive pleasures or flees moderate pains] because of excessive desire” (1148a17). As Rorty explains, the vicious man “is self-indulgent as a matter of principle.”⁸ This is somewhat strange. While the pursuit of excessive pleasure is a familiar occurrence, it is easier to conceive it as being sparked by a strong desire than as being “a matter of principle.” In passages like 1148a7 (see also 1150a27–31)

the intemperate person is described as one who feels little or no desire at all. Aristotle cannot mean this literally. Without desires, the intemperate person would not act, since “thought by itself moves nothing” (1139a36). Furthermore, Aristotle does describe the intemperate person as having an appetite for pleasures (1119a1). He accuses him of taking pleasure in hateful things, which a virtuous man would never do, as well as of taking too much pleasure in things properly enjoyable (1118b25–7). Thus, when he says that the intemperate has little or no desire, Aristotle seems to mean that he acts upon desires too weak to overpower right reason. This does not eliminate the possibility that he sometimes does act upon strong desires. The key point is only that he also acts on desires that he easily could have resisted, and he does so because he sees nothing wrong with acting upon those desires. He pursues his desires, weak and strong, with the acquiescence of his (corrupt) reason and so he acts without regret.

To reiterate an earlier point, if the vicious man of Book VII were to experience conflict, his character would veer towards moral weakness. And if this happened the moral typology with which Aristotle begins Book VII would be disrupted. There are, he says, three distinct character types that ought to be avoided: “vice (*kakia*), moral weakness (*akrasia*), and brutishness (*thêriotês*).” Each of them finds a complement on the positive side of the ledger: namely, virtue (*aretê*), moral strength (*engkrateia*), and superhuman (*huper hêmas*) virtue (1145a16–19). It is in securing this set of opposites or ordered pairs that Aristotle renders the vicious man as having a soul that, like the virtuous, is harmonious. Both characters are free of the psychological conflict experienced by the morally weak and the morally strong.

To close this section with an example: a vicious man may unjustly strike someone in anger. Such an act would be as blameworthy as it is frequent. At other times, however, he strikes not because he has lost his temper, but only because he feels a mild urge and sees nothing wrong with assault. He may even do so without feeling any emotion whatsoever, but simply as “a matter of principle.” In each case nothing in him says he should refrain and so he feels no regret. Unlike most people, but like the virtuous, his internal life is tranquil. This is what makes the vicious man so chilling. He is the natural born killer who is bad to the bone; a blank-eyed monster who neither believes nor feels that he has done anything wrong, and cares not a whit about being good.

PART TWO: THE VICIOUS MAN OF BOOK IX

A different picture of the vicious emerges in Book IX.4. Aristotle here argues that because his relationship to himself is isomorphic with that

between friends, a virtuous man can, at least metaphorically, be a friend to himself. A friend wishes for and does what is good for the sake of his friend; he spends time with, makes the same choices as, and shares the same feelings as his friend. "And each of these relationships belongs to a good (*epieikês*) man with respect to himself" (1166a10). The virtuous man wishes for and does what is good for himself, he enjoys his own company, and shares his own feelings with himself. He is "of one mind with himself and strives for the same things with all his soul" (1166a13). He is without regret "because for him the same thing is always painful or pleasurable; he does not experience one thing as pleasurable at one time, and another thing at another time" (1166a28–29). In sum, the virtuous man's soul is harmonious as well as excellent, and as a result he both can and should find himself endearing and thus become "a friend to himself" (*philauton*: 1169a12).

By contrast, the soul of the vicious man "is in conflict, and on account of being vicious (*dia mochthêrian*), when he is restrained part of him is in pain, part is pleased; one side pulls this way, the other that, as if he is being torn apart" (1166b20–23). Such a man cannot possibly become a friend to himself because his soul is not sufficiently stable to receive such friendly feelings. Most tellingly, "the vicious (*phauloi*) are full of regret" (1166b25). Their souls are infected with distasteful memories of their many bad actions, they can identify nothing endearing within themselves, and so in order to find distraction "they flee from themselves" (1166b14) into the company of others. They come to hate their own lives and ultimately may even "do away with themselves" (1166b13).

