

Aristotle's Alleged Ethical Obscurantism

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Aristotle's audience ... is explicitly a small leisured minority. We are no longer faced with a telos for human life as such, but with a telos for one kind of life which presupposes a certain kind of hierarchical social order ... All Aristotle's conceptual brilliance in the course of the argument declines at the end to an apology for this extraordinarily parochial form of human existence. At once the objection will be made: this is to judge Aristotle against the background of our values, not of his. It is to be guilty of anachronism. But this is not true. Socrates had already presented an alternative set of values in both his teaching and his life; Greek tragedy presents other, different possibilities; Aristotle did not choose what he chose for lack of knowledge of alternative views of human life. How, then, are we to understand this union in the Ethics of philosophical acumen and social obscurantism?

Alasdair MacIntyre¹

Alasdair MacIntyre's reaction to Aristotle's *Ethics* is a typical one. Many modern readers of this work come away with a sense of discomfort. When pressed to put this discomfort into words, what often emerges is a charge to the effect that Aristotle's ethical theory is inherently morally conservative—not only in the sense that it reflects the mores of a particular parochial form of society, but also in the sense that it lacks the resources to critically reflect upon the presuppositions of that form of society. These readers take Aristotle's ethical theory to leave no room for something upon which 'we moderns' have learned to place a pre-eminent value: namely, the need to subject any merely inherited scheme of values to a process of rational criticism.

The worry that Aristotle's ethical theory is blind to the need for reflective criticism surfaces again and again in contemporary com-

¹ Alasdair MacIntyre, 'Aristotle's *Ethics*', in *A Short History of Ethics* (Macmillan, 1966), p. 83.

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mentaries.² Even commentators who believe that Aristotle's ethics contains the resources for being able to supply a fully adequate response to this charge feel obliged to concede that, at certain junctures, his writings appear to invite the charge.³ Closer inspection reveals that this charge has a number of different sources and that there is, in fact, little agreement among Aristotle's critics as to precisely what it is about his ethical theory that leaves him open to such a charge. This complicates the task of a would-be defender of Aristotle. No attempt will be made here to offer an exhaustive response to all the myriad forms this charge has taken. What I shall do instead is attempt to identify two of the more compelling ver-

² Among those commentators who find Aristotle guilty as charged are: Jonathan Barnes (See 'Aristotle and the Methods of Ethics', *Revue internationale de philosophie* (1980), **34**, pp. 409–511); S. A. Grave (See *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Macmillan, 1967), Vol. II, pp. 157–8); Barbara Herman (See 'Making Room for Character', in *Aristotle, Kant, and the Stoics*, Engstrom and Whiting (eds.), (Cambridge, 1996)); Susan Okin (See *Women in Western Political Thought* (Princeton, 1979), esp. pp. 73–4); and Bernard Williams (See *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Harvard, 1985), esp. pp. 38–9). This line of thought is well expressed by Williams, who writes:

Aristotle ... gives an account of moral development in terms of habituation and internalization that leaves little room for practical reason to alter radically the objectives that a grown-up person has acquired. (op. cit., p. 38).

³ Commentators who meet this description fall into two categories: (1) those who think that Aristotle himself may not have been fully cognizant of the fact that his ethics, *properly adumbrated*, contains the resources for answering this charge, therefore Aristotelian ethics is not open to the charge, though Aristotle's actual articulation of it might be, and (2) those who think that Aristotle himself already held such an Aristotelian view. Commentators who belong to the former category include: Sabina Lovibond (See 'Aristotelian Ethics and the "Enlargement of Thought"', in *Aristotle and Moral Realism* (UCL Press, 1995)); and John McDowell (See, e.g., 'Eudaimonism and Realism in Aristotle's Ethics', also in *Aristotle and Moral Realism*, esp. p. 215, *Mind and World* (Harvard, 1994), esp. pp. 80–81, 'Two Sorts of Naturalism', in *Virtues and Reasons*, Hursthouse, Lawrence and Quinn (eds.), (Clarendon, 1995), esp. p. 171, 'Deliberation and Moral Development in Aristotle's Ethics', in *Aristotle, Kant, and the Stoics*, Engstrom and Whiting (eds.), (Cambridge, 1996); esp. pp. 31–32). Commentators who belong to the latter category include: Johnathan Lear (See *Aristotle, the Desire to Understand* (Cambridge, 1988), esp. pp. 192–208); Martha Nussbaum (See *The Fragility of Goodness* (Cambridge, 1986), esp. Ch. 8, 'Saving Aristotle's Appearances'); C. D. C. Reeve (See *Practices of Reason, Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics* (Clarendon, 1992), esp. pp. 44–5) and Iakovos Vasilou (See 'The Role of Good Upbringing in Aristotle's Ethics', in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. LVI, No. 4, December 1996, esp. p. 790).

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sions of the charge and, with respect to each, to isolate the misreading of Aristotle's text involved. The first misreading will be shown to derive from a failure to appreciate Aristotle's distinction between virtue of character and practical wisdom. The second misreading will be shown to derive from a failure to appreciate the differences between Aristotle's dialectical method and 'The Method of Common Sense'. The discussion of these two misreadings will occupy the first two sections of the paper. In the third and final section, I try to show that, far from being insensitive to the need for rational criticism, Aristotle, in fact, assigns to such criticism a fully adequate place in his ethical theory.

1. The Cost of Overlooking Aristotle's Distinction between Virtue of Character and Practical Wisdom

One way the charge of moral conservatism has been motivated is by fixing attention upon two features of Aristotle's ethical theory: (1) Aristotle's apparent willingness to treat the judgment of the virtuous person as the standard of correctness⁴, and (2) his claim that the morally educable are those who are able to regulate their behaviour in accordance with the prescriptions of the virtuous person.⁵ When these two features of Aristotle's view are isolated from the larger context in which they figure and placed in immediate conjunction with one another, they can appear to suggest that his theory rests on an impoverished conception of wherein the *standard* of moral correctness consists and an equally impoverished conception of how an individual should go about the task of *acquiring* virtue. It begins to look as if, on Aristotle's view, the judgments of the virtuous person represent a kind of ultimate law, one beyond which there can be no appeal; and that being morally educable is a matter of being merely susceptible to the impress of this law—a matter of merely reproducing the value scheme of one's teachers.⁶

⁴ This formulation is indebted to John McDowell.

1106b36–1107a2 is a passage which is often seized upon in this context. (Unless otherwise indicated, all references are taken from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, The Complete Works of Aristotle, Vol. II, Jonathan Barnes (ed.), (Princeton, 1991).

⁵ See, e.g., 1095b10–13 .

