

Aristotle on Deliberation

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Described schematically, Aristotle's theory of deliberation (*bouleusis*) is immediately familiar as a theory of what we¹, too, would call deliberation: a conscious, rational mental processes deployed by an agent in order to solve practical problems. He thinks, as we do, that deliberation is a form of thought that takes time, proceeds systematically rather than haphazardly, and ends by putting the agent in a position to choose rationally³. Deliberation, for Aristotle as for us, is thought that answers the question, "what should I do?"

We take deliberation to be the most direct manifestation of someone's mastery of practical rationality, and Aristotle does as well: he makes excellence at deliberation the characteristic virtue of the ideally rational agent or *phronimos* (*Nicomachean Ethics* (NE), 1141b10). The *phronimos* is a good person all around, but the virtue that marks him *as* *phronimos* is the fact that he is good at deliberating. Aristotle is also attuned, as we are, to the fact that deliberation does not represent the whole of practical rationality. He acknowledges that much human action⁴—action that may be courageous, generous or just—is produced without recourse to deliberation². Sometimes we know what to do immediately, and we simply act without having to think about what we should do. Like us, Aristotle thinks that we will find paradigm instances of deliberation in 'hard cases,' which is to say, when it is not obvious what a person should do⁶.

In its broad outlines, then, Aristotle's conception of the function of deliberation is akin to our own. This makes it all the more surprising that his conception of the mental operations of the deliberator is not. We understand deliberation as a process by which someone evaluates an action she is considering performing. This evaluation takes one of two forms. The first form is comparison: an agent deliberates in order to select the best among a set of available options. The second is one in which she assesses a single action by way of some (usually moral) rule, having committed to performing only actions that pass the test in question. Evaluations of the first kind

¹ I use a contrast between "our" approach to deliberation and the one I ascribe to Aristotle to ease exposition throughout this paper, with apologies to those readers whose sympathies and intuitions align more closely with the Aristotelian approach than with the evaluative one I ascribe to "us". ³ John McDowell has taken Aristotle's account of deliberation to be less a theory of a certain kind of thought process than an account of the rational structure inherent in action; see also Cooper pp. 9–10; here I follow Price and Segvic (pp.149–153) who conceive of deliberation as a process of occurrent thought, "a plausible sequence of mental acts" (Price, describing both his view and Broadie's). See also Broadie n.11, p.118–9. As Broadie emphasizes, it may nonetheless be possible to use what Aristotle has to say about deliberation to shed light on the rational structure of non-deliberated action. Moreover, it is important to keep in mind Cooper's (p.7–8) point that the deliberation may be performed well in advance of the action. ⁴ Moreover, Aristotle is careful, as we sometimes are not, to make room for rational reaction in addition to rational action; see Kosman for a discussion of the rationality of feeling.

² See especially his discussion of the value of sudden (as opposed to calculated) acts of courage at NE III.8, 1117a17–22. For discussion of the question as to how it is possible for such action to be virtuous, given the connection between deliberation, choice and virtue, see Segvic pp.157–159, and Broadie 78–82. ⁶ We deliberate more in those crafts that have been "less precisely worked out," and more generally, on matters where we are "in two minds" and where "it is unclear how they will in fact fall out." (NE III.3, 1112b5–9)

usually include some consideration of what consequences may arise from the proposed action, where the deliberative import of any potential consequence is tempered by the agent's understanding of the likelihood of that consequence. For instance, an agent might aim to perform the action that is likeliest to maximize the satisfaction of her preferences. The second form of evaluation is associated with Immanuel Kant, and its deployment typically involves less concern with the consequences of an action than with the internal or formal qualities of the action itself. Thus Kant famously concludes that one ought not lie to the murderer at the door, because the action of lying is one that the agent cannot will to be a universal law of nature³. These two forms of evaluation do not necessarily compete with one another: the Kantian deliberator may well fall back on comparative assessment when, for instance, she ascertains that multiple proposed actions are sanctioned by her 'categorical imperative'⁴.

Aristotle does not have an evaluative model of deliberation⁵. Aristotle thinks that the deliberator begins with a goal or target or end, the realization of which is both desirable and difficult: she cannot immediately see how to bring it about. She reasons backwards from this end, working out the process by which she might bring it into being. Drawing the end into the sphere of her own agency, she eventually hits upon something she sees she can do. This action then becomes the object of her choice. Aristotle's agent *evaluates* neither the goal with which she begins her deliberation nor the action in which her deliberation ends. Instead, her deliberation consists in the mental activity of *deriving the action from the goal*.

In this chapter, I will first explain how Aristotelian deliberation works, then contrast it with the evaluative deliberation with which we are more familiar. A familiar worry will arise: given that Aristotelian deliberation is an inquiry into the means for a given end, does it amount to Humean instrumental reasoning? I explain why it doesn't, while acknowledging that Aristotle agrees with Hume about the impossibility of deliberating about ends. Finally, I'll offer an overview of the difference between the evaluative and the Aristotelian approach to deliberation.

I. A Geometrical Model for Deliberation

What is it to derive an action from a goal? Aristotle suggests that a similar form of derivation occurs in geometry:

³ AK4:436–7

⁴ The function of both the Kantian and the comparative model is broader than that of deliberation, since we will not always need to occurrently think through the issues in question; my interest, however, is restricted to the deliberative function of each.

⁵ There has been a tradition of trying to squeeze Aristotle into the modern mold, for an overview of which see Nielsen. A number of more recent commentators, most notably Nielsen herself, have insisted that this will not work. See Calvin Normore (Picking and Choosing: Anselm and Ockham on Choice *Vivarium*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (1998), pp. 23–39), who observes that “it is not crucial to human choice (prohairesis) that the agent be confronted with several means to an end.” (p.25) See also Wiggins p.232.