Clearly, the Book IX account of the vicious man differs sharply from that found in Book VII, for he is no longer the mirror-image of the virtuous. In other words, he no longer has a harmonious soul. Instead, the Book IX description comes very close to that offered of the morally weak man in Book VII. Aristotle admits as much when he says that vicious men "like the morally weak, are in conflict with themselves" (1166b7–8).

This shift represents what can be termed a "normalization" of the vicious, for the morally weak man of Book VII, to whom the vicious is likened in Book IX, is someone familiar and recognizable. Indeed, most of us are more or less like him. We battle against desires and emotions we know we ought to resist. Sometimes we lose. Most important, the morally weak, like the morally strong, experiences the sort of internal conflict that seems basic to human experience. By contrast, both the vicious and the virtuous characters of Book VII are harmonious beings. The latter desires only what he should desire, does nothing wrong, suffers no temptations, functions smoothly, and feels only pleasure in the

doing of right actions. As such, he may well be, as some commentators have suggested, more of an ideal type than a person we might actually bump into on the street. Annas takes this line. The fully virtuous man, she argues, “functions as a normative ideal even if never met with in real life.”⁹ Concomitantly, the vicious man of Book VII is a negative extreme. He experiences neither conflict nor regret; he engages in no internal struggle; his “ruling principle” has been destroyed and so inside he is morally dead. Because he does not care about being good he is frighteningly unrecognizable.

In Book IX the vicious man has been normalized in that he is no longer remote, ice-cold, and vaguely terrifying. Instead, he experiences his life in a way we both recognize and find appropriate: he suffers.¹⁰ He hates himself, and is haunted by his own internal Furies. As such, he suffers precisely what we take to be his just due: he punishes himself and ends up being miserable and alone, a fate he has brought upon himself.¹¹ This description of him as self-lacerating and even self-punishing offers a welcome relief. Justice has been served.

PART THREE: A FORGIVABLE INCONSISTENCY

There are various ways of explaining the two different accounts Aristotle offers of the vicious man. The most straightforward is simply to say that they are inconsistent and leave it at that. This is Bostock’s view: “the claim that the wicked suffer from a perpetual inner conflict . . . is not consistent with Aristotle’s usual view.”¹² Annas concurs: the IX.4 account, she says, “does not fit happily into Aristotle’s *Ethics* where he is at pains to distinguish the wicked man from the conflicted weak-willed man.” Annas supplements her reading with what she takes to be an “obvious explanation” for the inconsistency: IX.4 “was written earlier, perhaps with [Plato’s] *Lysis* specifically in mind.”¹³

Rather than accuse Aristotle of simply contradicting himself, or invoking the *deus ex machina* of chronology, Brickhouse has a more interesting story to tell. In his essay “Does Aristotle Have a Consistent Account of Vice?”, he first presents the evidence supporting the charge of inconsistency. He acknowledges that in Book VII the vicious “pursue their respective goals without strong appetite” and thus “enjoy a harmony between what they find pleasant and what they take to be good”—and as a result feel no regret—while in Book IX.4 “Aristotle draws a picture of the vicious soul that could not be more different from the psychically stable and harmonious virtuous soul.”¹⁴ Nonetheless, he argues that this is but an apparent inconsistency under which lies a coherent account.

Brickhouse claims that while it is impossible for the vicious man to act from a settled and harmonious disposition and to be conflicted at the same time, there is no reason he cannot “act from choice and be conflicted at different times.”¹⁵ This logical possibility opens the door for a kind of developmental story. To explain by example: a man might begin his career of vice by regularly and systematically pursuing his desire for pleasure. In the early stages of his doing so he may carefully plan to earn a great deal of money, which he will then spend in order to fulfill his desires. His desires, however, gradually get the best of him. This is because, as Aristotle puts it, desire, like a growing child, naturally increases and thus “the desire for pleasure is insatiable.” As it becomes ever stronger it will eventually “drive out reasoning” (1119b1–10). The strategic plan for money-making will go up in smoke, and then the vicious man will suffer the regret described in IX.4. In other words, he will punish himself for not having been sufficiently methodical in his pursuit of vice.¹⁶

