

THE END OF ENDS? ARISTOTELIAN THEMES IN EARLY MODERN ETHICS Donald Rutherford

That Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* casts a long shadow over the history of philosophy goes without saying. That its influence continues to be felt among philosophers in the seventeenth century, particularly those recognized as quintessentially modern thinkers, is a more contentious proposition whose affirmation requires considerable qualification and argument. Textbook accounts of early modern philosophy emphasize its sharp break, especially in natural philosophy and metaphysics, with the doctrines of Aristotle. In part, this is a result of taking at face value the rhetoric of early modern figures who stress their independence and distance from Aristotle. More often than not, however, what these figures are eager to reject is not so much the content of Aristotle's own texts, as the accretions of commentary on Aristotelian doctrines that comprise the body of scholastic philosophy, along with the methods of commentary and disputation on which that tradition relies. The imperative of the moderns is to address head-on the problems that nature has set for us, not X's criticisms of Y's interpretation of Aristotle's answer to a given problem. There are, to be sure, places at which characteristically modern accounts of matter, mind and causation directly challenge the content of Aristotle's theories. Yet even here there has been a growing recognition of the danger of reading seventeenth-century philosophers as monolithic in their rejection of central Aristotelian doctrines, such as teleology and hylomorphism.¹

The early moderns' relation to Aristotle's practical philosophy, and especially his ethics, has received much less attention in the literature, and consequently suffers less from the weight of received opinion. In part, this reflects the fact that until recently relatively little attention had been devoted to the practical side of early modern philosophy, as against topics in epistemology and metaphysics, and to a lesser degree natural philosophy. In the domains of ethics and political philosophy, there are obvious places at which seventeenth-century philosophers stress their disagreement with Aristotle: Gassendi's qualified defence of Epicureanism; Hobbes's arguments for the artificiality of justice and the state; the movement in Grotius, Pufendorf, Cumberland and Locke toward a conception of morality founded on law rather than virtue. In these ways and others, we find the development of alternative conceptions of moral philosophy in the early modern period, which stand opposed to the teachings of the *Nicomachean Ethics* and are consequential for the subsequent development of the discipline.²

Restricting our attention to the seventeenth century, we may note again the importance for early modern philosophers of a methodological break with the school philosophies. One measure of this shift is that we find few explicit references in the writings of Bacon, Descartes, Hobbes, Spinoza, Malebranche or Locke to the works of their predecessors. Instead, there is the pretense of addressing each question *de novo*, as if it were a problem that an unprejudiced mind could frame and resolve through the disciplined use of reason alone. That this is largely a pretense, and that seventeenth-century philosophers remain as much indebted to the doctrines and arguments of

¹ See, e.g., Hoffman (1986); Des Chene (1996); Garrett (1999); Simmons (2001).

² The most prominent exponent of this reading is Schneewind (1998), whose influence is evident in the work of Darwall (1995) and Korsgaard (1996). For an opposing approach, which emphasizes the continuity of moral philosophy from Aristotle through the modern period, see Irwin (2007-09).

their predecessors as any group of earlier thinkers, is a working assumption of much current scholarship. In fact, if there is one point that distinguishes the practice of seventeenth-century philosophers, it is the sheer breadth and heterogeneity of the sources on which they draw. Eschewing any allegiance to a particular school or master, early modern philosophers are free to drink, almost indiscriminately, from the ferment of past thought. Accordingly, they are the unacknowledged disciples not just of Aristotle, but of Plato and later Platonists, ancient Skeptics, Stoics, Epicureans, Augustine, and the Christian, Jewish and Islamic commentary traditions.³

The prevailing tendency of recent work on early modern ethics has been to stress the significance of newly revived Hellenistic doctrines, especially Stoic and Epicurean ones, for the views of such thinkers as Gassendi, Descartes, Hobbes, Spinoza and Leibniz.⁴ This meshes neatly with a larger narrative in which the influence of Aristotle is eclipsed with the development of modern philosophy. The present essay seeks to correct, or at least complicate, this narrative. Especially in ethics, Aristotelian doctrines remain central in defining the structure and content of early modern philosophical thought. This is witnessed in seventeenth-century philosophers' adoption of the broad framework of eudaimonist theory, which Aristotle is chiefly responsible for formulating, as well as their indebtedness to specific Aristotelian notions of practical reason, virtue and happiness. Rather than insisting on the importance of Aristotle as against other ancient sources, however, I aim to emphasize the eclecticism and intellectual promiscuity of seventeenth-century thinkers, who combine the tenets of different schools and traditions to arrive at novel hybrid theories of human nature, well-being and value.

In what follows I can address only some of the ways in which Aristotle's ethics continues to shape the dialectic of early modern philosophy. In the first section, I sketch some ways in which the framework of Aristotle's eudaimonism is adapted and reconfigured by seventeenth-century philosophers. In the next two sections of the essay, I look in more detail at how in two of the most innovative thinkers of the period, Hobbes and Spinoza, the lens of Aristotelianism remains a fruitful vantage point from which to reconstruct their understandings of practical reason and the role it plays in ethical judgment. Although I read both philosophers as critics of Aristotle's teleological conception of nature, I suggest that their systems can be viewed as two contrasting ways of developing his eudaimonism – a contrast that mirrors the two conceptions of *eudaimonia* found in the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

I. VARIETIES OF SEVENTEENTH CENTURY EUDAIMONISM

Most major figures of seventeenth-century philosophy remain eudaimonists in the formal sense that they regard happiness as a deliberative end of practical reason. In deliberating about how to act, an agent may locate the ultimate reason for her action in the contribution the proposed action makes to her pursuit of happiness.⁵ Furthermore, an agent who is capable of reasoning well about how to act, i.e. one who possesses prudence or practical wisdom, will recognize that her happiness is inextricably bound up with moral virtue: she can live happily only to the extent that she lives virtuously, or is disposed to perform those actions that meet the standards of moral rightness. Given this, it emerges as a central task of early modern ethics, as it is of ancient ethics,

³ My former colleague Steve Strange never tired of stressing this point. This chapter is dedicated to his memory and to the memory of Paul Hoffman, two superb scholars whose careers were sadly cut short.

⁴ See, e.g., the essays collected in Miller and Inwood (2003), and Strange and Zupko (2004), as well as Wilson (2008) and Miller (forthcoming).

⁵ I say "may," since, as we will see, some early moderns adopt a dual account of the final end, identifying it both with happiness and with the highest good, which they distinguish.

to propose methods of disciplining desire through the practical employment of reason, so that happiness can be reliably pursued.⁶

From this broad perspective, early modern thinkers preserve central elements of Aristotle's eudaimonism. At the same time, there are obvious points at which their views diverge from Aristotle's. To understand better the scope of these differences, I will distinguish two types of challenges to Aristotle's eudaimonism. The first involves reconfigurations of the network of concepts that defines the shared background of ancient Greek eudaimonism. Such challenges go deep and allow us to mark out distinctively modern ethical positions, but they do not target Aristotle exclusively as against other ancient eudaimonists. Here I will be concerned principally with early modern philosophers' rejection of the traditional identification of happiness and the highest good. A second type of challenge – and the one most closely associated with the emergence of modern philosophy – arises from seventeenth-century philosophers' rejection of the teleological conception of nature foundational to Aristotle's ethics. Here I will be chiefly interested in the ways in which the early modern thinkers do, and do not, break with the end-directed outlook presupposed by Aristotle's eudaimonism.⁷

Happiness as a Final End

Among seventeenth-century philosophers, there is near universal agreement that happiness is to be understood in psychological terms. It is not conceived, as it is by the ancients, in terms of the general idea of a well-lived human life – an idea subsequently given determinate content through a particular philosophical theory; instead, happiness is just that affective state (one of pleasure, contentment or satisfaction) that human beings most desire to be in and whose attainment they deliberate about in deciding how to act.⁸

The limitation of happiness to a specific psychological state marks a narrowing of the problematic of ancient philosophy. The question is no longer the generic “how ought one to live?,” where it is understood that the best way of life for a human being is identical with the happy life. Instead, a primary concern of early modern philosophers is with delineating the kinds of actions, or the kinds of character, that are reliably associated with a preferred psychological state, whether that state be defined in terms of a certain affective tone (tranquility, contentment), or in terms of the satisfaction of desire.