⁶ For an illustration of the sort of charge of moral conservatism discussed in this section, we can look to the example provided by Barbara Herman. As the following passage indicates, Herman sees Aristotle's purported moral conservatism as flowing from his picture of character formation:

However well one is brought up, however complete the internalization of a regulative moral motive, what one will have to know, or how one

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Once the charge of moral conservatism is in the air, it will appear to find reinforcement in Aristotle's insistence upon the role of habituation in moral development. According to Aristotle, if we are to acquire the moral virtues, we must repeatedly practice them⁷ so that, in the end, they become second nature.⁸ Moreover, the process of habituation is complete only when the learner has come to *internalize* what she has been taught. In this case, she will invariably be motivated to do what she has been taught is virtuous. Thus, on Aristotle's view, there will be no gap, no distance to cross, between her understanding of what virtue requires and her desire to meet this requirement. This stands in stark contrast with a great deal of contemporary ethical theory. The modern era is characterized by a steady proliferation of projects (some broadly Humean in inspiration, others broadly Kantian) which aim to supply an answer to the question: 'Why should I be moral?' However, this question only arises if we presuppose the presence of such a gap. Its cogency depends upon the (un-Aristotelian) assumption that the content of what morality requires may be fully available to someone who is in no way moved to meet its requirements. In the context of the charge of moral conservatism, it can seem that the very fact that Aristotle departs from the contemporary tendency to presuppose the presence of such a gap is a sign that Aristotle must be depriving himself of the resources that would allow his view to secure a foothold for rational criticism of the relevant sort. For it can seem as if in elim-

⁷ See, e.g., 1103a16–18 and following.

⁸ See, e.g., 1147a20–22.

may have to rethink one's own values, cannot be predicted. There is thus reason, internal to the moral phenomena, to prefer a characterization of the moral life that supports a certain degree of flexibility in both motivation and judgment.

This seems to me to be a clear point of concern for a neo- or new-Aristotelian conception of character as the basis for moral judgment and motivation. Much moral work can be done by a sensitivity that is both world regarding and motivationally set. Agents are able to determine what is to be done through an appreciation or reading of what is morally salient in their circumstances. As the sensitivity is the judgment side of character, it is the product of upbringing, training, practice, and some amount of reflection. There is no separate question of motivation because moral knowledge is not available without the sensitivity, and the sensitivity is a function, an expression, of a motivational state. What seems to me a matter for concern is the apparent absence, in such a conception of character, of a way to criticize the sensitivity itself—for it to take itself as the object of its own critical regard. [Herman, op. cit., pp. 54–55.]

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inating this gap he is eliminating the logical space in which such criticism must occur if it is to occur at all.⁹

This way of formulating the charge of moral conservatism rests upon a failure to appreciate the role that Aristotle's remarks on the nature of moral education have within the context of his overall ethical theory. Aristotle divides the path to the acquisition of full virtue into two stages: namely, (1) an earlier stage, in which the *basic moral character* of the learner is formed, and (2) a later stage, in which the learner acquires *practical wisdom*. The crucial point to be emphasized here is that the achievement of basic moral character is, for Aristotle, a necessary but not a sufficient condition of the achievement of practical wisdom. Now, the charge of moral conservatism as motivated above invokes material as evidence for this charge which is drawn exclusively from Aristotle's characterization of the first of these two stages: namely, the stage which is concerned with the acquisition of basic moral character. Proponents of the charge tend to provide (albeit in a capsule form) a fairly accurate representation of Aristotle's conception of what is involved in this stage. However, in taking themselves to thereby provide a complete account of Aristotle's conception of moral development, they radically misrepresent Aristotle's view.

A careful reading of the *Nicomachean Ethics* can leave no doubt that Aristotle's view is that virtue of character (the product of stage one, assuming this stage is successfully negotiated) is, in and of itself, insufficient for the achievement of full virtue. He unequivocally states at various points that full virtue requires, not just virtue of character, but also practical wisdom.¹⁰ (For instance, in Book VI we find the statement: 'It is not possible to be good in the strict sense

⁹ Thus, Barbara Herman, for example, in her adducing of the purportedly problematic features of Aristotle's conception of character, alludes to each of the two features of Aristotle's ethical theory mentioned at the opening of this section. But being determined to champion the Kantian difference, she places special emphasis upon the feature discussed immediately above: namely, Aristotle's (seemingly un-Kantian) refusal to locate a gap between the possession of moral knowledge and being motivated to act on this knowledge.

¹⁰ I am here (and throughout the paper) bracketing Aristotle's odious views to the effect that, regardless of the education or upbringing they may receive, due to defects in their nature, some human beings (namely, females and natural slaves) are not candidates for full virtue. Thus, when I use the phrase 'full virtue' in the text, I use it (as Aristotle does) to refer to the maximal ethical achievement of which a person of 'sound nature' is capable. For Aristotle, full virtue, understood in this way, implies the presence of practical wisdom. By contrast, complete feminine virtue, that is, the maximal ethical achievement of which a woman is capable, will not, according to Aristotle, imply the presence (in the woman herself) of practical wisdom (though it will imply being governable by the practical wisdom of another).

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without practical wisdom.¹¹) Any attempt to derive the charge of moral conservatism exclusively from Aristotle's account of the molding of ethical character thus fails to do justice to the full complexity of Aristotle's views regarding our capacity for moral development. It assumes that, according to Aristotle, a good upbringing takes us to the end of the line: by instilling in us virtue of character, a good upbringing suffices to complete our moral development.¹²

¹¹ 1144b30–31. See also, e.g., 1144b16–17, where Aristotle says that 'excellence in the strict sense' involves practical wisdom.

¹² Some of the responsibility for this misreading must lie with Aristotle's method of exposition. At the beginning of Book II, he distinguishes the intellectual excellence of practical wisdom from the moral excellence of virtue of character in such a way as to invite the mistaken impression that the former is external to one's moral (or ethical) development proper. At 1103a14 he writes:

Excellence, then, being of two kinds, intellectual and moral, intellectual excellence in the main owes both its birth and its growth to teaching (for which reason it requires experience and time), while moral excellence comes about as a result of habit, whence also its name is one that is formed by a slight variation from the word for 'habit'.

One reason Aristotle expresses himself in this way is because he is concerned to offer a corrective to Plato's intellectualist account of virtue (according to which virtue just is a kind of knowledge). To this end, he gives special prominence to (and provides a separate discussion of) those preconditions of full virtue (habituation, training, etc.) which cannot be assimilated to the acquisition of propositional knowledge. Doubtless, this passage presents us with a further invitation to confusion—one which would not have been present for Aristotle's contemporaries—because of the difficulties we experience, not only trying to translate, but also trying to grasp the meaning of, the Greek terms 'arete' (often rendered 'excellence' or 'virtue') and 'ethike' (often rendered 'ethical' or 'moral').