This solution has much to commend it. However, in addition to the fact that there is no explicit textual support for such an “episodic” or developmental account, it has other problems.¹⁷ Brickhouse maintains that the vicious man of Book IX regrets not having been successfully vicious. But the language of self-loathing to describe him is too strong for this. The vicious are inauthentic; they consort with others only in order to flee themselves. They cannot sit still, for their own memories are too hard to endure. They find nothing lovable (*ouden philêton*: 1166b17) within themselves. Their souls are in violent conflict (*stasis*) with themselves, and so they may even wish to “do away with themselves” (1167a13–19). This does not sound like a man punishing himself for being a failure at the pursuit of vice. Instead, it better describes someone regretting the terrible wrongs he has done.

A second problem: Brickhouse puts significant emphasis on the ever-expanding nature of desire, which he locates as the engine of the vicious man’s ultimate wretchedness. As already noted, however, a striking element of Aristotle’s description of the vicious in Book VII is precisely the absence of strong desire. A genuinely intemperate man, as opposed to one who is morally weak, pursues excessive pleasures, but does so “while not desiring them” (1148a18).

Pace Brickhouse, then, the two accounts Aristotle offers of the vicious man are, just as Bostock and Annas maintain, inconsistent. The inconsistency is, however, “forgivable.” To explain what this means, a comparison with a legal notion is useful. In the law, *prima facie* evidence is that which is sufficient to raise a presumption of fact and to demand that the fact in question be rebutted. Analogously, because inconsistency

should typically be avoided in a good argument, it constitutes *prima facie* evidence of a philosophical flaw and therefore requires an explicit argument to exonerate it. Aristotle's treatment of the vicious meets this requirement. His inconsistency should be forgiven because, precisely in being inconsistent, it accurately captures something essential about the phenomenon of viciousness. His two accounts truthfully articulate the conflicting ways in which we experience, process, or simply cope with it.

In Book VII, the completely vicious man who experiences no internal reprimand initially presents himself to us as repulsive and nearly incomprehensible. As decent human beings, we hesitate to acknowledge that people like him actually exist. Even as he stands before us such a man seems impossible. We recoil at his tranquility and long to see it shattered. We want him to own up to and feel pain at what he has done. We want him to punish himself as he deserves, and to suffer as his victims have suffered. This is precisely what happens in Book IX. Here the vicious man does feel enormous regret and so we are able to recognize and possibly even pardon him. Recall that "pardon" translates the Greek *suggnômê*, a noun derived from the verb compounded by the prefix *sun*, "with," and *gnônai*, "to recognize" or "to know." *Suggnômê* could also be rendered as "acknowledgement," "fellow-feeling," "a lenient judgment," "allowance" and even "forgiveness."¹⁸ Only if a vicious man regrets what he has done can we, who know he has done wrong, know he is not entirely unlike us. Aristotle's presentation of this picture of the vicious man in Book IX, however inconsistent it may be with his description in Book VII, thus completes his account of the phenomenon of vice.

An example taken from an entirely different sort of text can help illuminate this thesis. In Book XI of Homer's *Odyssey*, Odysseus tells the story of his journey to Hades. On the one hand, he offers no more than a fantastic tale of life after death. On the other hand, his story is a vividly symbolic, and stunningly accurate, description of the human consciousness of the dead. To explain, consider first Odysseus' encounter with his mother. He sees her; she is present to him and she talks to him.

So she spoke, but I, pondering it in my heart, yet wished
 To take the soul (*psuchên*) of my dead mother in my arms. Three
 times
 I started toward her, and my heart was urgent to hold her,
 And three times she fluttered out of my hands like a shadow
 Or a dream. (XI.204–208)¹⁹

Odysseus asks his mother whether she is but an "image" (*eidôlon*: 213). She explains that death

is only what happens, when they die, to all mortals.