In some cases, the limitation of happiness to a particular psychological state is accompanied by the identification of that state with the highest good. Philosophers who pursue this course, Gassendi foremost among them, take up the mantle of one rival school of ancient eudaimonism, Epicureanism, which defines happiness, or the highest good, as a life in which one

⁶ In one way or another, this position is affirmed by Gassendi, Descartes, Hobbes, Spinoza, Malebranche, Leibniz and Locke. In what follows, I can offer only a limited defense of this claim, in relation to some of the figures just mentioned.

⁷ This does not exhaust the ways in which early modern philosophers distinguish their ethical theories from Aristotle's. Another important example is the displacement of virtue-based accounts of morality by law-based accounts in writers such as Grotius, Pufendorf, Cumberland and Locke. For a discussion of this development, see Schneewind (1990). Even in writers who do not subordinate virtue to divine or natural law, there is a tendency to reject Aristotle's particular account of virtue, including the distinction between moral and intellectual virtues, in favor of alternative conceptions, some traceable to other ancient schools (e.g. Platonism or Stoicism). For Aristotle's acknowledgment of his novelty on the topic of virtue and departure from the view of Socrates, see *N.E.* 1144b19-29.

⁸ This difference is noted by Annas as distinguishing ancient eudaimonism and “modern moral philosophy”; however, she does not apply it to the interpretation of the views of seventeenth-century philosophers (Annas (1993), 431). See also Kraut (1979), who contrasts “objective” (Aristotelian) and “subjective” (modern) conceptions of happiness.

enjoys a pain-free bodily existence (*aponia*) and a mind free of disturbance (*ataraxia*). Gassendi emphasizes that Epicurus' own position was that such an existence could be enjoyed only if one also lived a virtuous life, and he cites Aristotle as holding a similar position. In this, he misconstrues Aristotle's view. Where Aristotle identifies the highest good with rational activity in conformity with virtue and argues that the enjoyment of this activity is the pleasure proper to a human being, Gassendi follows Epicurus in identifying the highest good with the pleasure consequent on virtuous action. For the one, virtuous rational activity is constitutive of happiness; for the other, it is a necessary means to the end of pleasure, or tranquility of mind.⁹

Other philosophers defend positions that are less easily characterized in traditional terms. Responding to Seneca's arguments against the inclusion of pleasure as part of the happy life, Descartes instructs Princess Elisabeth that it is necessary to distinguish three concepts: (i) happiness (*la béatitude*); (ii) the supreme good (*le souverain bien*); and (iii) the final end or goal (*la dernière fin or le but*) toward which our actions ought to tend. Happiness, he claims, is "not the supreme good, but presupposes it, being the contentment or satisfaction of mind which results from possessing it." The supreme good, instead, "consists solely in virtue, because this is the only good, among all those we can possess, which depends entirely on our free will." And the final end, he adds, can be understood to be either of these, "for the supreme good is undoubtedly the thing we ought to set ourselves as the goal of all our actions, and the resulting contentment of mind is also rightly called our end, since it is the attraction which makes us seek the supreme good."¹⁰

The position Descartes outlines for Elisabeth breaks decisively with a key assumption of ancient eudaimonism: the identity of happiness and the highest good. In the same letter, Descartes argues that on his account the positions of Aristotle, Zeno and Epicurus can all "be accepted as true and as consistent with each other, provided they are interpreted favourably" (CSMK 261).¹¹ Taken at face value, Descartes's statement is suggestive of the eclecticism found among early modern thinkers: provided they are "interpreted favorably," the views of ancient authorities can be preserved; yet a "favorable" interpretation need not comport with the letter or the spirit of the doctrine in question. Descartes construes Aristotle as concerned with "the supreme good of the whole of human nature in general – that is to say, the good which may be possessed by the most accomplished of all men," who "possesses all the perfections of which human nature is capable" (CSMK 261). He introduces this view, though, only to set it aside, on the grounds that it "does not serve our purpose." Presumably this is because Aristotle's

⁹ See *Syntagma Philosophicum*, Part III (*Ethica*), Bk. I, Ch. 2: "The pleasure meant by Epicurus is not that indecent bodily pleasure... but the other, far purer one, namely, the body's freedom from pain and tranquility of mind, and indeed the latter most of all; and so there is nothing inappropriate in seeking virtue on account of pleasure of this sort, since happiness [*felicitas*], or a happy life [*beata vita*], consists in this very [pleasure].... Thus, a happy life is indeed sought for its own sake, but virtue is not sought so much for its own sake as for the sake of this" (Gassendi (1658), vol. 2, 691a). Referring later in the text to the Epicurean dictum "that virtues are not to be sought on account of themselves but for the sake of pleasure," Gassendi cites Aristotle in *N.E.* 1099a3-20 as supporting the same view. Aristotle does say there that "excellent actions must be in themselves pleasant," but he does not say they are to be sought for the sake of the pleasure they produce (*ibid.*, 740b).

¹⁰ Letter of 18 August 1645 (CSMK 261). See also his letter to Elisabeth of 6 October 1645: "If I thought joy the supreme good, I should not doubt that one ought to try to make oneself joyful at any price.... But I make a distinction between the supreme good – which consists in the exercise of virtue, or, what comes to the same, the possession of all those goods whose acquisition depends upon our free will – and the satisfaction of mind which results from that acquisition" (CSMK 268). Descartes's letters are cited according to the standard English translation (abbreviated CSMK), found in Descartes (1991).

¹¹ See also his letter to Queen Christina of 20 November 1647 (CSMK 325).

conception of the highest good recognizes the importance of external circumstances, which enable the functioning of the virtuous individual. As such, it describes the condition of the fortunate (*heureux*) person, to whom the good comes (in part) independently of her own efforts, as opposed to the person whose happiness depends solely on the virtue of her will (CSMK 257). In this respect, Descartes's conception of the good is closely allied with that of Zeno and the Stoics. However, in contrast to them, he does not identify virtue with happiness. The latter he assimilates to Epicurus' account of happiness as a kind of pleasure (which for Epicurus is also the highest good).¹²

Descartes's move to distinguish the highest good from happiness is exemplary of a trend observed in other early modern philosophers. The result is an interesting hybrid position, or family of hybrid positions, which take their inspiration from ancient eudaimonism, while rejecting a central tenet of it. In contrast to Aristotle, happiness for these philosophers is not virtuous activity as such, but the affective well-being that supervenes on it. Yet virtuous activity *is* intrinsically valuable and not merely valuable as a means to happiness. Hence, it is to be sought for its own sake and as the source of the affective state that is the object of a necessary natural desire.¹³

Descartes's elaboration of Aristotle's target metaphor (*N.E.* I.2) suggests a rationale for this reshaping of the framework of eudaimonist ethics.¹⁴ Descartes pinpoints a tension present in many ancient writers, including Aristotle, between what is *desired* as an end and what is *desirable* as such. It is a common starting point for eudaimonists that all (or almost all) human beings desire happiness as a deliberative end of practical reason; it is the reference point they rely on in deciding how to act. However, many or most people begin with a confused conception of happiness, identifying it with a succession of pleasurable experiences, or riches or honor. Ancient eudaimonists respond to this fact by shifting the discussion from a condition that is desired as an end to a condition that is desirable as an end: the highest good, which they identify with happiness. For Epicureans, this is an affective state, tranquility of mind, that many people indeed desire (though initially, perhaps, not as much as they desire other pleasures). For Platonists, Aristotelians and Stoics, by contrast, the end is not an affective state but a condition of the soul, on which pleasurable feelings supervene, but which human beings must be educated to desire for its own sake, as an intrinsically valuable state of existence.