For the person who deliberates seems to investigate and to analyze in the way we have said, as if with a diagram (and while not all investigation appears to be deliberation, as e.g. mathematical investigations are not, all deliberation is investigation); and what is last in the analysis seems to be first in the process of things' coming about. *NE* III.3, 1112b20-4⁶

Aristotle is here describing a mathematical operation of analysis⁷, which is a tool used by geometers in navigating tricky construction problems. Suppose I am told 'construct a square inscribed in a circle.' If I know how to do this, I will begin by drawing the lines from which the square will arise. That is called the synthesis. But suppose I do not know how to do this. How am I to decide which lines to draw? One thing I could do is begin by analysis, which entails assuming that I have before me the very figure I have been assigned to construct—a square inside of a circle (see figure A1 below) —and reasoning backwards to the way it was been produced. This form of reasoning involves adding elements to the diagram that can be constructed from it, or noticing relationships among its parts that are, in turn, geometrically determined by the assumption of the completed construction.

Here is an illustration of how one might use analysis to solve the problem I just described:

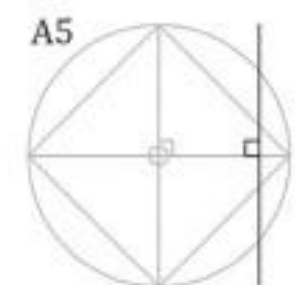
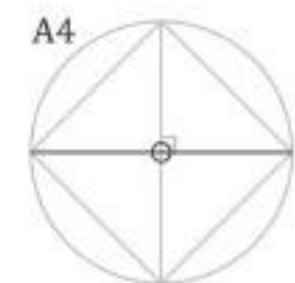
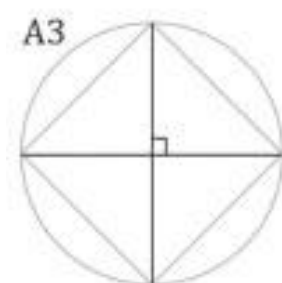
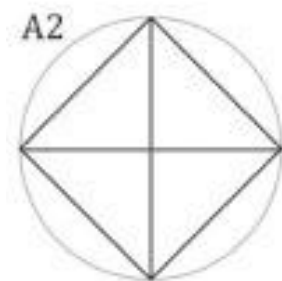
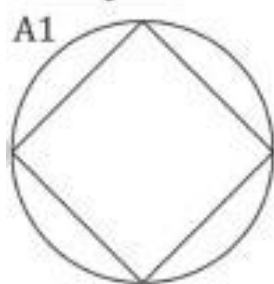
In the first step (A1), we have assumed a square inside of a circle. In A2 it occurs to me that if I had the square's diagonals, I could use them to draw the square. I then notice that the diagonals are at a right angle to one another (A3), and that they intersect at the center of the circle (A4). This focuses my attention on the project of drawing just one of the diagonals/diameters—because, given my ability to draw a perpendicular bisector, I know I can use it to draw the other. At this point, I have come to see that if I can draw the diameter of a circle, I can draw a square inside that circle. But how to draw the diameter? It occurs to me that the diameter of the circle lies perpendicular to the midpoint of any chord of the circle. And now I see that if I draw a chord to the circle, I can construct a diameter (A5). For I can draw the perpendicular bisector of the chord. At this point, something clicks and I have an "aha!" moment: I see that the chord on which the rest of the figure depends is one that I can simply draw on the basis of the circle alone. Elsewhere, Aristotle describes this final moment of the analysis—both geometrical and deliberative—as the work of a form of insight (*nous*, *NE* VI.8, 1142a25). From this point I can reverse the procedure and perform the (synthetic) construction (S1-5).

Let us make some observations about the various forms of competence this reasoning called for. The geometer I was imagining had in her possession some geometrical knowledge. She knew that the line perpendicular to a chord runs through the center of

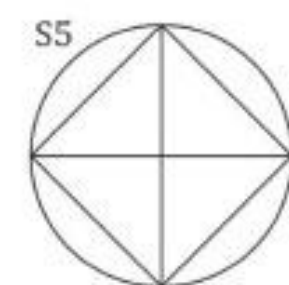
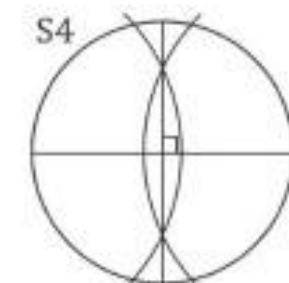
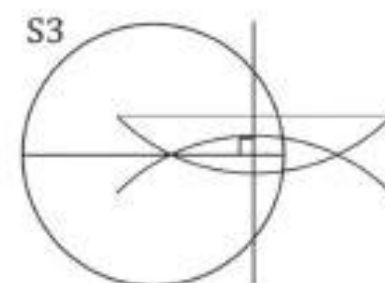
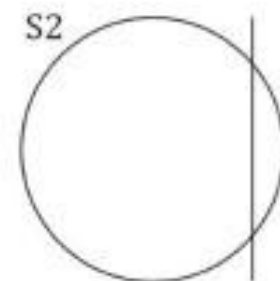
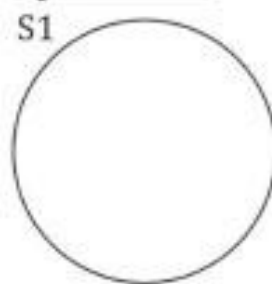
⁶ Translations of the *NE* are from Rowe; other translations of Aristotle are from Barnes.