On the basis of 1103a14 and similar passages, some readers of Aristotle are misled into thinking that he regards the acquisition of virtue of character as a merely mindless process—as if what one were habituated into was a set of merely behavioral responses (as opposed to an intellectual, or conceptual, capacity to discern certain ethical saliences.) [Sorabji identifies and attempts to counter this misreading in his paper 'Aristotle on the Role of Intellect in Virtue', *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*, A. Rorty (ed.), (University of California Press, 1980), p. 201ff. See especially the section on 'Moral Education', p. 214ff.] To her credit, Herman is completely innocent of this confusion. Thus, she readily grants that in Aristotle's virtuous person sensibility and judgment interpenetrate such that '[ethical] sensitivity is the judgment side of character'. What she misses is that judgment (as the faculty of concepts) also plays a further role in the making possible of full ethical virtue: namely, the role it plays in the acquisition and exercise of practical wisdom.

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Whereas, in fact, Aristotle holds that the most such an upbringing can do is merely to qualify us as candidates for full virtue (where our ultimate success or failure in this regard will turn on our capacity for—and the character of our exercise of—practical wisdom).

Where such critics discern only one, Aristotle himself distinguishes between two distinct excellences: virtue of character and practical wisdom. Aristotle conceives of the acquisition¹³ of these two excellences as belonging to different stages in a full life (with the acquisition of virtue of character belonging to an earlier stage, and that of practical wisdom belonging to a later one).¹⁴ Indeed, whereas virtue of character is an accomplishment of youth¹⁵, practical wisdom is to be found only among older persons.¹⁶ The reason for this temporal separation, however, is that these two excellences represent different stages in the teleological progression of the

¹³ With respect to the acquisition of virtue of character, it is perhaps more apt to say that Aristotle conceives of the *original* acquisition of this virtue as belonging to a distinct stage in a full life because one needs to allow for the thought that, even after one has acquired something which deserves the name 'virtue of character', one's character may yet be further improved (for instance, through the acquisition of practical wisdom). In this sense, one could continue to add to one's virtue of character long after one had originally acquired it.

¹⁴ See, e.g., 1143b8.

¹⁵ In Aristotle's view, virtue of character is the product of a good upbringing. Hence, the stable set of dispositions which such a character represents is not to be expected in a child (whose upbringing is only partially underway). Rather, it should emerge at that time of life which we loosely refer to as 'youth'. (John McDowell has suggested that the relevant notion of youth is that of the period which concludes 'at the point when [one's] parents send him out into the world to make his life.' [McDowell, 'Deliberation and Moral Development', *op. cit.* p. 31.] And it seems to me that this suggestion accords well with the Aristotelian texts.)

¹⁶ In this connection, Aristotle cites with approval the common observation that 'a young man of practical wisdom cannot be found.' He then explains:

The cause is that such wisdom is concerned not only with universals but with particulars, which become familiar from experience, but a young man has no experience, for it is length of time that gives experience. [1142a12–26]

See also 1143b7–14. Here Aristotle says of men of practical wisdom that 'because experience has given them an eye they see aright'.

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unfolding¹⁷ of man's nature¹⁸ (and to progress from the one stage to the other is necessarily the work of many years).

But if practical wisdom and virtue of character represent more and less advanced stages in the realization of full human potential, the next question is: In what sense does the acquisition of practical wisdom constitute an advance over the possession of virtue of character?¹⁹ For present purposes, it will suffice merely to offer the following observation: for Aristotle, the hallmark of the man of practical wisdom—the thing that, above all else, serves to distinguish him from the person of virtuous character—is the maturity of the 'rational principle' within him.²⁰ While this principle remains comparatively undeveloped in the youth of virtuous character, it achieves its full flowering in the man of practical wisdom.

Those critics who charge Aristotle with moral conservatism take his account of moral action to be one in which an insufficient role is accorded to our capacities for rational criticism and rational reflection. But this criticism misses the internal relation that obtains, on Aristotle's view, between the capacity for the exercise of practical wisdom and the maturity of the rational principle. Aristotle considers the exercise of the capacities of rational criticism and rational

¹⁷ My use of the word 'unfolding' here should not be taken to imply that, for Aristotle, the development of man's telos is either (1) inevitable or (2) something that he passively undergoes. As Aristotle makes clear, the development of one's nature requires a good deal of exertion (early on, it requires *inter alia* practice and self-discipline; later, it requires *inter alia* reflection and study). This development also depends upon certain external factors (such as the presence of moral guides or teachers), factors which may well fail to obtain.

¹⁸ In casting the transition between these two excellences as a teleological progression, Aristotle is drawing upon the conception of man's nature which he introduces in the context of the 'function argument' [1097b22ff]. Thus, the man of practical wisdom is the man who fully realizes the 'function' of the human being—he stands at the pinnacle of the arc of human achievement. By contrast, the man of virtuous character (who lacks practical wisdom) has, as yet, progressed only part way along this arc.

¹⁹ I touch briefly on this question below (in section III). However it would be beyond the scope of this paper to provide anything approaching a fully adequate answer to this question. Thus, many of the issues raised by this question must remain unresolved in the space available to me here.

²⁰ This claim draws support from diffuse sources in Aristotle's writings, among which perhaps the two most salient are: (1) Aristotle's linking of practical wisdom with 'right reason' [1144b21], and (2) his identification of practical wisdom as a virtue *of the intellect* (by contrast with virtue of character which counts as a moral excellence). (See the opening lines of Book II.)

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reflection to be among the 'higher' expressions of reason. He takes these capacities to be fully developed only in the man of practical wisdom (as opposed to the youth of virtuous character). The place in Aristotle's ethical theory where a role is accorded to the exercise of such 'higher' rational capacities is, therefore, not in his discussion of the acquisition of virtue of character *per se*, but rather in his discussion of the acquisition of practical wisdom.

As we have seen, in order to convince us of Aristotle's conservatism, the advocate of the charge in this form confines her attention to Aristotle's discussion of the acquisition of virtue of character. Indeed, she proceeds as if the discussion of the further developmental stage of the acquisition of practical wisdom were either simply absent from Aristotle's text or irrelevant to his conception of what the exercise of the capacity for judicious moral response comes to in the fully developed human being. The costs of this interpretative violence should, by now, be quite evident. To summarize: it leads one to mistake an early stage in a complex process of teleological development for the totality of this process. The advocate of the charge in this form is in a position analogous to that of someone who would want to ground the conclusion that a given botanical theory excludes the process of photosynthesis on the observation that there is no mention of this process in the theory's treatment of the germinating seed.

II. The Cost of Overlooking the Differences between Aristotle's Dialectical Method and 'The Method of Common Sense'

While some commentators trace Aristotle's purported conservatism to one or another of the substantive positions which he stakes out within his ethical theory (where his views on moral education would represent one such position), others see it as deriving from his general philosophical procedure. For these latter commentators, what plunges Aristotle into the static waters of conservatism is his adoption of the 'dialectical method'. Of course, how exactly one thinks this charge (that Aristotle's philosophical method entails a substantively conservative moral philosophical doctrine) is to be levelled against Aristotle will depend upon exactly what one thinks his philosophical method is.