Recognizing the difficulty of generating a desire for what is good in itself but potentially difficult to achieve (virtue), and also recognizing the superior value of this condition of the soul in contrast to (merely) pleasing affects, early modern philosophers like Descartes divide the desired from the desirable while insisting on a close connection, often amounting to a relation of natural necessity, between them. They acknowledge that a pleasing or contented existence is what most people desire most strongly and appeal to in deciding how to live; but they simultaneously argue that we are only able to achieve such a condition to the extent that we satisfy desires for actions that answer to an independent standard of good or right. Since most early modern philosophers deny that the latter is supplied by pleasure, joy or contentment, their positions remain distinct from that of Epicurus. Furthermore, they are disposed to frame their positions in terms of a theology that ancient Epicureans would reject. Although the desire for

¹² Descartes's account of the good has affinities with that of the Stoics, but acknowledges a variety of other goods in addition to virtue, including bodily goods and positive affective states. For more on this and other issues discussed in this section, see Rutherford (2004).

¹³ A position like this is defended by Henry More in his *Enchiridion Ethicum* (1668), translated in More (1930). For discussion of it, see Frykholm and Rutherford (forthcoming).

¹⁴ See his letter to Princess Elisabeth of 18 August 1645 (CSMK 262).

happiness is naturally determined in human beings, this fact has a ground in how God has created human beings. The desire for happiness is not a brute fact about human nature, but a fact about our psychology that has a larger meaning within a providential account of human existence and divine government. In short, as the world has been set up by God, we will only be happy, in the sense of enjoying a consistently pleasing existence, to the extent that we act rightly, ultimately with an eye toward how God intends us to act.¹⁵

Teleology

The notion of teleology, or end-directed activity, informs Aristotle's ethics in two ways: as a feature of the structure of practical reason, and as the basis of the function argument by which he deems the human good to be rational activity in conformity with virtue.¹⁶ The latter conception of teleology is inherently metaphysical. It assumes that for any kind of thing, there is a form of activity essential to being that kind of thing (in the case of human beings, rational activity), and a standard of excellence that applies to the execution of that activity (in the case of human beings, reasoning well). For any kind of thing, then, there is a fixed notion of what it is to live well as that kind of thing, as well as a presumption that the activity of any instance of that kind is directed toward the fulfillment of its potential to be (fully) that kind of thing. The distinction between being merely potentially F and actually/completely F is a distinction of goodness for Aristotle, and there is a further value-based hierarchy among kinds of things/activities. Some activities (e.g. contemplation) are superior to others, because they more completely fulfill the conditions on an activity's being perfect or divine: it occurs continuously, without change and without the need of external aids. Finally, especially in later (e.g. Thomistic) developments of Aristotle's cosmology, there are important normative claims that depend upon the relations among beings of the same kind and beings of different kinds. Thus, part of what it is to be, fully and correctly, an instance of F is to stand in the appropriate relations to other instances of F or to instances of G. From this idea emerge substantive conclusions about moral duties.

Such doctrines remain central to the ethical theories of some early modern figures, such as Richard Hooker and Francisco Suárez.¹⁷ In the course of the seventeenth century, however, the teleological framework of Aristotle's ethics is subject to challenge from several directions. In some cases, the criticisms target core doctrines of his ethics. Writing in a period of intense religious and moral conflict, and influenced by newly revived writings of the ancient skeptics, thinkers such as Montaigne and Grotius call into question Aristotle's case for objective standards of virtue and the good.¹⁸ Other philosophers attack more broadly Aristotle's teleological conception of nature. These objections stem partly from theological concerns. According to Malebranche, the attribution of end-directed forms or natures to created things amounts to an abrogation of God's power and ultimately a form of idolatry.¹⁹ The same anti-Aristotelian

¹⁵ Different versions of this position can be found in many seventeenth-century philosophers, among them Malebranche, Cumberland, Leibniz and Locke.

¹⁶ For a comprehensive treatment of Aristotle on teleology, see Johnson (2005).

¹⁷ Hooker's moral theory is presented in the first book of his *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* (1593), excerpts of which appear in Hooker (1989). For Suárez's views, see in particular *De Fine Hominis* (1628), one of his five treatises on Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologica*, Part I-II, in Suárez (1856-59), vol. 4.

¹⁸ This interpretation has been defended by Schneewind under the heading of the "Grotian problematic." See Schneewind (1990), 199-201, and (1998), 66-8.

¹⁹ See Nicolas Malebranche, *The Search after Truth*, VI.ii.3: "We therefore admit something divine in all the bodies around us when we posit forms, faculties, qualities, virtues, or real beings capable of producing certain effects through the force of their nature....All these insignificant pagan divinities and all these particular causes of the philosophers are merely chimeras that the wicked mind tries to establish to undermine worship of the true God"

conclusion is reached, sometimes by the same figures, on purely philosophical grounds. In the case of inanimate objects and non-human animals, a growing consensus rejects the existence of individual forms or essences, along with the potentiality/actuality distinction and the assumption that phenomena of change are best understood in teleological terms. In place of this, Cartesians in particular advance accounts of motion, including animal motion, that are spelled out entirely in terms of relations of efficient causation holding between the moving parts of bodies.²⁰

In the second half of the seventeenth century, a powerful rearguard defense of natural teleology is mounted by Leibniz.²¹ This remains, however, a minority view and by the end of the century natural philosophy has moved irreversibly in the direction charted by Galileo, Descartes and Newton: an understanding of the physical world as consisting exclusively of intrinsically similar particles of matter interacting through efficient causation, in accordance with mathematical laws. What remains unresolved is how human beings fit into this scheme. The predominant tendency, typified by Descartes, is toward some form of metaphysical dualism. Human beings are located within nature, but are not wholly of nature. Their bodies occupy a place relative to the bodies of other creatures, but their souls have specific moral duties and a destiny that lies outside this world, as determined by God.

A significant step beyond this compromise is taken by two of the most innovative thinkers of the seventeenth century, Thomas Hobbes and Benedict Spinoza. They begin from the assumption that human beings are not, in Spinoza's words, "things which are outside nature," but rather "natural things, which follow the common laws of nature."²² In this, they distance themselves from the Biblical narrative of human beings as occupying a privileged place in the world, created in the image of God and sustained by his providence, and uphold the naturalistic stance of Aristotle. However, Hobbes and Spinoza reject Aristotle's teleological understanding of nature and defend the thesis that all human actions can be explained in terms of their determination by prior efficient causes.²³ On the face of it, we might expect this thesis to have significant consequences for their ability to develop ethical doctrines that respond to the sorts of practical concerns that motivate Aristotle's eudaimonism. If actions are produced as a result of determined motions of matter, or parallel patterns of mental causation, what sense can be made of the idea, fundamental to eudaimonistic ethics, that human beings can through the exercise of reason guide their lives in the direction of virtue and happiness, and away from vice and misery?

In the next two sections, I will describe how, while breaking with the metaphysical teleology of Aristotle, Hobbes and Spinoza preserve important elements of the structure of practical reason that informs his eudaimonism. In the space available, I cannot give complete accounts of their ethical theories. Instead, I aim to substantiate one critical point, which is that while Hobbes and Spinoza advance theories of nature that appear to rule out teleological causation of human action, and teleological explanations of human well-being, they uphold the

(Malebranche (1997), 446, 451). For a similar criticism, see Robert Boyle, *A Free Enquiry into the Vulgarly Received Notion of Nature*, sec. 4: "the looking upon merely corporeal and oftentimes inanimate things as if they were endowed with life, sense and understanding, and the ascribing to nature and some other beings (whether real or imaginary) things that belong but to God, have been some (if not the chief) of the grand causes of the polytheism and idolatry of the Gentiles" (Boyle (1996), 41).

²⁰ The transformation in prevailing notions of causation, including efficient causation, is discussed in Carriero (2005).

²¹ For an entry into the literature, see McDonough (2009).

²² *Ethics* III, Preface. All citations of the *Ethics* are to part and section (or proposition, scholium, etc.), as found in Spinoza (1985).