⁷ This account of analysis draws heavily on Menn, who discusses the distinction (due to Pappus) between the "problematic" analysis I describe here and "theoretic" analysis. The latter is concerned with proofs of given propositions rather than construction problems (p.199).

Analysis



Synthesis



the circle; that the center of a square is the center of the circle in which it is inscribed; that the angles determined by the diagonals of a square are right angles. She also had skills, for instance the ability to construct both a perpendicular bisector of a line segment and the line perpendicular to a line at a given point on that line. She also evidently possessed some expertise in and familiarity with methods of construction: she saw drawing the diagonals in A2 or the chord in A5 as a useful moves in the construction. It takes some experience in geometry to see that the diagonal or the chord are lines from which the requisite figure—the square and the diameter, respectively—could arise.

Analysis offers someone a way to exploit her geometrical knowledge, skills and experience to derive the first step of her construction—the drawing of the chord—from a representation of the figure she is trying to construct. She operates on that figure both by adding (lines, arcs, points) to it, and by noticing relationships that obtain as a result of these additions⁸. In the analysis, she is figuring out how to bring a certain figure into being, and in the synthesis, she actually brings it into being. We can observe this difference in the two sets of diagrams: construction marks (e.g. the arcs in S3 and S4) are only present in the synthesis.

How can we translate this account of geometrical reasoning into a model of practical thinking? In the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle shows us how something like analysis appears in the deliberation of a craftsman:

What is healthy comes into being when the producer has had the following sort of thought: since health is this, then if something is to be healthy, it must have this (for instance, a uniform condition of the body), and if it is to have this, it must have heat. This is how he thinks at each stage, until he leads the process back to the last thing, which is what he can produce himself; and then the motion from here on toward health is called a production...Production is the motion that proceeds from the last stage in thinking. Each of the other things—those in between—comes to be in the same way. I mean, for instance, that if this [body] is to be healthy, its bodily condition must be made uniform. What then, is it to be made uniform? This. [The body] will have this if it is warmed. What is it to be warmed? This. But this is potentially present. And now he has reached what is up to himself. (*Meta. Zeta*, 1032b6-22)

The doctor begins by thinking of his goal, health, and then reflecting on what health is. He comes to some conclusion about what health is, and reasons that *that* (Aristotle

⁸ It is not quite right to say, as Nielsen does, that “the geometrician first identifies its smallest parts and then constructs these. Ultimately, she is able to construct the entire complex figure by breaking it down and constructing its simple constituents step by step.” (ibid., p.401) Quite often, what one needs to construct will not be, except in a very extended sense of the term, a “part” of the original picture (as the chord in my example, or the diagonal line in the example at *Meno* 82–85).

doesn't tell us what), calls for a uniform condition of the body. He then moves to the thought that heating produces uniformity. But applying heat is something he can do—it is “potentially present” not only in the analysis but in the synthesis, just as that the chord is potentially present not only in fig. A1-5, but also in S1. The doctor's reasoning involves both instrumental ‘additions’ to his picture of health, such as the idea that heating produces uniformity, as well as moments where he is examining the relations between its parts, rather than adding to it. The latter forms of reasoning (e.g., “since health is this”) parallel the geometer's observing that, for instance, the diagonals intersect at right angles in A3⁹.

One striking feature of Aristotelian deliberation that emerges from this passage is the fact that it begins with a fixed, given end. In order to do the work of deriving the action, one must hold that end fixed. The end of health sets the problem to be solved, just as the project of constructing the square in the circle does in the geometrical case. This feature—the fixity of the end—is not just a feature of mathematical reasoning or of craftdeliberation, but holds also in case of properly ethical deliberation. This becomes clear in the long discussion of deliberation in *Eudemian Ethics* (EE) II.10, from which I excerpt two key passages:

But the cause or object will come first, e.g. wealth, pleasure, or anything else of the sort that happens to be our object. For the man deliberating deliberates if he has considered, from the point of view of the end, what conduces to bringing the end within his own action, or what he at present can do towards the object. (EE 1227a13-18)

Now about the end no one deliberates (this being fixed for all), but about that which tends to it—whether this or that tends to it, and—supposing this or that resolved on—how it is to be brought about. All consider this till they have brought the beginning of the process to a point in their own power. (EE 1226b1013)

Notice Aristotle's emphasis on the fixity of the end over the course of the agent's deliberation: Aristotle is imagining a person who has as his end wealth or pleasure, and then derives from that end some action he can perform¹⁰. Compare this to the

⁹ We thus have a textual basis for the distinction that is sometimes drawn between constituent means and productive means. One can reason about what the end amounts to, or one can reason about what will give rise to it. This distinction has taken on a special significance extending beyond the study of Aristotle, since constitutive reasoning promises to broaden our conception of instrumental reasoning. See Wiggins p.224, Cooper p. 22, Nussbaum, p.297, Sorabji, p.202. These authors have rightly emphasized the significance, for Aristotle, of the fact that deliberation involves this constitutive element, though they have not always acknowledged the way in which the constitutive and the productive forms of reasoning work together in Aristotle's examples. It is hard to see how we could have the one without the other in a successful case of (geometrical or ethical) analysis.