Jonathan Barnes is a commentator who shares my desire to see if one can't rescue Aristotle by providing an account of his dialectical method that leaves it invulnerable to such a charge. Barnes considers and attempts to rebut a reading of Aristotle's notion of dialectic which leaves him open to such a charge. I will henceforth refer to this as 'the primary form of the charge'. The problem is that once

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Barnes has completed his defence of Aristotle there is still room for the worry that Aristotle remains vulnerable to a (slightly revised) version of the charge—which I will refer to as ‘the secondary form of the charge’. I will be concerned to argue that Aristotle can only be properly rescued from the secondary form of the charge if one furnishes a more penetrating criticism than Barnes does of the pre-suppositions built into the reading which gives rise to the primary form of the charge. This section will therefore take the following form: I will (1) review Barnes’ rebuttal of the primary form of the charge, (2) consider how Barnes’ reading still leaves Aristotle vulnerable, and (3) conclude by attempting to furnish a reading of Aristotle which does not leave him thus vulnerable.

In Book VII of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, as he is preparing to address the problem of ‘acrasia’ (or incontinence), Aristotle offers this description of his dialectical method:

As in all other cases we must set out the ‘phainomena’ and first of all go through the ‘aporiai’. In this way we must prove the ‘endoxa’ about these ways of being affected—ideally all the ‘endoxa’, but if not all, then most of them and the most compelling. For if the ‘aporiai’ are solved and the ‘endoxa’ are left, it will be an adequate proof.²¹

In philosophical dialectic, we set out the ‘phainomena’ (or appearances). We familiarize ourselves with the ‘aporiai’ (or puzzles) which they present. And, finally, we solve these puzzles in such a way as to preserve the ‘endoxa’.²²

As Jonathan Barnes observes, Aristotle’s dialectical method is often construed as a method of Common Sense—and, so construed, his method is open to the charge of moral conservatism.²³ On the Common Sense reading of Aristotle, the ‘endoxa’ themselves represent the answers to our moral puzzles. Accordingly, the dialectician’s initial task is to sift through, isolate, and arrange the ‘endoxa’. As they stand, the ‘endoxa’ may, of course, exhibit various infelicities. Individual ‘endoxa’ may be vague or ambiguous. And, as a collection, the ‘endoxa’ may suffer from inconsistency. The real work of the dialectician (i.e. that part of his project which is distinct from the gathering together of the ‘endoxa’) consists in the removal of such infelicities. His principal contribution is thus to groom the ‘endoxa’ so that the truth which is immanent in them may shine forth and speak for itself.

²¹ *Nicomachean Ethics* 1145b 2–7. The translation of this passage reproduced above is taken from Reeve, op. cit., p. 34.

²² The meaning of this term will be examined below.

²³ Barnes, op. cit., p. 495.

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The Common Sense reading of the dialectical method involves two significant interpretative components. These are: (1) a specific rendering of the Greek term 'endoxa': namely, as equivalent to 'common beliefs', and (2) a particular conception of how the 'endoxa' function within Aristotelian dialectic.²⁴ The first component of the Common Sense reading is encouraged by the (once widespread) translation of 'endoxa' as 'common beliefs'. The support for this component of the Common Sense reading of Aristotle disappears when one recognizes the patent inadequacy of this translation.

The best way to approach the term 'endoxa' is via the logically more primitive term 'phainomena'. 'Phainomena' are 'seemings' or

²⁴ According to the citations in Barnes' paper, those who read Aristotle's dialectical method as a method of Common Sense include: H. Bonitz, *Index Aristotelicus* (1955, Graz: Akademische Druck- und Verlagsanstalt), 203a27; A. Grant, *The Ethics of Aristotle* (London, 1885), vol. II, 194; J. A. Stewart, *Notes on the Nichomachean Ethics of Aristotle* (London, 1892), vol. II, 123; and H. H. Joachim, *Aristotle—the Nichomachean Ethics* (Oxford, 1955), p. 219.

At least with respect to Stewart and Joachim, I cannot agree with Barnes that they go all the way to adopting a Common Sense reading of the dialectical method. As indicated above, this reading consists of two parts: one having to do with the translation of 'endoxa' and the other having to do with an interpretation of the role allotted to the 'endoxa' within the dialectical method. Both Stewart and Joachim clearly embrace the former part. However, there is no adequate basis for attributing to either an acceptance of the latter.

A more contemporary commentator who could be added to Barnes' list, however, is Susan Okin. In her 1979 publication *Women in Western Political Thought*, Okin offers the following gloss on *Nicomachean Ethics* 1145b2-7:

Aristotle perceives his task as moral philosopher, then, as that of redeeming prevailing moral views and standards from whatever inconsistencies and vaguenesses might mar them. The assumption is that they are far more likely to be right than wrong. Aristotle's ethics is, to a large extent, traditional ethics clarified and justified. Unlike Plato, he does not argue, in dealing with ethics any more than with biology, that the world should be different from the way it is, but starts from a basic belief that the *status quo* in both the natural and the social realm is the best way for things to be. [p. 74]

Similarly, in his article on Common Sense Philosophy in the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Macmillan, 1967), S. A. Grave uses *Nicomachean Ethics* 1145b2-7 as a pretext for enrolling Aristotle among the (conservative) ranks of Common Sense philosophers. (See Vol. II, pp. 157-8.)

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'appearances'. They are, as Reeve puts it, 'things that appear, either veridically or non-veridically, to someone to be the case.'²⁵ 'Endoxa' are, then, a privileged species of 'phainomena'. '[A]n' 'endoxon' is a 'phainomenon' with some additional epistemic weight, weight it can acquire from a variety of sources.'²⁶ Some 'endoxa' gain the relevant additional epistemic weight by virtue of being universally or widely held. Thus, common beliefs count as 'endoxa'. But they are only one variety of 'endoxa'. And Aristotle says nothing to indicate that they are the most authoritative variety. Other beliefs count as 'endoxa' because they are supported by argument. Still others qualify because of the character of the persons who hold them. For instance, the views of Plato and Socrates count as 'endoxa' because of their reputations as thinkers. Similarly, expert opinions and the beliefs of the experienced are 'endoxa'. Naturally, these 'strengthening factors' can coincide and work to reinforce one another, as, for example, when an opinion that is independently one which is widely accepted also happens to be one which is held by someone who is a famous philosopher, one who, moreover, is known to have enjoyed a wide experience of the world.²⁷

In his efforts to distance Aristotle from the conservatism of Common Sense philosophy²⁸, Barnes is rightly concerned to take issue with the Common Sense reading's identification of 'endoxa' with 'common beliefs'. Barnes suggests that a more adequate translation might be 'reputable opinions'.²⁹ However, despite this promising start, the interpretation of Aristotelian dialectic that Barnes himself goes on to endorse retains the second component of the Common Sense reading.

According to Barnes, the basic procedure of (1) garnering an initial set of data, (2) 'purifying' the individual members of the set (by ridding them of vagueness and ambiguity), and then (3) 'refining' the set (by shrinking it so as to remove any inconsistency), is com-

²⁵ Reeve, p. 34.

²⁶ Reeve, p. 37.