²³ To what extent Spinoza rejects all teleology has become a controversial topic in the literature. I return to it in section IV.

primacy of practical reason as the standpoint from within which deliberation about the ends and means of action is conducted. Much like Aristotle, they take the fundamental practical question for human beings to be the question of how one ought to live, and they assume that human beings are cognitively and motivationally equipped to respond to this question in ways that are likely to increase their prospects for happiness. What we find, then, increasingly in the seventeenth century is a separation of the perspectives of theoretical and practical reason. From the point of view of the former, nature – and human beings insofar as they are parts of nature – is fully determined through ordered patterns of causal necessity. From the point of view of the latter, any human being represents herself as deliberating about how to act and as acting for the sake of ends to which she subscribes. The challenge for philosophers such as Hobbes and Spinoza is to bring together these two standpoints in a coherent philosophical position.

II. HOBBS

Hobbes is famous for his hostility to Aristotelianism, particularly as manifested in its late scholastic forms. Nevertheless, he relies heavily on at least one work of Aristotle, the *Rhetoric*, in his analysis of the passions.²⁴ In what follows I will suggest that the parallels between Hobbes's views and those of Aristotle go considerably deeper than this and that Hobbes can profitably be read as taking over much of Aristotle's project in ethics, while transforming it in line with his own metaphysical premises. Hobbes rejects outright the existence of universal essences and the theory of hylomorphic substance. Yet he retains, at the level of phenomenological description at least, a conception of human beings as deliberative agents, who reason well or badly about the attainment of happiness.

Hobbes is sharply critical of Aristotle's conception of human nature and of the ethical conclusions that depend upon it. Rejecting the basic tenets of Aristotle's metaphysics, he denies that there is any universal essence of humanity; any end at which properly human activities are naturally directed; and any soul or form over and above the characteristic arrangement of parts and motions that make up a living human body. To this he adds a metaethical thesis that contradicts a central assumption of Aristotle's ethics (and of Greek eudaimonism in general). According to Hobbes, no object or end is good or bad in itself, or according to nature. Judgments of the good and bad qualities of things are always consequent on the desires and aversions of particular individuals. Thus, there is no coherent notion of an objective human good and no rational power of accurately assessing and choosing the good.²⁵

The depth of these differences entails that Hobbes's ethics must diverge in significant ways from Aristotle's. It is nonetheless striking the extent to which Hobbes preserves the psychology within which Aristotle's eudaimonism is developed, particularly as it is exemplified in non-human animals. According to Aristotle, all animals possess sensory powers, which are the basis of their appetitive powers, especially natural desires such as thirst and hunger. The relation between these two sets of powers is mediated by the affects of pleasure and pain: "whatever has a sense has the capacity for pleasure and pain and therefore has pleasant and painful objects present to it, and wherever these are present, there is a desire, for desire is appetite of what is pleasant" (*De Anima*, II.3, 414b4-6). Animals differ from human beings in the limited range of their

²⁴ Skinner (1996), 38-9.

²⁵ See in particular *Lev.* 6 [7]: "But whatsoever is the object of any man's appetite or desire that is it which he for his part calleth *good*; and the object of his hate and aversion, *evil*. . . For these words of good, evil, and contemptible are every used with relation to the person that useth them, there being nothing simply and absolutely so, nor any common rule of good and evil to be taken from the nature of the objects themselves." All citations of *Leviathan* (*Lev.*) are by chapter and paragraph, as given in Hobbes (1994).

appetites, and hence in the notion of good proper to them. Under the influence of pleasure and pain, their natural desires lead them, largely unthinkingly, toward the end of a healthy existence. For animals that is their good.

In human beings, thought complicates this story in two ways. First, there are appetites that are directed toward or away from objects not just as they are perceived as sources of pleasure or pain, but as they are thought to be good or bad. These appetites include both passion (*thumos*) (non-rational desire for the good) and wish (*boulesis*) (rational desire for the good). Second, in human beings, non-rational appetites (desires and passions) are potentially, and properly, subject to the rule of reason – the “best part” of the human soul (1102b30-31). In its practical employment, reason regulates the expression of non-rational desires and determines the mark at which they ought to aim. Aristotle once credits animals with a limited capacity for practical wisdom: “some even of the lower animals have practical wisdom, viz. those which are found to have a power of foresight with regard to their own life” (1141a27-29). But this clearly is a more restricted power than the practical wisdom he ascribes to human beings. Above all, it involves no power to act for the sake of the good, exercising the distinctively human capacity for decision or choice (*prohairesis*), which brings deliberation to an end and culminates in action. Among animals, only human beings possess the capacity to choose to act in one way rather than another on the basis of their considered assessment of the goodness at which that action aims (1111b7-1112a17).

The starting point for Hobbes’s account of human psychology is more or less Aristotle’s account of the psychology of non-rational animals, but he grounds this account in a very different theory of nature. Hobbes takes as a first principle the physical notion of “endeavor” (*conatus*). Etymologically, the term suggests a tendency toward a prior end or goal; however, Hobbes strips the term of any teleological connotation. Endeavor is nothing but the smallest beginning of motion, which progresses in a certain direction but does not do so for the sake of realizing an end.²⁶ Within psychology, Hobbes names the two most basic forms of endeavor *appetite* and *aversion*, the former being a motion toward some object, the latter a motion away from an object. And he maintains that every passion of the mind can be defined in terms of these two basic kinds of endeavor and the affects of pleasure and pain.²⁷

For Hobbes, desire and aversion are the primary causal principles in terms of which all psychology activity is to be explained. Whatever happens in the mind (up through deliberation and choice) is caused by an agent’s changing patterns of desire and aversion. Yet there is a complexity to Hobbes’s account that remains underdeveloped in his own discussion of the passions. The most basic form of appetite/aversion is defined, causally, as a motion toward what is experienced as pleasant or a motion away from what is experienced as painful.²⁸ This appears to track Aristotle’s simplest form of appetite, desire, exemplified by hunger and thirst. Over and above these primary endeavors, Hobbes defines more complex forms of desire that involve the representation of an object as good or bad. These appear to track more closely what Aristotle calls “passion” (*thumos*), i.e. non-rational desire for the good. Hobbes himself does not draw this distinction, but it is implicit in what he says. Thus, on his account the practical standpoint of

²⁶ “For let a space be never so little, that which is moved over a greater space whereof that little one is part must first be moved over that. These small beginnings of motion...are commonly called ENDEAVOUR” (*Lev.* 6 [1]).

²⁷ See *Lev.* 6 [13], where Hobbes lists seven “simple passions”: appetite, desire, love, aversion, hate, joy, and grief. In *Lev.* 6 [2], he equates appetite and desire; in [3] he assimilates desire and love, and aversion and hate, with the two members of each pair differing in whether the object of the passion is absent or present; in [13] joy and grief are defined as species of pleasure and pain.

²⁸ *De Corpore*, 25.12, in Hobbes (1839), vol. 1, 332.

human beings differs from that of non-human animals in at least one of the ways noted by Aristotle. However representations of good and bad are determined (and whether or not they accurately represent real properties of things), the ethical experience of human beings is distinguished from that of animals by the fact that it consists of representations of things as good and bad, and not just the experience of them as pleasing or painful.²⁹

The anti-Aristotelian side of Hobbes's ethics is most evident in the diminished role he assigns to practical reason. Hobbes acknowledges that human beings surpass other animals in their capacity for foresight, the power to represent in imagination the effects of given causes or the causes of given effects (*Lev.* 12 [4]). However, he divorces the notion of prudence from the operation of reason. Prudence is ascribed exclusively to the effects of experience, and prudence in this sense is also observed in animals (*Lev.* 3 [7]; 5 [21]).³⁰ Hobbes likewise detaches the notion of deliberation from the operation of reason, defining it simply as "the whole sum of desires, aversions, hopes and fears, continued till the thing be done or thought impossible" (*Lev.* 6 [49]). And again, this is a psychological process observed in animals as well as human beings: "This alternate success of appetites, aversions, hopes and fears is no less in other living creatures than in man; and therefore beasts also deliberate" (*Lev.* 6 [51]).³¹

Hobbes's official position is that, strictly speaking, there is no power of practical reason. The scholastics' definition of will as "rational appetite" is unsatisfactory, he says, for it rules out the possibility of voluntary acts contrary to reason. Will, or volition, is nothing but the "last appetite in deliberating" (*Lev.* 6 [53]). These remarks reflect Hobbes's readiness to collapse the Aristotelian categories of the voluntary, wish and choice. For Aristotle, there can be both voluntary actions that are not chosen and voluntary actions in which an object of passion is pursued in preference to an object of rational appetite, or wish. For Hobbes, such distinctions fall by the wayside. There remains only the category of the voluntary, in which action is determined by volition, or the "last appetite in deliberating."