¹⁰ For discussion of why the fixed end must be something determinate such as wealth as opposed to “the mere unrestricted good, the formal end of practical deliberation,” see Broadie p.233, and n. 51

evaluative deliberation with which we are more familiar. There, what is fixed is the set of potential actions that stand before the agent as options: in order to evaluate whether an action is best overall, or satisfies the moral law, we must know *which* action or actions we are talking about. In order to form what Davidson (p.39) calls an “all things considered” judgment as to what one ought to do, one needn’t in fact consider “all things.” But one does need to close off the space of options, effectively counting whatever set of options one is considering *as* all the options that there are¹⁵. Thus evaluative deliberation operates by fixing the options. Nothing prevents the agent engaged in such deliberation from having in view multiple distinct ends which these potential actions might serve¹⁶.

Aristotle does not understand deliberation as a process of trying to figure out whether a given option is an acceptable option or the best among a certain set of options. Rather, one deliberates about how to bring about an end such as pleasure or money. Aristotle’s deliberator isn’t considering some candidate mode of financial gain, or even assuming that there is such a mode. He says that sometimes what deliberation reveals there is *no* option you can take (1112b25). Then you give up. The work of deliberation is to find the analytic path to a single option, rather than to select between given options.

Aristotle allows that such a search may include comparative reasoning. Consider this passage from NE III.3:

Having set the end they consider how and by what means it is to be attained; and if it seems to be produced by several means they consider by which it is most easily and most nobly produced, while if it is achieved by one only they consider how it will be achieved by this and by what means *this* will be achieved, till they come to the first cause, which in the order of discovery is last. (NE III.3, 1112b15-20)

Aristotle anticipates the possible need for comparison arising during deliberation. But rather than identifying the work of comparing with the work of deliberation, he sees comparison as a (possible) step in the course of deliberation. Moreover, what one compares are not options but rather means that will need to be further determined (“...and by what means *this* will be achieved...”) before they can be chosen. Perhaps the most striking feature of this passage, however, is Aristotle’s nonchalance in the face of the fact that the easiest way to do something is not always or even usually the most noble¹¹.

p.262. ¹⁵ This is not to say that new options can arise in the course of deliberation, but that if they do, the finality of the judgment is thereby undermined, and one must re-fix the set of comparanda to include the new item. ¹⁶ Proponents of the evaluative view may regard the end as fixed, but as formal or indeterminate: happiness, the good, whatever best satisfies my preferences (see n. 14). Some utilitarians may regard the end as both fixed and determinate, e.g., pleasure. Thus the clearest point of contrast with Aristotle will be on the question of the fixity of the options.

¹¹ For an extended argument that Aristotelian deliberation is noncomparative, see Nielsen. However, there is an important passage which seems to suggest the opposite: *De Anima* III.11, 434a5-434a10. In

We can consider the analogous situation in the case of the geometric construction: suppose there is a particularly beautiful way to do a proof, but it will take me more time because, e.g., I will need to go get my compass from the drawer. Aristotle seems to be saying: choose the more elegant one, or the quicker one, whichever! Multiple ways of achieving an end seem to strike Aristotle less as a source of profound deliberative challenge than as an embarrassment of riches. Comparison is an occasional wrinkle of Aristotelian deliberation; by contrast, in the evaluative deliberation familiar to us, comparison typically constitutes the agent's entire deliberative work. For Aristotle, the chief deliberative work is that of finding the means.

This fact about deliberation fits into Aristotle's bigger moral-psychological picture: he posits a division of labor between the intellectual part of the soul (to logistikon), which has the function of deliberating (as well as engaging in theoretical reasoning), and the affective part of the soul, in virtue of which one has feelings and desires (NE I.13). Famously and problematically, Aristotle allots to the affective part the job of providing the ends in the service of which we deliberate. Desire or affect or feeling grasps the end, while deliberation discovers the means (NEVI.12–13)¹². Aristotle, like Hume, denies that we can deliberate about ends. Does that mean that Aristotle, like Hume, relegates deliberation to the discovery of a causal pathway to whatever we happen to desire? Does he hold reason to be impotent? Does he agree with Hume, who says that "Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions" (2.3.3)?

Backwards Reasoning¹³

Hume's theory of motivation allots to reason the role of scouting out a causal link between the subject and her desired object. In his *Treatise of Human Nature*, he says that we "cast our view on every side" in order to seek out "whatever objects are connected with its original one by the relation of cause and effect. Here then reasoning takes place to discover this relation; and according as our reasoning varies, our actions receive a subsequent variation. But it is evident in this case that the impulse arises not from reason, but is only directed by it." (2.3.3) Hume is explicit that he is describing a form of theoretical reasoning discussed earlier in the *Treatise*, namely probabilistic reasoning about causes and effects. One could just as well engage in this reasoning without any desire for the end, and without being in a position to supply the means.

correspondence, Nielsen has suggested to me that she takes this passage to be the vestige of an earlier theory, one revised in the NE, EE and *Meta.* passages I cite here. While I cannot engage in an extended treatment of the passage here, I simply note in passing that I am inclined, instead, to argue that the passage concerns not deliberation but, more specifically, the role of the imagination in deliberation. (It treats not *bouleusis* but *bouleutikē phantasia*.)

¹² For a discussion of the controversy over whether we should (as I do) take these division of labor passages at face value, and a defense of doing so, see Moss.

¹³ Thanks to Tom Lockhart for raising a crucial objection that helped me re-think this section.

The fact that you could do this kind of reasoning without wanting anything and without having any practical capacities indicates a symmetry between the starting point and the endpoint of Humean practical reasoning. The two points are like dots on a piece of paper you are trying to connect. If there are relatively few ways to realize your goal, and relatively many things you are immediately in a position to do, you might start your reasoning from the endpoint, if you have relatively few immediate options, and there are many ways to get to your goal, it will make more sense to start reasoning from your current standpoint.