²⁷ I am throughout this paragraph indebted to Reeve's discussion of 'endoxa', *op. cit.*, pp. 34–7.

²⁸ When I make claims in this paper about 'Common Sense philosophy', I am relying upon Barnes' depiction of this school of thought. One might have reservations about whether Barnes' portrait of the Common Sense philosopher accurately depicts any significant figure in the history of philosophy (assuming that Dr. Johnson is not such a figure).

²⁹ Barnes, pp. 500–501.

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mon to both Common Sense philosophy and Aristotelian dialectic.³⁰ But this procedure is itself inherently conservative. On the one hand, the philosopher who employs it must remain within the confines of the initial set of data.³¹ The solution to our moral puzzles is taken to consist in a certain subset of the 'purified' initial data.³² Thus, the philosopher may not venture beyond the initial set of data in her efforts to solve these puzzles. For instance, she may not introduce an original insight of her own. Indeed, she is disallowed from so much as adducing (non-original) considerations which she deems relevant to the solution of a puzzle but which fail to appear in that initial set. Thus, she cannot freely exercise her powers of reason in their creative capacity. On the other hand, neither can she freely exercise these powers in their critical capacity. For she is debarred from rejecting or discrediting (either as a whole or in part) any member of the set of 'purified data'—except for the special case in which, for the sake of overall consistency, one member of this set must give way to another.

On Barnes' interpretation, then, the only significant difference between Aristotle's dialectical method and the method of Common Sense is that, while both employ the same basic process of purification and refinement, in Aristotle's case the 'input' submitted to this process is more varied. It includes, in addition to the relevant com-

³⁰ According to Barnes:

Put schematically, Aristotle's method amounts to this: first garner a set of 'endoxa' on the subject in question, call it the set $\{a_1, a_2, \dots, a_n\}$. Secondly, survey the a_i 's for infelicities. Thirdly, remove those infelicities: purify the a_i 's to produce a new set, $\{b_1, b_2, \dots, b_n\}$; select the 'most important' b_i 's; and construct a maximal consistent subset of the b_i 's containing those 'most important' members. Let us call the final set, the end product of the puzzling and proving, $\{y_1, y_2, \dots, y_m\}$: note that m is less than n ; and that each y_i is 'adequately proved'. The investigation is at an end: assembling the a_i 's sets up the problems; puzzling and proving, which turn the a_i 's into b_i 's and then pick out the y_i 's, solve the problems. [p. 493.]

³¹ Thus, according to Barnes' reading of Aristotelian dialectic, 'the "endoxa" *determine* the area of legitimate enquiry'. (Barnes, p. 497, fn. 13, emphasis in original.)

³² That Barnes attributes this (unappealing) view to Aristotle is clear from his reconstruction of Aristotle's dialectical method (as given in footnote 30 above). In addition, however, Barnes foregrounds this particular feature of his reading when he writes that, according to Aristotle:

Once the difficulties are solved—once the original 'endoxa' are purified or emended, and the appropriate consistent subset of them is determined—the truth is to be found, exclusively and exhaustively, in the 'endoxa' that remain. (Barnes, p. 493)

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mon beliefs, a number of different kinds of reputable opinions. Thus, Barnes' effective reply to the question posed at the outset of his paper: 'Does Aristotle's Method, like Sidgwick's, fence us in?' is Yes. On Barnes' reading, Aristotle's method, no less than Sidgwick's, fetishizes its initial starting points (either the 'endoxa' or the 'common beliefs') and prevents us from moving any real distance away from them. Only, in Aristotle's case, our feeling of confinement is less acute because the area enclosed by the fence is larger.³³

In my view, Barnes does not go nearly far enough in his repudiation of the Common Sense reading. In particular, he is led very much astray by his uncritical acceptance of the second component of this reading. Indeed, this dubious inheritance leads him to embrace an account of Aristotle's relation to the 'endoxa' which is as descriptively inaccurate as it is philosophically unappealing.³⁴ In the remainder of this section, I will sketch the outlines of an alternative interpretation—one which better accords with both the relevant Aristotelian texts³⁵ and our convictions regarding what is desirable in a philosophical method.

³³ Another way to characterize the (minimal) distance separating the two readings presently under discussion (i.e. the Common Sense reading and that advanced by Barnes) is to note that what is held constant between the two readings is a picture of Aristotle as extending (what is, to our minds) an undue deference to the 'endoxa'. What changes when we move from the one to the other is merely the category of opinions to which this exaggerated deference is said to be extended. Thus, whereas the one depicts Aristotle as being in thrall to 'common beliefs' the other depicts him as being in thrall to the more inclusive category of 'reputable opinions'.

³⁴ Barnes himself appears to find little or no philosophical merit in the 'Method of Endoxa' he ascribes to Aristotle. One indication of this is given by his comment that 'Aristotle's Method of Endoxa seems to be pernicious and philosophically enervating, for it assumes, depressingly, that the answers to our ethical questions are already at hand, enshrined in the "endoxa"'. (p. 497.) Nothing Barnes says in the rest of his paper goes any way toward dispelling this appearance. Indeed, his formal reconstruction of Aristotle's dialectical method has the opposite effect. For, if this reconstruction is accurate, Aristotle is committed to a supremely demoralizing view: namely, that, in our efforts to address the problems with which moral philosophy is concerned, the best we can do is to 'construct a maximal consistent subset' of the reputable opinions on our topic.

³⁵ In my view, Barnes' interpretation of Aristotelian dialectic is supported neither by Aristotle's descriptions of the method of dialectic (in passages such as that reproduced at the outset of this section) nor by Aristotle's actual practice of this method. Remarkably, Barnes concedes the latter point. Indeed, he explicitly maintains that there is little positive relation between Aristotle's theory of dialectic and his practice of it. [At p. 510 he writes: 'Aristotle's actual philosophizing was not greatly affected by his

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In Aristotle, where the dialectical method comes into play is where there is a conflict among the 'endoxa'. (It is this kind of conflict which generates the 'aporiai' the dialectical philosopher aims to resolve.) But how precisely does Aristotle go about addressing such conflict? On Barnes' view, what he does is to go to work directly upon the 'endoxa' themselves. By clarifying their expression and weeding out the troublemakers, he generates a subset of the original 'endoxa', where this subset, or purified remnant, is itself taken to represent the answer to our initial moral puzzle. Thus, for Barnes, to induce harmony among the 'endoxa' is both Aristotle's immediate as well as his ultimate aim. It is both the alpha and the omega of his task as a dialectical philosopher.