On Hobbes's account, reason consists exclusively of "reckoning," or the representation in thought and language of the necessary relations of causes and effects (*Lev.* 5 [2], [17]). Thus, all reason is theoretical reason. When perfected, the "knowledge of causes, and dependence of one fact upon another, by which, out of what we can presently do, we know how to do something else when we will," constitutes *science*. And this theoretical knowledge, Hobbes identifies as wisdom (or *sapientia*) (*Lev.* 5 [21]).

In sum, then, Hobbes sharply demarcates the domains of cognition and conation, reason and appetite – domains which Aristotle in his ethics closely integrates. For Aristotle, the person of practical wisdom knows how to act, being disposed by moral excellence to the correct ends and having the knowledge necessary to achieve those ends under varying circumstances. For Hobbes, the person who achieves wisdom knows at most how things are necessarily related as causes and effects. In form, such knowledge more closely resembles Aristotle's philosophic

²⁹ See especially Hobbes's discussion of deliberation in *Lev.* 6 [57]: "And because in deliberation the appetites and aversions are raised by foresight of the good and evil consequences and sequels of the action whereof we deliberate, the good or evil effect thereof dependeth on the foresight of a long chain of consequences, of which very seldom any man is able to see the end." Hobbes's use of the terms 'good' and 'evil' obviously must be understood in a way consistent with his remarks in *Lev.* 6 [7].

³⁰ Hobbes thus identifies prudence with the practical wisdom of animals that Aristotle mentions at *N.E.* 1141a27-29.

³¹ Although this is consistent with Hobbes's formal definition of deliberation, considerations evoked in *Lev.* 6 [57] (see note 29) suggest that the content of deliberation differs significantly in human and non-human cases, since for human beings deliberation informed by foresight involves a representation of the good and bad consequences of possible courses of action.

wisdom (*sophia*); however, for Hobbes the relevant knowledge does not ascend to things “noble and divine,” but concerns the mundane matter of natural and civil philosophy: “the accidents of bodies natural” and “the accidents of *politic* bodies” (*Lev.* 9).

Although Hobbes leaves no room in his philosophy for a substantive notion of practical reason, he is, we know, preoccupied with a practical question. Arguably, it is just the question that Aristotle himself assigns to political science: how to make “citizens to be of a certain character, viz. good and capable of noble acts” (1099b31-32). Consistent with the theoretical perspective adopted in his writings, Hobbes frames this question in the third-person: in what manner must human beings live, what rules must govern their lives, in order that they may enjoy a peaceful and secure social existence? Yet Hobbes’s concerns go beyond what is true in theory. He is desirous that his theory be realized in the concrete form of a state, and for this to occur human beings must reason their way to the conclusion that they ought to act in the manner Hobbes describes. That is, the theory Hobbes propounds about how human beings must think and act in order to live well politically can be effective in practice, only if human beings *do* think and act in those ways.³²

If this is right, then, Hobbes, no less than Aristotle, requires an account of practical reason: an account of how reason, as he understands it, can influence and improve practice, with the result that individuals are able to enjoy a better life than they would if guided by passion alone. Whether Hobbes sees the full weight of this point, he evidently believes that his own notion of reason as reckoning can fill the space occupied by Aristotle’s account of practical reason, with the critical work being done by the “laws of nature,” understood as “conclusions or theorems concerning what conduceth to the conservation and defence” of each individual (*Lev.* 15 [41]).

Exactly how Hobbes establishes the practical force of the laws of nature, and to what extent the attempt is successful, lie beyond the scope of this essay.³³ Nevertheless, it is worth highlighting three features of his position that reinforce its connection to that of Aristotle.³⁴ First, from the perspective of individual agents, the laws of nature represent the means to more than just the preservation of life through the institution of a commonwealth. As Hobbes describes their significance, the laws of nature are rational constraints agents impose upon their willing for the sake of a better, or “more contented” life – ultimately, the best life they can hope to achieve. Summarizing his position at the beginning of Part II of *Leviathan*, Hobbes writes:

The final cause, end, or design of men (who naturally love liberty and dominion over others) in the introduction of that restraint upon themselves in which we see them live in commonwealths is the foresight of their own preservation, and *of a more contented life thereby*; that is to say, of getting themselves out from that miserable condition of war, which is necessarily consequent... to the natural passions of men. (*Lev.* 17 [1]; emphasis added)

At a general level, then, Hobbes is concerned with a political problem in Aristotle’s sense: how the passions (especially desire and fear) can be regulated by reason so that human beings are able to enjoy the best life they can in community with other human beings.

³² This reflects the optimistic side of Hobbes’s writings: when the correct theory has been adduced, citizen-legislators will be moved to reconceive the basis of the state. The pessimistic side suggests that such efforts are likely to fail and that a Hobbesian commonwealth could only be imposed through sovereign power. For some relevant passages, see *Lev.* 30 [5] and 31 [41].

³³ For one account of how he does so, see Darwall (1995), 57-60.

³⁴ The points summarized here are argued for at greater length in Rutherford (2003).

Second, Hobbes explicitly frames the idea of a “more contented life” in terms of the idea of happiness, or “felicity,” contrasted with the condition of “misery” that prevails in the state of nature.³⁵ It is often noted that he dismisses the ideal of happiness (“beatifical vision”) defended by Christian theologians, and some have seen this as evidence that Hobbes rejects an eudaimonistic outlook all together. However, in the very same paragraph in which he rejects the former ideal Hobbes introduces his own definition of felicity: “*Continual success* in obtaining those things which a man from time to time desireth, that is to say, continual prospering, is that men call FELICITY; I mean the felicity of this life” (*Lev.* 6 [58]).

Hobbes’s primary intention in this passage is to distinguish his account of natural happiness from the accounts of supernatural happiness found among the scholastics.³⁶ To this extent he is on the same side as Aristotle, who also aims to define a conception of happiness appropriate to the mundane, social life of human beings. For reasons already discussed, centering on Hobbes’s very different metaphysical and metaethical premises, his account of happiness diverges significantly from Aristotle’s. It is not an account based on an objective conception of human perfection or the attainment of an end proper to human nature; rather, happiness is just that dynamical state in which individuals successfully satisfy desires, whatever those desires happen to be. Granting this difference, though, Hobbes unambiguously advances an account of happiness – the condition in which life goes as well as it can for a human being – and he is clear that the foresight of this goal functions as a deliberative end for agents. Agents reason about how to act *so that* they may ensure a happy life:

Felicity is a continual progress of the desire, from one object to another, the attaining of the former being still but the way to the latter. The cause whereof is that the object of man’s desire is not to enjoy once only, and for one instant of time, but to assure forever, the way of his future desire. And therefore the voluntary actions and inclinations of all men tend, not only to the procuring, but also to the assuring of a contented life, and differ only in the way; which ariseth partly from the diversity of passions in divers men, and partly from the difference of the knowledge or opinion each one has of the causes which produce the effect desired. (*Lev.* 11 [1])

Although Hobbes believes the content of a happy life will vary from person to person, based in part on “the diversity of passions in divers men,” he identifies a common goal at which all human beings aim: the “assuring of a contented life,” or the condition of felicity.³⁷

A comprehensive interpretation of Hobbes’s ethics, then, should see it as preserving much of the framework of Aristotle’s ethics, while challenging many of its specific conclusions. We have observed this in what Hobbes says about practical reason and happiness, and we find it also in his discussion of virtue. Again, he explicitly marks the distance between his position and Aristotle’s, criticizing the latter’s explication of moral virtue:

³⁵ See the title of *Lev.* 13: “Of the Natural Condition of Mankind, As Concerning Their Felicity, and Misery”.