If Aristotelian deliberation were just a matter of scouting a link between means and ends, then Aristotle would find it natural to describe us as working forward (from what we conceive as possible for us) at the same time as we work backwards (from what gives rise to the desired result). For we would be engaged in a project of matching the causes we can produce with the effects we desire. But Aristotle states explicitly, by way of the comparison with analysis, that deliberation is unidirectional: it moves backwards from the end to the action¹⁴.

For Aristotle, deliberation is an asymmetrical mode of reasoning: it systematically transforms wish, a desire for the end, into choice, a desire for the means as a way of getting the end. (Hence choice, *prohairesis*, is a getting (*hairesis*) of one thing—the means—in place of (*pro*) another thing, the end.) The transformation must follow certain rules, which is why it must proceed in the direction it does. In order to see the work these rules are doing, we must spend a moment reflecting on the kind of object that Aristotle takes an end to be.

Suppose, to take an end suggested in our *EE* II.10 passages, that the deliberator is investigating how to acquire wealth. Aristotle would refuse to describe her as someone who simply aims to “bring it about” that she has a lot of money, any more than the geometer simply aims to “bring about” a drawing that resembles the picture in A1. In order to generate a properly geometrical object, her process of generation must respect geometrical procedure. If she were, for instance, to *trace* the drawing of the inscribed square I produced above, the object she generated would be the wrong kind of square. Instead of constructing a geometrical square, she would have merely drawn a squareshaped mark. Likewise, the ethical reasoner would not be satisfied with bringing about a lot of money in a way that would, for instance, result in her being dead or otherwise unable to use the money.

¹⁴ Thus I disagree with Broadie’s claim that it is the work of deliberation “to convert the agent’s particular situation into the elements of a realised good action.” (p.227) For Aristotle is clear that what gets converted is the *end*, not the situation. I grant, of course, that the agent’s appreciation of her situation must figure in the conversion process (see fn. 22 below), but I believe the assumption that it takes a conception of her situation as a starting point leads Broadie, without textual basis, to import the evaluative model into her reading of Aristotle. For instance, she glosses deliberating as a matter of “considering alternative possible actions each of which presents itself as loaded with its own set of reasons.” (p.227) Notice how this description immediately makes deliberation a matter of comparison as opposed to derivation.

She doesn't just want money, she wants money insofar as it is something good for her. We could call her object "good wealth" but that would be a bit repetitive, in the way that I could have been accused of being repetitive when I spoke, a minute ago, of constructing the "geometrical square." A real square just *is* a geometrical square, just as, according to Aristotle, wealth just is a good thing: he calls it good absolutely [*haplōs*, see references below]. Better to say, by wealth she is referring to an item in the ethical domain, which is to say, some good; just as by the square the geometer is referring to an item in the geometrical domain, which is to say, some ideal figure.

The geometer must take care that each move in the analysis observes geometrical rules, lest his construction devolve into a mere drawing. Analogously, the ethical reasoner must take care to observe ethical rules, lest her deliberation devolve into a mere "bringing about." If she acquires a lot of money at the cost of, say, her life or health, she would not have acquired the ethical object that was her end. This is why Aristotle insists that good deliberation is *not* merely a matter of securing money, but of doing so "as a result of correct reasoning" (VI.9, 1142b16). Aristotle holds that there is a rational procedure for preserving the ethical status of the wealth one acquires that is analogous to the rational procedure for preserving the geometrical status of the square one inscribes. This rational procedure is what he takes deliberation to be.

Aristotle understands deliberation as having the hypothetical¹⁵ structure analogous to the one found in geometrical analysis: *if* I could construct the diagonals, I would be able to construct the square; and *if* I could construct one diagonal, I could construct the other, and *if* I could construct a chord, I could construct the diagonal. But wait: I *can* construct a chord! And you are off. Every step in the analysis is *a move* in the analysis—which is to say, it is *derived* from the previous step. And this is why deliberation is unidirectional: the agent is deriving her action from her end.

We might still wonder, "Why can't the deliberator reason forwards from where she stands at the same time as she reasons backwards from what she wants?" The answer is that such forwards movement could not be a form of ethical reasoning. The fact that the agent is situated at some place or time is not a fact from which anything rationally follows. It is true that her situation makes it possible for her to do some things and not others, but she has no principle for selecting among these in her reasoning: none of them is rationally necessitated, and thus nothing follows ethically from what resources she has at her disposal. From the fact that an agent has such-and-such powers, it does not follow that activating any of them would be good for her. Likewise, the geometer confronting the empty circle can draw many lines, but none of them would *follow* from anything.

Successful Humean instrumental reasoning secures the object of desire—so, in our example, it gives rise to wealth. In Aristotelian reasoning, this is not enough. One must not only secure the object, but secure it through a derivational procedure that ensures

¹⁵ See Menn, 209–215, for the connection between the method of analysis and Plato's method of hypothesis from Meno 86e4–87b2.

the end retains its ethical status—its goodness. This is why Aristotle insists that deliberation move backwards. And this insistence, in turn, implies a deeper difference in how Aristotle and Hume understand practical reasoning. In the next section, I will explain how Aristotle’s analytic conception of deliberation gives rise to his view that vicious people can’t reason well.

Aristotle’s account of the rational transformation of wish into choice provides an excellent diagnosis of why, in fairy tales, wishes so often go awry: if your wish “comes true” without your doing the work to make it come true, that means you aren’t around to guide the wished-for end, rationally, into existence. It’s not surprising, then, that we so often get, as they say, a slip twixt the cup and the lip—you get to marry the princess, but she’s a jerk; you get to live forever, but as a grasshopper; you get a delicious hamburger but, to borrow John Searle’s example, it’s encased in Lucite. If you let the end out of your hands and entrust it to a genie or magical force, there is no guarantee it will *stay* good. That’s the job of practical reasoning. Perhaps we can even say that the basic moral of wish/genie/fairy godmother stories is this Aristotelian one: you can’t acquire the good for you without reasoning your way to it yourself.