The sinews no longer hold the flesh and bones together,
 And once the spirit has left the white bones, all the rest
 Of the body is made subject to the fire's strong fury,
 But the soul flitters out like a dream and flies away. (219–222)

The dead are “strengthless” (*amenêna*: 29) or “fleeting;” They have no “force” (*is*) nor is there “any juice (*kikus*) left” (393) in their limbs. They are “senseless” (*aphradees*) and are “mere imitations (*eidôla*) of perished mortals” (475). Hades is thus a place entirely “without pleasure” (94), without life. No wonder, then, that Achilles utters his famous lament:

O shining Odysseus, never try to console me for dying.
 I would rather follow the plow as thrall to another
 Man, one with no land allotted to him and not much to live on,
 Than be a king over all the perished dead. (487–491)

The poet shows that death is near to nothingness, and that the “shades” are closer to memories, dreams and images held by the living than they are to substantial entities that exist on their own. Indeed, Odysseus's encounter with his mother, who is both present and absent, depicts with pinpoint accuracy just what it is to imagine or remember someone who is gone. Just as Parmenides reminds us that we cannot think non-being as non-being, nor the absent as absent, so too we can never quite imagine the dead as dead.²⁰ To remember or think or dream of someone dead is to bring them back to life in our minds; it is to make them present to ourselves. In fact, because a dream is often more vivid than waking consciousness, those who are gone can feel utterly real in the dream. And so like Odysseus, we may try to embrace them. And like Odysseus, we will fail, because the dead are not really there at all.

But this picture of the nothingness of the “senseless” dead is not consistently maintained in Book XI. First, Odysseus keeps the dead away from his pool of blood by threatening them with his sword (45–50). Second, villains like Tityos, Tantalos, and Sisyphos receive punishments for their crimes (576–600). Neither of these two notions can be perfectly squared with the otherwise shadowy and insubstantial picture of the dead. After all, the dead should not fear dying and if Hades is a place where the senseless dead feel no pleasure, it is hard to see how they could feel the pain of punishment.²¹ More specifically, how could Tantalos be “in lake water that came up to his chin, and thirsty” (583) if, as Odysseus' mother says, the dead have no bodies left?

To summarize: the overwhelming impression one gets of the dead in Book XI is that they are virtually nothing, mere shadows. Indeed, this utterly grim conception of death is integral to the Homeric concept of glory. For the hero is required not only to perform great deeds, but to do so with full knowledge that when he dies nothing will remain of him

but the stories told by others to celebrate his courage.²² But Homer is not entirely consistent. He reanimates Sisyphos and Tantalos in order to make sure they suffer what they deserve, and conceives of his shades as fearful of Odysseus' sword. It is as if he were unwilling or unable to sustain the notion of death as sheer nothingness, and so he allows some small measure of vivacity to continue in the next world, even though this contradicts his fundamental conception. It is arguable, however, that in doing so the poet is being truthful. Sheer nothingness is impossible to conceive. We crack and cannot sustain a vision of such emptiness. In Book XI this is especially so when thinking of evil-doers like Tantalos. We want them to live on so that they can receive the punishment that they deserve. In this fashion, Homer's inconsistent depiction of Hades captures accurately our own tenuous grasp of death.

One might think that inconsistency of this sort is more forgivable in fiction than it is in philosophy. Generally this may be true. But not if the goal of the philosopher is to save a certain kind of phenomenon. Aristotle's inconsistent account of the vicious is such a case. Does the vicious man crack under the pressure of his own wrong-doing and finally end up miserably self-conflicted? Who knows? But if he does not, he becomes a monster whose very existence is too difficult to acknowledge. He is too much for us to bear or admit into our ranks. And yet he still has eyes, and even if they are blank we see them as openings to a soul. We want, at times even expect, those eyes to well up with tears, and for the monster to be restored to humanity. This is the elusive and problematic way in which the vicious show themselves to us. Our encounter with them is baffling and itself is not entirely consistent. As a result, Aristotle's own inconsistency is not only forgivable, but has much to commend it. It is neither a lapse in logic nor the product of an earlier period of his thinking. Instead, it is his honest rendition of our troubled attempt to think through the reality of viciousness.