By contrast, as I read him, the existence of a conflict among the 'endoxa' is not itself the problem Aristotle seeks to remedy, though he does believe that where the dialectical method is successful such conflict will be removed. In my view, for Aristotle, the presence of a conflict among the 'endoxa' functions as a kind of signal, where what it indicates is that we do not yet possess an adequate understanding of the phenomenon under consideration (for example, that of 'acrasia'). The point of the dialectical method is to place us in possession of such an understanding, i.e. one which does not give rise to 'aporiai'.³⁶ Once an adequate conception has been achieved,

³⁶ We find textual support for this claim in, among other places, Aristotle's treatment of the problem of 'acrasia'. (Evidence deriving from this context is particularly telling because, while Aristotle's entire corpus contains only a handful of general descriptions of the dialectical method, one of these descriptions—the one reproduced at the outset of this section of the paper—serves to preface Aristotle's treatment of this problem.) What Aristotle actually does here makes clear that, *pace* Barnes, he does not consider himself bound to remain within the confines of the 'endoxa'. In addressing the problem of 'acrasia', Aristotle adduces a number of considerations which go well beyond the 'endoxa'. (These include: (1) the observation about how we can possess a bit of knowledge but not have access to it 'as in the instance of a man, asleep, mad, or drunk', and (2) the claim that the premises of a practical syllogism are different in kind, with the one taking the form of a 'universal opinion' and the other taking the form of a 'perception of particular fact'.) He then uses these considerations to construct his own, original, explanation of how what goes by the name of 'acrasia' is possible.

reflexion on how philosophy ought to be conducted.'] What is perhaps even more surprising, however, is that Barnes makes an heroic effort to make a virtue of Aristotle's purported inconsistency (arguing, in effect, that, given the philosophical merits of dialectic as Aristotle describes it, it is far better that when he sits down to do actual philosophical work he leave his theoretical ruminations behind.)

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however, it should be possible to return to the 'endoxa' and to bring them into harmony with one another.

This, then, is my first point of disagreement with Barnes. In his view, Aristotelian dialectic aims directly at a harmonization of the 'endoxa'. In my view, by contrast, it aims at an adequate understanding of some puzzling phenomenon, a proper understanding of which, once attained, makes possible a harmonization of the 'endoxa'. What Barnes holds to be the sole concern of Aristotelian dialectic, I hold to be one of its eventual benefits—a benefit which is made available through the achievement of its real goal.

I turn now to a further, related point of disagreement. What is at issue here is the question of *how* harmony among the 'endoxa' is to be achieved. For Barnes, it results from a process of subtraction. After surveying the set of purified 'endoxa', one somehow³⁷ determines which are 'the most important'. One then simply drops any member of the set which is in conflict with some member of this protected class. At this point, Barnes says, 'the investigation is at an end'.

As I read Aristotle, by contrast, the task of bringing the 'endoxa' into agreement with one another is a considerably more delicate one than Barnes allows. A good explanation of the phenomenon which has been puzzling us will have a certain resolving power. It will enable us to adjudicate the claims of competing 'endoxa', where previously we were paralysed by our attraction to each. However, it will only be in the exceptional case that this adjudication takes the form envisioned by Barnes. For it will be rare that we decide wholly in favour of one 'endoxon' and wholly against another. In the typical case, we will discover that each has some merit because each has a partial hold on the truth.³⁸

Now, it may be possible clearly to recognize the element of truth proper to each of the competing 'endoxa' only in retrospect—that

³⁷ Barnes says nothing about the considerations guiding this selection.

³⁸ See *Eudemian Ethics* 1235b12:

We must, then, find a method that will best explain the views held on these topics, and also put an end to difficulties and contradictions. And this will happen *if the contrary views are seen to be held with some show of reason*; such a view will be most in harmony with the phenomena; and both the contradictory statements will in the end stand, if what is said is true in one sense but untrue in another (my emphasis).

And the related passage at *Eudemian Ethics* 1216b26:

It would be best that all men should clearly concur with what we are going to say, but if that is unattainable, then that all should at least in some way concur. And this if converted they will do, for every man has some contribution to make to the truth.

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is, only once we are in possession of a satisfactory view of the puzzling phenomenon. In this case, the dialectical philosopher's relation to the 'endoxa' will resemble Kant's relation to the 'reputable opinions' he seeks to harmonize in the *First Critique*. When confronted with the recurring opposition between 'dogmatism' and 'scepticism', Kant does not attempt to resolve the conflict between them by simply dropping one or another of the competing views. Instead, he develops a position which allows him to discover and to delineate the element of truth in each.

To say that a reconciliation of the conflicting 'endoxa' may be possible only in retrospect is not to relegate the 'endoxa' (or to restrict their relevance) to what is sometimes called 'the context of justification'. To be sure, Aristotle believes that if an explanation of an erstwhile puzzling phenomenon facilitates a reconciliation of the 'endoxa', this speaks in favour of its truth. At the same time, however, he also holds that reflection upon the 'endoxa' can spark the discovery of the correct explanation. This can happen when, like Kant, one approaches the 'endoxa' with the conviction that each contains an element of truth which is, however, at present alloyed with an element of confusion. Where the dialectical method is successful, the effort to extract the element of truth and to explain the grounds of the accompanying confusion³⁹ will lead one to discover the correct explanation,

On my reading, then, Aristotle's dialectical method *saves* the 'endoxa' not, as Barnes would have it, by enshrining some of their number as the designated elect but, rather, by examining each with a critical eye and, in so far as this is possible, exhibiting their common ground in the truth. Thus, Aristotle's interest in the 'endoxa' is not that of the antiquarian concerned to guarantee that

³⁹ Regarding the need to explain the cause of error (when it has proven impossible to redeem some part of an 'endoxon' by regarding it as having some grasp, albeit an inadequate one, of the truth) see *Nicomachean Ethics* 1154a22:

Since we should state not only the truth, but also the cause of error—for this contributes towards producing conviction, since when a reasonable explanation is given of why the false view appears true, this tends to produce belief in the true view—therefore we must state why the bodily pleasures appear the more worthy of choice.

And also *Physics* 211a6:

We ought to try to conduct our inquiry into what place is in such a way as not only to solve the difficulties connected with it, but also to show that the attributes supposed to belong to it really do belong to it, *and further to make clear the cause of the trouble and of the difficulties about it* (my emphasis).

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as much of his collection as possible will be preserved perfectly intact. The respect he accords to the 'endoxa' is of a very different character. It requires that he first ask himself what he can agree with in the individual 'endoxa' and that he then go on to show how these different elements of the truth can be accommodated within the correct account of the phenomenon to be explained.

What I have presented here is of course only a partial characterization of Aristotle's dialectical method. Incomplete as it is, however, it should suffice to enable us to mount a defence against the charge that this method is inherently perniciously conservative. As we have seen, what is distinctive about the dialectical method (what earns it the title 'dialectical') is that it works *from* and *back to* the 'endoxa'. Reflection upon the 'endoxa' provides the stimulus for the discovery of the correct explanation. And this explanation is shown to be correct by virtue of its ability to induce harmony among the 'endoxa'. These forms of connectedness to the 'endoxa' do not, however, necessarily make for a vicious conservatism. For, in describing the method, Aristotle places no restriction whatsoever on how close we must, in the end, remain to the 'endoxa' in our efforts to save (what we can of) them. He places no *a priori* limit upon the conceptual distance we may travel in order to arrive at an explanation which will allow us to resolve the tensions which signalled the need for an application of the method in the first place. Thus, the dialectical method itself is not properly characterized as perniciously conservative. A given successful application of the method should prove in the end to be no less—but also no more—innovative or imaginative than the nature of the case requires.