Why Can’t the Vicious Person Reason Well?

Unlike Hume, Aristotle severs the question of whether reason is, from the question of whether it ought to be, a slave of the passions. In the *Topics* he says, “the reasoning faculty does not always command, but sometimes also is under command, nor is that of desire and spirit always under command, but also on occasion assumes the command, whenever the man’s soul is vicious.” (129a15-18) Aristotle thinks that the vicious person’s (and only the vicious person’s) reason is enslaved, because he thinks that defects in his appetite and spirit make it impossible for the vicious person’s reason to function well.

Why does Aristotle think that vice impedes deliberation? I present a two premise argument for this conclusion:

(P1) Vicious people have, as their ends, things that are not good for them.

Suppose one loves wealth greedily and indiscriminately. If such a person deliberates in the service of wealth, Aristotle says that he will get something bad: “....wisdom does not attend upon the unjust man. For the goods which he chooses and for which he commits injustice are what are absolutely good, not what are good for him. For wealth and office are good absolutely (*haplōs*), but for him perhaps they are not good; for by obtaining wealth and office he will do much evil to himself and his friends, for he will not be able to make a right use of office.” (*Magna Moralia* II.3.7, 1199b9; cf NE I.2,

1094b15, NE V, 1129b5. EE VII.15, 1248b30) The wealth that was his end was not in fact good for him, though it appeared to be.

The person who loves safety without having the virtue of courage deliberates her way to a kind of safety that is not good for herself; likewise the one who loves honor without greatness of soul; the one who loves pleasure without moderation; the one who loves victory without gentleness. Aristotle acknowledges safety, honor, pleasure and victory as “good absolutely,” but Aristotle cautions people not to assume, but rather to *pray* that “the things that are good absolutely (*haplōs*) may also be good for them.” (NE V.1, 1129b2-8) The things that are good absolutely are good for a good person, in the way in which foods that are good absolutely are good for a healthy person; whereas punishment and medicine are good for a vicious or unhealthy person, respectively.

When the just person pursues pleasure, he is sure to end up with something good. His justice makes him such as to acknowledge that in a given case it can be *worse* for a person to have wealth or pleasure than not to have them: “pleasures are desirable, but not from *these* [i.e. disgraceful] sources, as wealth is desirable, but not as the reward of betrayal, and health, but not at the cost of eating anything and everything.” (NE X.3: 1173b26-8) The just person won’t seek those pleasures, and thus whenever he pursues pleasure, he pursues something good for himself. The goodness of ends such as wealth or pleasure (or: health, honor, victory, political office, friendship) can be undermined both by how they will be used and the manner in which they are sought; the person who knows how to seek them is the one for whom they are good.

The virtues are the conditions in which the things that are good absolutely are good for us. They incline us to pursue wealth, health, victory and the rest under the right circumstances. That is why, when virtuous people deliberate about how to get wealth, or health, or victory, they are deliberating about how to get things that really are good for them; whereas vicious people are deliberating about how to get things that only appear good to them¹⁶. Suppose that we grant to Aristotle that the vicious person is in error as regards the end—that is he is wrong to want what he wants. Why does the fact that vicious people have the wrong end prevent them from deliberating well in the service of that end? Can’t you be good at reasoning about how to get something bad? No, not when you have Aristotle’s view of what deliberating is.

(P2) Good deliberation preserves the status of your end as something good for yourself.

We saw that success in derivation, in both the geometric and the ethical case, entails keeping hold of the distinctive (geometrical or ethical) status of the objects about which

¹⁶ Virtuous people have the “situational appreciation” (p.237) described by Wiggins: money strikes them as the thing to go for in those circumstances in which it really is.

one is reasoning. In the geometrical case, this means that one must grasp the objects—the square and the circle, and all the lines one adds—as geometrical objects rather than as markings on paper. One cannot, for instance, allow oneself to be distracted by the fact that it *looks* easy to draw a diagonal of a given circle with a ruler, and end the analysis at A4. Because one has not yet found the center of the circle by any geometrical procedure, any drawing of what looks like a diameter capitalizes on physical properties of the drawn object that are not geometrical properties. If we lose hold of the status of the circle as a geometrical object, our “construction” will fail to be anything more than a drawing.

In order to *derive* the square, we must bring it about while preserving its distinctive normative status—which is to say, its status as a geometrical object. In the case of ethical reasoning, we must preserve the ethical status of the end, which is to say, its goodness for the agent. If one’s end is wealth, one reasons in such a way as to preserve wealth as a *good* for oneself throughout the reasoning: for instance, one doesn’t (usually) have any interest in acquiring wealth at the cost of one’s life. If such a person fastened on a lifedestroying means, that would be a fallacious bit of practical reasoning.

C: The Vicious Person Cannot Reason Well, Because You Can’t Preserve What Is Not There.

The vicious person’s reasoning is necessarily shot through with fallacious moves, because his end is something that is not, in fact, good for him. He cannot preserve the ethical status of wealth in his reasoning because, for him, it doesn’t have any: wealth isn’t good for him. But it is equally true to say that it doesn’t have any ethical status because he doesn’t know how to preserve it. His grasping, unjust attitude towards wealth prevents him from seeing the good of it, and this blindness explains both his misconceptions about the appropriate ways to acquire wealth, and his misconceptions about what to do with wealth.