³⁶ The same point can be made about his remarks in *Lev.* 11 [1].

³⁷ I emphasize again the different status this claim has for Hobbes and Aristotle. Where the latter grounds the idea of a final end in a teleological account of human nature, the former understands it as a contingent fact about the structure of human desire. For Hobbes, while human beings have a fundamental desire for self-preservation, the desire most difficult to extinguish in them, their reasoning about how to live is more generally guided by the goal of being able to satisfy desires without interruption (i.e. the attainment of felicity). Locke defends a similar position on happiness as a final end. See *Essay*, II.xxi.43 and 45, in Locke (1975), and the discussion in Frykholm and Rutherford (forthcoming).

But the writers of moral philosophy, though they acknowledge the same virtues and vices, yet not seeing wherein consisted their goodness, nor that they come to be praised as the means of peaceable, sociable, and comfortable living, place them in a mediocrity of passions (as if not the cause, but the degree of daring, made fortitude; or not the cause, but the quantity of a gift, made liberality). (*Lev.* 15 [40])

Hobbes sees no basis for Aristotle's doctrine of the mean and hence challenges his account of the principle according to which moral virtue is defined. For Hobbes, this principle is given instead by the laws of nature, understood as "the way or means of peace" (*Lev.* 15 [40]). Despite this difference, however, Hobbes upholds Aristotle's conception of the moral virtues as "habits of mind," and he links the possession of such states of character to the pursuit of "peaceable, sociable, and comfortable living."³⁸ Taking the latter end as standing in for the goal of a happy life, we may see Hobbes as contributing in a meaningful way to the perpetuation of the eudaimonist tradition. The position he defends is distinguished in its commitments from Aristotle's, but it reproduces his attempt to articulate the basis of a life that can be rationally affirmed as happy, within the constraints imposed by human nature and the challenges inherent in a political life.

III. SPINOZA

On the surface, Spinoza's masterpiece, the *Ethics*, gives every indication of being a contribution to ethical inquiry in the classical sense. In the Appendix to Part IV, Spinoza says that he will bring together there the things he has taught concerning the "right way of living" (*recta vivendi ratio*). We are instructed as to the nature of the "highest good" (*summum bonum*) (IVP28), and we are told that this and all good things are achieved insofar as we act "from the guidance of reason" (*ex rationis ductu*) (IVP66). In these and other ways Spinoza's ethics seems to connect in a direct way with ancient eudaimonism.

When we look beneath the surface, however, a different picture emerges. Two features of Spinoza's position in particular demand our attention. The first is his embrace of a strong form of causal determinism, according to which everything that happens in nature, every motion of a body and every idea, passion or volition of a mind, is to be explained in terms of its necessitation by prior causes (IP28). On the basis of this doctrine, Spinoza rejects the existence of freedom of the will as an unconditioned power of choice (IIP48), as well as the operation of any sort of natural teleology. We do not explain natural events by saying that they occur for the sake of certain ends or goods; rather, they are explained by appeal to the prior causes that determine them to exist.³⁹

The second feature of Spinoza's philosophy that bears on his account of ethical agency is his analysis of the concepts of good and evil. Spinoza is clear that good and evil are not real properties that figure in a true account of nature. "As far as good and evil are concerned," he writes, "they also indicate nothing positive in things, considered in themselves, nor are they anything other than modes of thinking, *or* notions we form because we compare things to one

³⁸ See *Lev.* 26 [37] and *Lev.* 15 [40].

³⁹ Stressing his commitment to a deterministic human psychology, Spinoza writes: "The Affects... considered in themselves follow from the same necessity and force of nature as the other singular things. And therefore they acknowledge certain causes, through which they are understood, and have certain properties, as worthy of our knowledge as the properties of any other thing" (IIIPref.).

another” (IVPref.). This statement by itself does not show that the concepts of good and evil play no meaningful role for Spinoza. Nevertheless, his equivocal statements about good and evil, together with his determinism, raise doubts about the form such an account might take. In the sentence immediately preceding the one just quoted, he comments that “nothing belongs to the nature of anything except what follows from the necessity of the nature of the efficient cause. And whatever follows from the necessity of the nature of the efficient cause happens necessarily” (IVPref.). If Spinoza believes that everything happens necessarily, by virtue of following necessarily from the nature of its efficient cause, then what room can there be for an account of agency of the sort found among earlier philosophers? Yet if such an account cannot be given in the terms of Spinoza’s system, how can we understand his philosophy as involving an ethical doctrine in the classical sense: a set of instructions for living well, which can be rationally assessed by agents and, if accepted, adopted as a guide for action?

While foundational doctrines of Spinoza’s philosophy push against the conception of ethics articulated by Aristotle, there is no evidence that Spinoza means to eliminate a conception of ourselves as agents who act to secure the things we take to be good and to avoid the things we take to be bad. If Spinoza did think we would be better off discarding this conception of ourselves, because it did not track the truth about the determination of our actions, then it would be difficult to make sense of the last two parts of the *Ethics*, where he seems to take for granted an understanding of human beings as rational agents, intent on pursuing what they judge to be their greatest good. In what follows, I suggest that there are grounds for reading Spinoza as making important concessions to this way of representing our capacities as agents, and that he does so as a precondition for undertaking the ethical project that occupies him in Parts Four and Five. Although this conception of ourselves is in the end supported only by what he calls “human fictions,” they are fictions that we rely on in contemplating how best to act and live.

Central to our understanding of ourselves as agents, is the notion that we act for the sake of ends, or on account of the goodness of certain objects or outcomes, which goodness is a reason for our acting as we do. In a number of texts, Spinoza appears to accept that human action is teleologically structured in this way. In the Appendix to Part I of the *Ethics*, he writes that “men commonly suppose that all natural things act, as men do, on account of an end.” Elaborating, he adds: “all men act always on account of an end, viz. on account of their advantage, which they want.” Passages such as these can be read as implying that there is fundamental difference between the way in which human beings act and the way in which other things act. Other individuals act because they are determined to do so by prior causes, which may include their own appetites and aversions. Human beings, by contrast, act for the sake of ends, which they represent (in some cases) as reasons for action.

Although this is a distinction that Spinoza apparently wishes to uphold, he ascribes no metaphysical significance to it. It does not establish a separate mode of causation by which human beings are able to affect themselves or the world. He believes that human volitions are as much the product of determination by prior causes as any other kinds of actions. Furthermore, he explicitly defends a deflationary account of ends or final causes. Later in the Appendix to Part I, he asserts that “all final causes are nothing but human fictions” (*humana figmenta*). Expanding on his position in the Preface to Part IV, Spinoza states that, strictly speaking, “What is called a final cause is nothing but a human appetite insofar as it is considered as a principle, or primary cause of some thing.” Thus, acting for the sake of some end (e.g. a drink of cool water) is nothing

more than acting in such a way that one's pursuit of that end is explained by the appetite one has for it (which appetite itself is determined by prior causes).⁴⁰

The conclusion we may draw from these texts is that while all human actions (mental or physical) are necessitated in exactly the same way as other natural events, there is something different about how we take ourselves to be acting when we act intentionally.

Phenomenologically, our desires are teleologically structured: we represent ourselves to be acting for the sake of ends, which we judge to be good and regard as reasons for action. Yet none of this bears on the underlying mode of causation by which action is produced. Strictly speaking, final causes are "nothing but human fictions." Still, Spinoza holds that these fictions remain a significant fact about our psychological makeup and that discovering the truth about the determination of our actions by prior causes does not mean eliminating this, admittedly inadequate, representation of our practical endeavors.