There is an additional sense in which Aristotle's treatment of the vicious may suffer from inconsistency. Recall the moral typology with which Book VII begins. On the negative side appears moral weakness, vice, and brutishness. The last item, brutishness, is the opposite of "superhuman" virtue. It stands, Aristotle says, "outside the limits of vice" (1148b34–35). His examples of it include the cannibal, the woman who tore open the stomachs of pregnant mothers and devoured fetuses, and the slave who dined on his comrade's liver (1148b20–26). These creatures are beyond the boundaries of moral consideration (1148b34–49a1), and their savagery is so extreme that it requires a special explanation: they must be somehow damaged, mad, or ill, or perhaps they suffered sexual abuse as a child (1148b27–31). As such, punishment or any form of moral

therapy would be meaningless to them. They are more like rabid dogs than morally conscious human beings.

A brute is beyond the pale. But the vicious man, one bad through and through, one who does terrible things as a matter of principle and suffers no regret, is also regularly called a "monster," as he was above. But if this description is accurate, then he is not really a human being, and hence should be classified as brutish rather than vicious. Once again, the account is unstable. Aristotle's typology, apparently composed of six fixed and discernibly different moral categories, may thus be more porous than one might wish. But to reiterate the key point of this paper: the vicious man is elusive. It is difficult to affirm his existence, to recognize him, even as he stands before us. This difficulty is acknowledged by the shift from the Book VII account to that found in Book IX, in which the vicious man, having become regretful, is thereby "normalized" or "humanized." The same difficulty is implicitly acknowledged in the moral typology, where the temptation is felt to describe the man without regret as a "monster," and thus as brutish rather than vicious. In other words, the temptation here is to de-humanize the vicious; to describe him as a psychopath, as damaged goods, as less than fully human.

Both the inconsistency of the Book VII and IX accounts, as well as the instability of the moral typology, reveal the intrinsic difficulty of conceiving of a vicious human being. While these difficulties are undoubtedly present in the *Nicomachean Ethics* they should not be construed as evidence of Aristotle's philosophical sloppiness. Instead, they show, yet again, his remarkably faithful treatment of the phenomenon.

PART FOUR: CONCLUSION

The preceding section should provoke a question: is Aristotle offering an objective account of what the vicious man himself is really like, or is it rather an analysis of how we struggle to comprehend such a man when he presents himself to us? In other words, does the vicious man really become wretched and self-hating, or is this closer to a description of the way we would feel were we to do something truly bad? Perhaps we wish or need to believe that the vicious man experiences the same sort of regret we would feel.

The first-person plural pronoun that has repeatedly been used above, and throughout this paper, helps to answer this question. Aristotle makes it clear that "we" who study ethics and so read the *Nicomachean Ethics* are decent people. For only someone who already cares about being good, and actively tries to be so, can and will study ethics. In Aristotelian terms, "the one who will adequately study what is fine and just and political matters generally must have been brought up

in fine habits” (1095b4–6). People like us will never know what makes the truly vicious man tick. Because he does not share in our most basic mode of caring he is located at too great a distance from us; he is thoroughly unlike us. He seems impossible, he ought to be impossible, and yet he stands before us. Some measure of distraught mystery will thus accompany our encounter with him.

This near contradiction is captured by the inconsistent and yet complementary accounts of Books VII and IX. In tandem they do justice to the phenomenon of vicious man, to the way he shows himself to us as students of ethics. Aristotle gives us a truthful account of how we who are not vicious struggle to comprehend a basic and awful human possibility which is not, and cannot be, fully intelligible to us.