Deliberative excellence is a form of intellectual excellence that can only be manifested by people who grasp the good end in such a way as to be able to derive an actual good from it. This is what the ethical virtues allow a person to do. They are that condition of the passions which make sound reasoning in the service of one’s end possible. In loving wealth without justice or generosity, the vicious person misses what is good about wealth. He mis-loves it. Like any fumbler or fool, his attempts to get and use wealth will therefore end up harming instead of helping him.

To say that the vicious person cannot deliberate well is not to say that the vicious person is completely bereft of intellectual resources he might deploy in acting. Aristotle acknowledges that the unjust man may end up with money, and that he may even do so as a result of having “correctly” observed that money is attainable by theft. Nonetheless, Aristotle observes, (*NE* VI.9, 1142b17) “there is more than one kind of correctness.”

The sort of correctness of thought that tells the wicked man that he “can” get money by theft is mere Humean cleverness at causally linking ends and means. Aristotle calls this kind of cleverness “*deinotēs*.” (NE VI.12, 1144a23-4) Merely clever thinking does not reflect a practically sound deliberative procedure: theft is not a rational way to get wealth, because it does not preserve the goodness of the end, wealth. The fallaciousness is exposed when we observe that by such “correctness” the wicked person will “have gotten himself a great evil.” (NE VI.9, 1142b20) The vicious person cannot distinguish goodpreservative moves from fallacious ones. He cannot rationally discover the means to his ends.

It is, therefore, a mistake to understand the vicious person as making perfectly good calculations in the service of a defective goal. On Aristotle’s theory of deliberation, there is something wrong with the calculations themselves. This is a point worth emphasizing, because Aristotle’s claim that vicious people cannot reason well is not the much weaker claim that some reasoning “counts as” bad reasoning because it is done in the service of a bad end. Aristotle thinks the reasoning is bad on its own terms, having been made bad by the badness of its end. Compare: The iron which has been heated by a fire is hot because the fire was hot, but it now it has a hotness all its own.

Think back to the person who ends the analysis at A4 because she thinks she can just draw the diameter. She might take care to make sure that the line she is drawing is “correct” by making meticulous measurements with a ruler. But in pursuing this form of “correctness” she is not following any geometrical rules. Her failure to grasp the circle as geometrical translates into a failure to grasp any distinctively geometrical form of correctness.

If the passions are mal-educated, then when the person takes as his end things like health, wealth, safety, victory, and honor, those ends will not in fact be good for him. An unjust desire for wealth or a cowardly desire for safety sends reason off on a wild goose chase, bent on “preserving” a good that is not there. Such reason cannot reason well; the best it can do is find a Humean path to bringing about wealth.

Hume thinks that the only practical use of reason is to plot a path to the satisfaction of passion’s ends. But why does he think this condition counts as enslavement of reason? I do not “enslave” a rock when I use it as a door stop; I do not even enslave a chair if I use it as a table or as kindling. If something lacks ends of its own, I cannot do violence to it by using it for my ends. Contrast Aristotle’s characterization of the vicious person, whose reason is alienated from its very capacity to function in accordance with its proper mode of operation. Reduced to seeking out causal connections to the object of desire, such a person’s reason seems to have become a caricature, a shadow of its true self. It is intelligibly characterized as alienated from its own end of reasoning well. The shock value of Hume’s claim that reason is “enslaved,” i.e. permanently divorced from its own ends, capitalizes on his audience’s assumption that practical reason has ends of its own. But if Hume were speaking strictly and soberly, he would have to acknowledge that practical reason, as he understands it, *cannot* be enslaved.

Aristotelian deliberation is like geometrical reasoning: it has its own *sui generis* set of rational constraints that dictate what counts as a derivation in that domain. This is why Aristotle, unlike Hume, is in a position to assert that reason can be enslaved to the passions.

Deliberating Immersively, Not Reflectively

Let us end by reflecting on the import of the difference Aristotle's conception of deliberation and an evaluative one. Consider the phenomenon John Dewey called "reflective thought." Dewey, who popularized the phrase in his 1910 book *How We Think*, characterizes reflective thinking as "a conscious and voluntary effort to establish belief upon a firm basis of reasons." (p.6) The reflective thinker resists her own immediate inclination to judge that some proposition is true, or some action worth doing; instead she investigates whether the weight of the theoretical evidence or practical reasons supports the judgment she was inclined to make. She has a skeptical or selfcritical attitude borne of a distinction between grounded and ungrounded judgment. In theoretical reasoning, reflection is an alternative to "jumping to conclusions," and in practical reasoning reflection is an alternative to acting in a way that is not supported by the overall weight of the reasons.

The agent who engages in the evaluative deliberation familiar to us is someone who reflects on whether she ought (really) to do what she is inclined to do. Consider Christine Korsgaard's famous description:

For our capacity to turn our attention on to our own mental activities is also a capacity to distance ourselves from them, and to call them into question..... I desire and I find myself with a powerful impulse to act. But I back up and bring that impulse into view and then I have a certain distance. Now the impulse doesn't dominate me and now I have a problem. Shall I act? Is this desire really a reason to act? (p.93)

Many who might prefer to think of deliberation in less introspective terms than Korsgaard would nonetheless agree with her that when we deliberate we "back up" and ask ourselves whether the thing we were already inclined to do is *really* supported by the weight of the reasons. Deliberation, thus understood, interrupts action for a moment of potentially self-corrective reflection. It ensures that over and above simply acting, one acts in some especially well-grounded way: reflectively, or in a way that one can endorse, or in a way that satisfies some special procedural norm (i.e., so as to maximize expected utility). Evaluative deliberation is not required for acting *as such*; it is required only for acting *in that justified way*.