Careful attention to the way Spinoza frames his statements about our use of the terms 'good' and 'evil' lends support to this view. He denies that things in nature possess objective properties of good and evil. Like final causes, such properties are, strictly speaking, fictions. Nevertheless, Spinoza acknowledges, even more explicitly than Hobbes, that in our capacity as agents, we consider things as having these evaluative properties and we deliberate about actions based on our judgments about the relative goodness and badness of ends:

So each one, from his own affect, judges, *or evaluates* [*judicat, seu aestimat*], what is good and what is bad, what is better and what is worse, and finally, what is best and what is worst. So the greedy man judges an abundance of money best, and poverty worst. The ambitious man desires nothing so much as esteem and dreads nothing so much as shame. To the envious nothing is more agreeable than another's unhappiness, and nothing more burdensome than another's happiness. And so, each one, from his own affect, judges a thing good or bad, useful or useless. (IIP39S)

Based on the particular affects they experience, human beings evaluate different objects as good or bad, advancing the judgment that such objects ought, or ought not, to be pursued. By combining such judgments, some subordinated to others, they deliberate about what ought to be done all things considered. For Spinoza, the progress of such deliberation and its ultimate outcome are explained causally by the relative force of competing desires and aversions. Nevertheless, from the perspective of the agent, there is a representation of those desires and aversions as offering reasons for acting in one way rather than another. If this is correct, then it is plausible to see Spinoza as retaining a large part of the structure of practical reason.⁴¹

Yet Spinoza still might be thought to reject a critical element of Aristotle's account of agency, namely, the capacity for choice. Opposing this doctrine, it would seem, is his uncompromising rejection of freedom of the will: "In the Mind there is no absolute, or free, will,

⁴⁰ To take Spinoza's own example: "When we say that habitation was the final cause of this or that house, surely we understand nothing but that a man, because he imagined the convenience of domestic life, had an appetite to build a house. So habitation, insofar as it is considered as a final cause, is nothing more than this singular appetite. It is really an efficient cause, which is considered [*consideratur*] as a final cause, because men are commonly ignorant of the causes of their appetites. For as I have often said before, they are conscious of their actions and appetites, but not aware of the causes by which they are determined to want anything" (IVPref.).

⁴¹ Compare IVP65: "From the guidance of reason, we shall follow the greater of two goods or the lesser of two evils"; and IVP66: "From the guidance of reason we want a greater future good in preference to a lesser present one, and a lesser present evil in preference to a greater future one."

but the Mind is determined to will this or that by a cause which is also determined by another, and this again by another, and so to infinity” (IIP48). Spinoza’s immediate target in this proposition is Descartes, whom he interprets as defending a libertarian conception of the will’s freedom, according to which it is an unconditioned power of choice, or an “absolute faculty of willing and not willing” (IIP48Dem). Such a view, however, is not presupposed by Aristotle’s explanation of choice. For Aristotle, choice involves reason or thought, since it is “what has been decided on by previous deliberation” (*N.E.* 1112a15). It is directed at objects that we know to be good or bad (1112a3). And it is concerned with things that an agent thinks could be brought about through her own efforts: “in general, choice seems to relate to the things that are in our own power” (1111b25-30).

Of these three conditions, only the last seems directly threatened by Spinoza’s determinism. As he understands this doctrine, the necessitation of all things by God, either directly or indirectly, entails that there is nothing contingent in nature; it is impossible that anything could have been different than it is. Yet this by itself does not imply that there is nothing within an agent’s power. If the agent *has* causal power (and Spinoza believes agents do), then some things lie within her power and others not. There are some outcomes that her power is sufficient to bring about and others not. The thrust of Spinoza’s determinism is simply that what those things are, and how an agent in fact disposes her power, is fixed from the standpoint of God. For the most part, though, all of this information is inaccessible to agents. We don’t *know* the limits of our power or the particular effects that may or may not follow from our willing. Arguably, however, such knowledge is not necessary for the exercise of choice. The crucial condition is not that one knows a certain outcome to be within one’s power, but that one *believes* it to be. If this is sufficient, then a case can be made that Spinoza also upholds this central part of Aristotle’s account of agency.

The difference between knowing what *will* happen and believing that something *can* happen through one’s efforts is integral to Spinoza’s account. A true, or adequate, knowledge of nature would show everything to be as it must be. Such a representation would rule out the possibility of choice, by showing every effect to be necessary or impossible. But Spinoza denies that finite minds have access to this kind of knowledge. They are limited to acting from a point of view of relative ignorance about the causal order of nature. It is this ignorance that allows choice to enter the picture. We are thereby able to represent ourselves as agents with the power to make the world one way rather than another on the basis of our efforts. Since Spinoza denies that there is any real contingency in nature (IP29), and that it “depends only on the imagination that we regard things as contingent, both in respect to the past and in respect to the future” (IIP44C1), this can only mean that our conception of ourselves as agents, acting to attain the things we desire, is predicated on a confused, or inadequate, picture of nature, in which the future is open to our intervention. In this connection, it is significant that Spinoza begins Part IV of the *Ethics*, with a definition of the possible: “I call the same singular things possible, insofar as, while we attend to the causes from which they must be produced, we do not know whether those causes are determined to produce them” (IVD4). Although any genuine contingency is ruled out by Spinoza’s metaphysics, in order to function as agents, we must take the objects of our willing as possible. Again, he appears to accept that it is legitimate to do this, even though this judgment is premised on our ignorance about the causal order of nature.

On at least three counts, then, our conception of human agency incorporates imaginative fictions about how we act in the world: that we act for the sake of ends, as opposed to being necessitated by prior causes; that the goodness of the objects we desire offer reasons for our action; that the future is a space of open possibilities, among which we choose in acting. Strictly

speaking, none of these things is true for Spinoza; none is upheld within the metaphysical picture which he defends in Parts I and II of the *Ethics*. Yet at no point in the book does he argue that these fictions ought to be given up, and, in fact, the ethical theory of Parts IV-V largely takes for granted this (admittedly confused) conception of our agency.

The foregoing suggests some of the ways in which Spinoza preserves significant elements of Aristotle's account of agency. Similar parallels can be observed in his treatments of virtue and the highest good.

Spinoza's account of virtue is developed in a metaphysical register distant from Aristotle's. As he defines it, virtue is a kind of causal power: "virtue, insofar as it is related to man, is the very essence, or nature, of man, insofar as he has the power of bringing about certain things, which can be understood through the laws of his nature alone" (IVD8). The power that expresses virtue is the power that each thing has by nature to persevere in existence, that is, to endure as the same thing and to resist destruction by external causes. Spinoza refers to this power as a thing's *conatus*, which he identifies with its "actual essence" (IIIP7). For Spinoza, this is a completely general claim, which applies to all individuals, not just human beings: on the basis of the power proper to their nature, all things strive, or endeavor, to persevere in existence.⁴² In the case of human beings, this power is their virtue: "the more each one strives, and is able to preserve his being, the more he is endowed with virtue" (IVP20Dem). Assuming this conception of virtue, it follows immediately that all virtue is advantageous to its possessor.

The ethical import of the concept of virtue is established through an additional claim Spinoza makes about the specific form of the power that defines the nature of the human mind. According to him, "the power of the mind is defined only by understanding" (VPref).⁴³ Given this, a human being acts virtuously only through acts of understanding or adequate cognition (IVP23Dem). On the face of it, this suggests a narrowly intellectualist conception of virtue: to demonstrate the excellence characteristic of the best human life is to live a life of intellectual virtue. In the end, something like this is indeed Spinoza's position. Nevertheless, he also makes an effort to account for traditional conceptions of the morally virtuous person as one who lives according to the guidance of reason.