Thus there is a sense in which Aristotle's dialectical method *is* conservative in regard to the attitude it enjoins us to adopt towards the 'endoxa'. But we need carefully to distinguish between this form of conservatism and the obscurantism with which Aristotle is frequently charged. For Aristotle, the 'endoxa' possess good epistemic credentials and, for this reason, they are to be taken seriously. No 'endoxon' is to be thrown out lightly. On the contrary, each is to be carefully tested and we are enjoined to hold on to as much of each as is consonant with attaining a satisfactory explanation of those matters which call out for explanation. The conservatism that is at issue here is of a *methodological* sort. The methodological injunction in question does not place any inherent *a priori* constraints on the possible outcome of inquiry. It merely articulates a constitutive feature of any soundly conducted process of inquiry. William James—not one known for his moral or political conservatism—formulates the feature in question as follows:

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The individual has a stock of old opinions already, but he meets a new experience that puts them to a strain. Somebody contradicts them; or in a reflective moment he discovers that they contradict each other; or he hears of facts with which they are incompatible; or desires arise in him which they cease to satisfy. The result is an inward trouble to which his mind till then had been a stranger, and from which he seeks to escape by modifying his previous mass of opinions. He saves as much of it as he can, for in this matter of belief we are all extreme conservatives. So he tries to change first this opinion, and then that (for they resist change very variously), until at last some new idea comes up which he can graft upon the ancient stock with a minimum of disturbance of the latter, some idea that mediates between the stock and the new experience and runs them into one another most felicitously and expediently.⁴⁰

This form of methodological conservatism—which discourages mere revisionism, or the pursuit of the *outré* for its own sake, placing a premium instead upon the continuity of inquiry—is by no means peculiar to Aristotle and James.⁴¹ Moreover, once the form of conservatism that is at issue here is properly grasped, there remains no ground for equating it with that doctrinal conservatism (sometimes associated with Common Sense Philosophy) which lays down in advance a maxim enjoining us never to inquire in a direction which would require us to depart from some set of sacrosanct beliefs.

III. Conclusion

I want now to return to the question of what practical wisdom adds to virtue of character. In a well-known passage from Book I of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle restricts his intended audience to those who possess (at a minimum) virtue of character. In this same passage, he offers a useful characterization of the contrast between these two excellences:

⁴⁰ William James, 'What Pragmatism Means', in *Pragmatism* (Meridian, 1974), p. 50.

⁴¹ See, for example, Quine's 'maxim of minimum mutilation', as expressed, among other places, in *The Web of Belief* (with J. S. Ullian) (Random House, 1978), where he writes:

[C]onservatism ... is a sound strategy ..., since at each step it sacrifices as little as possible of the evidential support, whatever it may have been, that our overall system of beliefs has hitherto been enjoying. (p. 67)

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[O]ne should have been well brought up in good habits if one is going to listen adequately to lectures about things noble and just, and in general, about political (social) affairs. For the beginning (starting point) is 'the *that*', and if this is sufficiently apparent to a person, he will not in addition have a need for 'the *because*.' Such a person has, or can easily get hold of, beginnings (starting points)...⁴²

Here Aristotle states that only those who 'have been well brought up in good habits' (i.e. those who possess virtue of character) can profit from lectures such as those he is presently embarking upon. He then goes on to describe the contrast between the person of virtuous character and the person of practical wisdom (i.e. the 'phronimos') in the following terms: whereas the former possesses only 'the *that*' of virtuous conduct, the latter possesses in addition 'the *because*'.

When all one has is 'the *that*', what one has is an unthinking—that is, unreflective (as opposed to 'mindless')—acceptance of the ethical outlook one has inherited. By contrast, to advance beyond the 'the *that*' to 'the *because*' is to achieve a comprehending grasp of this outlook. Thus, the transition from virtue of character to practical wisdom involves a specific cultivation of the intellect. To be precise, it involves the intellectual activity of rational reflection. Only this activity can do the work of leading one beyond 'the *that*' to an explanation and justification of this 'starting point'.⁴³

If what one is seeking is a genuine *justification* (and not merely a clever rationalization) of a belief, then it must be possible, at least in principle, that no justification will be found. Rational reflection is not conducted in good faith if it is known in advance by the person conducting it to be guaranteed to issue in complete endorsement of the 'examined' belief. Indeed, we can say something stronger: strictly speaking, reflection which is entirely devoid of critical potential is not what we call 'rational reflection'. To subject a belief to rational reflection is to examine its rational credentials. It is to see whether there are *sound* reasons for holding it. By contrast, when the aim of reflection is simply to prop up a

⁴² 1095b2–13. Translation by M. F. Burnyeat. See 'Aristotle on Learning to be Good', *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*, A. Rorty (ed.), (University of California Press, 1980), p. 71.

⁴³ My reading of this passage is indebted to the seminal work of Burnyeat and McDowell.

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belief by inventing possibly spurious credentials for it, what is involved is a species of sophistry, not rational reflection.⁴⁴

We can see from the 'grammar' of rational reflection that the transition from virtue of character to practical wisdom necessarily involves a certain risk: namely, the risk that a putative component of 'the *that*' will be found to lack a justification. Of course, this lack of a compelling '*because*' needn't reflect upon the merits of the belief in question. It may reflect instead upon our (present) intellectual resources. If we determine, however, that the belief is unjustifiable, we must be prepared either to revise or to relinquish it. Thus, while the rational reflection which is characteristic of practical wisdom may serve to reinforce our 'starting points', it may also serve to undermine them.

What is implicit in Aristotle's early (Book I) characterization of practical wisdom becomes explicit in his later (Book VI) discussion of this virtue. As we have seen, when we examine the logic of Aristotle's early characterization of practical wisdom (as involving an ascent from 'the *that*' to 'the *because*'), it emerges that the exercise of this virtue necessarily involves a potential for criticism. In other words, it emerges that practical wisdom could not serve its function (of rationally legitimating 'the *that*') if it were incapable of demonstrating that one's inherited values (or 'starting points') stand in need of amendment. Now this particular feature of practical wis-

⁴⁴ For Aristotle, to provide 'the because' of a given 'that' is not just to provide something which has the *form* of a rational defence. Rather, it is to provide a true, or satisfactory, defence of the pre-reflective commitment in question. But what are the criteria of adequacy here? What counts, for Aristotle, as a *satisfactory* (as opposed to an ineffectual or lame) defence of a given 'that'? This question cannot be adequately addressed within the confines of this paper. I will, however, offer the following tentative suggestion. It appears that, for Aristotle, one condition that a defence must meet if it is to be deemed satisfactory is that it must be able to survive the testing procedure represented by the dialectical method. In other words, it must have the power to elucidate what has gone wrong in the formation of any reputable opinions (whether these be articulate, or merely implicit in our conduct) which are in tension with it. (In his discussion of slavery in the *Politics*, for instance, Aristotle reveals the inadequacy of a popular justification of this institution by showing how this justification rests upon a confused appropriation of the insight which lies at the heart of his own dialectically sound, but considerably more narrow, justification of it.)