Early in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle reminds us that the same degree of “precision” is not to be expected in all areas of theoretical inquiry. Indeed, “it is the mark of an educated man to seek just so much precision in each kind of subject as the nature of the subject matter allows” (1094b24–25). An account is “sufficient” if it achieves the level of “clarity” appropriate to its subject matter. Because ethics studies the “fine and the just,” and the practical lives of actual human beings, it cannot achieve the high level of “precision” that is rightly expected from a mathematician who studies purely abstract entities. Thus, when the subject matter is the vicious, mathematical certainty is not only an unrealistic goal, but a seriously mistaken one. Therefore, even if inconsistency is *prima facie* unacceptable in philosophical argument, and thus always requires an explicit exoneration or justification, in the case of Aristotle’s treatment of the vicious it is not only forgivable, but illuminating.²³

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NOTES

1. I will use “man” and the masculine pronoun throughout this paper only in order to imitate Aristotle’s own linguistic practices.

2. For an argument that, at least in what became the standard sense of the phrase, Aristotelian science does not “save the phenomena,” see A. Kosman, “Saving the Phenomena: Realism and Instrumentalism in Aristotle’s Theory of Science,” in *Aristotle and Contemporary Science*, ed. D. Sfendoni-Mentzou (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2000), pp. 54–72. For arguments closer to my own, see M. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness* (Cambridge: Cambridge

University Press, 1986), pp. 240–263, and K. Pritzl, “*Endoxa* as Appearances,” *Ancient Philosophy*, vol. 14 (1994), pp. 41–51.

3. The Greek text of the *Nicomachean Ethics* is I. Bywater's (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962). Translations are my own.

4. For a thorough discussion of this issue, see S. Broadie, *Ethics with Aristotle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 274–287; N. Dahl, *Practical Reason, Aristotle, and Weakness of the Will* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984); and D. Davidson, “How is Weakness of the Will Possible?” in *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), pp. 21–43.

5. See J. Gosling, “Mad, Drunk or Asleep? Aristotle's Akratic,” *Phronesis*, vol. 38 (1993), pp. 98–104, for a discussion of the sleep metaphor.

6. Also see 1109b32 where pardon is granted for involuntary actions.

7. A. Rorty, “Akrasia and Pleasure,” in *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*, ed. A. Rorty (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), p. 271.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 272.

9. J. Annas, *The Morality of Happiness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 83. S. Broadie, by contrast, states that “virtue, Aristotle assumes, must be attainable through ordinary decent upbringing”; Broadie, *Ethics with Aristotle*, p. 267.

10. The use of the first-person plural pronoun here may seem excessive or objectionable. It will be defended in Part Four.

11. This is the description Socrates offers of the vicious tyrant in Book IX of the *Republic*. See, for example, 579b–e.

12. D. Bostock, *Aristotle's Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 173.

13. J. Annas, “Plato and Aristotle on Love and Friendship,” *Mind*, vol. 86 (1977), pp. 553–554.

14. T. Brickhouse, “Does Aristotle Have a Consistent Account of Vice?” *Review of Metaphysics*, vol. 57 (2003), p. 9.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 23.

16. T. Irwin, in *Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1999), p. 292, argues along these lines.

17. Brickhouse acknowledges that Aristotle does not make this explicit. Brickhouse, “Does Aristotle Have a Consistent Account of Vice?” p. 20.

18. These translations are all found in the standard Greek-English Lexicon of Liddell and Scott.

19. Translations of the *Odyssey* come from R. Lattimore's translation, *The Odyssey of Homer* (New York: Harper, 1991).

20. I refer to Parmenides' fragment #4.

21. It is equally difficult to square the picture of the shadowy, senseless dead with the Elysium Fields. As my colleague Steve Esposito informed me, this is mentioned only once in Homer, at *Odyssey* IV.561–69, where Proteus describes to Menelaos the idyllic existence that awaits him in the afterlife.

22. For a thorough discussion of this theme, see S. Schein, *The Mortal Hero: An Introduction to Homer's Iliad* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

23. The original idea for this paper was developed through an extended conversation with Anna Lännström. It was initially presented to a meeting of the Graduate Students of the Department of Philosophy at Boston University. I am especially grateful for the probing questions asked by Alice MacLachlan, Tim Brownlee, Franco Trivigno, Ingvild Torsen, and Stefan Cojocar. Thanks also to David Glidden for his many helpful suggestions.