To live according to the guidance of reason is to live in such a way that one's acts are determined by an adequate, or true, understanding of things. One acts on the basis of reason, rather than passions or habits conditioned by experience. A person who acts in this way, Spinoza believes, acts autonomously, or "from the laws of his own nature," and in a way which is "really useful [*revera utile*] to him" (IVP18S).⁴⁴ However, the pursuit of what is "really useful" does not entail a narrow egoism. On the contrary, under the guidance of reason, one seeks nothing for oneself that one does not seek for others. Consequently, one exhibits the moral virtues of justice, nobility and moderation.⁴⁵

Spinoza ascribes to the power of reason our disposition to be impartial in the pursuit of what is advantageous and to find agreement with other human beings on the ends and means of

⁴² I agree with Carriero (2005) that this central Spinozan doctrine does not imply a commitment to teleology. For an opposing reading, see Garrett (1999).

⁴³ Although Spinoza retains the vocabulary of "essence," "nature," and "virtue," these terms do not carry the meaning that Aristotle gives to them. Understanding defines the power of the human mind, because it is the power of mind in general, i.e. the power expressed in God's infinite intellect, of which the human mind is part (IIP11C). Adequately conceived, the activity of such power is directed at no end, but is expressed in eternal patterns of understanding.

⁴⁴ The notion of the virtuous person as self-determined, or autonomous, is stressed in IVP37S1.

⁴⁵ See IIIP59S; IVP18S; IVP37S1.

action. On both counts, he contrasts the person who is guided by reason with the person who is led by passion or individual temperament: where the latter acts from desires that are inevitably in conflict with the desires of others, the former finds agreement with others who are similarly guided by reason (IVP35-37). In Spinoza's theory, here sketched only in the broadest terms, we find evidence both of the classical conception of prudence and of the moral skepticism that permeates Hobbes's philosophy. The fundamental problem of ethics is the problem of the government of the passions by reason. Only to the extent that reason exercises control over the unharnessed and idiosyncratic impulses of passion can human beings be expected to live securely in community with other human beings. Where Spinoza and Hobbes diverge from Aristotle is in the latter's understanding of the moral virtues as habits of acting built on the natural affective responses of human beings. For Aristotle, virtues like justice, courage and moderation represent correct patterns of motivation and feeling, defined with respect to the judgment of the person of practical wisdom. Hobbes and Spinoza effectively reject the existence of such a standard. Passion, and appetites originating in passion, remain for them inherently partial and the source of conflict among human beings. For this conflict to be avoided, one must take sides against passion, relying on a power of reason that is defined in opposition to it (for Spinoza, adequate cognition) or relative to a common end desired by all (for Hobbes, the laws of nature as means to peace).

Looking beyond these differences, we find in Spinoza (as we did in Hobbes) a reiteration of the broad themes of Aristotle's eudaimonism united with a fundamentally different account of nature. Like Hobbes, Spinoza takes up Aristotle's question of how to make citizens "be of a certain character, viz. good and capable of noble acts" (1099b31-32). He pursues an answer to this question from the perspective of a theory of what human beings are by nature and how they must be formed psychologically in order to thrive as citizens who recognize the value of virtuous conduct and the necessity of a state in which they live under the rule of law. Furthermore, like Hobbes, Spinoza takes for granted the practical point of view from which individuals reason about their own advantage and choose to act on the basis of that reasoning. This is true even if for Spinoza, as for Hobbes, deliberation is a causal process that unfolds within the necessary order of nature. Thus, neither philosopher takes the rejection of Aristotle's teleology as grounds for concluding that human beings do not genuinely reason about how to act, or that their reasoning is not critical to explaining why some live well and others do not.

Yet for Spinoza, in contrast to Hobbes, this is only the opening act of his *Ethics*. A political life, in which one seeks to preserve one's life and to satisfy desires in concert with the like activities of other human beings, is not the highest human existence. When we act in a fully virtuous manner, determined only by the dictates of reason, we strive for understanding alone. And the greatest thing we can understand is God, the eternal, active principle from which all things necessarily follow (IVP28Dem). It follows that for Spinoza, as for Aristotle, supreme happiness, or blessedness, is reserved for a life beyond the ordinary political life of human beings.

Spinoza identifies blessedness with the knowledge and love of God (IVApp4; VP42Dem). Adopting the teleological idiom of eudaimonism, he sometimes talks as if the virtuous person acts for the sake of the knowledge and love of God as a final end. The person who "acts absolutely from virtue" desires nothing more than to understand God, from which the love of God immediately follows; and she understands that this knowledge is the state of being that brings the greatest benefit to her (in this sense, it is her good).⁴⁶ The latter claim shows that the

⁴⁶ "By good I shall understand what we certainly know to be useful to us" (IVD1).

knowledge and love of God functions as an end for the agent in at least the sense of supplying her with a justificatory reason for choosing to act in that manner. She understands that she would be, all things considered, better off were she to realize that state. What Spinoza denies, however, is that teleology provides any sort of *causal* explanation for why she acts in pursuit of that end. She acts as she does not because the knowledge of God is good, but because someone who acts absolutely from virtue, determined by the intrinsic power of the mind, necessarily acts in that way.⁴⁷

A blessed life is one devoted to contemplating things eternal and divine. Like Aristotle, Spinoza suggests that such a life can be attained only in the rarest of cases (VP42S). Indeed, he follows Aristotle in implying that such a life is not a human life at all, if the latter is understood as the life of a temporally enduring body, enmeshed in the causal order of nature. To identify one's life with the activity of intellect is in effect to assume the nature of a god (or God).⁴⁸ Given this, for Spinoza, as much as for Aristotle, there arises the question of whether the blessedness ascribed to a philosophical life, enjoyed by a mind conscious of its own eternity, can be reconciled with the worldly happiness of a human being who shares a political life with other human beings.⁴⁹ The tension between these ends arises in exactly the same way for the two philosophers: adopting reason as the standard of human excellence, the best human life may be identified with a life in which the appetitive and emotional activities of human beings are *regulated* by reason or a life in which those activities are *replaced* by the activity of reason alone. Here we find the deepest resonance between the structure of Spinoza's ethics and that of Aristotle.

IV. CONCLUSION

One of the aims of this essay has been to add greater nuance to discussions of the legacy of Aristotelian ideas during the seventeenth century. Aristotle's eudaimonism is a remarkably robust framework for ethical theorizing, whose influence remains strong among seventeenth-century philosophers, even those usually seen as most fervently anti-Aristotelian. Despite the early moderns' predominant hostility to Aristotle's views in natural philosophy, their ethical theories remain indebted to key components of Aristotle's position, including the goal-directedness of human action, the identification of happiness as a final end, and the relation of prudence, moral virtue and happiness.

Beyond this, I have suggested how, for Hobbes and Spinoza, anti-Aristotelian views in natural philosophy and metaphysics – above all their rejection of teleology – entail a split between what philosophers have come to call the “theoretical” and “practical” points of view. For most ancient and medieval philosophers, it is a given that human action is goal directed: like all creatures, we act for the sake of attaining or avoiding things that are naturally good or bad for us. Accordingly, our best theory of human nature should represent this as a truth about human agency. For early modern thinkers like Hobbes and Spinoza who reject the teleology of nature this assumption cannot stand unchallenged. Like all change, human action is determined by prior efficient causes operating in accordance with necessary laws. At the same time, Hobbes and Spinoza recognize (at least tacitly) that in explaining the behavior of rational agents – those subject to norms of prudence and morality – we are bound to take them as acting for the sake of

⁴⁷ See IVP21-P28.

⁴⁸ Compare *N.E.* 1177b30-1: “If intellect is divine, then, in comparison with man, the life according to it is divine in comparison with human life”; and *Ethics*, VP40S.

⁴⁹ For an elaboration of this point, see Rutherford (2008).

ends. Thus, teleology or goal-directedness is an ineliminable feature of the psychology of agency, even if it is not a feature of the underlying causal order of nature. Although rejected from a theoretical standpoint, teleology remains constitutive of the practical point of view. The acknowledgment of this distinction has wide-ranging consequences for the subsequent development of philosophy, up through contemporary debates about normativity, agency, and responsibility. What I hope to have shown is how these debates get their start at a crucial moment in the seventeenth century, in part at least through the enduring influence of Aristotle.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ I am grateful to David Brink and Monte Johnson for their comments on an earlier draft of this essay.