If this suggestion is correct, it will turn out that what practical wisdom requires is a process of rational reflection *which has no terminus*. For the process of testing our intellectual commitments in this way is not one which we might some day complete.

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dom—what we might call its ‘intrinsic critical potential’—reappears in Book VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Only, this time, it is visible at the very surface of Aristotle’s text. In §13 of this Book, Aristotle remarks that the possessor of practical wisdom is able successfully to negotiate the uneven ground (of the field of practical deliberation), whereas those who lack this virtue ‘may stumble badly’ despite their possession of all of the requisite ‘moral qualities’.⁴⁵ The most natural reading of this remark is to read it as saying that practical wisdom enables its possessor to *correct* the unreflective value judgments of the ethically immature.⁴⁶

Aristotle acknowledges the critical potential of practical wisdom not only in his formal theoretical descriptions of this virtue but also in his own practical attempts to embody it. For example, when he subjects the Athenian institution of slavery to the rational reflection required by practical wisdom, he concludes that, as presently constituted, this institution is deeply unjust.

In the *Politics*, Aristotle’s discussion of slavery develops in two stages. In the first stage, he briefly sets out ‘the *that*’ of this institution. Thus, he opens with a quick description of the slave’s legal sta-

⁴⁵ See 1144bl–17. Within his ethical theory, Aristotle countenances a number of different forms of ethical immaturity. The specific form at issue in this passage is that which is exhibited by the individual who possesses ‘natural excellence’ without also possessing practical wisdom. (To possess ‘natural excellence’, for Aristotle, is to possess some moral quality such as bravery or temperance ‘in some sense by nature’.) But I take it that this passage has broader implications which overreach the specific context. Part of what Aristotle says here is that while (some) ‘children and brutes have the natural dispositions to [the moral qualities]’, ‘without thought these are evidently hurtful.’ Here Aristotle gives explicit recognition to the idea that the element of thought which is characteristic of practical wisdom can serve to modify and to correct the dispositions to act of the ethically immature. But there is no reason to assume that Aristotle means to restrict the corrective power of practical wisdom to cases of natural excellence and to exclude it from cases of virtue of character. On the contrary, there is every reason to suppose that for Aristotle the dispositions to act which belong to virtue of character are like those which belong to natural excellence in that both are subject to correction by the lights of practical wisdom. (Heda Segvic’s comments on an earlier draft of this paper have helped me to clarify my reading of this passage.)

⁴⁶ This natural reading is only reinforced if we place the remark in its wider context. In the previous section of Book VI, Aristotle has just argued that practical wisdom is not idle with respect to the determination of one’s ends. On the contrary, it helps to fix the content of one’s conception of what is worthy of pursuit (e.g. what is ‘noble’ or ‘good’). [See 1144a24–36.]

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tus (that of a 'living possession')⁴⁷ and of his function within the household⁴⁸. From here, Aristotle immediately ascends to the question of 'the *because*'. 'But is there,' he asks, 'any one [who is] intended by nature to be a slave, and for whom such a condition is expedient and right, or rather is not all slavery a violation of nature?'⁴⁹ This framing of the question appears to indicate that, for Aristotle, the issue of whether or not slavery can be justified is an open question. In other words, he here appears to be prepared to entertain the possibility that no defence of slavery can be given. Disappointingly, however, Aristotle does proceed to mount a defence (albeit a narrow one) of the institution of slavery.

The measure of whether Aristotle himself in his own practical political proposals was capable of forms of philosophical reflection which are anything but morally conservative should not be whether his proposals strike *us* as revolutionary. What is decisive for this question is how, in their time and place, these proposals would have struck Aristotle's contemporaries. Our abhorrence of Aristotle's attempt to justify any form of slavery at all should not blind us to the fact that, for his time, Aristotle's views on slavery were nothing short of revolutionary. According to Aristotle, *only* those who are 'natural slaves' can justifiably be held as slaves. (A natural slave, on his view, is a human being in whom the principle of reason is deficient such that, while he cannot rule himself, he can obey and anticipate the will of a superior.⁵⁰) In fact, however, the Athenians of Aristotle's day made many persons into slaves without certifying that they suffered from the relevant natural deficiency. For instance, in addition to kidnapping foreigners, they would enslave whole populations of conquered peoples, treating them as spoils of war. And they would consider the children of slaves to be slaves themselves.⁵¹ In Aristotle's view, by contrast, in order to be counted a slave, one had to demonstrate, through one's own manifest actions, that one had a slavish nature.⁵² Thus, had Aristotle's theory of slavery been made the basis of policy in Athens, contemporary practice would

⁴⁷ 1253b32.

⁴⁸ This function being to ensure that the master's other property serves for the maintenance of his life. See 1253b32-39.

⁴⁹ 1254a18-19.

⁵⁰ See especially 1254b21-22.

⁵¹ See Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death, A Comparative Study* (Harvard, 1982), p. 111 and pp. 115-116.

⁵² To judge by his will (as recorded by Diogenes Laertius), Aristotle himself was prepared to free at least some of his slaves if they could demonstrate through their upright behaviour that they merited freedom. See Diogenes Laertius, Trans. R. D. Hicks, Loeb Classical Library, No. 184 (Harvard, 1972), 458-9.

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have undergone radical reform. Certainly, a great number of persons (who were 'slaves' merely by convention) would have been freed. And perhaps others (who proved unable to govern their passions) would have become slaves.⁵³

In this section, I have attempted to show that Aristotle is innocent of the charge of moral conservatism by pointing to two forms of exculpatory evidence: one form derives from Aristotle's discursive characterizations (both abstract and figurative) of practical wisdom, the other derives from an example of his own practical efforts to exercise this virtue. Taken together, this evidence shows that Aristotle is not lacking in sensitivity to the need to subject one's inherited values to rational reflection. On the contrary, he regards the satisfaction of this need as a prerequisite for the attainment of full ethical maturity.⁵⁴

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⁵³ It is interesting to note that, disappointing as it is, Aristotle's theory of natural slavery is far more progressive than is the theory of racial inferiority advanced by some 18th century (and later) apologists for slavery. According to Aristotle, it is unjust to condemn a person to slavery on the basis of their ancestry because, although nature strives to bring like from like, she does not always succeed. (See 1255a39–b3.) Moreover, Aristotle is careful to point out that one's physical appearance is not a reliable guide to the character of one's soul. (See 1245b25–32.)

⁵⁴ I am indebted to James Conant for comments on an earlier draft of this paper.