Reflective thinking is by its nature secondary to some process which has generated the options to be reflected upon. Dewey observes that reflective thinking "begins in what may fairly enough be called a forked-road situation, a situation... which proposes

alternatives.... In the suspense of uncertainty, we metaphorically climb a tree; we try to find some standpoint from which we may survey additional facts and, getting a more commanding view of the situation, may decide how the facts stand related to one another.” (p.11) When Korsgaard’s agent “backs up,” or when Dewey’s “climbs a tree,” they are responding to options that were already there. This is true whether, like Korsgaard’s agent, we are independently inclined to do some one thing, or whether, like Dewey’s, we simply see the road forking and are unsure which way is best.

Evaluative deliberation is only possible for someone who could’ve done something without deliberating. She could have simply followed inclination, or in the forking case, she could have made an arbitrary choice. (Arbitrary choice may in any case be the only solution in a Buridan’s ass case where one’s options are virtually identical. Likewise, one might have to pick arbitrarily if one runs out of time to deliberate, or if the difference between the options does not warrant a deliberative time-investment.¹⁷)

Aristotelian deliberators are in a different predicament. They deliberate in search of something (anything) to do in the service of their end. As such, their thinking is not reflective but rather, as I will call it, *immersive*. A familiar example of immersive (though not deliberative) thought is provided by the detective who is pondering a puzzling crime just as her eye falls on the crucial detail. Suddenly, she finds herself constructing a complete account of what happened, fitting together various details that had previously struck her as disconnected or irrelevant. Consider, in this connection, the activity of trying to recollect something. When one seeks to remember a detail of, e.g. a story or movie or past experience, one brings to bear a gradually more detailed reminiscence of elements relating to the missing one until the relevant part ‘clicks.’

In immersive thought, one cannot separate the question of whether some answer is the *right* answer from the question of whether it is an answer at all. For this reason, the thinker’s positive assessment of an answer must be internal to the very process by which she generates the answer: she senses that the relevant move seems right or familiar, or that the elements fit together or that she has got it. She experiences her thinking as going well, but not because she can assess it by a separable standard of success¹⁸: instead, she simply feels that she is connecting or associating things that belong together. In Stephen Menn’s discussion of analysis, he returns again and again to a certain way of describing moments like the identification of the chord at A5: “And then at some point something clicks” (p.195, 198, 199, 217) Aristotle sees this noetic moment of insight as a common point between analysis and deliberation: they end in one just “seeing” the answer (VI.8). By contrast, in reflective thinking, one can take what has already been understood as a candidate answer and ask whether it meets some independently graspable standard for being the best answer. There’s no “clicking” because those are two things, not one.

¹⁷ For a discussion of the rationality of arbitrary choice, see Ullmann-Margalit and Morgenbesser.

¹⁸ Thus Aristotle describes the ultimate moment of deliberation as consisting in a moment of quasiperceptual intellectual insight by which the person grasps, e.g., that the chord is the right line. (*NE* VI.9, 1142a25-30)

If you have available to you an option that would achieve your end, then you have no problem that Aristotelian deliberation could solve. The person who knows how to construct a square in a circle will, upon being presented with the problem, go ahead and produce the synthesis starting from, e.g., S1. Such a person *cannot* use the Aristotelian analytic method to derive the starting point, because she already knows the starting point. She may go through the relevant motions, drawing the sequence A1-5, but this “analysis” must be a sham: you can at best *pretend* to search for what you already have.

The Aristotelian deliberator, could not have done anything without deliberating. The evaluative deliberator may not have acted *as well* if she had not deliberated, but she could have acted. She was deliberating between things that she could (already, predeliberatively) have done. She had options.

The evaluative approach to deliberation understands the process—whether it be in the form of comparing or testing—to be a kind of *checking*. When we evaluate some proposed option, we are taking a certain deliberative initiative. Dewey says reflection is a product of a “conscious and voluntary effort.” The action we select for evaluation is not, of course, selected at random. It is something we see some reason to do. The question we ask is: do we have the *most* reason to do it? Is it the *best* thing we can do? Is it better than this or that alternative action I also see some reason to do? Does it pass every relevant moral test? Evaluative deliberation seems to be borne from doubts as to whether the action that it occurs to a person to do might be the wrong thing to do. Thus we are called upon to reflect, to “weigh reasons,” to form “all things considered” judgments and test proposed actions to see whether they could become universal laws of nature. Carried to its extreme, such deliberative work is sometimes taken to have the potential to reorient a person, so that she reasons her way out of her current ends and values, and into ones of a radically different kind.

On Aristotle’s picture, there is no a neutral standpoint from which a person might, rising above the fray of his own self, rationally call his impulses, values and projects into question. Aristotelian deliberation is unashamedly pragmatic¹⁹, tasked with finding an action when none immediately presents itself. Aristotle’s account of deliberation thus throws our own concern with practical grounding into relief. By reading him, we come to appreciate how profoundly our own approach to practical thought is shaped by the felt need to respond to anxieties about practical justification—anxieties that Aristotle reveals are not written into the very concept of reason made practical.

¹⁹ It is important to keep in mind, however, that excellence at deliberation does not exhaust intellectual virtue—it does not even exhaust practical intellectual virtue. For there is, in addition, the virtue of comprehension (*sunesis*), discussed in VI.10, and forgiveness (*suggnome*), discussed in VI.11. For an account of the relation of those virtues to deliberation, see Segvic, 160–162.

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